



## ANITA DESAI'S FICTION: A STUDY OF SELF CONCEPT IN INDIAN WOMEN

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**ABSTRACT** Fiction has become in our times the most powerful and popular literary genre. This form which was evolved more than two hundred years ago has uninterruptedly and comprehensively depicted the saga of human activities and experiences, rich and varied, unfolding thoughts and feelings, hopes and dreams, down the ages.

**KEYWORDS :** Women, Self-Concept, Novels

**INTRODUCTION**

According to Robert, R. Henkle, "fiction and drama present men and women reacting to each other in the way that is closer to real life." Even as the visual media make a steady progress conquering multitudes, the popularity of fiction has not ebbed. It is a form or genre people will never willingly let die as it depicts effectively "... the most thorough knowledge of human nature, the happiest delineation of its varieties, the liveliest effusion of wit arid humor to be conveyed to the world in the most chosen language."

**INDIAN FICTION IN ENGLISH**

The beginnings of any genre are closely associated with social and political movements in a particular historical context. When we trace the rise of Indian fiction in English specifically to a moment in history, we are convinced that it evolved in the wake of our contact with the west. Most of the critics feel that English education along with the influence of the west made this genre very popular in India. According to Pratima:

*The synthesis of eastern and western literary modes has given a comprehensive perspective to the Indo-English writers, and they have successfully analysed the psychological, emotional and spiritual crisis experienced by the Indian intellectuals as well as men and women representing the different layers of Indian society.*

**REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

Anita Desai's fictional canvas holds a mirror up to real life situations. She is a writer with a vision and expresses truthfully her views of life in general. She presents the harassed, circumscribed world of the Indian woman in most of her novels. Desai the writer is more concerned about the individual than the environment. She herself has confessed that she was deeply influenced by Emile Bronte, Virginia Woolf, Forster, D.H. Lawrence, Henry James, Malcolm Lowry, Joyce, Proust, Dostoevsky, Chekhov and Kawabata. Her favorite's poets are Eliot, Rimbaud, Hopkins and Rilke.

Some of the major studies of her work may now be mentioned. Asha Kanwar, in a comparative study entitled *Virginia Woolf and Anita Desai: A Comparative Study* remarks that "in both Woolf and Desai, we find an almost obsessive involvement with character's past as a key to their consciousness, their life. Preoccupations with nostalgia and memory thus become an integral part of their craft." Desai's protagonists' tragedy is rooted in the past. The majority of them have a past that has psychologically tortured them. It generates conflicts in a powerful manner. In *Maya (Cry, the Peacock)* it is father fixation along with the Albino's ominous prophecy, in *Monisha, (Voices in the City)* it is her parents' unhappy married life and an unhappy childhood, in *Nanda Kaul's life (Fire on the Mountain)* the betrayal of her husband and children, in *Sita (Where Shall We Go This Summer?)* it is again father fixation and the absence of her mother, in *Bim, Tara and Raja (Clear Light of Day)* it is unhappy childhood and parental neglect. In *In Custody* Deven's thwarted ambitions and inferiority complex, in *Baumgartner's Bombay* the separation from his mother during the world war and in *Journey to Ithaca* Matteo's unhappy childhood and obsession with attaining spiritual enlightenment, give rise to the conflicts.

Peter Alcock says that in Desai's fiction "... no self-consciousness intrudes; rather we have the expression of, surely, a uniquely Indian

sensibility that is yet completely at ease in the mind of the west." Her spontaneity of expression encircles her story line and she interprets a highly complex, ever changing ensemble of social relations in which women are confined. The impasse of action and the avid impotence of the fractured self of Indian woman are depicted very powerfully, without any self-consciousness.

According to Desai conflicts are a part of life and they exist in man-woman relationship. In the Indian context the conflicts become more due to compartmentalization of man and woman. Stereotyping in society also contributes to the oppression of women. These conflicts have many negative results. Many women suffer from identity crisis. Most of the female protagonists are driven to the point of suicide. Others become neurotic. Sudhakar Ratnakar Jamkhandi emphasizes the fact that

*Desai is able to illustrate that (i) the sensibility of the Indian housewife, a victim of society's malicious traditions, is significant and that (ii) the effect of self-centredness or self-pity is detrimental in husband and wife relationships."*

Women empowered with education, new orientations and economic independence refuse to accept meekly the traditional constraints of patriarchy. This is a major concern of the novelist. How these Indian women with a new awareness, with a focused consciousness decide to go in the opposite direction is very often the main thematic concern in Anita Desai. Meena Bellappii remarks that Desai's novels mark a new beginning in the female literary framework in India. According to her, "... the focus of interest has shifted from girlish romance to a more complex search for value in human relationship." It is a mature world that is delineated by Desai, a world that rejects, accommodates, oppresses and propels the individual. The predicament of the individuals, caught in the whirlpool of socio-cultural changes, their struggle to survive, their alienation and existential agony are portrayed by Desai. Thus in her novels, "... she looks at the problem of rootlessness, in its different forms, candidly and closely, and describes its social and individual effects without mincing words."

**ANITA DESAI**

Anita Desai is widely acclaimed as one of the foremost Indian novelists. She has almost a world wide audience making her a literary celebrity of lasting significance. Her uniqueness lies in the fact that in her novels we witness a long interrogation of the self through introspection, psychological analysis and stream-of-consciousness technique. She recasts the essence of Joyce, Proust and Kaka, in her own way, mostly treading over alienation with special reference to feminine psyche in her novels. The interior landscape peopled by women characters is set against the background of man's domination of social and domestic life with accumulated authoritarianism as its foundation. According to P.F. Patil, "... in Anita Desai's novels the inner workings, the inner sensibilities are more compelling than the outer weather or the visible action." Thus, the question of the self dominates her fiction. She believes firmly in the impeccable dignity and in the inviolable sanctity of the self. In her novels she highlights the fact that "... without this sense of dignity and sanctity of the self, existential awakening of the self remains vulnerable and the inner space can once again become contaminated." She is an explorer par excellence of the interior human experience. Desai portrays the monotony of quotidian dreams of the individual, the probable

impossibility of knowing one's own self and the paradoxical nature of human existence. Desai herself feels that " . . . all my writing is an effort to discover and then to underline and finally to convey the true significance of things.

### **OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

The objectives of this study are:

1. To explore the novels of Desai and other contemporary women writers to prove that a new feminine sensibility is slowly evolving and is getting established in India. A comparative study of Desai and her contemporary women writers point to the fact that these women are vocalizing the new awareness of Indian womanhood.
2. To attempt a critical, historical analysis of the self-concept of Indian women as derived from socio-religious, political and cultural traditions and beliefs, down the ages.
3. To apply many psycho-social theories, feminism and psychological theories, to trace the root cause of gender-based oppression.
4. To establish Desai as a psychological novelist who writes using the stream-of-consciousness technique.

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