

# Quest For Identity In The Fiction Of Anita Desai

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**Abstract - In the short history of four hundred years of Indian writings in English, Indian fiction emerged steadily from the imitative stage to the realistic and to the psychological and then to the experimental stage. Due to these innovations Indian novels are getting recognition all over the world. The themes of loneliness, isolation are recurrent themes in Indian fiction. Writers from Mulk Raj Anand to Arundhati Roy all have dealt with the various aspects of this theme. But in the postmodern context these themes have been dealt with new dimension especially in the hands of innovative experimental writers like Anita Desai. It has become more complex. To deal with these characters is a challenge and Anita Desai uses different fictional techniques to bring out their situation.**

**keywords - Fiction, imitative, recurrent, postmodern**

## I. INTRODUCTION

In the short history of four hundred years of Indian writings in English, Indian fiction emerged steadily. We can see the gradual progression of the form of novel from the imitative stage to the realistic and to the psychological and then to the experimental stage. In the hands of early fiction writers like Mulk Raj Anand, Bhabani Bhattacharya, Kamala Markanday, it was deeply realistic dealing with social issues like poverty, hunger, starvation, class distinction and untouchability. Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande gave a new lease of life to it by going deep into the psychological realms exploring the inner self and the basic problems faced by individual being in their search of self- identity. Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth, Amitav Ghosh have brought about certain innovations in Indian fiction by introducing experiments with the linguistic medium and other fictional techniques. Vikram Seth's "The Golden Gate" is a novel in sonnet sequence and Arundhati Rai's "The God of Small Things" is the best example of linguistic experiments. Due to these innovations Indian novels are getting recognition all over the world. Indian English literature has attracted a widespread interest recently and has occupied a greater significance in the world literature.

## II. Review of Indian English Fiction

At the initial stage Indian novels were response to the social, political and economic situations. They dealt with socio-economic problem like poverty, hunger, starvation, industrialization, urbanization. Writer like Kamala Markanday presented segment of urban India. These novels also aimed at the elimination of social evils. Many of the writers have also dealt with political themes like emergency and the pathos related to the partition. Along with the social, political themes, it is noteworthy that female writers have presented feminist point of view. They have focused on man-woman relationship, marital disharmony, struggles against patriarchal cultural patterns, marginalization, sufferings and anger of women. Thus we can see Indian women writers have passed through the process of self- discovery and rediscovery.

Apart from all these themes, there has been one dominant theme recurrently found in Indian writing in English that is quest for self. Indian fiction writers have tried to find out and establish their self- identity since the beginning. They face identity crisis and project it very powerfully through their protagonists. This identity crisis is either due to the empty, banal life where growth and self- awareness is not possible as in the case of Bhakha, a scavenger or Munoo or Nathan and Rukhami in their struggle against hunger and starvation or the quest for the self-realization and salvation as in the case of Arun Joshi's Billy Biswas. Thus we can see the expression of feelings of loneliness, doubt, value conflict, meaninglessness, isolation and alienation. Dealing with these themes of frustration, disintegration, disillusionment has become more acute in the postmodern Indian writing in English. New social scenario and new techniques have been evolved to focus this theme. Even Indian poetry has given expression to the theme of loneliness and alienation. We find poets from Arun kolhatkar to Nissim Ezekeil and Kamala Das giving expression to the theme of loneliness and isolation.

## III. Theme of Loneliness in Anita Desai's Fiction

Anita Desai is one of the leading female novelists in Indian fiction. She is interested in the interior landscape of the mind. A close study of her work reveals her struggle against the patriarchal cultural pattern prevailing in India. Along with the strong female concern, we also find the quest of self- identity in her novels. All her female characters are trapped into intricate social situation. They are helpless, unsatisfied. There is very strong urge of self- identity in them and in search of self-identity they go to the extreme extend of destroying themselves. They try to search out their own identity and always suffer from guilt that they do not belong to the place or to the person and finally they are left to struggle for their existence in their society. All the characters in Anita Desai's novel share their own dreams and desires. Some of these dreams are partially realized and many more are simply dashed to the ground leaving behind long trails of woes and sufferings.

Though identity crisis is a typical theme in Indian writing in English, it has been dealt with new dimension in postmodern context. Earlier it was in context with social, political, and economic background. In the postmodern context it has become more complex. In postmodern context it is in the case of individual being struggling in his own world to find out space and scope. In spite of all

the things around the character are not happy within. It is as if suffocated. There are certain existential problems that make life unhappy, unsatisfied and almost unbearable. Due to the meaninglessness of life there is a strong pull of self –destruction. They become almost neurotic. They suffer from nervous breakdown due to disorder and degradation of life. Life appears to be a tale told by an idiot having no meaning and significance. They face serious psychological confusion and start living in the world of dream, fantasy and make believe under the strain of serious psychological disorder. And in their attempt to find out the meaning they even destroy themselves in the most absurd way. Externally life seems to be complete lacking in nothing but internally it is totally shattered. It seems that they belong neither to the earth nor to the heaven but drifting in between trying to find out their identity.

In her first novel 'Cry, The Peacock' Anita Desai attempts to explore the inner world of Maya, the protagonist who is sensitive and unfit for the harsh social world. She is a tender clinging creeper. Her greatest problem is her father fixation. She wants to find out the replica of her father in her husband. Therefore, she marries Gautama at the early age and who is twice of her age. It is very obvious that she is destined to suffer from emotional starvation. The situation is aggravated by her barrenness since she is childless. The first emotional crisis that she faces arises at the death of her pet dog Toto who has been the center of her affection. It is a great shock for her and cannot stand for the sight of the dead dog. Another shock comes when she finds her husband Gautama to be cold and casual in her grief. He invites her to have tea and stop crying. And then instead of consoling her in her grief, he leaves her alone to meet a visitor outside.

In fact it is a time when she needed companionship of Gautama and his closest understanding. She continues to suffer from the feeling of suffocation of her internal self even after sugar coated pills of relief given to her by Gautama. Thus, there occurs an unbridgeable gulf between Maya and Gautama. In fact there is long gap in between Maya's expectations from her marriage and reality of the marriage. Finally she comes to the conclusion that "torture, guilt, dread and imprisonment" are the four walls of my private hell. Maya was in search of her dream world where she expects her husband to be kind and sympathetic like her father and since it was impossible Maya murders her husband and she herself commits suicide. Her contemplation on murder before her death suggests her basic needs. She thinks that murders are committed only for the sake of money or property or anything solid and dirty and not for love or life or basic things. But still her basic urges for love and life are so strong that she commits murder. Maya searches for an order of lines and designs, a symmetry to find out peace of mind. She crumbles down gradually and ultimately finds fulfillment in disintegration.

#### **IV. Fictional Techniques Used by Anita Desai**

To deal with these characters is a challenge and Anita Desai uses various fictional techniques to bring out their situations. Anita Desai introduces number of psychological elements like obsession, love hate relations, hysteria, memories, perceptions, drives and complexes to catch the bewilderment of the individual psyche. Anita Desai does not register the surface realities only. To present this utter loneliness of her characters, she employs various linguistic devices such as carefully chosen clusters of images, symbols. In fact symbols play vital role in her narration. The house, sea, the island Manorias in where shall We Go This Summer are most effective symbols. Tea and dust are symbols used in Cry, The Peacock focusing on the inner situation. The traditional peacock symbol is reinterpreted several times as brain fever bird, a reminder of death and ill- fated lover which are contrary to the traditional popular image of peacock.

In her fourth novel "Where Shall We GO This Summer", Sita the protagonist of the novel is on the journey of self- discovery. Sita is over forty. She hangs between married life and her self -fulfillment. Sita is unhappy while living in her in law's house where her individuality is totally crushed. As children become independent and husband getting absorbed in his management work, she faces boredom and loneliness. Moreover she is forced with the fifth unwanted pregnancy. Her hopelessness makes her insensitive, cruel, alien to the family. Now she is almost solitary individual being trapped in a situation on which she has no control at all. She is almost cramped by situation. Finally she is on her journey of exploration. Totally disillusioned she wishes to go back to her childhood past, her parental house at Manori Island. The island Manorias cut off from mainland Bombay. It is an island where her father, a Gandhian man was respected figure. She desperately tries to recapture her childhood days when she was happy and secure in the company of father. But finally she realizes that the island where she goes in the hope that she may find solace and comfort turns out to be as suffocating as the city. She must reconcile with the situation if she has to continue with the life.

Anita Desai also uses myths with their religious and traditional associations to bring out psychological pangs of the characters. Thus Sita reminds us of the mythological Sita who is alienated and suffers intensely. Thus the myth serves a powerful instrument to suggest what cannot be expressed in the words.

Anita Desai's "Fasting and Feasting", which was nominated for Booker Prize, is another attempt to search for the self. Basically it is a story of Uma, the most subdued and crushed member of Indian family. She is victim of the Patriarchal set up and lost in the jungle of duties sometimes to Mama-Papa, sometimes to her brother or sister. She is reduced to the status of domestic help and everybody forgets that she is also an individual being with soul. She is also a victim of social evils like dowry and her dreams for marriage shattered twice because of dowry. Now Uma is trapped in a situation where there is no escape. Her search for an identity is seen in her aspirations to make a career, to leave home and to soar high but her wings have been clipped. The romantic poetry of Ella Wilcox opens a magic casement before Uma. She tightens her hold over a book in spite of knocking on the door suggesting her attempt to realize her dreams.

#### **V. Conclusion**

Thus, Anita Desai deals with the theme of identity crisis in the postmodern context. All characters from Anita Desai's novels are on interior journey. They struggle to find out new patterns of life or new orders of life. They have strong creative urge and they try to rediscover a creative possibility within them. They attempt for the self- assertion. They get swayed by the problems of loneliness, pessimism. Their conflict arises from self's craving for fulfillment. They always look at the life from distance from

where life seems to be out of their reach. Though they are self-conscious about the reality around them, they carry a sense of loneliness within them.

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