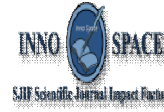


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Dr. P.F. Patil

A Crisis of Consciousness and Values in Anita Desai's Select Novels

Former Principal,  
Kaveri College of Arts  
Science & Commerce,  
Pune, Maharashtra**Abstract**

Anita Desai stands apart from other Indian Women novelists in English, because her concern is largely with “the enduring human condition”, one which is faced by women, particularly modern women from the middle class. Desai, in one of her interviews states: There are elements which remain basic to our lives. I mean the human condition itself. It is only superficially affected by the day- o-day changes; we continue to live in the same way as we have in the past centuries with the same tragedies and the same comedies. And that is why it interests me.

Anita Desai has raised a question of a crisis of consciousness and values which has a universal significance. Her observations and interpretation of “the enduring human condition” have been successfully presented through her monumental novels. By dealing with this, she tries to establish a meaningful pattern of values in the apparently meaningless and seemingly chaotic and insensitive world. She deals with an eternal quest for love, sensitivity, righteousness, loyalty, trust which only sustains the human spirit. Her women characters: Maya, Monisha, Sita, Bim, Lila and Nanda Kaul in *Cry*, *the Peacock*, *Voices in the City*, *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*, *Clear Light of Day*, *Village by the Sea* and *Fire on the Mountain* respectively have an elemental quest. It is the quest of a human being in general towards the understanding of human being's predicament itself through love, sympathy and sensitivity. Anita Desai tells about her pursuits as a writer:

One's preoccupation can only be a perpetual search for meanings, for value, for - dare I say it - truth. I think of the world as an iceberg the one tenth visible above the surface of the water is what we call Reality, but the nine tenths that are submerged make up the truth, and that is what one is trying to explore. Writing is an effort to discover and then to underline and finally to convey the true significance of things.

Her novels reveal her intimate involvement in the current predicament of our country and its social and cultural situations. After nineteen - sixty, Indian women seem to be constantly becoming conscious of their individual rights and roles as well as human

values. She takes the readers into inner recesses of her characters- especially the female characters. Her efforts are strenuously directed in all her novels towards self-realization. Meena Belliappa's statement regarding the focus of interest revealed in modern Indian English fiction is quite applicable to Anita Desai's novels. She writes.

An important phase, in the growth of fiction in India, as elsewhere, is the gradual shift from the external world to inner world of the individual. The focus of interest lies in the portrayal of states of mind rather than in holding up the mirror to society.

In her illustrated novel, *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* A crisis of consciousness and values has been explicitly presented through the characters like Sita, Deedar, Moses and Miriam. The creation of Menaka, Karan and their father Raman is a literary device to heighten the effect of contrast and juxtaposition. Loss of faith is the first casualty of the crisis of consciousness and values in her almost all novels. It is the question of human survival, of his noble existence and his dignified adjustment in the society. This reminds us of Mathew Arnold's poem, *Dover Beach* which expresses his anxiety about the retreating faith during the Victorian period and thereafter,

The Sea of Faith

Was once, too at the full, and round the  
earth's shore

Lay like the folds of a bright gridle furl'd;  
But now I only hear

Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar

Anita Desai's major concern is with psychological truth of her characters. The trembling of her women

characters whose values and beliefs are in danger, which in turn, comes in the way of individual's self-realization. In *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* If we delete, 'This Summer' from the title, the perennial question remains Where Shall We Go? This question causes confusion. Today every individual seems to confront and confound with this genuine question, because the citadel of consciousness and values has almost crumbled or is likely to crumble. The cruel forces of money, machines, automation, deception, scepticism, corruption and violence have consequently resulted in distrust disharmony, divorce, rape, illicit sex, melancholy and frequent emotional and psychological break-downs. Nobody feels secure: Even mothers feel scared of giving birth to their children. It is better not to think of providing security to the children already wanting in nutrition and prosperity, scepticism has increased due to the loss of faith, because, man ceases to have faith even in his own self. Luxurious life purchased through the power of money renders every one, fragile in matters of righteous conduct. Sita, the protagonist of the novel is immensely confused and not finding a suitable society where she can breathe peacefully and where she can give birth to her child. In a disturbed mental state, she utters with a baffled consciousness:

Beginning to pace up and down, up and down, she would strain to catch the precise language of this invisible unquiet. "Where shall we go of this summer?" The words, appearing out of nowhere; worried her and plagued her. "Nowhere, no where," she made an effort to control herself and quietly reply. "I'll keep you safe inside. We'll go nowhere" [*Where Shall We Go This Summer?* p. 127]

Crisis of consciousness and values leads to a gradual decline in faith which clearly means a total collapse of culture and civilization. A civilization based on multi-storeyed buildings, perverted vision, sycophancy, incest, theft and robbery is no better than a prison. In this respect Anita Desai writes:

How civilization could survive, how could the child? How could she hold them whole and pure and unimpeached in the midst of this bloodshed? They would be wounded, fall and die (*Where Shall We Go This Summer?* 55).

Sita hates such civilization of the metros, such a culture of the haves and greeds where there is no mental peace, no emotional fulfillment.

Sita has inherited from her father a genuine love for natural objects, because nature is a magic for her. She prefers Manori to a metro. Raman, Menaka, Karan and Raman's business friends love a city of flats and alleys, but Sita feels extremely bored of it. She witnesses a cruel and black drama of crows in their balcony. She compares this cruel, black drama with that of human beings greedy for power and their unmindfulness. In such a cruel city culture, Sita does not find any conscience left even in her husband, Raman, not to talk of her other neighbours even her own children-Menaka and Karan appear to her as two machines void of sensitivity and finer feelings. She tells about Raman and his friends:

They are nothing - nothing but appetite and sex. Only food, sex and money matters Animals (*Where Shall We Go This Summer?* p. 47)

A very genuine question, closely related to the crisis of consciousness and values as raised in this novel is the question of human survival, of his noble existence and dignified adjustment in society, in the married life with total submission and surrender to what exists, to what one's fate dictates one to endure or whether one should architect one's own future. Sita's survival, her existence, her adjustment are symbolical of the entire humanity. Her rebellious mood is suggestive of thousands of sensitive souls who do not find peace in environment of distrust, disloyalty, indifference and corruption caused by the material advancements of all sorts. Sita explicitly signifies for herself that life is a constant struggle and the more lasting is the existence, the survival, self-improvement, self-preservation is most human, but this will occur with our faith in our creator. This is precisely, the evolution of man taking place under the kind and benevolent superintendence of God.

The theme of a crisis of consciousness and values is not a sporadic, a passing reference but a recurrent, a pervading strain in Anita Desai's all illustrated novels. Her *Voices in the city* is a tale of struggle by men and women of Calcutta for higher and sophisticated life of consciousness and values. Calcutta, a "city of death", it is a city of crowds and beggars with hidden violence, the anger which reveals itself in murder and crime, in trains being burnt and bonfires being lit all over the city, it is volatile in spirit and response. This city has several faces like Nirode, Monisha, Amla, their mother, Jit, Dharma, Jiban,

Aunt Lila etc. Nirode, the protagonist, aspires for a life, full of values. He is unhappy with his friends Jit and Jiban who want to force. Upon himself something they themselves are not prepared to take a career, a way of life, some high ideals. He is confused and confounded with a life which holds no great prospects for the artist. He is depressed by the inconsequential work which gives him no opportunity to display his creativity. He is surrounded by the city which would wipe out any traces of his individuality. Nirode therefore solicits Dharma's friendship for "something, unique, astonishing, and valuable" Reader does experience a crisis of consciousness and values in *Voices in the City*.

Anita Desai's another monumental novel; *Fire on the Mountain* explores alienation, anxiety, desperation and repentance of Nanda Kaul, her grand-daughter Raka and her friend Ila Das. It exploits the situation of Ila Das' rape - murder and Nanda Kaul's death to highlight the problems which confront women in a self-centered, cold, insensitive and cruel world. Nanda Kaul's life has been an endless story of suffocation and weariness. As a vice chancellor's wife, she was the pivot of a busy world. But "Its crowding had stifled her". She was immensely glad when there came an end to her relentless responsibilities. The married life of Nanda Kaul and Mr. Kaul at the beginning appeared quite attractive. But for Mr. Kaul, wife was a non entity. R.S. Pathak rightly points out:

Far from being a happy wife, she felt like an animal put into a cage and very skilfully trained to dance to the command of the ring master - her dominating husband whom she could not defy [ *Fire on the Mountain*, p. 127]

Days and nights, she worked as a dutiful housewife and dutiful mother looking after her husband and his guests. She ceaselessly looked after her children, their unending needs and demands totally neglecting her health and her own interest but they prove to be utterly selfish, indifferent and cruel to her. Her busy husband had nothing to do with her private self and her relationship with her children were not intimate either. The following passage reveals the futility of her relentless duties she has done for her husband and children:

Nor had her husband loved and cherished her and kept her like a queen he had only done enough to keep her quiet while he carried on a life-long affair

with Miss David, the Mathematics mistress, whom he had not married because she was Christian but whom he had loved, all his life loved, and her children the children were all alien to her nature [*Fire on the Mountain*, p. 145]

Suffocation and weariness caused by her pleasure loving husband and indifferent children forced her to live alone at Carignano; in fact, she was forced to do, reduce to doing it. Ila Das, Nanda Kaul's close friend tries to rise to the higher planes of life despite her glaring pitfalls. She keeps herself busy in doing social work here and there, but the cruel, indifferent and insensitive social situation proves to be ungrateful to her. As a social worker, out of anxiety and righteousness, she advises Preet Singh's family not to settle their seven year daughter's marriage with an old man, which was absolutely unnatural. In fact, it was a sane piece of advice, but as it was an advice from a woman, it injures

Preet Singh's male ego. He feels insulted and decides to punish her. While Ila Das was on her way, he cruelly pushes her inside and "Pinned down her into the dust and the goat droppings, and raped" [143] Rape implies the highest insult and injury to the women's dignity. Nanda Kaul is terribly shocked after listening to the gruesome news of Ila Das' rape murder and feels like Ila's that her womanhood is defied and insulted. Anita Desai through her novels implies that girls, spinters as well as married women do not have any space in the present insensitive and brutal society.

*Fire on the Mountain* also deals with the detrimental effects of a stifling home environment upon the tender psyche of a young child, Raka; Raka is not a normal child by any standard. She shuns all tenderness viciously. She is not born recluse. She becomes introvert because of the abnormal circumstances around her. She is the victim of a broken home. In her eight years of existence, she has witnessed enough of the ambiguity of life. Almost the glamour and glitter of diplomatic society in Madrid, New York, New Delhi, and other big cities she has experienced the squalor and dirt of home. She has seen bitterness, distrust and violence. Her parents do not love each other. Childhood is a formative period when a person has intrinsic desires for spiritual health. Raka's traumatic experience deprives her of a child's innocent trust and feeling of joy in the company of others and comes out as an abnormal child. The novel implies loneliness

,alienation, weariness, psychological suffocation and insecurity of all women - girls, spinters as well as married women amidst the brutal forces of money machines, automations, scepticism, insensitivity and violence resulted by the lack of conscience and human values.

In *Clear Light of Day* - Bim, the protagonist of the novel has many qualms of consciousness and a woman who cherishes values as dearer than anything else. Even the slightest occurrence hurt her sensitive mind deeply, Raja's (her brother) departure for Hyderabad to lead a life of his own, is less pricking to Bim's sensitive soul than Raja's letter directing her to retain Hyderabad's house after his demise. He writes, "you may continue to have it at the same rent, I shall never think of raising it or of selling the house as long as you and Baba need it". It is a great shock to her. Bim performs motherly duties for her brothers and sister. She sacrifices her own aspirations and interests for the wellbeing of her brothers and sisters, but in return, she receives indifference and ungratefulness.

In *The Village by the Sea*, Hari and Lila's struggle for survival is a moral, righteous struggle which "seemed to tell Lila to be clam and happy and all would be well".

Anita Desai's sympathy is with the suffering of humanity. Her moral and psychological proinquiries are more with George Eliot's than with Jane Austen's and Emile Bronte's. In fact, she endeavours to view life with the spectacles of a true Greek. Her vision of life is

steady and whole not fragmented and punctured. She delights to see human consciousness intact and his life whole and untainted despite all odds and discomfitures.

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