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An Exploration of Indian Female Psyche in the Novels of Anita Desai

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ABSTRACT: This paper deals with the unchanged struggle of women in India and their subjugation under the patriarchal setup. Anita Desai is regarded as one of the contemporary feminist writers of Indian Fiction who has also tried to put forward the psychological turmoil of the woman characters in her novel. This paper would help to analyse the sufferings of the woman and deeply look at the problem of marriage, dysfunctional relationships, inequality and dominance.

KEYWORDS: feminism, dominance, patriarchy

I. INTRODUCTION

Women, also known as Stree or Nari, have been subjected to various transitions throughout the history of India. Women and their rights have been a matter of question all around. If we assess their status beginning from ancient times till today, we see specific changes, but the struggle they are facing remains perpetual.

During the early Vedic period, women were respected and treated equal to men. Women had the right to participate in many rituals, and even the men who were married were given a significant role in performing religious rites at various events compared to the unmarried males. During the Vedic period, women were not just acknowledged for their role as a mother, daughter, or wife, but also appraised as individuals who contributed to society. The women had the right to choose their husbands through “Svayamvara,” though not necessarily at a young age. Women had the right to make sacrifices, weave garments, and participate in other activities. Dowry was non-existent during that time. Women were also worshipped in the form of goddesses like Saraswati, Laxmi, Mahashakti, Parvati, Usha, Rati, Aditi, etc. Hindus also purported the dual worship of a half-man, half-woman Avatar, a fact that male gods were accompanied by female goddesses, for instance, Vishnu with Laxmi, and Shiva with Parvati. Women were also independent regarding the economic aspect, as they had the choice to work. During that time, if a lady died, her property was transferred to her daughter. Women’s education was also given weight in the Vedic period. They had the liberty to study, and they excelled at it; some also read shlokas and played the role of women pandits. They also worked as Acharya, which was a prestigious job. Women of that time were also allowed to go to the battlefields with their husbands.

Manava dharma shastra, also known as the Laws of Manu, is an ancient law book written by Manu that also talks about women from an anti-women perspective. It was composed around the 2nd–3rd century BCE. In a few places, there are derogatory comments about women. Women are labelled as being dependent.

In childhood, a female must be subject to her father, in youth to her husband, and when her lord is dead, to her sons; a woman must never be independent. She must not seek to separate herself from her father, husband, or sons; by leaving them, she would make both her own and her husband’s families contemptible. (Verse 9.3)

Along with the changing ideas, the role of women has also started changing. During the Later Vedic period, women were not allowed to utilize Vedic education, and were married soon. During this period women were restricted to households, and their status started declining, the dowry system and female infanticide also began. The idea of a patriarchal family started to shape.

The medieval period can be considered the “dark age for women,” because when new rulers started conquering India, they brought their own culture. Systems such as the Sati system and child marriage began during this time also the Purdah system became an important culture. The Rajput traditions of Jauhar and Devadasi prevailed. Until the colonial

period, women had to start accepting domination. However, various reform movements helped them get rid of these systems. Few women even participated in the war for freedom.

In the post-colonial or modern period, women were treated better and were given importance as per the drafted constitution. Their education and rights were considered. However, they were still objectified.

The theories of post-colonial feminism talk about the struggles of women, which state that they were doubly marginalized by patriarchal oppression and also by the colonial power. Even with the equal rights given to women and the implications of various acts and rights, they are still the victims of harassment, discrimination, and dominance. The seed of patriarchy that was sown earlier has now become a part of life. Men in every aspect regard themselves superior to women.

With the opportunity for education provided to women, feminism came into being. The first work that focused on the rights of women was *A Vindication of Their Rights* by Mary Wollstonecraft, written in 1791, which became highly influential for everyone, including writers outside Britain. She speaks: *I shall first consider women in the grand light of human creatures, who, in common with men, are placed on this earth to unfold their faculties.* In this essay, Mary Wollstonecraft raises questions about the educational inequality between males and females and the traits that society imposes on them. She argues that if there was equality, women could achieve more than being housewives and confined to their roles. She says men already have a superiority complex due to the physical strength and contemplate women as sensitive. It is only through quality education and impartiality that women's real strengths can be measured. She also talks about the temporariness of women's beauty.

Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* deals with the question of "Who is a Woman?" and clearly speaks against the idea that biological differences should make women inferior to men. She questions the idea of women being regarded as "the other." She says, *"My body is not alone enough to describe my identity."* Women's cases have worsened over time, and they are in fact treated as property. She talks how women, beginning from their childhood until adulthood, are asked to be passive and act as objects. She claims about women being suppressed and oppressed in the hands of various societal norms like the institution of marriage.

These works have influenced people all over the world and inspired writers from all around to vocalize the struggles of women. Many Indian English women writers were influenced by them which had a huge impact on their writings. Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Kamala Markandaya, Arundhati Roy, and Ismat Chughtai are a few of them.

Analysis of Women Characters in *Voices in the city* and *Fire on the Mountain*

Anita Desai is an important novelist and short story writer who has tried to put forward the struggle of the female character in her works. She mainly chooses woman character as the protagonist to bring out the conflict between the desires of self and society. She deals with the complexities of the human experience. Her work reflects the struggle of a woman in the Patriarchal society.

Voices in the City is a 1965 published novel set in Kolkata. The novel deals with the struggle of three siblings, Monisha, Nirode, and Amla. She tries to portray the internal as well as the external struggle of the female characters in the novel. In her works, she has depicted various instances where she questions marriage as an institution. The novel begins with the meeting of Arun and Nirode. Initially, they have nothing to say, so they fake interest in the marriage party of the neighbourhood. Anita Desai gives a description of the condition through which the groom and bride go while fulfilling the ritual that is imposed on them by the society. *"The groom in a white sharkskin suit looked damp and harried, whereas the bride hid behind the fold of a squirrel sari and looked sniffed."* Fat men surrounded them and cracked indecent jokes, while a woman hanging back cried for her daughter. The writer mocks at rituals where only the daughter has to sacrifice her family and move somewhere else.

The parents of these characters don't share a good relationship as the mother is dominating and the father is a drunkard. Geeta Devi, one of the minor characters, represents the role of a traditional wife who silently sticks to her responsibility. She has been left motherless even though she has the desire to have children.

Lila and Rina's sisters, one of whom had married for the title and fame and the other for her father's will, were not happy after their marriage. Rina had married for money, and her husband sent scandalous messages to other women. Rita, the daughter of Aunt Leila, also had a short-lived marriage.

In the novel, the writer, through the character of Raghavan, depicts the problems of the displaced women, mentioning the refugee women from the city or other countries who are provided with sewing machines to earn for their survival. Jit Nair and Sarla also harbor distrust of each other. There are minor characters and their relationships with each other that face issues, leading to question about marriage and the difficulties it poses for women.

Monisha, the protagonist of the novel, is the greatest example of victimization of a patriarchal setup that steers her toward death. She is one of the members of the Bohemian Family, faces drastic changes in her life after she gets married and enters a new phase of her life. She becomes the victim of isolation and alienation. Her diary serves as a means of communication as she opens there, and we get to know about the interior conflict that she goes through. She is surrounded by distrust, ignorance, lack of privacy, and a lack of love. She is never understood by Jiban and her in-laws. She remains unsuccessful in adjusting to her new family. Her life became desolate and dull because she was not able to get the expected love from her better half. She likes reading and has read Albert Camus and Franz Kafka; she understands them well. But she gets no time to feel the books. She is compelled to touch the feet of every member. *Another pair of feet received my touch, then another.* "How they all honor their own feet! More: I count feet before faces. While keeping her hand on her head for a blessing, she is pushed down by her mother-in-law more than is needed. This makes her a victim of elderly pride. She mentions the struggle of being confined to her family, her duties of serving chapatis and listening to the lessons about cooking from her mother-in-law. She struggles with the privacy that is the right of an individual; the room that is regarded as the bridal room doesn't remain her own for long. *"Sisters-in-law lie across the four posters, discussing my ovaries and theirs; Kalyani di throws open my wardrobe in order to inspect my sari,"* she is asked questions that makes her feel like an outsider. Monisha speaks about the Bengali women who walk five paces behind their men and wear the dullest sari like *"female birds in cages."*

She feels sad for the generation of women who, hiding behind the barred windows of a dark room, spend time washing clothes, kneading dough, and murmuring verses from the Bhagavad-Gita and Ramayana. *"They spent their life waiting for nothing but demanding men."* She contrasts the death of these Bengali women with that of a tiger, who at least has dignity in his death. Monisha seemed like a caged bird; she could rarely meet people outside her family. She had no freedom to drive out to meet her brother. Her relationship is filled with fears, pains, and regrets. The worst thing happened when "she was accused of theft" because she took money from her husband's wardrobe to pay Nirode's hospital bill. When she returned home, she was surprised to see *"the big house shrunken, drawn together like a boil about to burst."*

She Also had an issue with her fallopian tube; her pain increased due to sterility, which is a stigma for married women in society. Monisha, in a conversation with Amla, says, "You must want something greater than the security of marriage," as she can totally feel the pain that marriage brings with it. Marriage brought ill-fated experiences that kept piling up in Monisha's head, and she decided to kill herself to attain freedom from this confinement. She is the victim of traditional Hindu familial ideology; her unfulfilled sexual desire, lack of love and lack of privacy contributed to her existential crisis. She finally burns herself out and gives up on life. This depicts the tragedy of a common young girl aspiring to become a good wife.

Amla is also exploited by Dharma, who is a painter. Dharma's character as a philanderer and his treatment of his daughter makes him an example of an archetype of masculine hegemony. Amla came to Calcutta to find her career as an artist, but her search for a career changed into an unfulfilled desire for love. In this novel, we find vivid instances and symbols that reflect the harsh lives of female characters in a misogynistic society.

Fire on the Mountain

The novel *Fire on the Mountain* focuses on three main female characters and their struggles. One character is the isolated widow, named Nanda Kaur, who lives in Kasauli; the other is Raka, the great-grandchild of Nanda. The next character is Ila Das Nanda's friend, who lives as a Welfare Officer in Kasauli. Anita Desai has not created women who fit well in the social chain, but rather women who are of their kind, and full of their strengths and weaknesses.

Nanda Kaul is one of the main characters in the novel who faces problems due to her failed, loveless marriage. Once she used to be the wife of the vice-chancellor of a university that was part of the busy world. Throughout her married life, she tried to adjust to satisfy her husband's needs and financial well-being. She was being treated by him as a *"mechanical apparatus."* This novel thus employs many Victorian elements, including:

- The relationship between men and women during Victorian age was demanding.
- Women in Victorian society had the role of marrying and following the interests of their husbands.

- They were expected to be well-versed in homely skills.
- Victorian men expected women to possess feminine qualities and did not give them the liberty of education.
- The whole interest of women was kept confined to the idea of marriage, as depicted by Jane Austen in *Pride and Prejudice*. “It is the universally acknowledged truth that a single wealthy man would be in search of a wife.”

- Women were prepared to be ideal wives, and their sole purpose was to bear children.
- Women were given adjectives like weak, dutiful, helpless, and incompetent. The protagonist of the novel is shaped by Victorian society- “*Mr. Kaul had wanted her always in silk, at the head of the long rosewood table in the dining room, entertaining his guests.*” Her privacy was invaded by the continuous visits of guests. She did not enjoy the life she was living so she decides to leave everything and go in isolation after becoming a widow. The novel also depicts the idea of male domination. Nanda Kaul’s husband had an extramarital affair with Ms. David. Nanda did everything possible to be a good wife even then she was cheated. When she learns about the affair, she feels devastated but tries to avoid it by not questioning and, in this way, decides to get oppressed.

Due to all this She was forced to live a life of self-exile. She reads the book “*The Pillow Book of Sei Shonagon*,” which she finds relatable, as quoted there “When a woman lives alone, her house should be extremely dilapidated; the mud wall should fall to pieces... “I greatly dislike a woman’s house when it is clear, when the look is on her face as she arranges things, and when the gate is kept tightly shut.

When Nanda was at her husband’s house, she didn’t enjoy it because “its crowding had suffocated her.”

Raka-Raka is the second main character of the play and the granddaughter of Nanda Kaul’s daughter Asha. Raka’s mother and father were living in Geneva. we see the existential perspective and the futility of life through her character. She was sent by her grandmother to Carignano to live with Nanda after her typhoid attack. She depicts the pain of an individual in the least understanding universe. Nanda Kaul’s isolation results from her obligation, restriction, and non-acceptance, whereas Raka’s reclusion comes from birth. She liked being isolated, away from home in nature, as mentioned in the novel. The title of the play is also related to her, as we see she is close to wildlife, the forest fire fascinates her, and it helps her question whether to continue with this struggle in her life or begin a new chapter. At the end of the novel, we find her setting fire to the mountain, which symbolizes her expression of freedom.

Ila Das is also one of the prominent characters who depicts the plight of women and becomes a symbol of physical, emotional, and financial struggle. She faces misfortunes throughout her life. Her brothers were sent abroad for education, but they wasted the money and also got into the habit of drinking. Their father had to pay for the loan, so he had to sell his house, carriage, and other personal property. The brothers, who again set the example of patriarchy, left the sisters penniless. They were left alone after their mother died. Both started finding jobs for themselves. Rima got a job as a piano instructor, but she lost it, as mentioned by Ila: “Young people don’t play the piano anymore; even in the Christian family, they play guitar.” Poverty was the real struggle of their lives. Ila Das worked as a social welfare officer and wrote a journal to give a column to increase income and her sister. She fought for the rights of the people and against child marriage. Even being educated, she could not fulfill the necessities of her life, she says. “Isn’t it absurd how helpless our upbringing made us? We thought we were given the best piano lessons, the best English classes, and the best French lessons—all that just to be left helpless and positively handicapped.”

Ila Das shared an instance where a family in her village was marrying their little girl, who was seven, to an old man who was wealthy. Ila tried convincing her mother as well as her father, Preet Singh, but they defy her request and she was raped. Anita Desai covers similar themes in her novels as she tries to depict the universal struggle faced by women in society. She has said, “I do not write about romance or fantasies like a dream world; I like to write about the truth.” Her question as a feminist writer is about the idea of liberation from social constraints.

C.S Laxmi’s *Yellow fish* also becomes a metaphor for women’s liberation in a male-dominating society. She uses various symbols to reflect the sufferings of women. She compares one of her characters with the yellow fish to put forward her point. In the novel, when the fisherman throws the yellow fish onto the seashore, it becomes a symbol of how men try to overpower women and control them by leaving them in any condition. C.S. Laxmi points out the idea of marriage. The fish feels free as long as it doesn’t come into the hand of the fisherman’s hands, similar to women who feel free until they are married, only to be controlled by their husbands.

Virginia Woolf, Shakespeare's sister, also deals with a similar idea where women were not given the freedom to write. They wrote with a pseudonym until Virginia Woolf started writing. She has put forward this idea by making an imaginary sister of Shakespeare named Judith. Through this, she pinpoints the Elizabethan society in that women didn't write and men were in the forefront. Even though Queen Elizabeth ruled, she was not able to do for the freedom of women. Through the story of a brother and sister who were born together, the girl was not given an equal education as the boy, but somehow, she managed to read. She had a theatre talent but was rejected in many places because, saying a woman, would look like a puppet dancing "and was made pregnant by her manager leading to her shame and suicide.

All these works by various writers impacted the Indian writers' desire to stand for the rights of women and bring out their feminist perspective through literature. The struggle women face remains the same. Characters like Judith and Monisha choose to give up their lives as if trapped in the "bubble of patriarchy."

Existentialism is the philosophical belief that human beings try to seek purpose and meaning in their lives. Existential philosophers like Friedrich Nietzsche, Fyodor Dostoevsky, and Søren Kierkegaard came up with the idea of identity. This idea is seen throughout Western history but was also expanded to India in the late 19th century. Existentialism emphasizes actions, choices, decisions, and freedom. Human beings have always tried to find meaning in their lives, but when they are not able to get the happiness they seek, they have this self-doubt about their whole existence. Albert Camus says in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, "There is only one serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide." He talks about the absurdity of life and how the solution to dealing with it lies in acceptance. In the Mahabharata, in Krishna's lesson, we find answers to all our existential problems. Existentialism in Indian English novels had a connection to Western philosophy. Many Indian writers, like Kamla Markandaya, R.K. Narayan, and Salman Rushdie, have also used existential philosophy in their works.

In *Fire on the Mountain*, there is the idea of Existentialism, which is reflected through the angst of the protagonist. The novel propagates the universal struggle of humans in the face of failures and mishappenings. Nanda Kaul lived her life like an automated machine while she was with her husband. Raka, a young girl who had negativity around her due to a bad relationship with her parents, was struggling to keep up with the meaning of her life. She found peace in nature as the Romantics in England did. It is said, "Man lives in association with nature and every change of mood in nature influences humans". Humans have often turned to nature to find solace. Ila Das, who tries to face all the problems of her life, faces the most horrifying tragic ending, leading to arguing about the whole idea of our life and its meaningless existence.

Sigmund Freud's Psychoanalysis

Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis is a set of theories that says that everyone has unconscious desires, feelings, and memories. He also talks about the three aspects of the human psyche: the Id, Ego, and Superego. This theory talks about the conflict of the unconscious self and he divided human understanding into three parts: unconsciousness, consciousness, and preconscious thought. He says the unconscious mind has a lot of influence on how we perceive things. He has used the concepts of free association, defence mechanisms, and dream analysis.

Anita Desai's novels often fall under the category of "psychological novels." In India, she is one of the most prominent writers to use this technique. Through the character's behaviour, we are able to analyse these psychological concepts. Anita Desai's female characters are hypersensitive to their husbands and undergo traumatic experiences. They find it difficult to cope with the changes in their surroundings. Id, according to Freud, is the sum of the primary needs, desires, wants, and impulses of a human being. It is a selfish, entirely unconscious, and primitive segment of human personality. The ego is the rational, organized agent that fluctuates between the ID and superego. The superego is the ethical component and moral standards that influence the ego.

In "Voices in the City," Monisha, the protagonist of the novel, goes through mental trouble. Her id represents the desire of love and physical relations with her husband and also the craving for privacy. The superego represents moral standard and societal constraints that is the family, which expects her to behave in a certain way and fulfill all the duties of a wife and daughter-in-law. She had to listen taunts about her sterility and was made to follow rituals, like touching the feet of elders. She always felt that she is doing something wrong by not being able to match the expectations of her family. She is not able to keep a balance between her id and superego, which led to development of anguish and anxiety in her. This causes a mental conflict between the two.

The novels of Anita Desai can also be looked at through the lens of gender performativity, a theory by Judith Butler that identifies the discriminated roles assigned to male and female members of society. The roles are not inborn; rather, they are an illusion created by the repetitive acts of gender. These roles are performed in accordance with the societal norms imposed by society. She says society describes feminine sex as subordinate and considers it body-oriented, whereas masculine sex is more mind-oriented. These masculine signs of economy divide men and women by dividing the power relations that affect the female. These forces create “intelligible gender,” which is the socially approved gender roles that individuals perform to fit in with society. For females, these repetitive actions include passive behaviour, soft speech, female clothing, and body standards like having curvy body, sweet voice etc.

Anita Desai's work can also be looked from the standpoint of gynocritical approach. Gynocriticism is a feminist literary criticism that examines literature from a female perspective and seeks to understand the ways in which women have been represented in literature. It aims to challenge patriarchal assumptions and disclose the gendered biases that are inherent in literary works. Anita Desai is having written broadly on the experiences of women in India. Gynocriticism can be applied to Anita Desai's works in contemplation of how she portrays women in her writing, and to explore the ways in which her writing challenges traditional gender roles and expectations. For example, in her novel “Voices in the city” she examines the lives of two sisters whose struggles she highlights that women face in a patriarchal society, and challenges the idea that women are passive and submissive. In another novel “Fire on the Mountain” she explores the experiences of two women from different generations, and how they navigate the constraints and expectations placed upon them by society. Through her writing, she exposes the ways in which gender roles are enforced and perpetuated, and challenges the idea that women are defined solely by their relationships with men. Overall, gynocriticism can be a useful tool for analysing and understanding the ways in which Anita Desai's works challenge patriarchal assumptions and offer a unique perspective on the experiences of women in India. Elaine Showalter is a prominent feminist literary critic who has heavily contributed to the development of feminist literary theory. In her essay “Towards a Feminist Poetics,” Showalter argues that feminist criticism should be concerned with identifying and analysing the ways in which gender shapes the production, reception, and interpretation of literature. Showalter's ideas about feminist criticism can be applied to Desai's works in order to analyze how gender shapes the literary texts, and how the text in turn forms our understanding of gender.

The Feminist phase emerged in the 1980s and was characterized by a more overtly political approach to feminist criticism. Feminist critics tried to uncover and challenge the ways in which gender shapes literature and the ways in which women are marginalized within literary texts and the literary establishment. *The Female phase* emerged in the 1990s, Critics in this phase were interested in exploring the ways in which different women's experiences are shaped by their race, class, sexuality, and other such social factors.

Anita Desai's works would likely come under the Feminist phase of feminist literary criticism, as her writing is often characterized by a political engagement with gender and an overt critique of patriarchal norms and expectations. Desai's works challenge traditional gender roles and offer a feminist perspective on the experiences of women in India, making her an important figure in the development of feminist literary criticism.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, women have been subjected to domination and are suppressed in the male-dominated world and history proves it. In India, often mental health is not considered a serious issue, especially if it concerns females. Psychological novels were prominent in English literature, but Anita Desai brought this technique to India too through the analysis of the female psyche.

Anita Desai is an important novelist and short story writer who has tried to put forward the struggle of the female character in her works. She mainly chooses a woman's character as the protagonist to bring out the conflict between the desires of self and society. She deals with the complexities of the human experience. Her work reflects the struggle of a woman in patriarchal society. She has very well talked about feminine sensibility. This paper would help to outline the situations that women in India go through. Be it from different social backgrounds, different age groups, or different endurance capacities they hold, their struggle remains the same. It will help to pinpoint the casualties of women in a male-centric world and ask questions about how to find equality and respect for women all around. To look at the works through the lens of various theories and comparisons would help the reader to get a broader idea about the text.



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