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## **DESAI'S OUTLOOK ON HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS IN HER NOVELS**

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A study of the novels of Anita Desai suggests that the portrayal of human relationships is the central and dominant concern in her novels. In the words of Desai, "I think all human relationships are inadequate. I have worked this out. Basically everyone is solitary. I think involvement in human relationships in this world invariably leads to disaster" (Dalmia 13). Thus all her novels depict the inadequacy of relationships because of which her characters are isolated from their world. This leads to their disastrous state of mind. Instead of presenting the characters in conflict with people around them, Desai keeps her focus on their conflict with themselves.

The broad gamut of human relationships presented in Anita's novels suggests only fragments of autobiographical element in her novels. The relationships that she presents seem to have some bearings of seclusion, racial and cultural barricades, clash between conventionality and modernism, she suggests some touches of the personal experiences in her novels.

Desai's characters, Maya, Monisha, Amla, Nirode, Nanda, Bim, Sita, Sarala, Raka are the reflection of her own image. Through them, she expresses what she has already experienced or desired to experience. In her interview with Yashodhara Dalmia, she hints: "In countless small ways, the scenes and settings certainly belong to my life. But the major characters and the major events are either entirely imaginary or an amalgamation of several characters and happenings" (Dalmia 13). The statement helps us to deduce that her novels are only slightly autobiographical. However, it is not easy to deduce that her personal life relationships do not match with the relationships she depicts in her novels.

In Anita's novels, marriages are sour and discordant. The partners do not have a cordial and a fulfilling relationship. Primarily her novels are women centric. True romance finds no room in the lives of most of Desai's protagonists. Most of her women characters suffer in their

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marriages. They turn psychotic and act in an extreme manner. Maya in *Cry, the Peacock* ends up killing her husband Gautama. Monisha, in *Voices in the City* commits suicide. Sita in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* and Nanda in *Fire on the Mountain* take up a life of a recluse. In most of her works temperamental incompatibilities of husband and wife are responsible for their broken conjugal bonds.

Desai's women protagonists, Maya, Monisha, Nanda, Sita, Sarla are not satisfied with their marital relationships and hence are frustrated. In most of the cases, these women are themselves responsible for the unhappy and tense relationship. They act very sensitive on mundane incidents. These women do not have smooth relationships because their tastes and temperaments are not in harmony with their husbands and with the surroundings. "They are always in search of a more authentic existence than what is provided to them" (Kaskari 3).

Sita in *Where Shall We Go This Summer ?* cannot adjust to the violence and other harsh realities of life and wants to find peace. She leaves her family relationship to go to the island. Anita Desai portrays women with the fundamental problems of modern life and shows their predicament in the context of their relationships with their counterparts. Her women do not want to shed their identity under the shadow of their husbands, but helpless in doing so, they fall prey to frustration and isolation resulting in abnormal relationships. Such women want to live in isolation and make their husbands to do the same. None of them is prepared to compromise. Consequently, their relationships suffer.

An important feature in the novels of Desai is the way woman is pressurized to come to adjust to the situations around her and sacrifice herself for the sake of relationship. Tara in *Clear Light Of Day* is one of her characters, who is under subordination of her husband. She adjusts and compromises in all possible ways to be in tune with her husband Bakul. Some critics advocate such kind of surrender and camouflage the sufferings by terming it as understanding in the relationship. Nevertheless, some other critics raise a question – why the women only? Why is she made to compromise, to adjust, to forgive for the sake of relationships.

Relationship between couples, as depicted by Desai, is generally tense. Sometimes, such tensions are caused by fairly frivolous matters. Relationships become so tense that the women seek refuge in living a life of a recluse in some distant place or accepting death as their unavoidable fate. Her characters "strive to achieve harmony and tranquility by

alienating themselves, by escaping from the demands, and expectation inherent in human ties” (Kaskari 3).

Relationships in Desai’s fiction are generally determined by the involvement of her protagonists in either the other’s life or the life of themselves. When they are lost in their own secluded world, they do not pay heed to the cry of others. Their ‘ego’ comes in the way. The feeling of ‘self’ is vital for them. Ridden by this feeling, their attitude generally turns rebellious. As a result, their relationship gets affected. The frustrations keep growing up and her characters end up acting in an extreme manner and become the victim of self-destruction.

In her novels, it is rare to find any woman involved in an extra-marital relationship. There are insinuations that Nirode’s mother has an extra-marital relationship but it has not been mentioned expressly. The mention of such relationships is very subtle. It never comes into light through frank discussion. Hence, it can be deduced that though she treats the subject of man-woman relationship as her choicest subject, yet description of sexual passions is absent in her novels. She focuses more on the emotional relationship in the marriage rather than the physical relationship. Symbolic description is enough to convey the meaning. Desai seems to be of the view that adjustments or compromises, physical as well as mental, are essential to a healthy man-woman relationship.

A mutual understanding is the key to a successful man-woman relationship. It has to be from both the sides. If only one partner makes adjustments and puts in efforts to make the relationship work, that partner is bound to suffer. In Desai’s novels, this sufferer is generally the woman. It is because the woman does not suit the expectations of her counterpart, being a mix of modern and traditional. Likewise, the male protagonists do not clear the test of her female’s expectations of providing her a dreamy world of her imagination. Consequently, the relationship reaches on the verge of breaking.

In Desai’s novels, we find women full of confidence and courage initially, however, as the story progresses they are pressurized by the circumstances. They have two choices - either put up with the going circumstances or live in agony. However, her women are eager to show that they can live even without their incompatible marital relationship.

The role of communication is very significant to maintain healthy marital relationship. A number of man-woman relationships suffer from lack of communication. As a result, there

occurs a large communication gap. Lack of communication deprives the partners of the opportunities to mutually try to get over differences and sort out the reasons of dissonance.

Maya in *Cry, the Peacock* is incapable of communicating her feelings. On the other hand, her husband is equally indifferent to her silent emotions and feelings. He does not have value for such sentiments. Maya never tries to discuss anything with him openly. Ultimately, this leads to an unfortunate end.

In the cases of Monisha and Sita, communication gap can largely be held responsible for the tense lives and relationships that they hold with their husband and the in-laws. Monisha in *In Custody* always longs for some space to live privately and so she prefers seclusion, seeking silence and loneliness. This is practically not possible living in a joint family where one needs to indulge with all the family members. Consequently, she fails to develop any understanding with the other members living in the house.

The element of love is missing in their relationship. The situation becomes so extreme that she commits suicide. While Gautama and Jiban are indifferent husbands, Raman, to an extent, is quite the opposite. He is an understanding husband. He is as pragmatic as male protagonists in other novels, still he is equally conscious about his wife. When he tries to make amends, he gets the positive response from Sita and she accepts to return to him.

Sarla in *In Custody* has been depicted as a traditional woman, who is very unhappy with her marital relationship. Her frustrations make her weaker. She never protests strongly against what makes her unhappy. As a result, there is a large communication gap between Sarla and her husband. The husband does not take the grumblings seriously and thus is never able to understand her real feelings. Consequently, the relationship suffers and grows sour.

Desai's women, regardless of their riches, are not satisfied as they experience void in their lives. Consequently, they miserably fail in developing harmonious relationships with their husbands and the others. They are very sensitive about their ego and that to an extent makes them turn a blind eye towards everything else around them, including marital-bonding. All through their life, they try to assuage their sufferings rather than try to find a way to end it. They are aware that most of the anguish germinates from an unhappy relationship still they do not try to spend any effort towards establishing some understanding with their counterpart and suture the relationship.

After going through her novels it can safely be deduced that conjugal bonding needs both sacrifice and understanding on the part of both the partners without which a cordial relationship can not be expected. In the existing set up of society, the greatest problem of the couples is the scarcity of time. In most of the cases, they both are bound to go for work. Therefore, it is all the more essential for them to find ways to establish and maintain a sense of trust and understanding in the relationship by communicating well and nurturing it with love and patience.

Childhood is the foundation of one's personality because its experiences play a very important part in the making up of an individual's personality. A child's relation with its parents is the most critical as childhood impressions remain throughout the life. Hence, childhood deserves special attention. Anita Desai presents multiple colors of parent-child relationship.

In her novels, the parent-child relationship is never fulfilling. Children are the victims of either the parents' over-indulgence or over-negligence. Over-indulgence pampers them and when in their adult life they face slightest of the rejection, they fall into depression and take the mask of a rebel. They seek the same care, love and affection from their future partners. Girls compare their husbands with their fathers and expect him to behave the same way. Children, when they grow up, try to copy and behave the same way as their parents did. Girls try to copy their mothers generally and boys try to copy their fathers. In fact, they wish to shape their future on the traits of their parents.

Anita Desai has depicted these filial relationships in a very convincing manner.

In *Clear Light Of Day*, we find the depiction of filial-relationship which is very weak. The children's relationship with their parents does not satisfy their emotional needs required at that tender age. The four Dass family kids (Tara, Bim, Raja and Baba) are rejected by their parents at a very early age. The impact of this negative relation works upon her mind and later leads to their alienation and distressed life.

Desai, from different viewpoints, lays stress on the significance of pleasant filial relationships. The filial relationship, like any other, requires reciprocity. Parents expect obedience while children need love, affection, and security. Children see themselves secured with their parents. Honest, frank and affectionate communication between children and parents is necessary for a happy domestic life. The concept of 'sweet home' stands for homes

where mutual respect for values is observed. According to the psychologists, the growth of children into excellent personalities capable of leading meaningful lives depends largely on an atmosphere of domestic happiness. According to Anita the peace lies in "home." It lies in harmonious mutual bonding.

Maya, Monisha, Sita and Tara, having left their homes, feel uprooted. They try to adjust and adapt themselves to the new situations; they are gripped by the feelings of annoyance and solitude. They dwell on their past while they need to live in present. They can neither get rid of their past nor completely adapt to their present. A person may adapt to the new situations and customs but one cannot give up what he gathered during his childhood from his parents. What he learns from his parents and surroundings in his childhood, serves as the foundation for all his growth and achievement in later life.

Desai deals with the affluent urban class. In her novels, we find glimpse of different relationships – relationship between mothers and daughters; fathers and daughters; sons and mothers and the like. Anita throws light on how these relationship affect the psychology of these protagonists. Maya, Sita, Uma, Monisha and Bimla are a few characters who suffer from patriarchy in one form or the other.

In *Cry, the Peacock*, Maya is a child born in an old orthodox family, Maya enjoyed life which provided her love and pleasure along with discipline in her father's house. She is a pampered child, surrounded with all comforts and marks of affluence. As a young girl, living under the protected roof of her father's house at Lucknow, she has the affectionate and kindly care of her father who is over-indulgent towards her. "For Maya's father, loving a child means creating a world of sugar and candy for her." "Her father never says 'no' to her, never reprimands her for anything" (Pathania 107). She becomes nostalgic and her attachment with her father can be sole consolation for her. This indulgent love she received in the childhood ruins her after marriage.

The novel *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* throws light on how negligence of parents in the lives of their children create havoc in their lives. The protagonist, Sita, is deprived of all motherly care and affection for no fault of hers. To make it worse, she is completely neglected by her father. Later, her situation becomes more precarious when she comes to know about her father's illicit relationship with Phoolmaya. Her husband, in later years, finds

himself unable to understand the hostility that Sita attaches with to every incident. This is the psychological outcome of her childhood impressions.

*Fasting, Feasting* presents a different aspect of filial relationships i.e. parents' preference of their boy child (Arun) over their girls (Uma and Aruna) which leads to the disharmony in the lives of two of their kids Arun and Uma.

Nirode in *Voices in the City* seeks the real meaning of life in context of various relationships but does not find any meaning. May be, he is an escapist. He is troubled to see that his mother has a romantic affair with Major Chadha. How can a son approve of such a relationship? This deeply affects his mind and he wants to flee from his own life. Nirode can arguably be accused of being more concerned about the social norms than the emotional needs and feelings of his own mother. His mother needs a companion in her life. However, the illicit relationship has a deep impact on Nirode and he suffers from multiple failures in his life.

Siblings play a unique role in each other's lives. They get introduced to the concept of companionship through each other. Anita Desai presents that the relationship siblings share with one another plays a vital role in shaping up their psyche and their personality. In most of her novels the protagonists do not enjoy a healthy relationship with their sibling thereby becoming the major cause of their alienation and worthlessness in life. Be it Sita in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* or Bim in *Clear Light of Day* or Uma in *Fasting, Feasting*, the only exception in this is the relationship of Nirode and Monisha in *Voices in the City*, where both of them understand very well each other but still can not do anything about each other's troublesome situations.

Anita has authentically presented the relationship between the friends. She talks about the characters who are failed by their friends. Deven in *In Custody*, remains loyal to his friends though he is aware of the cunning designs of these friends. Though Murad never does anything to help Deven faithfully, yet he is always there to suggest new ways to fulfill Deven's dream project. Nur exploits him too. Their friendship, in fact, is self-seeking. Baum and Lotte in *Baumgartner's Bombay* truly support each other, though they herself are in stressful situation. Both of them stand true to the test of friendship.

Desai's narrative gleams through various bonds such as great-grandmother-great granddaughter (*Fire on the Mountain*), a private college lecturer- a creative Urdu writer (*In*

*Custody*), a virgin widow as a caretaker of four Das family children (*Clear Light Of Day*) and a man-pet (*Baumgartner's Bombay*) in the works studied by me. All these relationships have significant impact on the psyche of various characters. It is the psyche of the person, which matters in the process of decision-making.

The most common themes in her novels is the complexity of human relationships. She portrays these relationships keeping focus on the psychological reflections, but never tries to impose her own viewpoints in the matter. She leaves this to her readers.

Anita Desai's vision of life centers around the nucleus of internal states of mind of her characters. It is clear that she weaves her plots around the agony her characters face living in these relationships. She uses all the tools of her craftsmanship only to highlight the central theme of the given relationships in certain circumstances. Therefore, "her images, symbols and myths are written in the language of interior thoughts. All these images reveal the inner nature of her character with their obsessions, changing moods and psychic aberration. Her novels bear the testimony of this fact" (Lal 35). She clearly establishes this fact that harmonious relationship are really necessary for the well-being of an individual. Discordant and sourness in bondings affect an individual's psyche leading to alienation and disaster.

In present times, human being is becoming materialistic. He is running day in and day out to amass wealth and other comforts. In this mad race after money, he is forgetting the real meaning of all his relations. Hollowness and utility are the two characteristics which can be attributed to modern human relations.

Therefore, in such a scenario, it becomes all the more essential to save and bring music in whatever 'relations' have been left in one's life. After reading Desai's novels, the fact can easily be deduced that proper understanding, communication and patience are the three magical words which can nurture any relationship (man-woman, filial, sibling, friend) and can bring perfect harmony and happiness in life.



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