

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

**Societal Reflections in Anita Desai's Novels**V.S Bindhu<sup>1</sup>, \*R Pranesh Kumar<sup>2</sup><sup>1</sup>Assistant Professor, Department of English, Noorul Islam University, Tamil Nadu, India.<sup>2</sup>Senior Assistant Professor, VIT University, Vellore, India.

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper focuses on the societal reflections in Anita Desai's novels and it further explores the serious day-to-day issues faced by women in a male dominated society. The status of women in India has witnessed many ups and downs. Women writings have contributed much to the growth of literature. Desai's sensitive portrayal of the personal struggle of women in contemporary society brings out the challenging aspects of their lives. As a woman, Desai has assumed an un-paragoned role by exploring the emotional world of women and placing them in an inhospitable terrain.

**Keywords:** Plight, Society, Freedom, Woman, Alienation.

**1. SOCIETAL REFLECTIONS**

The Indo Anglican novelist Anita Desai explores the plight of Indian woman and their psyche and goes on to the complexities of human existence. As Desai is a keen observer of the society, her novels have a main theme of alienation, detachment, Man-Woman relationship which are vividly seen in the Indian society. According to Aristotle, Tragedy is the imitation of certain kinds of people and actions. Plato's theory of Mimesis states that all art is an imitation of life. Desai's writing portrays the exact life in the society. "Art is said to be a reflection of life"

Desai's keen observance of the society draws her special attention to the position of women in the contemporary society. The novels of Anita Desai mainly focused on family issues and the causes behind the separation of women from their families. The fiction of Anita Desai is relevant to all times because it reveals the day-to-day incidents happening in the society. Indian Women generally find it difficult to accommodate the role of both bread winners and domestic caretakers. The plight of women in India is distressing and they often face a deplorable condition. Although these conditions are improved by the government and voluntary groups, a lot of measures still remain to be done to ensure their meaningful life. Gender Bias, absence of freedom, crime against

women, poverty, denial of education, inadequate facilities for professional training, absence of employment opportunities, are some of the problems faced by women in the society. Indian women suffer from gender bias of extreme nature. The society is partial to men even in the matter of food, nourishment, education and other basic necessities of life. In Anita Desai's novel *Fasting Feasting* [1], the male character Arun is imposed with all necessities of life. He who is not good at studies is educated abroad. In contrast, the female character Uma suffers social impoverishment. Necessities and care are being denied for a female child even from her family. Thus gender bias seems to be deeply rooted in the family in which the parents are the root cause for this nature of discrimination. Education is denied to girls; particularly in rural areas of the country as the parents believe they are only fit to do household activities. They are not supposed to be outside the four walls of the home. Women's suppression is clearly portrayed in Desai's novel *Village by the Sea* [2]. The character Lila had to leave her schooling and stay at home to look after her two sisters.

Women experience social evils in society. They have been treated cruelly which affects them both physically and mentally. In Desai's novel *Fasting Feasting*, Uma's cousin Anamika has to face the cruel torture imposed

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by her husband and mother-in-law. "Anamika is beaten regularly by her mother-in-law while her husband stood by and approved – or at least, did not object" [1]. She is beaten by her husband even when she is pregnant. "She had had a miscarriage at home, it was said, after a beating. It was said she could not bear more children" [1].

The present day dynamic Indian woman has improved a lot. They occupy high positions and achieve more to their credit. In the Vedic age, women were worshipped as goddesses. Later, during the reign of Mughal emperors, status of women declined and in the British period, women were treated as slaves. Today Indian women are economically independent. Women's role in society is burdened with two kinds of jobs- her work within the house and the work outside. She does not find any time to enjoy the fruits of her economic independence. Women's labour and effort at home and work place is not recognized in the society. She manages to place herself in an acceptable position.

Freedom of mobility is restricted to women when compared to the freedom of men. Women being considered as a weaker sex in the society, have to depend on their father in their childhood and adolescence, their husbands after their marriage and their children in their old age. In Desai's novels, most of the male characters enjoy life without bothering about their wife's tendency and temperament. The women characters suffer a lot because of the difference in their attitudes. They are culturally as well as emotionally dependent on man and any disruption in relationship proves to be a loss of self. Desai's unique nature of writing gives voice to the psychological, emotional as well as physical needs of women which are hardly considered in Indian society. In the novel *Cry the Peacock* [3] the female character Maya finds it difficult to cope with the practical world of her husband Gautama. Naturally it leads to misunderstanding, worries and quarrels which disturb their relationship. "One might have said that our marriage was grounded upon the friendship of two men and the mutual respect in which they held each other rather than upon anything else." [3]. Desai points out the reason for quarrels in families and illustrates how such quarrels affect the peace of the family. This kind of disharmony between husband and wife can directly influence the society. Maya

is alive through all the senses and lives intensely for each moment. But Gautama is remote, detached and they lead a strained relationship because of their difference in temperaments. The fragile bond created through their marriage gets fractured when Maya kills Gautama because of extreme anger and then commits suicide.

In the novel *Voices in the City* the hero Nirode remains as a dominating figure. The sufferings of an individual due to the absence of meaningful relationship are primarily focused in Anita Desai's novels. The illegal affair of Nirode's mother makes him obsessed and it also causes dissonance in husband-wife relationship. Monisha and Jiban's marital life is depicted in this novel. Jiban believes that every woman has to take an active role in domestic affairs under the authority of strict mother-in-law. Monisha being alienated from her husband and her family leads a starved life. Loneliness, lack of communication and love, sterility, the stress experienced while living in a joint family and the lack of love and care from her husband influence her to commit suicide. Anita Desai probes deeply into some problems faced by women in their marital life and its reflections in the society. Desai has given a real and pathetic picture of a lovely married woman in the novel *Where Shall We Go this Summer?* [4]. The problems faced by the sensitive woman Sita in her married life are pathetic. Desai tries to find solution for the problems such as individual complexes, different attitudes and fear but she finds marital discord as her only solution. Sita represents her world of emotion and Raman represents the prose of life and the acceptance of norms and regulations of the society. He is unable to understand his wife Sita who reacts against every incident. Sita is alienated from her father during her childhood as her father is a doctor, who is busy with his patients. After marriage her expectations are shattered into pieces by her husband's failure to understand her expectations. Her married life ends in marital discord due to the wide gap and the increased tension between them. Woman's feelings are not at all respected in a male-dominated society and it is the woman who has to change her life style to suit a man's need and not man. Whenever a woman fails to adjust herself, there arise problems.

The novel *Fire on the Mountain* [5] tends to focus on the feminine Sensibility and also women's inherent desire to know herself in terms of her identity. Nanda Kaul's husband Prof Kaul had an illicit affair with another woman. So he did not enjoy a warm relationship with his wife "To the outer world they were known as ideal couple, but inside, their life remained barren" [5]. Desai describes the sufferings of the innocent Nanda Kaul and manifests her tragic vision of life in this novel.

The novel *Village by the Sea* [2] is about an alcoholic fisherman, his sick wife and their four children-Lila, Bela, Kamal and Hari. In this novel, Anita Desai describes human relations, man's relation with woman and man's relation with god. The invention of modern technology and machinery has made life more commercial. Naturally the innocence and purity of humans vanishes due to this technology. Before the development of industries, family bonds in the village remained pleasant and strong.

The emotional relation between the two main characters Bim and his sister Tara is described in Desai's *Clear Light of the Day* [6]. Bim and her brother Raja had a close emotional relationship. Raja is taken care of by his brother Bim when he is sick. After his recovery, he wishes to go away to a distant place and marry Benazir, daughter of Hyder Ali. "I will go -go-to Hyderabad. HyderAli Sahib asked me to come --- I have to begin my life sometime, don't I? You don't want me to spend all my life down in this hole, do you?" [6]. Time has the ability to change even the close human relationship whether it be a brother or a sister. Without understanding the love and care given by his sister, Raja leaves Bim alone. This is later understood by Bim and recognizes the value of time, the only powerful weapon to transform the old relationship which they enjoyed during childhood. Bim realizes that "the only way to happiness is to acknowledge and accept all" Marital discord is also seen in this novel. Lack of adjustment between Tara and her husband lead to an unhappy marital life. Such incidents and the people who are related to these incidents reflected in the novel can also be seen in the society. Desai tries to portray the city life in his novel *In Custody* [7]. Devan has to confront the problem of facing the society and also the responsibilities in his

family [7]. Devan and his wife Sarala lead an unhappy marital life because of their different temperament. In a city like Delhi, men indulge in extracurricular activities so they find less time to spend with their family.

"Anita Desai's writing is an effort to discover and then to underline and finally to convey the true significance of things" (*The Times of India*) [8-11]. Desai takes up the complexities of human relationship as a contemporary issue and makes the characters to experience those complexities and gain their individuality in the modern society. As her themes are all universal issues, her novels are attracted by readers worldwide. Desai's woman characters are all problem facers and they learn through their bitter experiences. Every problem has its own solution and the solution does not come from outside. It is the individual, especially women who should know to tackle problems by identifying solutions from them.

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