

# THE MEN AND THEIR ALIENATION IN DESAI'S FICTION: UNRAVELLING THEIR INNER WORLD

DR KANU PRIYA VERMA

ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR

MAHARISHI UNIVERSITY OF INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY, LUCKNOW

## Abstract: -

The subjects mostly dealt with by Anita Desai in most of her novels are alienation and despair which is linked with the existential problems of men.

By linking the past and the present of the characters, in *Clear Light of Day* Anita Desai tries to show their different identities and temperaments.

Anita Desai not only delves deep into the female psyche, she also delves deep into the male psyche and has deep understanding about it. Her novels *In Custody*, *Voices in the City*, *Bye-Bye Blackbird*, *Baumgartners Bombay* and *Journey to Ithaca*, make a shift from the earlier novels where she had the female protagonists but here the main protagonists of the novel are male and themes also cover existentialism immigration, alienation etc.

**Key Words:** - existentialism, immigration, alienation, male psyche

The subjects mostly dealt with by Anita Desai in most of her novels are alienation and despair which is linked with the existential problems of men.

Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day* deals with the life of two brothers and two sisters, who live in a house in Old Delhi. The despair, isolation and agony of a young woman have been beautifully portrayed in the novel. The novel does not have any hyper sensitive character as her other novels. The novel throws light upon the relationship between two sisters Bim and Tara and their past life.

By linking the past and the present of the characters, Anita Desai tries to show their different identities and temperaments. The present circumstances of the two sisters Bim and Tara are very different and their view towards their past life if also very different.

Tara's Life changes after her marriage with a diplomat who stays abroad. Her returning home after many years develops pleasant memories about her past within her. When she returns to her house she sees that everything at her house in the same, nothing has changed. She says to Bim :

...how everything goes on and on here and never changes. I used to think about it all and it is all exactly the same, whenever we come home."

[C.L.O.D Pg. 4]

Tara imagines that " a part of her was sinking languidly down into the passive pleasure of having returned to the familiar. [C.L.O.D Pg. 10]

Her husband Bakul does not like her to be engrossed in her past memories. She aggravates his anger when she refuses to go with him to Delhi. He says:

So, I only have to bring you home for a day, Tara, and you go back to being the hopeless person you were before I married you. And you won't let me help you. I thought I had taught you different life, a different way of living. Taught you to execute your will. Be strong. Face challenges. Be decisive. But, no, the day you enter yours old home, you are as weak-willed and helpless and defeatist as ever.

[C.L.O.D Pg. 17]

The difference between the two sisters can be seen on in the following lines:

Physically smaller and weaker than Bim, Tara lacked her vigour, her stamina. The noise, the dense populace, the hustle and jostle of school made her shrink into a still smaller, paler creature... Whereas, school brought out Bims' natural energy and vivacity that was kept damped at home school to Tara was a terror, a flight... To Bim, school and its teachers and lessons were a challenge to her natural intelligence and mental curiosity. Tara, on the other hand, wilted when confronted by a challenge, shrank back into a knot of horrified stupor....

[C.L.O.D Pg. 123]

In an interview with Sunil Sethi, Desai comments on the novel thus:

My novel is set in Old Delhi and records the tremendous change that a Hindu family goes through since 1947. Basically my pre-occupation was with recording the passage of time. I was trying to write a four-dimensional piece on how a family's life moves backwards and forward in a period of time. My novel is about time as a destroyer, as a preserver, and about what the bondage of time does to people. I have tried to tunnel

under the mundane surface of domesticity.<sup>1</sup>

Time has brought about a change in the lives and relation of brothers and sisters. In an interview Anita Desai herself says:

Basically, my pre-occupation was with recording the passage of time. I was trying to write a four-dimensional piece on how a family's life moves backwards and forwards in a period of time.<sup>2</sup>

Her brother Raja married Benazir, the daughter of Hyder Ali Sahib, their former landlord. Bim is deeply hurt when her brother Raja, after the death of his father-in-law writes to her that :

I want to answer you that now he [father-in-law, Hyder Ali] is dead and has left all his property to us, you may continue to have it at the same rent. I shall never think of raising it or of selling the home as long as you and Baba need it.

[C.L.O.D Pg. 26]

The humiliation and agony, which Bim feels by Raja's behaviour pierces deep into her heart. It can be seen in her conversation with Tara:

But I still have it [the letter] I still keep it in my desk- to remind me. Whenever I begin to wish to see Raja again or wish he could come and see us, then I take out that letter and read it again...You say I should come to Hyderabad with you for his daughter's wedding. How can I? How can I enter his house-my landlord's house? I, such a poor tenant? Because of me, he can't raise the rent or sell the house and make a profit- imagine that. That sacrifice."

[C.L.O.D Pg. 28]

Bim has to undergo adverse circumstances. After the death of her parents and marriage of Tara, the responsibility of sick brother Raja, retarded brother Baba and old aunt Mira. Bearing all these burdens and fulfilling all her responsibilities he remains single. After Aunt Mira's death she is left totally isolated with her retarded brother Baba. There is nothing to cherish from her past life for Bim. Bim alone looks after her mentally retarded brother Baba. Her despair can be seen in the following lines:

Tara and Bakul, and behind them the Miras, and some where in the distance, Raja and Benazir, only to torment her and mosquito- like, sip her blood, All of them fed on her blood...Now when they were full, they rose in swarms, humming away, turning their

backs upon her.

[C.L.O.D. Pg. 153]

Bim feels frustrated fulfilling, all the duties and responsibilities. In this anger she says to Baba:

...but I might have to send you to live with Raja, I come to ask you...what would you think of that? Are you willing to go and live with Raja in Hyderabad." [C.L.O.D. Pg. 103]

Bim feels isolated, alienated and fragmented when she is separated from others.

Bim thinks of selling her business shares to Mr. Sharma and sending Baba to Raja. But then she gives up and feels:

...only home and yearning for them all, and if there were hurts, these quashes and wounds in her side that bled, then it was only because her love was imperfect and did not encompass them thoroughly enough and because it had flaws and in-adequacies did not extend to all equally. [C.L.O.D. Pg. 163]

Bim sees the clear light of Day and comes to the realization that:

Her love for Raja had too much of a battering, she had felt herself so humiliated by his going and leaving her, by his reversal of role from brother to landlord, that it had never recovered and become the tall, shining thing it had been once. Her love for Baba was too inarticulate, too unthinking, she had not given him enough thought, her concern had not been keen, acute enough. All these would have to be mended, these rents and tears, she would have to mend, and make her not whole so that it would suffice her passage through the ocean. Somehow she would have to forgive Raja that unforgivable letter. Somehow she would have to wrest forgiveness from Baba for herself. There were great rents torn in the net that the knife of love had made. Stains of blood that the arrow of love had left. [C.L.O.D. Pg. 165-66]

Her anger melts away. She is deeply hurt when she comes to the realization that Raja has turned his attention towards Tara because of her indifferent attitude. After reading *Life of Aurazeb* her attitude changes totally. She tells Tara to bring Raja with her whole family when she comes back forgetting all her anger.

In her novel *Voices in the City* shifts the scene from Delhi and paints a picture of the City of Calcutta where the characters search for their existence in this urban life. The main characters in the novel *Voices in the City* search for their true existence in this urban life. The novel shows the story of two brothers and two

sisters Arun, Nirode, Amla and Monisha. The people come to the city of Calcutta and get caught in the unfavourable circumstances of life. In this connection B.Ram Chandra Rao comments thus:

Most of the characters are either caught in the traps which are partly of their own making or are feverishly trying to get out of traps laid by others. <sup>3</sup>

The city of Calcutta also plays a major part in the novel, its descriptions build up the atmosphere of the novel. It shows the motion of life there. It can be seen in the description of the city:

On all sides the city pressed down, alight, aglow and stirring with its own marsh-bred monster life that, like an ogre, kept one eye open through sleep and waking. Calcutta, Calcutta-like the rattle of the reckless train: Calcutta, Calcutta- the very pulse beat in its people's veined wrists. The streets where slaughtered sheep hung beside bright tinsel tassels to adorn oiled black braids, and a syphilitic beggar and his entire syphilitic family came rolling down on barrows, like the survivors of an atomic blast, then paused to let a procession of beautifully laundered Bengalis in white carry their marigold-decked Durga-Lakshmi, or Saraswati, or Kali-on their shoulders down to the Ganges, amidst drums and fevered chanting. In one shadowy doorway an old-crone lit a fire, mumbling. Beneath a brief canvas roof a skeletal old gnome with electric white hair served *kebabs*, still sizzling on their red-hot spikes... From the balconies above the streets long *saris* hung limply down, and voices murmured, reciting prayers or lessons...Calcutta, stirred as though in answer, as though it were a living spirit Calcutta was merely the bazaars ringed by cinemas, slaughter-houses and pan booths, but also the history of those old Georgian houses that lined still, gaslit streets, their sweeping marble staircases and deep pillared verandas, their shuttered windows that seem to enclose and hide their memories of the balls and crinolines and house-drawn carriages of a hundred and two hundred years ago. The city was as much atmosphere as adour, as much a haunting ghost of the past as a frenzied passage towards early death."

[V.I.T.C. Pgs. 41-42]

Monisha finds the city sickening, Amla calls it a monster city. She says to Nirode: "...this city, this city of yours, it conspires against all of us who wish to enjoy it, doesn't it?" [V.I.T.C. Pg. 153]

The novel shows a comparison between two brothers Arun and Nirode. Arun being a bright child, receives the love of the family, goes to London for further studies and becomes a success. Nirode on the other hand becomes a middle class journalist who "cut[s] out long strips of newspaper and paste and file them, occasionally venturing out to verify a dull fact in some airless office room.

In this connection R.K. Srivastava comments thus:

Her sensitive nature makes him shrink from working for a meaningless job under any man. An artist cannot survive in a society, which insists on doing a mechanical valueless job, devoid of personal element which is so vital for art.....hence Nirode's dissatisfaction with the impersonal newspaper work and his final rejection of it. <sup>4</sup>

Nirode tells Amla that he wants to

...earn only-as much as I need immediately, never so much as to spill into a bank". To him 'aloneness alone was the sole natural condition, aloneness alone the treasure worth treasuring [V.I.T.C. P.24]

He tells David ' I want to fail...quickly, then I want to see if I have the spirit to start moving again, towards my next failure. I want to move from failure to failure, step by step to rock bottom. I want to explore that depth. When you climb a ladder, all you find at the top is space, all you can do is to leap off and fall to the bottom. I want to get there without the meaningless climbing. I want to descend quickly.

Nirode feels "to leap out of window and end it all instead of smearing this endless sticky glue of senselessness over the world. Better not to live.

He thinks of living a life which is beyond the joys and pains of life. B. Ram Chandra Rao avers:

From hack-work in newspapers office Nirode turns to the editing of a magazine and just when it is about to succeed abandons it, writes a play, then abandons it, and often a brush with death comes back to life, but this time with a different outlook. He has learnt the great lesson that anything that is of any value to oneself should be kept a Great Secret.<sup>5</sup>

His sister Monisha also like him feels isolated and lonely. She finds herself a stranger in her husband Jiban's house. She wants isolation but is unable to get in her in-laws house. Monisha says :

What a waste it had been. This life enclosed in a locked container merely as an observer and so imperfect ...I have not given birth. I have not attended death."

[V.I.T.C. Pg. 240]

Monisha does not get the love and understanding from her husband Jiban. She says "If only love existed that is Binding, that is free from rules, obligations, complicity there is no such love. It is not there in my relation with Jiban which is filled only by loneliness." [V.I.T.C. Pg. 116]

She says to herself:

Has this city a conscience at all, this Calcutta that holds it's head between its knees and grins toothlessly up at me from beneath a bottom black with dirt that it sits on.

[V.I.T.C. Pg. 116]

She hangs between life and death and in the end chooses death.

Amla, a commercial artist from Bombay comes to Calcutta to take up a job in an advertising firm. She is much bold and full of vigour when she comes to Calcutta but later finds the city a "monster city." as she feels frustrated and disappointed here.

So in the novel city plays a major part. It shows that a man has to face the tragedies of life.

Lionel Trilling avers:

The novel is a perpetual quest for reality the field of its researches being always the social world, the material of its analysis, being always manners as the indication of the direction of man's soul. <sup>7</sup>

Anita Desai like many of her contemporaries writes about the feelings and emotions of expatriates. *Bye-Bye Black bird* deals with the life of Indian immigrants, their homesickness, alienation, rootedness etc. in the lives of Dev, Adit and Sarah.

In this novel Adit thinks about the pros and cons of living in England, and his longing for his native country India. Adit living in England loves the country and praises it. He says: "I love England. I admire England. I can appreciate her history and poetry as much as any Englishman." [B.B.B. Pg.104]

While on the contrary his friend Dev who comes to England hates the country for their invasion and rule over India. But in the end it's Adit who returns to India, while Dev stays behind in England. Comparing India with England Adit says that in India we 'only notice the laziness of the clerks and the unpunctuality of buses and trains and the beggars and the flies and the stench and the boredom of it.' [B.B.B. Pg. 49]

On another occasion Adit says:

Nothing ever goes right at home, there is famine or flood, there is drought or epidemic always. Here the rain falls so softly and evenly, never too much and never too short. The sea is mild. The birds are plump. The beasts are fat. Everything so wealthy, so luxuriant, so fortunate. [B.B.B. Pg. 129]

Adit feels proud living in England and enjoys the atmosphere and life there.

"The Convent Garden Operas and the pub down the road...picnics in the Hyde Park. I have every right to enjoy them because of my education, my tastes, my interests in them. No English man can deny that." [B.B.B. Pg.164]

Ironically however, it can be seen that he has to face racial discrimination and humiliation there and is also called *Wog*. He has the realization that being an Indian he cannot attain any high post there. Even Adit's wife Sarah is mocked at insultingly for having married an Indian.

The conversation between Adit and Dev explains the condition there:

That boy at the bus stop he called us Wogs. You heard him "I did not". "Adit, I saw you tense, I saw your face. You can take that from a school bog. "It is best to ignore who don't deserve one's notice." [B.B.B. Pg.162]

In spite of his love for England, often Adit feels alienated here and longs for his country. He feels :

I will go. My mother will cook hilsa fish wrapped in banana leaves for me. My sisters will dress Sarah in saris and gold ornaments. I'll lie in bed, till ten every morning and set up half the night listening to the shehnai and sitar."

[C.L.O.D Pg. 48]

Adit's love for India can be seen when he raises funds for his country during India Pakistan War. He comes back to his country with wife Sarah.



It was Dev who earlier criticized Adit for praising England. He said :

If the British were still in India you would be one of those Babus who used to go crawling after them, drooling if they noticed you so far as to give you a kick.

[B.B.B. Pg. 163]

Dev used to say, "I wouldn't live in a country where I was insulted and unwanted." [B.B.B. Pg. 17]

Interestingly he is soon fascinated by the charms of the place, changes his decision of going back to India, forgets about the insults and humiliation and joins the job left by Adit. While Adit in the end realizes that there "Everything tells you you're an outsider and not entitled to the country." [B.B.B. Pg. 162]

R.S. Sharma comments thus:

The novel is about the alienation of the immigrant in a world which is alluring and appalling at the same time. It does not bring into fictional contest the larger social and political aspect of the immigrant question. Rather it deals with the self awareness of the educated Indian immigrants, who keep wavering between acceptance and rejection of a world they have been educated to admire and love and which they find, on an actual contact either to be strange or to be hostile.<sup>7</sup>

K.R. Srinivas Iyenger avers:

In her latest novel: *Bye-Bye Blackbird* [1971], Anita Desai moves out of familiar Delhi and Calcutta, and vividly projects the prison physical and psychological...in which the coloured immigrant in Britain is caught, both the difficulties of adjustment there and those of return to India.<sup>8</sup>

B. Ram Chandra Rao says:

*Bye-Bye Blackbird* makes a heroic, although, unsuccessful attempt to prevent the whole gamut of emotions of Indian immigrants in England...Mrs. Desai's forte-her uncanny ability to probe into the minds and hearts of her characters, both major and minor.....is missing in the book.<sup>10</sup>

The novel also shows the adjustment made by Adit and Sarah with each other. Sarah undergoes a lot of change after marriage with Adit. She herself thinks:

Who was she - Mrs. Sen who had been married in a red and gold Benaras sari one burning bronzed day in September, and Mrs. Sen' the Head's secretary, who sent out the

bill and took in the cheques, kept order in the school and was known for her efficiency?...They were roles and when she was not playing them, she was nobody. Her face was only a mask, her body only a costume. Where was Sarah...."

[B.B.B. Pg. 38]

Sarah's alienation is different from the alienation of the other characters. She chooses her alienation herself.

*Baumgartner's Bombay* deals with the story of two continents. It deals with the story of a Jew, his life in Germany and India. Hugo, the protagonist of the novel is a German, his past and his present life is dealt with in the novel. The Jews in Nazi-Germany are ill-treated. In order to save his life from their violence he comes to British India. But here he is called an alien.

Accepting- but not accepted: that was the story of his life, the one thread that ran through it all. In Germany, he had been dark- his darkness had marked him the Jew-der jude. In India, he was fair and that marked him the *firangi*. In both lands, the unacceptable.<sup>11</sup>

Her novel *Journey to Ithaca* shows Malteo's coming to India in search of spirituality. He tells Sophin that : "It is the spiritual experience for which you must search in India, nothing less."<sup>12</sup>

The main protagonist of her novel *In Custody* is a male character Deven Sharma, a lecturer in Hindi in a college in Mirapore near Delhi. He comes from a lower middle class family. He is shy and there is less of strength in him. He wants to get success, tries for it but fails in his attempts. He feels that "marriage, a family and a job had placed him in cage."<sup>13</sup>

He tries to interview the famous Urdu poet Nnr Shahjehanbadi. In this attempt he faces a lot of difficulties. He has to undergo financial losses and undergo a lot of humiliation. Even then his attempts lead to failure. Deven is shown in the novel as "a different and awkward hero" caught in adverse circumstances.

Nur's house is full of gloominess and darkness. The place Mirapore and Old Delhi are shown drab and barren just like the dull, still and bleak life of Deven. Deven thinks, that his job, family and circumstances are obstacles in his literary success, but the fact remains that his own weakness and timidity cause his failure apart from some adverse circumstances.

The darkness, bleakness and the atmosphere in Nur's house shows that his literary activity is overpowered by moral corruption and gloom.

The story revolves around the places which he has to undergo to achieve his goal, his success, the obstacle he has to face, the help he gets and his final realization to face life as it is.

Deven felt that life and art were different. But in the end when he has been exploited at all levels, he has seen Nur's reality, he comes to the realization that art and life are not separate. He comes to understand the reality of life and discover his own identity. The novel ends on a positive note where Deven is ready to face reality.

Anita Desai not only delves deep into the female psyche, she also delves deep into the male psyche and has deep understanding about it. Her novels *In Custody*, *Voices in the City*, *Bye-Bye Blackbird*, *Baumgartners Bombay* and *Journey to Ithaca*, make a shift from the earlier novels where she had the female protagonists but here the main protagonists of the novel are male and themes also cover existentialism immigration, alienation etc.

## **REFERENCES**

1. Anita Desai, *Tremendous Changes*, "Interview with Sunil Sethi." India Today. December 1-15, 1980, Pg. 142.
2. Sunil Sethi, Op.Cit. Pg. 142
3. B. Ramchandra Rao, *"The Novels of Mrs. Anita Desai: A Study."* Ludhiana : Kalyani Publishers, 1977, Pg. 40
4. R. K. Srivastava, *"Voices of Artists in the City"*, Journal of Indian Writing in English, IX, No. 1 (January 1981), Pg. 47
5. B. Ramchandra Rao, Op.Cit. Pg. 40
6. Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination* (London : Mercury Books, 1961) Pg. 212
7. R.S. Sharma, *Anita Desai* (New Delhi : Arnold Heinemann, 1981) Pg. 49
8. K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar, *Indian Writing in English* (Delhi : Sterling Publishers, 1984) Pg. 470
9. B. Ramchandra Rao, Op.cit. Pgs. 47-48
10. Anita Desai, *Baumgartner's Bombay*. London: William Heinemann, 1988, pg. 20
11. Anita Desai, *In Custody*. Vintage : London, 1999, pg. 131.