

A Study of the Themes of Alienation, Detachment and Relationship Crises in Anita Desai's Major Novels

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Complexities of Life – Anita Desai's Focus

Anita Desai is one of the best known and celebrated Indo-Anglican novelists of post-independence era. She has gained distinction in exploring the human psyche and the emotional ecology of her protagonists who, while wrestling with the pervasive force of absurd realities, feel terribly oppressed with the burden of living helplessly in a chaotic contemporary milieu. Going deeper into the complexities of human existence, she seeks to evaluate various formidable factors that make human life uncomfortable and unendurable.

The major dominating themes in Anita Desai's novels are, the sense of alienation and detachment and human relationship particularly the man-woman relationship. Nowadays these kinds of themes have assumed special significance in the closer context of rapid industrialization, growing awareness among women of their rights and individualism, and the westernization of attitudes and lives of people. D.H. Lawrence points out, "*The great relationship for humanity will always be the relationship between man and woman. The relation between man and man, woman and woman, parent and child will always be subsidiary.*" (D. H. Lawrence : 130)

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Current Trends

Twentieth century novelists treat the subject, mentioned above in a different manner from that of earlier novelists. They portray the relationship between man and woman as it is, whereas earlier novelists consolidate it as it should be. Their investigation of a number of unsatisfying lives has as its basis the deep conviction that it is man's sacred duty to fight for a life that will express the inherent dignity and worth that he is capable of. He is aware of that pain, pathos, and failure but sure of the values of the struggle towards fulfillment and perfection.

Introduction

Anita Desai, an eminent Indian English woman novelist, is a modern Indo-English writer, widely acclaimed not only in India but also in the world of fiction writing. She emerged on the literary horizon after independence, deliberating on the highly debatable contemporary issues. As such she has added a new dimension and marvelous flavour to the contemporary Indian English fiction. She has secured a unique and significant place due to her innovative thematic concerns and deals in her fiction with feminine sensibility. Her preoccupation is with the revealing and examining of the deep psyche of her characters, especially women characters. A concerned social visionary Anita Desai is a keen observer of the society and the position of the women in the contemporary society draws her special attention. The novels of Anita Desai are noted for the profound probing into the inner life and feelings of the women, bounded by the shackles of the middle class. They are the explorations of the family problems, which perhaps is the chief cause behind the estrangement of the women from their family.

The Fiction of Anita Desai

The fiction of Anita Desai is relevant to all times because she writes about the predicament of modern man/woman. She digs into man's inner psyche and goes beyond the skin and the flesh. Literature for her is not a means of escaping reality but an exploration and an inquiry. She prefers the private to the public world and avoids the traditional grooves of external reality and physical world. In fact, her real concern is the thorough investigation of human psyche, inner climate, and she unravels the mystery of the inner life of her characters. She writes neither for placing entertainment nor for dissemination and propagation of social

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ideas. Her main engagement is to study human existence and human predicament, her exploration being a quest for self. *“She is the novelist of psycho-emotional situations and her theme is the individual against himself and against the milieu”* (Manmohan K. Bhatnagar : 110). This particular reality leads to the most common theme in her novels that is the complexity of human relationships, particularly the man-woman relationship.

This theme, however, has been as old as novel itself and is usually delineated in the novels of Richardson, Fielding, Lawrence, Virginia Woolf and Faulkner. As far as Anita Desai is concerned, she writes mostly about the miserable plight of women suffering under their insensitive and inconsiderate husbands, fathers and brothers. On the other hand, man-woman relationship brings characters into alienation, withdrawal, loneliness, isolation and lack of communication that frequently occurs in her novels. Most of her protagonists are alienated from the world, from society, from families, from parents and even from their own selves because they are not average people but individuals. When these characters have to face alienation, they become rebels and turn reactionaries. Tension, worries, depression, disappointment, anxiety and fear become their lot and they lose their sense of sanity and mental poise. Anita’s main focus, in this way, is to depict the psychic states of her protagonists at some crucial juncture of their lives. Therefore, the most recurrent themes in her novels are *“the hazards and complexities of man-woman relationships, the founding of individuality and the establishing of individualism of her characters”* (Raji Narsimhan : 23).

Theme of Feminine Sensibility

Feminism is an ideology which seeks not only to understand the world but to change it to the advantage of women. Simone de Beauvoir opines that woman’s idea of herself as inferior to man and dependent on him springs from her realization that *“the world is masculine on the whole, those who fashioned it, ruled it and still dominate it today are men”* (1949 : 298). Though the biological distinction between male and female is an accepted fact, the notion that woman is inferior to man is no longer acceptable to women in general and feminists in particular (Binay Kumar Das : 65).

Anita Desai’s academic contribution in the ambit of transgender, trans-cultural and transnational aspect constitute an essential adjunct for a woman who tailors her identity on the background of femininity and who is always an object of gaze in the masochistic society whether she is a wife, a daughter, an artist or a writer. The passion and agony of woman in all contexts undergoes repression and suppression unless she transcends her boundaries of inner

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Dr. Mohammad Shaukat Ansari

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insecurity and inner dilemma to meet the outer world realities that are largely controlled by a man's world.

Uniqueness

Anita Desai explores the Indians' (especially women's) use of make-shifts to escape attachment and their attempt to find love and life in disillusion that are the end product of their alienation, obsession, transgression and diffusion of self in double consciousness, i.e., of a woman and then an Indian.

The uniqueness of Anita Desai's fiction, however, lies in her treatment of feminine sensibility. In India where women have redesigned roles, which do not allow any room for individualism, identity and assertion, Anita Desai advocates for women who question the age-old traditions and want to seek individual growth. They try to reassess the known in a new context and find a meaning in life.

Desai suggests that a balance between the conventional pre-set role of women and the contemporary issues has to be struck. Her female protagonists try to discover and rediscover meaningfulness in life through the known and the established. These characters are not the usual, average, normal women, but different from others. They do not find a proper channel of communication and thus become alienated and start worrying about their lives. All their wanderings and reflections finally bring them into new vistas of understanding, which they had formerly ignored or rejected.

Alienated Characters

Most of Desai's protagonists are alienated characters. She portrays her characters as individuals "*facing single-handed, the ferocious assaults of existence*" (The Times of India) Thus, characters in her novels are generally neurotic females, highly sensitive and engaged with their dreams and imagination, and alienated from their environments. They often differ in their opinions from others and embark on long voyages of contemplation, in order to find the meaning of their existence. That is why they suffer from their relationships more than others do. In other words, in Desai's novels, the love encounters explode into marital disputes as the result of devastating post-marriage relationship between husband and wife.

Anita Desai has dwelt upon problems of love, marriage and sex in her novels in a very convincing and realistic way. She seems to champion the view that marriage alone does not provide a ready-made solution to life's tension, chaos and turbulence. Instead, mental

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 13:5 May 2013

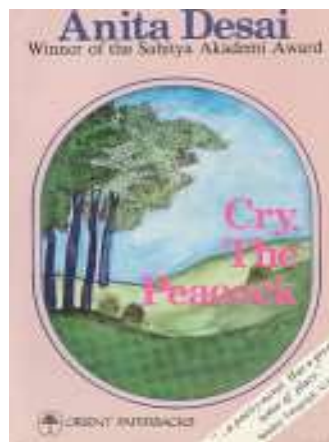
Dr. Mohammad Shaukat Ansari

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satisfaction and happy married life means better understanding between husband and wife. One needs the genuine help of the other. A proven and trusted sense of co-operation at every stage and phase is required. Psychological adjustment is safe key to a healthy compromise and cordial existence in a conjugal life. Husband and wife need to nurture the strong feeling that they are complimentary to each other.

In this close context of co-existence, mutual respect, mutual understanding and enthusiastic attitude to help each other, and also in the backdrop of relationship crises, let us take up the themes of Anita Desai's major novels:

Themes of Alienation, Marital Discord, Strained Relationship



The novel, *Cry, the Peacock* (1963) is “a remarkable attempt to fuse fantasy with perceptual experience” (Meena Belliappa:25). It is the faithful description of psychosomatic growth of a female character, who cannot cope up with the practical world of the husband and feels dejected, forlorn and demoralized. It is mainly concerned with the theme of disharmony in the relationship between husband and wife. Desai looks into the reasons for marital discord and illustrates how such discord affects the family. Sometimes, the inability of an individual to be responsive to the behavior patterns of her partner leads to strain and tension in the relationship, while sometimes it is on account of varied levels of sensitivity, that relationships become strained.

In this novel, Maya and Gautama have been projected to live in sharp contrast. Maya, the central figure, is alive through all she senses and lives intensely for each moment. Her husband Gautama is remote, detached, intellectual and somewhat bewildered by his wife's hyper-sensitiveness. Both of them are, as a matter of fact, poles apart in their nature. Maya is dreamy, sensitive and emotional, while Gautama is realistic, insensitive and rational. Maya is

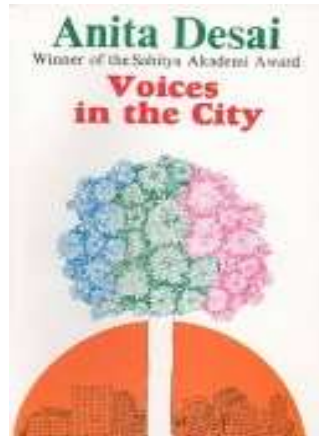
poetic and high-strung while Gautama is detached, philosophical and remote. Maya has tenderness, softness and warmth while Gautama is hard and cold. In this way they are plagued with the virus of strained relationship because of their incompatible temperaments and temperatures.

The matrimonial bonds that bind the two are very fragile and get fractured. And the growing tension between them reaches its climax when Maya kills Gautama in a fit of insane fury and then commits suicide.

Maya is a prisoner of the past, lives almost perpetually in the shadow world of memories, which engulf her; Gautama lives in the present and accepts reality and facts even though they are not very beautiful. On the contrary, Maya never tries to accept the facts, but she wants to live in her imaginary fairy world. She keeps on remembering her childhood days or the treatment her father meted out to her. She is a father-obsessed child; she feels that no one else loves her as her father did. She seeks another father in her husband. But he does not respond to her accordingly. Sensitive Maya is terribly upset at the death of her dog that she loses her mental calm and Gautama neglects the emotional yearnings of Maya and says that he would bring another dog for her. This mechanical behavior makes Maya brood over Gautama's insensitivity: *"how little he knows of my misery, or how to comfort me. But then, he knew nothing that concerned me. Giving me an opal ring to wear on my finger, he did not notice the translucent skin beneath, the blue flashing veins that ran under and out of the bridge gold... telling me to go to sleep while he worked at his papers, he did not give another thought to me...it is his hardness – no, no, not hardness, but the distance he coldly keeps from me"* (Cry, the Peacock : 9).

In the final estimation, the novel attempts to discover the turbulent emotional world of the neurotic protagonist Maya who lived a carefree life under the indulgent attention of her loving father, and desires to gain similar attention from her husband; but she totally fails in her marital voyage.

Voices in the City



The novel, *Voices in the City* (1965) is divided into four parts – Part 1 for Nirode, Part 2 for Monisha, Part 3 for Amla and Part 4 for Mother. It tells the story of a brother, two sisters and their mother. But throughout the novel Nirode, the hero of the novel, remains the dominating figure. From the beginning the theme of loneliness, alienation and loss of identity of the characters, is often stressed by the novelist to create an atmosphere of dramatic tension and conflict.

Anita Desai's concern, in the novel, is primarily with human relationships and how in the absence of a meaningful relationship the individuals suffer. She probes the psychic compulsion that may pollute an individual in forging long term and significant relationships and how an individual is affected if he is unable to forge such relationships. Nirode, one of the main characters, is obsessed with the relationship of his mother with Major Chadha and considers her a she-cannibal. She is having an affair in Kalimpong which itself is a consequence of dissonance in husband-wife relationship. Nirode's relationship with his mother is a love-hate relationship. We have veiled suggestions of his mother-fixation and according to psychologists' hatred often is a defense mechanism of the psyche to stop one from committing incest.

If Maya's tragedy in *Cry, the Peacock* emanates from her obsession with a father figure, Nirode's tragedy lies in his love-hate relationship with the mother.

The novel also deals with the incompatible marriage of Monisha and Jiban. Monisha's husband is the prisoner of conventional culture. He believes that a woman's most important roles besides child bearing, are cooking, cutting vegetables, serving food and brushing small children's hair under the authority of a stern mother-in-law. Monisha feels that her privacy is denied to her. Her husband is busy with his middle rank government job with no time for Monisha and no desire to share her feelings.

The theme of alienation is treated in terms of mother-children relationship which itself is a consequence of dissonance in husband-wife relationship. Monisha leads an equally fragmented and starved life. She is alienated from her husband as well as his mother. The graph of her mental life can be constructed from her long-searching and self-confronting entry in the diary. Her relationship with her husband is characterized only by loneliness and lack of communication. He reckons his wife as worth nothing in consequence. He does not bother to ask his wife, even when he finds some money missing from his pocket.

Monisha's ill matched marriage, her loneliness, sterility and stress of living in a joint family with an insensitive husband push her to breaking point. The element of love is missing in her life and finally she commits suicide.

Where Shall We Go This Summer



Where Shall We Go This Summer (1975) has been applauded as “an interesting addition to Anita Desai’s achievement as an Indian novelist writing in English” (Vimla Rao : 50). In this novel, Desai pinpoints “a real and pathetic picture of a lovely married woman and aspires to establish victory over the chaos and sufferings of her rather unusual existence” (Vinay Dubey: 5). She presents her favourite theme of investigating the consciousness of an introvert and sensitive woman who is bored and frustrated by her commonplace and hum-drum life and tries to escape into purposeless and unproductive loneliness. She chooses marital discord as the subject matter and highlights how the inability to lay bare one’s soul and one’s fear and anguish results in the snapping of communication between husband and wife. Different attitudes, individual complexes and fears add to this distancing between the husband Raman and the wife Sita resulting in conjugal disharmony.

Structurally this novel seems to have been inspired by Virginia Woolf’s masterpiece *To The Lighthouse*. Throughout the novel, Desai makes a meticulous attempt to go deeper

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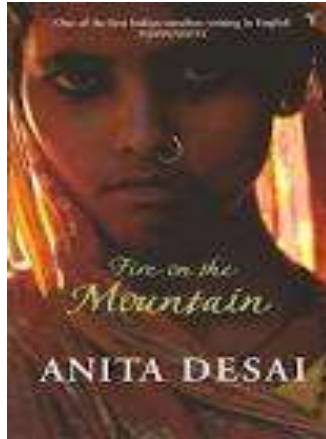
into the extraordinary inner life of its protagonist, Sita. Here she reveals the character of Sita through the stream of consciousness method, with layers of thought in her mind.

Sita and Raman, like Mrs. and Mr. Ramsay who stand poles apart from each other, have irreconcilable temperaments and attitudes to life. The ill-assorted couple is confronted with the same problem of husband-wife discord. Sita represents a world of emotion and feminine sensibility while Raman is a man with an active view of life and the sense of the practical. Sita is a nervous, sensitive middle-aged woman with explosive and emotional reactions to many things that happen to her; she always wants to escape realities, she even hesitates to perform ordinary responsibilities of life. She finds her very existence threatened with boredom because her husband keeps himself busy in his business and the children growing independent.

On the contrary, Raman represents the prose of life. He represents sanity, rationality and an acceptance of the norms and values of society. He is unable to understand the violence and passion with which Sita reacts against every incident. His reaction to his wife's frequent outbursts is a mixture of puzzlement, weariness, fear and finally a resigned acceptance of her abnormality. He cannot comprehend her boredom, her frustration with her existence: "*... she herself looking on it saw it stretched out so vast, so flat, so deep, that in fright scrambled about it, searching for a few of these moments that proclaimed her still alive, not quite drowned and dead*" (*Where Shall We Go This Summer* : 33-34).

In this novel, again, the theme of alienation and lack of communication in married life is discussed and re-assessed by the writer. Sita finds herself alienated from her husband and children. She remains an ignored personality since childhood. She is the product of a broken family. She yearns to have the attention and love of others, but her father remains busy with his chelas and patients. Even after marriage, she remains lonely. Her husband also is busy. He fails to address her expectations. As a result, there is marital discord, a widening gulf and increasing tension between husband and wife.

Fire on the Mountain



Anita Desai's fifth novel *Fire on the Mountain* was published in London in 1977. It won the Royal Society of Literature's Winifred Holtby Memorial Prize and the coveted 1978 Sahitya Akademi Award. The Statesman eulogized it as "*an outstanding novel.....sharp and refined, descriptive as well as symbolic*". The novel, on a plain scale, may be considered the story of the agonized cries of Nanda Kaul, an old woman who has had too much of the world with her and so longs for a quiet, retired life. Her busy past now looks like "a box of sweets". But, on being examined on a broader scale, the novel tends to focus on the feminine sensibility and a woman's inherent desire to know herself in terms of not only her relationship with her family, but also in terms of her individual identity and its relationship with the world at large. Nanda asks the question: "*Can I not be left with nothing*"? – which is centre to the meaning of the novel. As such, Nanda stands for detachment. To quote Jasbir Jain: "*Nanda Kaul resents the claims it had made on her, the curbs it had placed on her freedom and the deceptions it had held*" (Jasbir Jain : 43).

In the novel, Nanda Kaul and her husband Prof. Kaul (the former vice-chancellor) do not have a warm relationship. He has cared little for his wife and family. He carried a life-long affair with another woman. Nanda could not associate with the family in the desired proportion and her position is no better than a house keeper. Her husband is totally accountable for this. He is such a coward that he could not marry a Christian lady because he could not dare break social conventions. Outwardly, the Kauls are an ideal couple for university community but from inside their relationship is all-barren. The novel further explicates the alienation of Nanda Kaul and her grand-daughter Raka. The loneliness and isolation of the two have been presented in it. Specially Nanda feels happy in the barrenness and enjoys in her own company. "*All she wanted was to be alone, to have Carignano to herself in this period of her life when stillness and calm were all that she wishes to entertain*"

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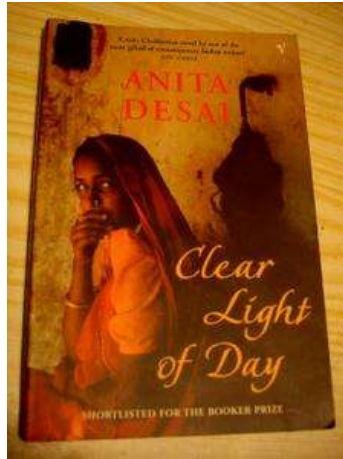
(*Fire on the Mountain* : 17). In this way, this novel manifests Desai's tragic vision of life, in which the innocents are made to suffer a lot. They pay a heavy price for their sincerity and innocence, as ordained by an unkind fate. The novel further shows "the dilemma of women in a society that has become a fit place not for living but dying" (Binay Kumar Das : 43).

The Village by the Sea



The story of the novel, *The Village by the Sea* (1982) is woven around an alcoholic fisherman, his sick wife and their four children – Lila, Bela, Kamal, and Hari. Here Desai describes human relations, man's relation with woman, man's relation with God in the real village Thul, situated in the western coast of India. Village life with the advent of modern technology and machinery becomes commercial. Consequently, the purity and chastity of human love is violated. The happy married life is richer and better in Thul without industrial development.

Clear Light of Day



Anita Desai's sixth novel *Clear Light of Day* (1980) "describes the emotional relations of two main characters – Bim and her younger sister Tara, who are haunted by the memories of the past" (Vinay Dubey : 89). The novel highlights the theme of the effect of remembrance of the past on the chief protagonists. To Tara, the memories are a source of wishful joy, and to Bim they strike like the knell of sorrow. The former wants to live in the past and enjoy it while the latter is wearied of it and wishes to run away from it.

In this novel, Desai scripts other forms of man-woman relationship. Bim carries a childhood image of her brother Raja - romantic, poetic, dreamy - whereas Raja is rational, pragmatic and materialistic. She gets angry about Raja as she feels that he does not reciprocate her feelings normally; because, during childhood they had close emotional relationship, which she still feels as an adult. Raja shuns her.

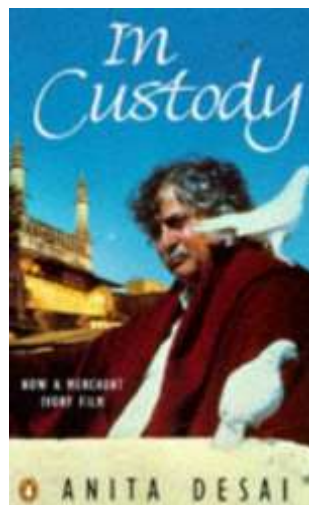
Bim is Raja's admirer and she encourages him in every act and ambition. They wanted to be the heroine and the hero, when they would grow up and go away into the big world away from their old parental home. In this way, they had greater mental and temperamental affinity with each other in comparison to the other brother and sister. Both of them are bold, independent and possess a fiery impetuous spirit. When Raja is sick, Bim takes care of him with love and devotion thinking that he would take her father's place the day he recovers. However, to her utter dismay, when Raja gets well, he decides to go away to a distant place. "I will go- go to- to Hyderabad. Hyder Ali 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?" (*Clear Light of Day* : 95). And Raja rushes to Hyder Ali and marries Benazir, his daughter. Then he leaves Bim alone with Baba in the crumbling house. Raja abdicates his responsibility towards Bim and Baba entirely.

So, their relationship changes in a surprising manner. Tara too, later on, understands the significance of time and comes to realize how human relationship – even the close relationship between a brother and a sister – changes amazingly with the passage of time. This gets clearly reflected through the fact that Raja never recalls the old days, the love and sacrifice of Bim, her taking care of him in sickness.

In this way, Bim is treated most cruelly by her brother. Utterly neglected and treacherously deserted, Bim muses painfully on how the passage of time has ravaged the old relationships of childhood and created a changed pattern of relationship in the family. So, after a long span of time, Bim decides to patch up with Raja who was probably not even conscious of the hurt and damage his letters have caused to Bim. She purges herself of the intense hatred for ultimately she realizes. *“No other love had started so far back in time and had had so much in which to grow and spread”* than she felt deeply for her family. She wakes from her dreamy world of the past in the clear light of day to mend her relations with her brother. Bim realizes that *“the only way to happiness is to acknowledge and accept all”* (M.K. Naik & Shaymal A. Narayan : 79).

The novel also touches upon the issue of discord at other levels. Both Tara and her husband are not able to adjust. *“To her husband, Tara is merely a hopeless person”* (*Clear Light of Day* : 28). The relations between the four brothers and sisters – Raja, Bim, Tara and Baba are also threatened by their inability to perceive the deep connection with each other hidden under the apparent divergences and differences from the others (R.K. Dhawan : 117).

In Custody



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Anita Desai, in the novel, *In Custody* (1984), presents the thematic problem of love and marriage in a very exquisite manner, analyses the crushing upheavals of Deven Sharma, an impoverished college lecturer. In this world of 'sick, hurry and divided aims' he has to confront the common problems as others do. After his marriage with a sullen and dull wife, Deven sees a way to escape from the meanness and hopelessness of his daily life. Deven and his wife Sarla lead an unhappy marital life. They are quite different from each other in their temperaments. Deven is a Hindi lecturer in a college and Sarla has no interest in literature. Sarla is a typical picture of an abandoned wife. Deven is a temporary lecturer appointed in a private college, but he lives in a fool's paradise. He is usually lost in the dreamy world of fantastic fame that one day he will rise to the pinnacle of glory by flying on the wings of his devotion to art and poetry. However, his extreme devotion to art leads him to be indifferent to his wife, Sarla. He cultivates an aversion to and dislike for his wife.

Here Desai deals with the purely marital problem of this materialistic world of glittering civilization in a pent up city like Delhi, where people have little time to stand and stare. In such a big city the relationship between husband and wife is commonly under strain because of the undue indulgence of husband in extra-curricular activities and his attachment to other women during work hours.

Conclusion

To conclude, for Anita Desai, writing "*is an effort to discover, and then to underline, and finally to convey the true significance of things*" (The Times of India). She presents to readers her opinion about the complexity of human relationships as a big contemporary issue and human condition. So, she analyses this problem by projecting and expressing changing human relationships in her novels. She is a contemporary writer because she considers new themes like alienation and detachment and knows how to tackle them in brilliant manner. Anita Desai takes up outstanding contemporary issues as the subject matter of her fiction while remaining rooted in the tradition at the same time. She explores the anguish of individuals living in modern society. She deals with the complexity of human relationships as one of her major themes, which is a universal issue, as it attracts worldwide readers to her novels. She strives to show this problem without any interference. On the other hand, she allows to her readers to pass judgment over her characters and their actions in an objective

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and impartial way. Anita Desai unravels the tortuous involutions of sensibility with subtlety and finesse and her ability to evoke the changing aspects of Nature matched with human moods is another of her assets (M. K. Naik : 243).

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