

# Man-Woman Relationship in the Novels of Anita Desai

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**Abstract:** Study on Novels of Anita Desai endeavours to examine the man-woman relationship as depicted in the novels and analyses the ways the protagonists have adopted to overcome the problems of their lives. A study on the novelist provides a fascinating and rewarding experience. Anita Desai is the great artist in the realm of English fiction. A large number of critical article and some full-length studies with regard to the Anita Desai have appeared individually. This study is an attempt to analyse the various woman characters against the background of important aspects of woman life - marriage, migration, motherhood and midlife. In Desai's novels most marriages are proved to be unions of incompatibility. Her fiction is relevant to all times because she writes about the predicament of modern man. She digs into the inner psyche and goes beyond the skin and flesh. Literature for her is not a means of escaping reality but an exploration and an inquiry. Desai writes mostly about the miserable plight of woman suffering under their insensitive and inconsiderable fathers and brothers. Most of her protagonists are alienated from the world, societies, families, parents and even from their own selves because of their individuality. So man-woman relationship brings characters into alienation, withdrawal, loneliness, isolation and lack of communication. Hence, this paper seeks to examine the portrayal of women by these contemporary Indian women novelists in English.

**Keywords:** Novels, Man–woman relationship, Predicament of modern man

## Introduction

Widely acclaimed as a gifted writer and the winner of the Sahitya Academy Award, Anita Desai continues to spearhead the second generation of Indian English fiction writer that links the established greats like R.K Narayan Mulkraj Anand and Raja Rao and emerging grates like Salman Rushdie, Vikram Shet and Arundhati Roy. Being one of the most powerful contemporary Indian novelists in English, Anita Desai is more concerned with thought, emotion and sensation than with action, experience and achievement. Anita Desai is an existential writer who is pre-occupied with internal conflicts and agonies of her sensitive characters in an insensitive world. The most common themes in her novels are human relationship, particularly the man-woman relationship. Desai's portrayal of man-woman relationship has been influenced and conditioned by the existing intricate social situation. Man –Woman relationship seems of particular interest to her for in most of her early novels she writes on this theme. She concentrates on the predicament of modern woman in this male-dominated society and her destruction at the altar of marriage.

The theme of man-woman relationship in Anita Desai's novels reveals her consummate craftsmanship. Nowadays this theme has become more important due to rapid industrialization, growing awareness among women of their rights and individualism and the westernization of the attitudes and lives of the people. Twentieth century novelists treat this subject in a different manner from that of earlier novelists. They portray the relationship between man and woman as it is, whereas earlier novelists concentrated on as it should be. Indo-English writer is concerned with the problems of interaction between man and woman, between the individuals and the social world.

According to Desai, most marriages prove to be unions of incompatibility. Men are apt to be rational and matter of fact while women are sentimental and emotional. Their interests, their attitudes are different. Naturally they look at things in different way and react to the same situations differently. Not only is the man himself different, but as often happens in the society of changing values his family ways, his surroundings to which she is expected to adjust herself are entirely different. To Mrs. Desai fluctuating relation between man and woman more important than the plot or story of a novel. The titles of her novels are symbolical and suggest this theme. Let us discuss her novels one by one.

### 1) Cry, the Peacock (1963) :

In her first novel, Cry, the Peacock. Anita Desai has depicted the failure of marriage between Maya and Gautham, her practical lawyer husband who is quite senior in age to her but the two persons are entirely opposed to each other in their temperament and emotional responses. Maya is sensitive and emotional while Gautham is insensitive and rational ; Maya is fanciful while Gautham is realistic ; one is emotional and high –strung the other is detached , philosophical, remote . Maya is soft and warm; Gautham hard and cold ,the wife is the enstinct the husband is that of intellect .The novel is about Maya's cries for love and understanding in her loveless marriage with Gautham. She is neither able to get company from him nor physical sexual satisfaction. The peacock's cry is symbolic of Maya's agonized cry for love and life of involvement.

Gautham preaches to her the need for detachment, “detachment on every count. “ In a moment of extreme bitterness Maya tells Gautham in so many words how she loves him. Gautham’s attitude to Maya is that of a typical husband who wants to keep her at arm’s length. He treats her as a child, a light-headed woman who is not worthy of his confidence.

It was Gautham’s etachment that came in the way of her involvement. The tragic end of Maya’s and Gautam’s married life is seen in her act of killing her husband and afterwards killing her own self by committing suicide. The novelist’s own attitude in the matter does not appear to be ambivalent. She does not want to justify Maya’s action and seems to give an implied suggestion that the private vision of every individual be made open. So that mankind may have a sigh of relief from the endless tortures of the unconscious.

## 2) **Voices in the city (1965):**

In the novel, voices in the city the theme of man –woman relation is treated in somewhat different way. Monisha’s predicament is similar to that of Maya. While Maya is obsessed with fear, Monisha is oppressed by sense of suffocation. There are four main characters in the story- Nirode, Monisha, Amla and Mother- and different aspects of human relationships have been depicted from their point of view. Man –woman relationship has also been viewed from four different points of view, although some marked similarities may also be found in them. Nirode, who can be described as the protagonist of the novel, decided to remain a bachelor. Because he has the hostile views about the institution of marriage itself. Monisha is a lady with an intellectual bent mind but Jiban is a practical down to earth man and is essentially mediocre. It is the joint family proves to be an obstacle in their happiness. So there are temperamental differences between them. Monisha’s married life is devoid of happiness and satisfaction .She could not bear the pain being alone. This led to her death. Thus Monisha, like Maya proved to be a failure.

## 3) **Bye-Bye Blackbird (1971):**

In her novel, Bye-Bye Blackbird man-woman relationship has been depicted in a social milieu characterized by racial discrimination. Adit is a Bengali Indian, but he has married an English girl Sarah, because he has settled down in England. Sarah, on her part, tries to identify herself with her Indian husband. But the two are not able to go along happily as husband and wife. In spite of marrying an English girl, Adit is preoccupied with the longing to go to India and his homesickness proves to be an impediment in his married life. So far as Sarah is concerned, she has no complaints against her marriage with Adit, and wants to fill her life anew.

Though marrying an Indian she became nameless, taunted and insulted by her own people. Towards the end of the novel Anita Desai shows that Adit does not care to know Sarah’s feelings when he decides to return to India and settle there. Sarah is pregnant and has concern for her unborn baby. She comes out of her anguish when Adit asks her to accompany him to India.

The last chapter of the novel depicts the return of the blackbird to its permanent nest. Shara lives this life of a culture in her own country. She feels displeased by marrying an Indian.

## 4) **Where shall We Go This Summer?(1975)**

Her fourth novel, Where shall We Go This Summer? also deals with the theme of strained man- woman relation beautifully like cry, The peacock. Here we have a couple living in two different psychological poles resulting in the alienation of Sita, the central figure. Sita’s predicament too is similar to that of Maya and Monisha. She is also obsessed with her loveless marriage with Raman. Here marital relations as well as abnormal man-woman relationship have been portrayed with a remarkable poignancy. Sita is a married woman and has four children, but in the very picture of misery and dejection. She feels herself to be a prisoner in a house which offers her nothing but a crust of dull tedium, of hopeless disappointment. Her unhappiness in married life finds expression in feelings of contempt for the friend and colleagues of her husband.

At last Sita realised’ What a farce marriage ,all human relationships were and confronted with the unfilling husband “she could hardly believe that although they lived so close together he did not even know this basic fact of her existence” that she was pained with dullness and boredom of everyday life .

## 5) **Fire on the Mountain (1977)**

In Fire on the Mountain, Anita Desai probes 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. Fire on the Mountain creates the problems of man-woman relationship as a basic component part of uninteresting family life. Like Sita, Nanda Kaul lives alone in her villa. She is a vice-chancellor's wife. Having been rejected and discarded all her life by her husband and children. Nanda Kaul decides to live alone in Simla hills at Carignano. Her husband is responsible for this. Outwardly the Kauls are an ideal couple for universal community but from inside their relationship is all-barren.

## 6) **Clear Light of the Day(1980) :**

In her novel, Clear Light of the Day, Bim , the protagonist of the novel and a spinster professor of a college takes the entire responsibility of her family . Here man-woman relationship has not been delineated in any depth, but it has been brought home

to the readers that the relationship between Tara and her husband Bakul has not been going on smoothly. Tara had realized every moment of her life that with Bakul. She lived in a disinfected land, with its set of rules and regulations, its neatness and orderliness. What she felt was that the way of life which her husband followed was devoid of human sentiments. Except these stray references to married life of Tara and Bakul there is nothing in detail. It can be said that man-woman relationship does not seem to form a very significant part of the novel.

#### 7) **The Village by the Sea ( 1982):**

In village by the Sea, the strained man-woman relation is themed round Hari's parents. Hari's father is alcoholic and does not take care of the family which consists of three sisters-Lila, Kamal and Bela and the brother Hari, as the only conscious male member besides the drunkard father. Hari joins the village march that gives slogan against the industrialization of village agriculture and arranges a deputation to Mumbai. At Hari's absence Lila as the elder sister runs the family while the father drinks liquor, abuses the family members and borrows money from the neighbors only to thrust the family into deeper misery and distress. The character of Hari's father gradually develops. He leaves liquor. In course of their mother's admission to the hospital the father goes to the mother to serve and stay there till she recovers. Gradually the dark cloud of distress passes the way from the family. The mother recovers from her illness. Hari earns money and returns. The flower of happiness blooms over the dark family and enlightens it. Thus though the relation between Hari's father and mother was strained earlier, it ends in sweetness. Again the father and Hari is the reprehensible of most of the Indian village father while the son, Hari, represents the destitute village boys.

#### 8) **In Custody (1984) :**

Anita Desai's novel, In custody, is woven with couple of couples-impractical Deven and practical Sarla on the one hand and on the other, old decayed poet Nur and his two wives—one, a virago with poetical imagination and dancing career and the other, ignorant with material greed for wealth. She depicted an unhappy married life. Deven is married to Sarla. But they are not able to get along happily as husband and wife. Both of them are frustrated to their own ways, but they are unable to do anything for each other. Deven feels as if he was in prison. Marriage, a family and a job had placed him in a sort of cage, and there was no way out of it. There is another kind of unhappiness in married life of Nur, the famous Urdu poet. There is no love between them. Nur's own life must be miserable an account of it. We have no details as to how Nur married Imtiaz Begum, but it has been clearly shown how in spite of his infatuation for her, he is not able to drive and happiness or satisfaction from her.

#### 9) **Baumgartner's Bombay(1988) :**

The theme of man-woman relation in Baumgartner's Bombay is woven in a different way than the rest of Desai's novels. In all her novels except this novel, the relation between man and woman is woven either with the help of husband-wife relation or with the help of brother-sister relation which construct the man plot of the novels. Here the relation between Baumgartner and Lotte the two Germans—one Jew in search of his livelihood and luck in India and the other, a cabaret dancer brought by the boatman to Calcutta. Lotte and Baumgartner make sweet couple without being as couple so far we see them in the scenes of the novel. Their relation is somewhat of childish brother and sister relation resembling the first phase of Raja and Bim's life in Clear Light of Day. Thus without being close kinsmen the two figures made one comfortable whole.

#### 10) **Journey to Ithaca (1995):**

In Journey to Ithaca Desai shows the theme mainly in three ways. First, she shows it through the contrastive attitude to life of the western couple-Matteo, the Italian husband and Sophie, his German wife. In the second case she shows it through the temporary love-relation between Laila, the Egyptian girl who became the Mother and Krishna, Laila's temporary dance-master travelling Europe and America from India with his dancing troupe in search of career. In the third case the theme is woven with the help of Laila's divine love with her Great Sage the incarnation of God. In this novel the novelist through her treatment of the man-woman relation seems to suggest that extremely materialistic life is as damaging to conjugal life as extremely spiritual life which we see in the case of Sophie-Matteo relation. But the connection of both lives with human love and social service is the root of heavenly joy which we see in the case of union between Mother and her real Master.

#### 11) **Fasting, Feasting (1999):**

Anita Desai's Fasting, Feasting is the graph of family life in two different cultures-Indian, on one hand and American, on the other. In part-I, Uma, the plain older daughter of an Indian family, is the victim of traditional system of marriage. She is cheated by Harish, the already married husband, her ignorant parents particularly Mama choose for her as Papa thought marriage as 'women's affairs and left it' to materially greedy Mama. Gradually Uma fails to outgrow her home and family and stays on surrounded and suffocated by god like and masterful parents who had hardly been separate entities. But Aruna her dauntless and non traditional sister, is ambitious and successful in life for a 'good' marriage. Beautiful Anamika, Aruna's cousin, is another tragic victim of marriage. She is burnt to death in her in-laws family. The picture of man-woman relation in America is somewhat different. In Part-II across the world in Massachusetts where young Arun, Uma's brother goes as a student, life outlying district of the town is bewildering and full of terror of young Indian adolescent far from home. Here the patton family men are seen to be busy in burning pieces of flesh while their women folk do not appear to cook or eat at all. Arun is surprised with the nakedness of the Americans who starve and suffer emotionally in spite of their material wealth and freedom.

## Conclusion

To conclude, it is clear that man- woman relationship seems of particular interest to her for in most of her early novels she writes on this theme. Her treatment of man-woman relationship is both artistically moving and psychologically sound. She concentrates on the predicament of modern woman in this male-dominated society and her destruction at the altar of marriage. Her women characters make a reader look at them with awe with their relationship to their surroundings, society, men, children, families, psychological make-ups and themselves. Though not admittedly a feminist, Anita Desai is well aware of the predicament of the Indian women and their relationship with men. Man-woman relationship in the urban society is her concern and in novel after novel she delves deeper and deeper in this dilemma. Each one of the frustrated characters adopts his or her own manner of facing the problem of alienation, suffering and boredom and the appropriateness of such manners can be justified and supported by the views of the psychologists.

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