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## REDEFINING FREEDOM THROUGH SELECTED NOVELS OF ANITA DESAI

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**Abstract:** Since inception thinking and existing contradict each other. It captures the binary of subjectivity and objectivity of human mind. Ages ago Descartes explored this through his own ideologies and evoked a chain of thoughts for many who followed his philosophies and challenged his principles. Many women writers and critics who found a ground to voice their experiences and opinions tried to unearth the suppressed desires and free will. They explored those avenues of their lives that remain clouded with preconceived notions and prejudices. Now women establish their identity and bravely put forward what they think.

Many Indian English writers especially women explored the unexplored areas of women's consciousness. Consecutively women faced and are still facing a challenging world where their expectations and realities clash at every juncture of their lives. They are constantly conscious of insecurities, fear, loneliness, guilt and anxiety while they embark towards a journey to prove their identity.

The present paper therefore is an attempt to explore some of the major fundamental experiences of inner reality from the point of view of Anita Desai and her central characters from her novels *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*(1975), *Clear light of Day*(1980) and *Fasting, feasting*(1999). Women in these novels explore freedom in different ways and come closer to self-knowledge by the end of the novel.

**Keywords:** Identity, Inner reality, Objectivity, Subjectivity, Self-knowledge

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*"Freedom is relational. It requires reciprocal recognition"*

The above statement of Simone De Beauvoir quoted by Barbara S. Andrew in her essay "Beauvoir's place in philosophical thought"<sup>1</sup> justifies that experiencing freedom and recognizing it for others are two sides of the same coin. Every individual should understand that others are also free and likewise he/she cannot take away another's freedom. But while encountering one's freedom and that of others, people ignore and deny the rights of others and impose their decision on those who are afraid to exercise their freedom.

The consciousness of freedom comes with the subjective self which has limitless imaginative flights and feelings. According to the existentialists, the infinite longings of the subjective self are never satisfied until it is free from the fear of finitude. So the inner life of an individual is in continuous conflict with social reality and pressures of reason. Experiencing freedom, recognizing the inner reality through subjectivity and establishing identity of a renewed self are the issues of my present research paper.

Many women writers and critics who found a ground to voice their experiences and opinions tried to unearth the suppressed desires and free will of women in general. Women know their limitations yet they keep on experimenting with superficial freedom of expression promised by both the liberal and the rigid social norms. One of the most popular Indian English writers, Anita Desai said in an interview, "you can't be free unless your mind is free." (Uniyal 254) Through this statement she comments about many women characters of her novels, trapped between

their desires and rigid social structures that decide their limitations.

Desai draws a vivid picture of the inner life and has a unique ability to do justice to microseconds of experience through acutely captured sensory details. Among all her novels, *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*(1975), *Clear light of Day*(1980) and *Fasting, feasting*(1999) throws light on different perspectives of women in quest to come closer to their real selves. Women in these novels after recognizing their inner realities reconcile with the objectivity of their lives and turns out to be brave and confident entities.

*Where Shall We Go This Summer?* (1975) portrays the character of Sita, a hypersensitive, extra-rational and emotional woman. She has two opposite perceptions; her cynicism is related to real life, while her optimism is related to the unreal, which draws her to explore her belief in her self-myth. Desai, in this novel not only examines the mythical world of Sita but also analyses the rationality of Sita's husband Raman, who represents social limitations. Mother of four children and pregnant with the fifth child, Sita is shocked and disappointed to see brutality and violence around her. Outer reality is gruesome to her. She states, "It is like living in the wilds".(43) She identifies herself with the wounded eagle that falls prey to some opportunistic crows. Giving birth, therefore, she thinks, is another act of victimizing and exposing a child to an ugly world, "where everyone is waiting to pounce, kill and eat."(47).

So she resolves to prevent childbirth in the belief that the child will be safe and protected in her womb forever. She rests her belief on Manori island and expects to reclaim the past glories of her father. She

completely deviates from reason under the spell of illusion and nostalgia. Sita in her hope for a miracle to escape childbirth, takes her children all alone to Manori island. Even though the island of Manori holds a special place in Sita's life, she gradually finds herself unconnected and unwelcome. She feels insecure and lonely in the island, especially during rain-storm. She realizes that nature too, can be unprotective and disorderly just like her life in the mainland. Eventually the escape to the island turns out to be an eye-opening experience. The myth that is attached to the island and the islanders disappoints her. She acknowledges the fact that impulsive choice she has taken, has actually created a disturbance in her relationships.

Sita after experiencing two different sides of life tries to attain a balance between illusion and reality in the end. She manages to accept the truth of life and returns to Bombay with renewed sensibilities. Though she surrenders to the life of reason and objectivity, yet she has at least experienced a life of her own choice. When asked in an interview why a character like Sita is inconceivable for Indian men, Desai said, "Perhaps they are so content that they refuse to believe women can face discontent, dissatisfaction." They "must be comfortable to live with stereotypes". (Uniyal 252). These stereotypical women from ages surprisingly struggle to survive with rigid familiar social structure and few of them finally say 'No' to embark upon a journey of self-discovery.

Sita's brief 'No' of flowing against the current has given her temporary relief and an understanding and strength to accept the challenges of practical life. Moments of truth redefine the meaning and purpose of life for Sita. Similarly the brave acceptance of truth gives a new strength and individuality to Bim, in Desai's another novel *Clear Light of Day* (1980). Divided into four parts, the novel connects the childhood memories of two brothers and two sisters with their pent up feelings at a mature age. Bim, Raja, Tara and Baba grow up in an absurd world of indifferent, sick and disinterested parents. Raja is very close to Bim in childhood as both share a common interest in literature. While Bim is head strong, confident and responsible, Raja is a blind follower of romantic ideals. Tara being a diffident and submissive child struggles to be a part of Bim and Raja's world. Baba, the youngest in the family, is mentally retarded.

The childhood memories dominate the adult world of Bim, Raja and Tara. Bim's lonely life in a dilapidated house with the responsibility of looking after a mentally challenged brother, have made her a practical person. Her experiences of hard life have wiped away all her childhood illusions. She copes

with actual struggles of life. Raja's unconcerned attitude towards Baba and their old house in Delhi is a reality check for Bim.

She becomes a pillar of strength for her family. She is single, lonely, independent and responsible. She does not try to escape from problems. She does not even feel pity about her alienation. She takes pride in handling her duties towards her younger brother, Baba and her ailing aunt. Ranu Uniyal states, "Her vocation of love and living is not a mere abstraction, a product of her fantasy, but adds significance to her everyday life." (Ranu Uniyal 209). For Bim life is exposed in true colours. She loses her faith not only in Raja but in the high idealisms of life. Bim agrees to abide by the values of the society and family responsibility. Dr. Biswas, who treats Bim's aunt, expresses his wish to marry her. But after Bim's refusal he confirms,

You have dedicated

your life to others—to your sick brother and your aged aunt

and your little brother who will be dependent on you all his life.

you have sacrificed your own life for them.(97)

But Bim rejects this idea of sacrifice. She considers her deeds her ethical choice. She never acknowledges it as a burden. She is not an escapist. Her lifestyle does not cut her off from society. But she avoids exercising her emotional freedom and hence refuses to involve herself in expectation of any relationship.

On the other hand Tara the youngest sister becomes mature in her later years and she takes initiative to materialize Bim's practical problems. She confesses childhood misunderstandings and confronts Bim with her inner urges and weaknesses. Bim while struggling with her own emotions realizes the fact that she actually wishes to reunite with her siblings. Reality and illusion reconcile and Bim rediscovers her connection with her brother, who is her soul mate. Bim, after many years, approves Tara's suggestion and asks her to convey a message to Raja. She finally unburdens her mind and expresses her desire to meet Raja and his family. Desai delves deep into the experiences of ordinary women leading ordinary lives and treating their opportunities new avenues for freedom and self-development.

While comparing Sita with Bim, Desai clarifies that Bim is an emotionally strong woman having better understanding towards life and its commitment. What is probably lacking in Bim is that she is reluctant to explore herself, which Sita does with an instant bravery and takes a leap of faith. Bim faces her inner self and frees herself from her pent up feelings much later in the novel.

Another ordinary, stereotypical woman Uma and attention seeking Melaine in *Fasting, feasting*(1999)

creates an intriguing ground to question freedom and equal opportunities offered to women in a multicultural world. The novel *Fasting, feasting* (1999) explores the complexities of dependent and independent lives around the world. Anita Desai has sensitively described the similar condition of two women in two completely different countries. The character of Uma plays a significant role in portraying the life of a single woman who is married but leads a life of widow. Her husband marries her for dowry and leaves her on her wedding night. For the rest of her life, she remains a burden on her parents. "Having cost her parents two dowries, without a marriage to show in return, Uma was considered ill-fated by all and no more attempts were made to marry her off." (96)

Trapped in social obligations, Uma becomes a victim of narrow-mindedness and orthodox prejudices. Having no freedom to choose a life for herself, she ends up being a glorified maid-servant in her parents' home. The very place of shelter i.e. home becomes a sort of a prison. She also suffers from epileptic fits which symbolized her deep-seated anger and rebellion against social and familial structures. Her life remains stagnant and purposeless until she becomes aware of the fact that she deserves freedom, dignity and an independent status. Uma looks forward to Dr. Dutta's proposal for job of a matron in the nurses' dormitory. It comes to her as a ray of hope and a fine promise to change her life.

A Career. Leaving home. Living alone. These troubling, secret possibilities now entered Uma's mind—as Mama would have pointed out had she known—whenever Uma was idle.

They were like seeds dropped on the stony, arid land that Uma inhabited. Sometimes, miraculously, they sprouted forth the idea: run away, escape. But Uma could not visualize escape in the form of a career. What was career? She had no idea.(131)

Even after being aware of her parents' supervision in her life, she never protests. Some moments of temporary happiness comes in Uma's life when she visits various pilgrimages with Mira Masi. The momentary joy that Uma attains in the company of Mira Masi gives a brief opportunity to live an authentic life of her choice. Returning to her empty, aimless existence, Uma undergoes what is described

as a state of 'Fasting' throughout her life. She dedicates her whole life in her parents' service. In course of time Uma also takes up the responsibility of writing letters to her brother Arun who moved to America for higher studies.

The other half of the novel describes Melaine's plight in America, which is shockingly similar to Uma's although she is given unlimited freedom to live the way she wants. Melaine's parents are unconcerned about the distance that she has been keeping from them. Her weird habit of over-eating symbolizes her mental instability. She continues to hurt herself only to protest against insensitivity and unemotional attitude of her parents. There is loneliness, boredom and negligence under the veil of freedom. As the title suggests, 'Feasting' means dissipation and here it symbolizes the over-eating of Melaine who has the chance to enjoy excess, without getting any fulfillment and satisfaction from this feasting. Melaine and Uma fail to develop a genuine relationship within their families. Uma is a victim of dominating relationships. Her parents are too concerned about her and will not set her free. It is the suffocation of relationship in this case that deprives Uma of her true "self-hood" (Macquarrie 120). Since anxiety is linked to freedom, Melaine comes face to face with the challenges and fear of surviving all alone without any love and support. Although Melaine's condition improves in the end when her family recognizes their fault, Uma remains an eternal victim of isolation from which there is no release.

**Conclusion:** All the above discussed novels have probably one chain of thought and that is the various experiences, flights and recognition of freedom. Women at every juncture of their lives face contradictions. This challenges their identity. Be it Sita or Melaine, each of them are trapped in typical social gender expectations and lifestyles. They are constantly struggling to cope up with strict gender roles and searching a niche for their fulfilling existence. They are joined with one common thread of an unknown journey of inner reality which is incomplete due to their ignorance of self-knowledge. The journeys of redefining freedom by the end of these novels bring reconciliation, acceptance and self-actualization.

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