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Analysis and Appraisal of Images and Symbols in the Selected Novels of Anita Desai: ‘Cry, the Peacock, Voices in the City and Bye Bye Blackbird’

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Abstract:

Anita Desai is a fascinating blend of Indian and European sensibilities. A vivid reflection of this unique blend finds spontaneous expression in her novels. She is a self-conscious artist who forges a different world out of the mundane things of the day-to-day existence of Indian women. It is pertinent to note that the use of imageries and symbols is one amongst the various linguistic devices that she employs in her major novels. Anita Desai displays her brilliance in evoking characters, moods and situations through the skilful use of powerful images and symbols which contribute to her greatness as a premier imagist in India. In this paper, an attempt has made to focus on Anita Desai’s usage of images and symbols as an important narrative technique for the articulation of her sensibility in her major novels.

Keywords: Image, Symbol, Psychological, Narrative, Isolation

Anita Desai, born Anita Mazumdar is an Indian novelist and the Emerita John E. Burchard Professor of Humanities at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). As a writer she has been shortlisted for the Booker Prize three times for

her novels *Clear Light of Day* (1980), *In Custody* (1984) and *Fasting, Feasting* (1999). She received a Sahitya Akademi Award in 1978 for her novel *Fire on the Mountain*, from the Sahitya Akademi, India's National Academy of Letters. She won the British Guardian Prize for *The Village by the Sea*.

Anita Desai is a great analyst of psychological insights and inner concerns of characters. Her novels depict the kaleidoscopic image of the minds of her characters with a mesmerizing art with keen observation of emotions and feelings that add high depths to her themes. Her novels are the reflection of social realities that depict through a psychological perspective but not as a social reformer. Her earlier novels revolve around a woman’s quest for identity, the repression she faces within the family and society, marital disharmony, generation conflicts and anti-semitism, while her later novels focus on the spirit of nationality, social problems of the contemporary society etc. In her earlier novels Anita Desai looks at things mostly from a woman’s point of view, suppressed and discriminated as she is from self and society, where as in the later novels, she portrays the alienation that both men and women experience and how they struggle for self identity in this materialistic world.

M. H. Abrams in his book *A Glossary of literary Terms* points out that 1. “Imagery” is used to signify all the objects and qualities of sense

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perception referred to in a poem or other work of literature. 2. "Imagery" in this usage includes not only visual sense qualities but also qualities that are auditory, tactile (touch), thermal (heat and cold), olfactory (smell), gustatory (taste), and kinaesthetic (sensations of movement). 3. In many usages, "imagery" signifies figurative language, especially the *vehicles* of metaphors and similes. (P. 172-173) Imagery is an important part of Desai's effective fictional technique. In this context, R. K. Srivastava has made a succinct analysis:

Desai resorts generously to imagery strictly on a criterion of aesthetic rather than casual-relevance with a view to vivifying moods, psychic states as well as distinctly individual consciousness of her highly sensitive introverted characters, complexities of human relationships, scenes and situations resulting in a remarkable textual density in her novels. (Perspectives on Anita Desai 150)

Desai's novels are not bounded to the world of art only; there are also scientific images which are observed hugely in her fictional world. Moreover, these images have been brought from several sources such as *Botany*, *Zoology*, *Meteorology* and *Nature* which contribute to the texture of her novels. Besides, both these images produce aesthetic effects and impart a tangible shape to stir up emotional states of alienated self.

Etymologically, an image may be an epithet, a metaphor, a symbol or a simile in the form of a mental picture. It derives its origin from the Latin word 'imago'. It is an imaginative perception of the external form of any object. The word 'symbol' has been derived from the term 'symbolism' which stands for something else. However, definition of 'symbol' has varied uses in different contexts.

Anita Desai applies symbolic and functional imagery as the major ingredients of her art. Her images are literal, metaphorical and symbolical. In fact, her imagery maybe recognised to assemble the poles of an axis on which her fictional world revolves. The symbolic world of her fiction, the themes despair, desolation, death and socio-psychic fragmentation have been presented through narrative fascinating images. Botanical, zoological, meteorological and coloured images add to the aesthetic beauty and textual density of her novels. Besides enriching the artistic aesthetic value of the novels, images in Desai, magnify the critical and interpretative horizon of her art. Anita Desai is avowedly the most powerful imagist novelist presenting a poetic and lyrical perspective to the problems of the alienated self in her diasporic world of the western world.

Anita Desai's debut novel, *Cry, the Peacock* (1963) is a replica of lyrical novel that is packed with complex images and symbols. The protagonist is Maya who wears the poet narrator's mask and portrays the poetic vision through her monologues. The novel deals with striking images illuminating the dark and shadowy realms of Maya's consciousness and her deteriorating psychic states. The symbolic self-portrait of Maya is painted step by step by the juxtaposition of other characters and scenes like Gautama, Lila, Pom, Maya's father, Gautama's mother, sister along with the scenes of the meeting with the albino astrologer, cabaret dancers, the inner parties and the storm scene in the end, which intensify Maya's inner state of turmoil. Maya as a symbolic heroine absorbs the animate and the inanimate world around her.

The botanical image of the "sapless and sere neem tree", "the silk-cotton trees", "huge, scarlet blooms" and "squashed into soft yellowish miasma" (34) symbolically project the inner void and isolation of a sterile housewife. These significant botanical images symbolize painful aspects of the central character - her inner dryness and infertility.

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The images of 'petunias' and 'lemon blossoms' suggest the temperamental difference between Maya and Gautama. When Gautama fails to distinguish the smell of lemons from that of petunias, Maya explains to him what the blossoms of the lemon tree like. To Maya, Gautama's hand appears as cool and dry as the bark of an old and shady tree. The first zoological image used at the beginning of the novel is the image of Maya's dog, Toto, which introduces the death motif of the novel. The image of dead Toto is also used in different forms to reveal Maya's psychic rearrangement and her ineluctable preoccupation with death. The image of an iguana is used to express Maya's psychic disorder reaching a climax. The image of a domestic cat is metamorphosed into horrifying iguanas. When Maya sees the cat slinking in the room, she wails out: "Iguanas, my blood ran cold, and I heard the slither of its dragging tail even now, in white day light." "Get off - I tell you, get off! Go!" (147)

Maya stands for the domestic cat that under pressure goes wild and neurotic like the iguanas. The iguanas suggest her neurosis and melancholy. The animal images in Maya's mind indicate her submerged instinctive drive. The image of the cages monkeys on the railway platform stirs and excites her agony. She too is caged within her nostalgic remembrances. It also signifies her loss of privacy, her loss of isolated life, a life of domestic imprisonment. As a result, the monkeys boisterously struggling inside the cage for liberation remind Maya of her own alienation and estrangement.

Stellar imagery that emphasises on the obsession of Maya is also used in this novel. It expresses the 'loneliness' of Maya, and the distance between Gautama and Maya which finally gives focus on her obsession with death. The lunar images are used like stellar imagery which also form a part of colour images. It expresses Maya's morbidity and the Gautama.

Anita Desai also uses various dance images which repeat itself to indicate the growing impatience and

fatality in Maya. One of these images is the 'Kathakali Dance'. The images of 'Carabet Dance' and 'Bear Dance' depict the cruel exploitation of the society. Another mythological image is used to explain the dance of death. The image is the 'Dance of Shiva' which is used as a symbol of liberation. The 'Dance of the Peacocks' described is the most significant of all the images around which the title of the novel revolves. Maya's love of life is reflected in the splendid dance of the peacock whose 'Dance of Joy' is the 'Dance of the Death'. Desai aptly narrates:

Pia, Pia", they cry. "Lover, lover, Mio, mio – I die, die – how they love the rain – these peacocks. They spread out their splendid tails and begin to dance, but, like Shiva's, their dance of joy is the dance of death, and they dance knowing that they and their lovers are all to die, perhaps even before the monsoons came to an end (95).

Gautama remains mute to the cry of peacock because he is isolated from the milieu. He has neither sexual urge nor sensual desire. Hence Maya, the 'peahen' fails to get any response from Gautama, the 'peacock'. The meteorological image of dust-storm is used artistically in this novel. It denotes the fierce storm rising in Maya's subconscious mind, her desire for "release from bondage, release from fate, release from death and dearness and unwanted dreams" (219). Maya welcomes the storm with the pleasure of a dancer and notices in it the source of both agony and ecstasy.

Desai's second novel *Voices in the City* (1965) deals with various meteorological images like the images of fog, mist and air; colour images like the images of light and dark, images of filth, ugliness, sordidness, misery, poverty, decay, death and disintegration which appear in the novel. The images of fog, mist and air reflect the inner

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confusion and the image of “muddy river air” signifies Nirode’s sense of deep disgust. Colour imagery like ‘light and dark’ signifies the nightmare of Nirode’s and Monisha’s souls. It expresses their emotional imbalance, natural anarchism and futile desire and solitude in the cacophonous multitude of Calcutta. Image of light and darkness, symbolically expresses Nirode’s defeatist mentality and his apprehension of future failures.

At the outset of the novel, Desai uses an image scene. The opening line describes the train in subjective as well as in objective terms. As the leitmotif of the novel is journey, the symbolic vision includes journey at every step. Nirode, the main protagonist, always connects his ideas and experiences with train and journey. Desai narrates his speech:

Nirode groaned, “I’d never go, David, I never shall.” ‘I pack my bags’. “I arrive at the station’ and when I have one foot in the train, I hesitate. That’s my undoing – this lack of faith and this questioning. I just stand watch the train rush off, leaving me behind like a ghost in a bloody nightmare...” (39).

Unlike the first novel, the second novel lacks the zoological imagery although Anita Desai uses a significant prey-predator image which is an integral part of zoological imagery. Amla’s longing to flee is expressed through the image of the horses bursting forth to release themselves from the massive impatience and the lust of the mob. The horses symbolises the possibility of isolation and escape from the pressure of conformity. The prey and predator image occurs in the race-course scene in which a horse falls on the ground and is hurt while running fast to escape beyond the city for emancipation. The other scene deals with a flock of hungry birds swooping down the ground to feast. The female birds in the cages remind us of the unpleasant lot of the bereaved humanity.

The symbolic expression of the bleeding scarlet doves’ retells the unspeakable abyss of

misery into which Monisha is forced. Bird images are used now and then, as a mechanism of identification with women, the doves’ torture symbolizes allegorically the condition of helpless women enduring the scorching effects of harsh and mindless treatment. The novelist presents a lively portrait of Calcutta characterised by its crowds and cacophony, maddening hubbub and uproar that deny peace to the helpless creatures caught in the toils of the metropolitan city. In fact, Calcutta is an ‘overpopulated burrow’. Its sewers and gutters are chocked with “garbage, darkness, poverty and disease” (48). The image of ‘*Goddess Kali*’ is used to remind to the ‘*Eternal Mother*’ and the ‘*Earth Mother*’. In her vision, the street singer merges with the ‘*Eternal Mother*’. A few different images of ‘the river’, ‘the bird’ and ‘the flying kite’ are employed to illustrate a sort of release. Such minor images express both Monisha’s and Nirode’s craving for freedom from Calcutta.

Anita Desai’s third novel *Bye Bye Blackbird* (1971) does not have abundant imagery. The image of the city occurs in a different perspective. It points to the void of existence, which is mutely repulsive and incomprehensively cold. The silence and emptiness of the houses and streets of London makes Dev uneasy. The hollowness of the city bewilders him. Desai presents it:

... the houses and blocks of flats, street and squares and crescents – the English habit of keeping all doors and windows tightly shut – of guarding their privacy – it remains incomprehensible to him. It never fails to make Dev uneasy to walk down a street he knows to be heavily populated and yet finds it utterly silent, deserted – a cold wasteland of brick and tile. (70)

In fact, tormented by the agony of silence and solitude in the city. Dev develops disgust for London. He becomes a rebel like Nirode. The waterloo station serves as an image to reveal the emotional estrangement of the blackbirds. The lone

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and solitude image of the station – all smoggy and hazy – objectively projects the isolation of the black birds in England. In that hazy atmosphere, none could see the other. Each remains alienated from the other behind the thick screen of smog. None could even hear the other. Alienation – both physical and emotional – persists throughout the novel. The melancholic haze of departure and the anguish of separation seem to have seized every word and feeling of the couple; Adit and Sarah: “As an old film, the dialogue was blurred, almost inaudible, merely an accompaniment to the scene – words snatched away and sank into the haze of departure, the fog of preconceived absence.” (257)

There is one lunar image which is related to the theme of the novel, pointing indirectly to Dev’s existential predicament and his wavering mind. The image of the moon refers to Dev’s feeling of silence and stillness of estrangement and uncertainty in England. The lunar image occurs with the botanical imagery forming a powerful cluster image: “In the night, Dev lay on his back; smoking a cigarette and watching the moon fill the pool of the ceiling with its thin polar light in which the long weeds and fronds of garden shadows languorously swayed and danced ...” (169)

Symbolism is a mode of becoming aware of reality, originating from the habit of finding parallels. Being a psychological novelist, Anita Desai makes a liberal use of symbols in most of her novels. The symbols are drawn from various sources like human life and nature, specifically from trees, animals, birds and hills etc. In this process, Anita Desai’s novels explore the inner world of human beings and demonstrate the causes of their strange behaviour and fear. As she is concerned with the depths of the inner self, the psyche of her characters, she uses symbolism to express their innermost feelings and thoughts. Her major novels are, therefore, rich in symbolic situations, episodes, characters and scenes etc.

Cry, the Peacock deals with a lot of symbols having contextual significance. The title of the novel is highly symbolic. The word ‘peacock’ by its repeated use becomes a symbol of the haunted protagonist, Maya herself. The peacock is supposedly the only bird which knows about its death beforehand. Like the peacock, Maya is more in love with life when she knows about her imminent death. When the peacocks see the clouds laden with water, they cry out as if in pain: “Pia, Pia, Lover, Lover, Mio, Mio – I die, die”; it signifies Maya’s love of life and obsession with death. R. S. Sharma makes a pertinent point in his observation: “The cry of the peacock is symbolic of Maya’s ‘life-in-death’ and ‘death-in-life’ (95). The peacocks know that death is the ultimate reality and that when it rains, they will die. They gaze at the sky to see the approaching death in the form of dark clouds, and thus, they are never free from the fear of the presence of death throughout their lives. Like the peacock’s idea of life and death, neurotic Maya has knowledge about the life and death with her trust in the prophecy of the albino astrologer. Maya is aware of the fact that she is going to die soon, and therefore, she is deeply in love with life. The peacocks at first make flight, then mate and in the end die. This process of peacocks’ death is symbolic of the end of Maya and her husband.

The major symbols used in the novel relate to characters, animals, birds other natural and man-made objects. Maya’s husband, Gautama stands for the figure of Gautama Buddha, the founder of Buddhism, who had left all the pleasures of the material world including his wife and son in quest of achieving the larger issues of life. As his namesake, he is detached, philosophical, rational and even inconsiderate. The Gautama of the novel is neither detached nor as devoted as his namesake. Apparently his death is the transversion of the original Buddha, more befitting to the postmodern world. When Maya mourns, it is not merely over her pet dog, Toto’s death, but over the loss of nobility of Gautama as a human being. On the contrary, Maya, Gautama’s wife becomes a symbol of Maya

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(illusion) as she gives priority to insubstantial and illusory things and seeks comfort on the material world. Toto which is a child-substitute to her stands as a symbol of her desirable companion. The death of the dog symbolises the constant presence of death in human life. The dead body of Toto is like that of her own child.

Anita Desai uses day and night as major symbols in this novel. Day symbolises the naked reality of life, i.e. death. Death becomes as clear as day and as scorching as the sun in high summer for Maya, and that is the reason she does not like day. She finds the ‘rituals of the evening, the preparation for the night’ (98) very comforting. Night is pleasant for her, because it represents the unawareness of human beings. Moreover, it hides all the shadows- that is, fear – in its darkness of ignorance.

Maya’s father is a symbol of excessive care which spoils her conjugal life. Being a pampered child, Maya expects the same loving and tender care from her husband. But unfortunately Gautama fails to cater to her emotional need. Desai also deftly uses directions symbolically to reveal the significant potentialities of Gautama and Maya. The East symbolises Gautama. The sun rises in the east symbolises hope and life. Likewise, Gautama epitomizes life, hope and strength. The West symbolises Maya. The sun sets in the West and stands for the loss of light and spirit and symbolises death. Maya possesses identical traits.

The dust-storm, approaching Maya soon projects her unconscious planning to kill Gautama. Her malicious desire is symbolised by the dust-clouds which are indicative of a very destructive storm. In fact, Maya is waiting, and she feels that all the things around her are waiting to listen to “that final, awful crash, which might not sound louder than the barest whimper” (160). ‘Final’ here implies the end of either Maya or Gautama. Gautama’s tragic end is also suggested here: he will die soon as he comes in contact with Maya in a state of insanity.

As the clouds envelop the sun, so also her insanity overpowers Gautama and Maya kills him down the roof without delay.

In the second novel, *Voices in the City*, Desai uses the characters and the city of Calcutta as the major symbols. The city comes out as a towering figure looking down upon its inhabitants. The novel symbolises the voices of various sensitive artists like Nirode, Dharma, David and Amla. The dreadful image of the city is portrayed well as a contrast against the greenery of hills in Kalimpong by the novelist. It also presents a suitable backdrop of the novel. The prettiness, sordidness and ugliness of the monstrous city, Calcutta signifies the ugliness of the mind. Calcutta, personified as Kali, who is both Goddess and demon, both the universal mother and the Goddess of Death casts its nihilistic influence on three siblings,, Nirode, Monisha and Amla.

The male protagonist Nirode symbolises an ideal and a sensitive artist. Though grown up in the dire of poverty, but he tries his level best to preserve his personality and self-respect. He is always in search of a meaning for life, and a life of detachment, but at every step feels thwarted and torn by an internal conflicts. He is also a rebel. He symbolises the contradictions in human nature and as a passive purveyor of visions, wishes to raise higher, towards an ideal self.

Monisha mirrors the personality and experiences of Nirode, and Amla does the same for Manisha. The main characters absorb objects and persons in order to achieve aesthetic objectivity. Nirode, Amla and Monisha, three personages, engaged in search of meaning for life cope with it in their own ways, confront the moment of recognition, and form their own resolutions which merge with the universal in the end.

Monisha’s visit to the zoo at Alipore signifies her keen desire to get a relief from the claustrophobia as she feels totally shattered in her father-in-law’s house. She always looks for loneliness and longs for

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privacy. But she is lost in hallucination at her visualisation of the “bleeding scarlet doves” (98). The image of “the bleeding scarlet doves” reminds her of the empty miserable life of Bengali women. In the context, it is pertinent to note that bird images are, now and then used, as a mechanism of identification with women. If in *Cry, the Peacock* the elevated colourful feathers speak of Maya’s infatuation with life, the doves’ torture in *Voices in the City* symbolize allegorically the condition of helpless women enduring the scorching effects of harsh and mindless treatment.

Dharma symbolizes an ideal artist who wants to create a new world of his own. David is also the symbol of an artist having faith in human beings. Amla is the symbol of an artist without the right kind of sensibility and drifts towards commercialism. Jit symbolises a minor artist having a collection of Rajasthan and Moghul miniatures. Sonny’s father symbolises an artist who believes in art for art’s sake. Sonny and his father also symbolise the decadent Zamindar life in Calcutta.

In *Bye Bye Blackbird*, England as portrayed by Anita Desai symbolises a golden world which glitters with polished surface, but hides a comparatively cruel and empty interior. The female protagonist Sarah, with her Anglo-Saxon origin, is ‘oriental’ in gentleness and submissiveness. Though she is alien to Adit’s land, she is well aware of the torrid oriental heat and ugliness. Torn between East and West, she is simply an epitome of being miserable. The male protagonist, Dev, symbolically portrayed as a ‘Blackbird’, suffers from utter humiliation as an Indian for his coldness. He is also decided as a western oriental gentleman. Despite the blatant racial prejudice he encounters, decides to stay on, because he wants to live in the land of romantic poets.

CONCLUSION

Anita Desai is the most powerful imagist novelist of Indian English literary canvas. She uses imagery and symbolism to capture the intensity of feelings and to highlight the inner consciousness of her protagonist with the skill of an artist. Thus the use of images and symbols is the foremost technique for the novelist in narrating her themes. The relativity between her imagery and her thought is really admirable. Imagery and symbolism which enhance the quality of a literary work are the soul of any literature. It facilitates a writer to express his/her vision with clarity and permits the reader to visualize what the writer describes revealing the submerged truth. Anita Desai, a novelist of psychological insights and inner concerns seeks to convey the truth hidden in the subconscious of her protagonists by employing the technique of symbolic imagery. She is perhaps the most powerful imagist-novelist of the Indian English literary canon, who uses the techniques of imagery and symbolism as the two wheels to run her narration that verges on poetic prose. The symbols and images which are an integral part of her literary scenario enable her to establish the setting, build the atmosphere and evoke the appropriate mood of the complex themes of her novels.

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