

# Gender and Feminist Consciousness in Anita Desai's Novels

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## Abstract

This paper critically examines the fictional world of Anita Desai, a prominent Indian woman writer to understand her outlook and standpoint on the socio-cultural issues of female freedom and empowerment. The study finds that Desai while depicting psychological plight of female characters in her novels makes clear that Indian feminism is quite different from the western one. Besides, this paper shows how authentically the writer represents the deplorable status of women in Indian patriarchal society.

**Keywords:** Western Feminism, Indian Feminism, Gender Oppression & Feminist Perspective, Indian Social Milieu

## 1. Introduction

A writer can never be dissociated from the reality of his/her time. The socio-cultural-political milieu is bound to find artistic interventions in a writer's texts as an indirect commentary on the behavioral ethics at that time and place and beyond its immediate contexts. When one has to consider feminist representations in any writer's text, one questions feminism, its validity and necessity in a given situation. So before analyzing Anita Desai's gender/feminist concerns in her novel, it is essential to glance through the annals of the present times and the history of feminist movement in India and its relevance.

## 2. Annals on gender oppression and feminist perspectives in Indian context

In a country like India where there is regular trafficking of women, where female fetuses are killed, where five year olds are raped, where a mother does not have medical facilities to give birth to her child in peace, where girls are burnt dowry, women being by-product of patriarchal societal set up act against other women, treat them inferior, and manipulate them mentally and physically. In such an Indian scenario, one really wonders at the potency of western feminism!

For discourse on gender awareness in the Indian context, "women's issues could no longer be turned into an enclave" Shunder Rajan (1999) commenting on gender discourse tells us that,

...in studies of culture, religion, law; in political analysis of state and civil society; in the sociologies of family and community; in the economics of population, poverty and labour; in official that is governmental and administrative concern such as census, development, population control and projects of the eradication of poverty, unemployment and illiteracy, in the "new social movements" (dalif, ecological, tribal, anti-dam, peasant, trade-union and self-employed women's associations)...in all these disciplines and cites of action, gender (has) began to figure as an 'issue' as well as a category of analysis.(p. 3)

The way all people alike in the country indulge in perverse and sadistic acts against women in making them subservient, gender discourse and feminist movement are inseparable from the concerns of Human Rights. As Kishwar (1999) in *Off the Beaten Track* points out, Indian feminism should not be equated with the western 'ism'. She writes against the 'imported label', and refers to the term (feminism) as "the international band wagon". As the editor of the feminist journal *Manushi* (meaning humane), with subtitle, "A Journal about Women and Society" tells us that her concern is not just with women's equality but with the whole range of socio-political issues related to the protection of human rights. She declaims herself as a 'feminist', and refuses to be labeled by a western terminology.

As the socio-historical-cultural-religious context in the Indian situation is widely variant from the western situation, Indian feminism in her opinion requires 'redefining'. To quote Kishwar (1999) again "...women should receive their due rights and place in society only if they go beyond petitioning the government to make symbolic gestures and concessions on narrowly defined women's issues"(p. 271-276). Following her argument, just as feminist representation in politics need redefining, in literature too the subject needs to be re-defined.

But this is not to suggest that feminist ideas are new to this soil. Thoughts of women emancipation, revolt against the patriarchal structures have prevailed in the country, long before the western world was alive to the feminist movement. The history of women's movement and 'resistant literature by women' in India has been meticulously traced from the sixth century B.C by Tharu and Lalita (1995) in their two volumes on Women in India.

Deriving from Lalita and Tharu's analysis the revolt against the power structures however was not commensurate with the repressive pressures and women continued to be exploited though child marriage, Sati, widowhood and

*Devdasi* lifestyle in the past. The women empowerment movement in India took rapid strides in the wake of nationalist ideas in the nineteenth century. It began with women's education and emancipation largely due to the efforts of Raja Rammhune Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar. Gradually, with the infiltration of the western ideas and the rise of 'Bramho Samaj', women of the middle class acquired a new identity. The extracts from stories included in Tharu and Lalita's second volume reflect only half – truths about the Indian reality in the twentieth century concentrating chiefly on middle class woman's problems. Again if the regional literatures reflect resistance writing against patriarchal pressures, the Indian English writers do not broach the subject in depth. Just try and compare texts like *Adyaja* by Indira Goswami, *Stanodayini* or *Draupadi* by Mahasweta Devi, *Samskara* by Ramaujan, *Gandharbi* by Bani Basu, -the list can run on and on-with the works of the writers in Indian English fiction dealing with gender/feminist issues. The English novels lag behind not only in their narrowness of theme, but also in their quality of representation. One of the reasons for this weakness in Indian English novels is possibly the distancing of the author from the ground realities. English, after all is the trajectory of the middle-class urbane elite. This brings us to the question of textual representation and reality in the Indian society involving complex questions of who should represent, what is fit to represent and what reality, etc.

### 3. Anita Desai: The Social Perspective and the Figurative Imagination

One has to consider Anita Desai's novels in such a social context or in such a transitional state of Indian feminism. As her novels deal with the middle and upper middle class society, the complexities of the "have-not" section would be safely left out while considering the feminist issues in her writing. Considered as a whole, her novels reveal a progression in the psychic awareness of women about their position in a society. It is difficult to refer to any direct source for any of Anita Desai's novels. The writer herself refers to none. However, her novels like *Cry the Peacock*, *Voices in the City*, *Where Shall We Go this Summer?* and her recent novel *Fasting, Feasting* explore the issues of gender from the Indian socio-historical perspective. Desai's first three novels are a study of women's depression resulting from their inability to grapple with their family situations. The latest novel deals with the issues related to women's education and their aspiration to obtain self-sufficiency and a meaningful existence.

Anita Desai writes about women who have had the privilege of receiving education. But as her novels reveal, educational qualification and degrees did not until recently impel women to create their space in the outer world and acquire self-sufficiency. The Victorian ideal of the lady continued to dominate the social consciousness even in the 1980s and early 90s. The repression had taken a psychic dimension and women continued to restrict themselves to the "interior space" as that was more acceptable to the respectability of the middle class household. The "mad women" or the "hysterical" women in Anita Desai's novels belong to this generation of women as daughters and wives in the Indian society of late 80s and early 90s of the twentieth century. The drudgery of daily chores, of catering to the needs of husbands and children often led women to feel depressed, isolated and bored. Repression of desires and a breakdown of communication within the family often drove women to commit suicide or made them suffer from neurotic disorders from time to time. It is possible to analyze her women characters in this light to identify their psychic disorders and find justification for their actions.

Desai's earlier novels, *Cry the Peacock* (1963) and *Voices in the City* (1965) deal with the case of the depressed housewife in two different ways. In the first novel, Maya is pushed beyond endurance to insanity because of her husband's inability to relate to her. In the second novel, Monisha has to suffer not only her husband's insensitivity but also the suffocating authority of the in-laws. While Maya turns insane, Monisha chooses death as her mode of escape. Such events are not uncommon in Indian middle class households.

Both Maya and Monisha belong to the middle class Indian household. In Maya's case it is a nuclear family consisting only of her husband, but in Monisha's case it is the joint family household in North Calcutta. The common factor between the two women is that they are both deprived of love and affection and they both are childless. Anita Desai does not even hint at a solution to tackle their depression. Neither Maya, nor Monisha attempt to find alternatives to their existence. The idea of venturing out in the outer world to obtain their economic independence which brings with it a sense of freedom and self-worth does not occur to them. Both Maya and Monisha are tortured minds in their stultifying existence. The writer does not endow this women characters with their possibilities as she has the definite objective of exploring the mental state of women placed in such situations. The first two novels then become the study of two women characters in their claustrophobic confines of loneliness. The writer adopts the narrative mode of internal monologues to render their trauma which tells the story of Indian middle class society and it's on the minds of women. So the narrative discourse in these novels "permit(s) us to consider the specific story as an image of the events about which the story is told..." (White, 1990, p. 110)

Lal (1995) in *The Law of the Threshold* makes a study of the patriarchal forces which explore the Indian women's situation. She analyses the three stages of Indian feminism which moves from "interior space" to "doorway poise" to "exterior adjuncts". Anita Desai's first two novels explore the story of "interior space". While the "interior space" of Indian women could be the fulfilling role of a mother, wife and daughter-in-law as in Toru Datt's time in the late nineteenth century, it could be the painful seclusion of Maya and Monisha in the twentieth century. In the autobiographical writings by women in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, trauma of an arranged marriage, compromise and frustrations may not be evident directly. However, any sensitive reader would be able to detect the subtext of repressed desires and sad compromises. In Devi's (1964) *Pratham Pratisruti*, the female protagonist is married off in an early age. She is compelled to go over to her in-laws, repressing her desire for future studies. She takes up an oath to educate her daughter and not allow her to suffer the same fate as hers. Yet her aspiration fails. In *Subornolata*, (1967) the daughter's arduous life in a joint family household is depicted. The two novels in this sense embody the repression of women's desire for emancipation for two generations. Both the novels have autobiographical elements are some such novels which use figurative language to offer a glimpse of the repressed desire of women of two generations in a joint family household. The problem of woman's identity in the family and society becomes more complex in the succeeding generations. Desai's first novel (1963) hence becomes a magnified vision of the trauma in an Indian wife who craves for love and affection from a husband acutely repressed by the dogmatic forces of Hindu philosophy. Though the novel is centered on Maya, it poses an important question about male identity as well, in the Indian context.

In the context of the second novel, the writer (1965) has a deliberate intention of placing Monisha as a wife in a North Calcutta joint family household. For any reader who has exposure to the city's culture, such specification has definite implications. South Calcutta is modern, and has a liberal lifestyle compared to North Calcutta, which is more representative of the Victorian 'Babu Culture'. Generally 'Kolkata' would ironically mean North Calcutta as depicted in Seth's (1990) tongue in his rhyme on Calcutta:

*Ajab shahar Kolkata*

*Randhi, Badi, Judigadi;*

*Michey Kathar Kiketa*

(A strange city is this Calcutta. Whores and place, carriages and cars abound.

And how fashionable it is to lie. (p. 314)

While the glamour of the so called aristocracy or the Zamindari Babu culture (culture of land owners) has lost its glitter with the passage of time and economic pressures, the vanity remains. A woman's confinement as the 'bahu' (wife) of the house is considered aristocratic and equated with the values of the high middle class society. A woman's education loses its worth and in Monisha's case it begins and ends with *The Gita* (The holy book of Hindu religion). It is the 'detachment' philosophy of the text which determines the patriarchal values of the culture in both the novels. Maya's sensitive mind refuses to accept her husband's blind adherence to the detachment philosophy and Monisha tries to grapple with it till her last breath.

The two women end up with two hysterics in their claustrophobic confines. They become a study of 'neuroses' in middle class Indian households. Monisha's predicament and her reaction looks forward to Sen's (2000) *Paromitar Ek Din*. The film depicts a joint family house hold in North Calcutta and explores the woman's position over two generations as mother -in-law and daughter-in-law. The relationship is an affectionate one unlike Monisha's case, but the patriarchal values remain the same. The mother-in-law belonging to the older generation could not make an alternative choice to her life as cultural 'values' weighed her down. But Paromita moves beyond the confines of so called 'values', to make her choice of life against a life of sad compromise. Desai's female protagonists do not even consider choices. Even if they do, they do so to ultimately yield the forces of patriarchy. Sita in Desai's (1972) third novel (*Where Shall We Go this Summer?*) moves beyond the "interior space" to the "exterior adjunct" to retreat back to the "interior space" once again. The transitional phase renders her as a hysteric. The writer projects her character from the patriarchal gaze. She is considered as immature and given to tantrums. As her name suggests mythological significations, Sita has to choose between two confinements: her husband's home and her father's abode. She can survive only when she puts her troubled self to rest. Just as the mythological Sita embraces 'Vasundhara' or the mother-earth to seek refuge in the realms of darkness, the modern Sita in Desai's novel in a similar fashion swallows her semiotic urges to determine her subjectivity through her compromise. With the symbolic order taking over, the writer also appears to relax with the solution she has to offer her readers. It is perhaps in *Fasting, Feasting*, that Anita Desai (1999) takes up the issue of women in Indian conditions with a broader perspective; yet her narrative here once again flows from the patriarchal gaze.

Desai (1999) takes up the issue of marriage, dowry and education in *Fasting, Feasting* as comprehended by the Indian patriarchal system. She depicts in her novel values and beliefs prevailing in the society only to interrogate

them. The writer does not delve deep into the 'otherness' of the other (woman) but questions the conditions that determine the 'other' in Indian society. The title *Fasting, Feasting* is ironical with its binary implications. The birth of a son always is to be fe[a]sted upon. This is a common Indian belief, for a daughter spells misery. She is to be married off with a dowry and she is to be educated to qualify as a desirable bride to a prospective groom. So a daughter instead of bringing any good fortune only adds to the compulsive expenditure in a family. Such are the implications of 'fasting'. The novel consists of three chief characters: Uma, Aruna and Anamika besides the aunt and mother in the first part referred to as 'fasting'. While the narration chiefly revolves around Uma and her frustrated efforts at education, the reader gets to know about Anamika's educational achievements. If Uma is plain and stupid, Anamika is beautiful and clever. Yet it is plainness which escapes tragedy. Anamika, in spite of her being attractive and good in academics, has the only choice in life; to marry according to her parent's wishes. Her admission letter to Oxford University is tucked away carefully to be revealed to the prospective grooms as one of the requisites for 'good' marriage. The efforts yield fruit and Anamika is married off to a joint family household. For the parents and her relatives the story of Anamika ends. Her people do not see her again as her in-laws do not like her to visit her people. So the relatives only hear about her from various sources. The reader learns about Anamika's groveling existence in her husband's family and finally her gruesome death from hearsay reports.

Anita Desai (1999) does not reveal Anamika's mental condition and her painful life in vivid details. Her predicament is made known to the reader as an outsider, just as another newspaper clipping about a wife 'burnt to death'. What the writer wishes the reader to note is the reaction of Anamika's family to her predicament. She sums up Anamika's marriage and her condition in four paragraphs (p. 70-71). The first paragraph relates the episode of the marriage: "Anamika is simply an interloper, someone brought in because it was the custom and because she would, by marrying him, enhance his superiority to other men. So they had to tolerate her." (p. 70)

The next paragraph moves on to say that "only they did not tolerate her". Anamika is beaten by her mother-in-law while her husband is a mute observer of her humiliation. She is treated as a slave to cook for the massive family and is given to eat "the remains in the pots before scouring them". The writer is quick to point out this last detail with an ironic touch in the parenthesis "(or did Uma and Aruna imagine this last detail?)". Fact and fiction mingle together to determine Anamika's fate. The following paragraphs continue to unfold further miseries. Anamika has had a miscarriage and has lost her child bearing capacity. She was "flawed, she was damaged goods". Such a verdict immediately hastens to the forbidding thought "would she be sent back to her family?" The plain thinking Uma observes that Anamika will be far more happy, back home with her parents, to be snubbed by her mother: "You are so silly Uma...How can she be happy if she is sent home? What will people say? What will they think?"

While Uma is shocked at her mother's insensitivity and sorts out words to say, Aruna cries out, "Who cares what they say? Who cares what they think?" Her indignation is struck down by the mother as she dismisses her daughter: "Don't talk like that...I don't want to hear all these modern ideas. Is it what you learnt from the nuns at the convent?" She threatens them that their education could be stopped as "All this convent education-what good does it do? Better to marry you off than let you go to *that* place?" Desai, in short makes a comedy out of tragic stuff. She uses irony as her narrative tool to expose the patriarchal notions in Indian society. Anamika's death is reported in a similar flippant mode.

The news is like a shock one receives "when the electricity suddenly comes to life, blindingly with a thump, and lights up the message." (Desai, 1999, p. 151) of the telegram. The details follow later as a newspaper report. Anamika has poured kerosene and burnt herself to death in the kitchen.

At five o'clock her mother-in-law woke to hear a whimpering sound...she got up and went to the kitchen to investigate. Through the screen door she was a small fire flickering on the verandah. She went out and found Anamika charred, dying. (p. 151)

The writer in her ironic style takes the reader into confidence. "That was what she said. To the police. To Anamika's family" (p. 151). The gaps between the closed statements reverberate with meanings. It is as if the words are uttered in one breath to make each of these three statements complete. More irony is to follow as the narrator adds with sadistic relish:

What the mother-in-law said was that she always had Anamika sleep beside her...as if she were a daughter, her own child. Only that night Anamika had insisted on sleeping in her own room. She must have planned it, plotted it all. (p. 152)

The writer records the reaction in the same narrative vein. "What Anamika's family said was that it was fate. God had willed it and it was Anamika's destiny. What Uma said was nothing." (p. 152)

Anita Desai (1999) in her novel ironically unfolds the acceptance of such events as mere fate or 'God's will' to mock at the patriarchal gaze and its blindness to these gruesome details of life. The Indian circumstances, the

patriarchy is not just male authority. It chiefly the authority of mothers-in-law who unleash their frustrations on their daughters-in-law to maintain the power structure in the family. The mother and relatives of the girl are meant to be mute observers in their subservience to the patriarchal belief and control: 'Marriage is the only destiny even if it kills you. Compromise, the only choice, no matter how unhappy you are.' The actual 'feminism' in this sense of liberation could be possible with the consciousness of the younger generation of women. So Uma, in spite of her dullness craves for education and wishes to be economically free of her parents. She belongs to the "doorway poise" category. Yet she too suffers the brunt of the patriarchal structure which makes her a hysteric. As the common Indian belief is in vogue, a dowry is what one needs to offer, to marry off a daughter. So Uma is married to a man much older than herself. The story does not end here, for after going through the humiliation of her in-laws' place she realized with a shock that she is married to a man already married. He has married her for a dowry that he needed to cater to the needs of his already existing family. Unlike Anamika's parents, Uma's father is sensible to bring his daughter home. So Uma is saved. She does not die but she has no life either in her parental home where she is expected to serve her parents and be of use to them. Uma's predicament in the novel is of daughter that the parents have not been able to get rid of and has to bear with shameful fortitude.

Uma's epileptic fits are given a religious bent. A woman without a husband is bound to be a devotee of Krishna, the God of Love. Religion acts as a comforter or as a bandage to make up for the damage done to her life and to ease the hurt of glaring truth. So the people around Uma, who 'crave' for her, provide her with a solution to her 'loneliness'. They allow her a vocation in life. It is Aruna, who sees through the hypocrisy. Smart and nobody's fool as she is. Aruna warns Uma: "Don't you *dare* do that at the wedding, don't you *dare*! The anxious sister who had summed up Uma's marriage with "Did he touch you?" takes care not to spoil her own.

Between Uma's plainness and simplicity and Aruna's smartness it seems there is no compromise. The writer offers no reasonable solution and through the comic presentation of stark realities, emerges a darker vision of Indian society.

From Maya in the first novel (Desai, 1963) to Uma in *Fasting, Feasting* there is a gap of two generations. Maya is enclosed within her mental space and her geographical space to claim her husband's love. She has no space of her own in defiance of the heterosexual social space offered to her as a wife to a man. Monisha's (*Voices in the City*, Desai, 1965) is also a similar case and both Maya and Monisha are trapped in their social predicament. With Sita (Desai, 1972) in the third novel, there is a revolt which becomes self-defeating in the end. However a slight change in the perception of the woman's condition makes for a gradual social change brought about through the changes in female psyche. In *The Clear Light of Day*, (Desai, 1980) hence, Bim is compelled to make choices which do not signify compromise with a sense of defeatism. It becomes a choice of responsibility, where she plays the gender role of a matriarch who undertakes the responsibility of the family tradition and that of a helpless sibling, Baba, dependent on her for his survival. Desai (1980), in this novel, reveals how gender roles can defy the masculine and feminine paradigms of activity and passivity based on sex distinction. While the males of the household are rendered as irresponsible or selfish (Raja) or weak (Baba), Bim emerges as the matriarch/patriarch to resolve personal conflicts and undertake responsibilities.

In the Indian joint family system, it is usually the eldest member of the family who is responsible of holding the house together. The hierarchical power structure often has a grandfather at the helm of affairs or a father and is generally a male. Desai (1980) here reverses the gender paradigms. Being a patriarch or a matriarch is a matter of psychic quality. Bim is gendered as being 'eldest'. Her matriarchal values of affection as well as her patriarchal values of control render her as the first member for bearing the burden of family history and responsibility.

Such strength of character is not to be found in the women in *Fasting, Feasting* (Desai, 1999). Anamika's characterisation which is rendered to the reader as a journalistic report, reveals that mere educational freedom is not sufficient for emancipation. Anamika succumbs to a disastrous marriage and a pathetic death as she lacked the inner strength to resist the family tradition or the myth that daughters have to be married irrespective for their mental capabilities for other activities. Through Anamika's predicament, Anita Desai (1999) explores the impact of the patriarchal oppression in Indian psyche. It requires a lot of strength and courage to tear the veil of representation: marriage for women, higher education for men. Uma has the courage, but not the mental ability and Aruna, the courage and prowess to create her own destiny. She is an opportunist, who can at least claim her happiness through feminine charm and common sense. The deficiencies and possibilities in these three women characters reveal the three levels of emancipation in the Indian middle class women. Though such realities are still prevalent, there have been considerable changes in the social structures in the middle class and elitist societies in the recent years. Women have taken challenge to identify their gender roles in society in the recent past. One could contrast Shashi Deshpande's female protagonists in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980) or *The*

*Binding Vine* (1993), with Anita Desai's women characters, to point out that Desai's women are actually a generation behind and that times have changed. Sarita in Deshpande's (1980) *The Dark Holds No Terrors* is a career woman who has the courage to fight the mental battle to secure her own identity and space beyond the constraints of a painfully oppressing marital relationship. The other novel, *The Binding Vine* (1993), takes up the issue of rape and rape otherwise to highlight women's torture and sexual exploitation in the interior space as well as in the outer space. The physical torture leaves a gaping psychic wound which could be healed with women's understanding of women's miseries. The women in Deshpande's novels hence do not succumb to patriarchal tortures rather they have the capacity to analyze the nature of their pain to come to a decision about their lives. Unlike the Mayas, Monishas and Anamikas they do not end up pathetically, but they emerge as survivors with the will to re-invent their lives in Desai's (1994) vision:

In the west there is a movement towards abandoning the old order, to bring a new order. The Indian women is always working towards an adjustment, compromise. Few Indian feminists really contemplate total change. Working towards an adjustment through the traditional role is much less drastic, much more Indian. I think Indian feminism is more practical than theoretical. It is expedient rather than ideological. (p. 168)

Surely, Desai had radical western feminism in mind when she mentioned abandoning the old order to embrace the new in the quote above. In such an observation Anita Desai comes close to Nandy's (1998) ideas in "Woman versus womanliness in India":

For the more sensitive woman, the challenge is nothing less than redefining of herself. The first task that faces her is to devise means of de-emphasizing some aspects of her role in family and... so that she may widen her identity without breaking totally from its cultural definition or becoming disjunctive with its psycho-biological distinctiveness....(42)

There is a need for the Indian women to make an effort to recover their sense of identity. While Desai may realise the need for change commensurate with Indianness and think of a solution, such thoughts do not find reflection in her fictions. Anamika's death cannot be accepted with an indifferent pathetic relish. But that is exactly what Desai does in the novel, *Fasting, Feasting*. Her novels, except for *Clear Light of Day* (Desai, 1980) do not project women as capable of possessing identity and there is only a hankering for a better existence. It is only Bim in the above mentioned novel (Desai, 1980) who acquires a constructive vision of maintaining the family ties in the midst of a decaying culture, with its fast eroding values of the old Delhi days. What could be the reason for the writer's skepticism about women's characterisation in other novels? Does it not have something to do with her distancing from the country and expatriate writing in the last few years?

#### 4. Cultural preservation and gender in Anita Desai

The other novel which writes about the preservation of culture that is dying, is *In Custody* (Desai, 1984). However, the writer's concern here is a man and not a woman. The story is about a 'feminine' man who acquires 'masculine' values to bear the responsibility of preserving an old Urdu poet's verses and the cultural tradition which he belongs, that is slowly being swallowed up by the 'post-colonial modernism'.

The novel (Desai, 1984) deconstructs the power structure based on masculine/male (subject) and feminine/female (object). Desai feminises the hero in the novel. Deven is weak and he is almost comical. A sense of humour is subtly at work whenever Deven is in a crowd. One may take, for example, the lines describing his plight in one of his classes in his capacity as a teacher. "Last time I asked you to read...he began pitching his voice too high in order to make it carry to that invisible student outside the door, the ideal one. Now it cracked."(p. 13)

Deven is scared of his wife's pressures and is often bullied by his friend Murad. His slow process of making up his mind renders him into the active process of preservation of a culture: of undertaking the burden of preserving Nur's verses. The novel in this sense is an interesting study of gender representation as the gender attribute pertaining his sex naturally missing in Deven. He acquires the masculine trait through his decision. His gender role has then a 'performatory' function as it is determined by his desire of 'doing' and 'effecting' (Butler, 1990, p. 24-25). Yet another novel (Desai, 1987) that makes an interesting study on gender and culture is *Baumgartner's Bombay*. Baumgartner is neither masculine nor feminine. He is the 'hermaphrodite' trapped in his mother-love and in his history. The novel as a 'historiographical meta-fiction' takes on a psychic dimension, where facts are not 're-presented' but reiterated over and over again as a continuous process in the limbo of Baumgartner's consciousness. Even his relationship with Lotte doesn't signify any sexuality or gender. It is triggered off by the sense of sharing of a common past and a common cultural background that has made him and Lotte cultural exiles, irrespective of gender. Though Baumgartner spends the larger part of his life in Bombay, the city has the least possible significance in his experience. The text through such encoding of

personal history question the spontaneity of cultural transactions. The oppressor and oppressed paradigm through gender as a power construct operates within the monolithic cultural domain. Baumgartner is trapped in his German past and dies in his past. It is a physical as well as metaphorical death. The geographical displacement is of least consequence in the novel and the fear of Nazi chases him even in Bombay and hounds him to his death. The text through Baumgartner's consciousness is trapped in personalisation of history. The novel as a literary artifact interrogates progress and problematises gender. It explores an exclusive case of a consciousness in its own exile from any sense of 'presentness'. Lal (1995) referred to Baumgartner's characterisation as that of "The feminisation of a Hero" (p. 128). She opines that the text compels a feminist deconstructive reading, where creative writing of a novel "bypasses geo-political and cultural barriers" (p. 128). But as mentioned earlier Baumgartner is actually genderless. The 'mother's absence' does not make him embrace the symbolic order and thus in Lacanian terms (Lacanianism, n.d.), he never moves beyond the "mirror stage". Though physically dislocated from her, mentally he is never separated from his motherland or his mother. He remains "polymorphous perverse", without any consciousness of his gender identity.

There are evidences of multi-culturalism inscribed in the passages in German and a few in Hindi, which are woven into the main texture of English. But this cultural intercourse operating through language in the text fails to taint the purity of Baumgartner's (Desai, 1987) German Jewish consciousness. So, Baumgartner is "the vanishing hero", or "the vanishing gender" (Lal, 1995, p. 128). Being neither male, nor even female, stretching into the realm of utter negation of the definition of gender and sex, he does not feel any sexual impulses as a male as he is in complete harmony with his mother enclosed in the memories of childhood. He has no social or cultural realisations of gender either. In other words, he deconstructs Judith Butler's gender heterogeneity in terms of sex, gender and desire, only when sex can be understood in some sense to necessitate gender..."(Butler, 1990, p.22)

## 5. Summing up

Desai explores patriarchal oppression through the embedded code of social imagination with regard to the 'desirable' image of the woman 'the Sati-Savitri-parampara'. Women are physically and sexually too repressed to find their subjectivity. Desai's novels explore the neurotic explosions due to sexual repression in women. As a feminist critique, Anita Desai's novels seek to analyse how the category of women as the subject of feminism is produced and restrained by the power structures through which emancipation is sought. The works interrogates the prevailing patriarchal set up through women's consciousness and raise questions on the intellectual and psychological dimensions of Indian male consciousness. If her early novels depict gender and feminist concerns in middle class Indian society with some authenticity, the last novel betrays the limitations of expatriate writing by metaphorically raising voice against oppression on women through the portrayal of a feminised hero.

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