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## **Domestic Violence: Impact on Indian Society**



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**Theme of Marital Discord in the Selected Novels of Anita Desai**

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**Abstract**

In her novels Desai is mostly preoccupied with the frustration of married women yearning for genuine love. Female protagonists of her novels had some serious expectations from their partner, from their husband which remain unfulfilled. Anita Desai's first novel, *Cry the Peacock* presents the story of Maya her husband Gautama who never tries to understand her and her misery and is always indifferent to her. She feels disappointed and thinks that there is no place for her in this world. Ultimately she accepts alienation and loneliness of her soul and keeps mum. In the novel *Fire on the Mountain*, Nanda Kaul's husband, the Vice-Chancellor, did not love her and carried on a lifelong extramarital affair with Miss David, the Mathematics Lecturer in the University. Her relation with her husband did not involve her inner self or any regard for him but is out of sheer sense of duty. She is a forsaken woman. She withdraws herself from the world of bags and letter messages and demands, requests, promises and queries. The novel *Voices in the City* highlights Monisha's search of total freedom in her life. She seeks liberty from all bonds that have trapped her because of marital agreement. The only option left for her to get out of this marital trap is to commit suicide.

**Key words:** marriage, discord, alienation, disintegration, freedom

In her novels Anita Desai strives for a harmonious and individualistic existence within the family matrix. She is mostly preoccupied with the frustration of married women yearning for genuine love. Projecting wretched plight of the couples trapped in marriages, Desai focusses on various factors such as intellectual disparity, lack of communication and mutual understanding, maladjustment, clashes of tastes, values and childlessness that ushers in frustration, disillusionment and husband-wife alienation, leading ultimately to marital discord. Domestic friction often leads to tragic death and family disintegration. Desai is quite conservative and moralistic in respecting the rich social value accorded to the institution of marriage. Female protagonists of her novels had some serious expectations from their partners, their husbands. They suffer alienation just because they are not ready to adjust themselves in their family. Somewhere due to this reason wife gets alienated from her husband.

Anita Desai's first novel, *Cry the Peacock* presents the story of Maya, her moods, obsessions, dilemmas and abnormality. Maya is married to Gautama. He with all his wits and intellect takes a woman no more than a chattel whereas Maya always craves for love and identity. She is aware of 'Maya' the illusion. Peter Alcock observes that she is "surrendered to glamour of 'Maya', the illusion and pride of this world as opposed to her dharma-devoted husband. He believes in detachment on every count as *the Gita* preaches, "He, whose mind is not agitated in calamities and who has no longing for pleasure, free from attachment, fear and anger, he indeed is said to be of steady wisdom." But it is difficult for Maya to act according to the message of *The Gita*. She wants to love and be loved. Contrary to the character of Gautama, Maya appears to be a romantic figure inordinately given to nostalgic reminiscences and this in large measure contributes to their psycho-emotional detachment and temperamental incompatibility. Maya fails to adjust with his ways and feels lonely. This leads to obsession, seclusion and alienation making her sick.

Gautama and Maya have different approaches to life and death. Gautama is a dutiful and reasonable man and has balanced attitude towards life. On the other hand Maya is very sensitive. Gautama never tries to understand her, her misery and is always indifferent to her. He is not aware of her sentiments and changing moods. Maya is of the opinion that her husband is not her companion in





real sense. Her alienation from her husband is due to her loneliness and her morbid thoughts and feelings. Gautama thinks that a cup of tea makes her calm and normal. But she considers it his hardness and remarks, "No, no, not hardness, but the distance he coldly keeps from me. His coldness and incessant talk... and talking, reveal myself. It is my loneliness in this house" (9). Gautama's indifference to his wife's lonely life is mitigated by the death of Toto, the pet dog. Gautama consoles Maya and we find that he is not totally alienated from her. Showing awareness of her sufferings he wipes away her tears and comes close to her lovingly and tenderly. At this moment she forgets all his indifference towards her and confesses, "I was flooded with tenderness and gratitude, I thought of his as my guardian, my protector, the one who had.....wiped the strands of hair out of my wet eyes and speak to me softly" (11).

Maya clings to Gautama's arm like a child knowing pretty well that he detests it. He tolerates her for a moment but soon moves away. She thinks that contact, relationship and communion are vital for avoiding sense of alienation. "I let these warm and tender sensations bathe me in their lambency soothe me till the disturbed murmurs of my agitation grew calmer, and I could step out of the painful seclusion of my feelings into an evening world" (18). On the death her dog, Maya reflects, "something slipped into my tear-hazed vision, a shadowy something that prodded me into admitting that it was not my pet's death alone that I mourned today, but another sorrow, unremembered, perhaps yet not even experienced and filled me with this despair...surely connected with the corpse" (8). Thus Maya equates the soft decaying carcass of her dog with the decay of her relationship with Gautama.

Maya always desired for communion with Gautama in their loneliness. But he seldom gives her company and "she is a young wife left alone the whole day, ignored in the evenings and worse, not even allowed to speak herself and reveal her agony of alienation and isolation, leaving Maya agitated, disturbed and alienated" (Sunaina Singh, *Images of New Women* 100). To Maya love is great and splendid ideal of the young. Whenever Gautama cares for her presence and caresses her, she is overloaded with tenderness and gratitude. At such times Maya clings to her life with a passion born of love and affection and has no desire to abandon it. According to Som. P. Sharma, "She is not seeking a fulfilment of mundane love but of archetypal love. She is longing, for the companionship like that of Radha and Krishna. It is communion that she seeks the true marriage in which body, mind and soul unite. Maya tries to extricate herself from the fatal web of circumstances. She knows that her relationship with Gautama and the adult world is not strong enough. A slight touch of his fingers brings out spontaneous reaction of joy, long fall into the soft velvet well of primordial, of original instinct, of first formed love. When her husband does not respond in the expected manner her neurotic pride is hurt and feels the insult of rejection.

Alienation between wife and husband is rooted basically in the latter's philosophical aloofness and imperviousness to the splendid yet tremulous beauty of the natural world. Contrary to the character of her husband, Maya appears to be a romantic figure inordinately given to nostalgic reminiscences and this in a large measure contributes to their Psycho-emotional detachment and temperamental incompatibility. Maya perceives that eventually she will lose herself as a result of a long experience of eventlessness. Her life appears to be an endless tedium with nothing significant taking place at any time. Her desire for outdoor life is constantly frustrated mainly by Gautama. One day Maya sees her husband and his friends gather in the garden and finds him entertained by the sight of his more sentimental cronies. She could not have tolerated this favourable behaviour of her husband towards his friends and this irritates her. Gathering courage she joins them with strong urge and stormy longing. Gautama simply ignores her and continues to talk to his friends. This indifference even in the company of his friends upsets her still more. With every passing day of her married life, Maya's alienation grows stronger and it is bound to damage the husband-wife relationship. She feels disappointed and feels that there is no place for her in this world. Ultimately she accepts alienation and loneliness of her soul and keeps mum. She understands that her marriage with Gautam has been a





failure. She reflects on her unsuccessful marriage, "It was broken repeatedly, the pieces were picked and put together again as a sacred icon with which out of pettiest superstition we could never bear to part" (45). As she utterly fails to make her husband understand her desires and passions, she begins to contemplate on death, "Life with emotion, without passion is merely another form of death" (72).

The novel *Fire on the Mountain* presents two alienated souls (Naik 242). One of them is Nanda Kaul, who undertakes a recluse out of vengeance for a long life journey of duty. It is the story of marital unhappiness personified. Nanda Kaul has been desperately hurt and frustrated in her past life as a wife. Now she tries her level best to hide it. She is terribly afraid to be hurt again by the apathy and callousness of the outside world and encourages no interference, no trespassing into her sanctuary. Her self-imposed withdrawal underlines her alienation from her Vice-Chancellor husband who did not love her and carried on a lifelong affair with Miss David, the mathematics lecturer in the University. According to Solanki, "This marriage is solely based on physical lust and circumstantial convenience for the husband, who lives his double life without any commitment either to his wife or to his mistress. Nanda becomes a victim of forced motherhood, producing umpteen numbers of children. Her relation with her husband did not involve her inner-self or any regard for him but out of sheer sense of duty. She did not consider his house as her own and menially she stalled through the rooms of his house. She is a forsaken woman. Although she mechanically performed her duties and responsibilities towards her husband, she was not happy with her life because her husband never tried to understand her inner being. She never felt a sense of belonging to that house. She was highly disturbed by her noisy family life and her busy house where doors are never shut and feet flew or tramped without ceasing. Her life was over busy and there was complete lack of privacy. She was twice alienated. Her very busy and pleasure loving husband had nothing to do with her private self. Her relationship with her children was not intimate. She could not share her happiness of sorrow either with her husband or children. She was always wailing with a singular burning, soul-destroying hatred for her husband to cease, willing for the blessed widowhood, the exquisite solitude without husband and children around. She considers the death of her husband to be the death of a jailor, it brings for her the long awaited freedom from the condemned cell of spiritual annihilation. Being disgusted with her husband and children and vexed with her daily routine in the house, she wants to be free at least in the last stage of her life. Her life for the three decades in the company of her husband has been full of disappointments and betrayal. In her total isolation in the last part of the novel, she remembers her life as a Vice-Chancellor's wife, "Looking down over all those years she had survived and borne, she saw them, not bare and shining as the plains below, but like the gorge, cluttered, choked and blackened with the heads of children and grandchildren, servants and guests, all restlessly surging, clamouring about her" (17).

Now she craves for no attachments, be it children or anyone. She wants nobody from her past to intrude into her present. She lives away far from the maddening crowd. She desires to avoid all sort of human company as she wants to be peaceful at least in the last part of her life. Once she was an important both in the society and in the family. As Asnani says, "She is one of those intelligent, unsentimental Indian women with a build in streak of sardonic feminism who don't love their matriarchal role" (83). She had previously entertained her husband's colleagues and students and took proper care of rosewood furniture in the house. Now she has a different view towards her personal environment. She is seriously self-alienated. As George Victor says, "Alienation from the self is a tragic condition for those who are severely alienated, the loss is usually obvious. Their feelings range from apathy to grinding despair. Many live apparently ordinary lives until with advancing years, there comes a missed chance of a wasted existence others spend a large part of their lives in institutions (2). Nanda realise at the last stage of her life that she has lost so much of the pleasure of her family life and she also feels that her past life has been a futile one. She withdraws herself from the world of bags and letter messages and demands, requests, promises and queries.





Nanda wants to shut people out. She does not want to involve herself in any responsibility. Now she wants to continue her peaceful life of detachment and non-involvement.

Another novel of Anita Desai, *Voices in the City* highlights the theme of alienation, the quest for freedom in protagonists from their own family. The protagonists are in the existential dilemma due to the conflict between their hypersensitivity and hostility of them being trapped in the cage of life situations. The protagonists attempt to achieve the meaning to their lives by searching freedom from the disharmony and chaos of the absurd world that stifles them. They have lost their private individual attitude and fail to synthesize the quality of life. The novel is mainly denoted to the analysis of the dark domains of the psyche of the three protagonists, Nirode, Monisha and Amla. However, of the three, it is Monisha who undergoes the pangs of marital discord and so it is her character that we would analyse in this paper.

Monisha is in search of total freedom from all bonds that exist because of her marital life. She is a sensitive and nervous woman. Her subjective attitude and individual aspiration in her married life leads her to end her life. She constantly feels that her life is futile and meaningless in house of her husband. Her strong desire for love, freedom and ambition remains unsatisfied due to her marriage. She does not accept the conventional family, her confrontation with rough and crude facet of life. Her hypersensitivity and subjective outlook towards reality creates a wide gap between her and the rest of the people. She is denied her privacy, freedom and solitude and the life that follows is a subdued pattern of monotonous activity without acquiring any meaning. She feels disgusted with the domestic atmosphere and people of family, and she does not find freedom and privacy and wants to read Kafka, Hopkins and Dostoyevsky and so on, but her creativity is totally blocked by the dull routine of the family. Monisha yearns for freedom from her duties and responsibilities. In order to achieve the meaning in her solitude life, she attempts to overcome the problem of existential condition. She retreats behind the bared windows, instead of free life. She wants to live her life with free will but is burdened in the house crowded with aunts, uncle and relatives. She craves for freedom from her domestic chores like cutting vegetables, serving food and brushing the children's hair. She was doing all this unwillingly. She wants to be, "away from the aunts and uncles, the cousins, nieces and nephews" (115).

Her rejection of reality seems tragic because she finds her experiences uncertain and avoids any participation in the activities of the real world. Her desire for meaningful and free life becomes a dream due to lack of touch of love from her husband. In her struggle for freedom and meaningful life from the trapped situation, death seems to be the only way out. She is weary living in crowd, which according to her seems peaceful from outside but is violent inside. Thus she asserts her existence, pour-soil in her romantic journey of life but emerges as disillusioned romantic, an existentialist. She is characterized by individual consciousness, freedom of choice and asserts individual dignity. Her clash with the hostile environment of marriage brings out the urgent need for her to choose the path that would bring solace and peace to her. But the situation is not resolved and she is left with no choice but to set fire on her resolve of achieving total freedom from absurd life. This lack of solution pushes her to the situation where she cannot escape the dreadful situation of ending life. She commits suicide which has been the outcome of her uncordial marital life.

Thus we conclude that Desai mainly deals with the psychological problems of married Indian woman. We come across three different responses to the uncordial marital relations by the three different characters in the works of Desai analysed in this paper. Maya remains mum and accepts the harsh reality. Nanda Kaul seeks isolation from family life and Monisha commits suicide. Desai writes about interpersonal relations, maladjustment, temperamental incompatibility, quest for identity and meaninglessness of life and predicament of modern human being which comes out from domestic disharmony and marital discord. Indian society does not allow much freedom to woman. The marriage which should provide them comfortable and peaceful life, brings a rigorous struggle to



overcome the age old chauvinism. They search for their identity and want to enjoy privacy and individuality. Whenever their feelings are deeply hurt, they feel extremely dissatisfied and alienated.

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