



Research Paper

A Study of Imagery and Symbolism in Anita Desai's Novels

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ABSTRACT: 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 which cannot be expressed otherwise. 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 since the conventional narrative mode does not suit her fictional purpose. 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 fabric, enable her to establish the setting, build the atmosphere and evoke the appropriate mood of the complex themes of her novels by providing a key to the reader to understand them.

KEY WORDS: Symbolism, Imagery, Psychology, Narrative, Sign, Origin, description

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I. SYMBOLISM - ITS ORIGIN AND SCOPE

Symbolism is an integral part of human expression more so the literary expression. From times immemorial humans have been communicating among themselves through different symbols comprehended and understood by the members within the community. As Arthur Symons asserts:

Symbolism began with the first words uttered by the first man, as he named every living thing; or before them in Heaven, when God named the world into being. And we see, in these beginnings, precisely what symbolism in literature really is, a form of expression at the best but approximately, essentially, but arbitrary, until it has obtained a force of a convention, for an unseen reality apprehended by the consciousness. Without symbolism there can be no literature; indeed not even language. What are the words themselves nothing but symbols almost as arbitrary as the letters which compose them, mere sounds of the voice to which we have agreed to give certain significations, as we have agreed to translate these sounds by those combinations of letters? (Symons, Arthur. 1952: 6).

The word symbol is based on the Greek verb 'symballein' and its noun 'symbolon' which means 'to toss together' or 'to join together' or 'sign' suggestive of the idea of analogy between sign and the signified. A symbol or a sign is an object which represents or stands for something else, that is the signified. This word symbolon was first used by the Egyptians as a sort of identification stamp made of various materials known as 'tessera' in Latin. The 'tessera' was originally regarded as a 'symbolon'; it is only later that the concept is applied to the sign and to the pictorial reference to the tessera'. At the same time, however the verb symballein is used in manner of speech that suggests gathering or hiding or veiling (Oxford Dictionary, 1971: 737). 'Symbolon' is also referred to in different contexts and for different purposes - as a term in logic, in mathematics, in semantics, and semiotics and epistemology. It has long history in the world of liturgy, of fine arts and of theology, synonym for creed suggesting to those articles of faith of a religious community. Algebraic and logical symbols are conventional, agreed upon as signs, whereas religious symbols are based on some intrinsic relation between the sign and the thing signified like the cross which is symbol of the great sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Christ's crucifixion on the Cross became a symbol of Christianity.

II. IMAGERY - ITS ORIGIN AND SCOPE

It was Yeats, who said that "wisdom speaks first in images" (Yeats, W.B. 1903: 196)

The word image is derived from the Latin word 'Imitari,' the English equivalent of which is to imitate which involves imitation or reproduction of the form of the person or thing. The principal meaning in

dictionaries is the optical counter part of an object produced by lens, mirror or other optical system or likeness of an object produced on a photographic material (Webster, 1934: 1233). Image is further explained as an impression, a mental picture of remembered experience. The concept of imagery derived from the psychological term image has been widely used in literary criticism. The word originally stood for visual pictures but with the passage of time its usage shifted to language and literature. In its literal sense, an image is a concrete object identifiable in the physical world, which when imitated and reproduced or represented, performs definite functions in a literary text. According to New International Dictionary of English Language,

An image is a mental representation of something not actually present to the senses, a revival or imitation or sensible experience together with accompanying feelings the reproduction in memory or imagination of sensations of sight, touch, hearing etc as visual, tactile, auditory images (Webster, 1934: 1234).

III. IMAGERY AND SYMBOLISM IN ANITA DESAI'S NOVELS

Anita Desai is a great analyst of psychological insights and inner concerns. Her novels depict the kaleidoscopic image of the minds of her characters with a mesmerizing art with keen observation of emotions and feelings adding greater depths to her themes. A fine blend of Indian and European sensibilities, her novels are reflective of social realities which she depicts 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 existing in the contemporary society, east west cultural collision, Vedanta and philosophy. In her previous 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. However, Desai claims that she is not particular about the selection of themes, My novels do not have themes - at least till they have finished, published or read, do I see the theme. While writing I follow my instinct, I follow the flashes of insight; I veer away from or even fight any thing that threatens to distort or destroy this insight, and somehow come to the end and look back to see the pattern of footprints on the sand (Desai, Anita. 1981: 4).

In the Indian English literary canvas Anita Desai is perhaps the most powerful imagist novelist. In all her novels we find a perfect correspondence between theme and technique. She uses imagery and symbolism to capture the intensity of feelings and to highlight the inner consciousness of her protagonists with the skill of a painter. One can find even minute sounds and sights depicting the mood of her character. A unique feature of Desai's novels is that an image a metaphor or at times a simple reference to something can be understood solely as it functions within the novel as a whole. Her exploration of psyche as well as her intensely individual style, subtle and poetic prose, careful attention to detail and her use of the important modern techniques of fiction besides her craftsmanship added new dimensions to modern Indian English fiction. She is a literary artist of high order, who has a rare gift of an opulent vocabulary. According to Darshan Singh Maini "words appear to have sensuous appeal for her, and she exults in the reach and power of her rhetoric" (Maini, 1973: 223). In her novels we find a compactly woven fabric of her vision through an artistic treatment of complex themes conveyed through her evocative symbolism and imagery. Madhusudan Prasad says that "in Anita Desai's novels imagery lends a poetic and lyrical colouring to the problems of the estranged self and project reality through artistic parallels more powerful and eloquent than common collocation of words" (Prasad, 1981: 142). Her technique is an instinctive outcome of her preoccupation with individual psyche seen with a painter's eye. Her awareness of the external world, her keen power of observation, above all her remarkable command over the language she uses lend depth and musicality to her narration. Meenakshi Mukherji comments that "Anita Desai's distinctive use of language is characterized by sensuous richness, a high stung sensitiveness, and love for the sound of words" (Mukherji, Meenakshi.1971:22).

Anita Desai has the poetic ability to create spontaneous word pictures which illuminate her themes and project her vision. In this context Madhusudan Prasad observes that in her works "imagery and symbols used as literary forms to crystallize the various levels of consciousness to illumine the state of mind" (Prasad, 1981:143). Images and symbols are not merely ornamental in her novels but serve an important narrative device to convey the intense feelings of her protagonists. The novelist rightly conveys that "it is the movement of the wing one tries to capture not the bird that is, it is the image that matters, symbols, the myth, the feet of associating them, of relating them of constructing with them" (Dhawan. R. K. 1982: 226). In depicting the symbolism she is much influenced by celebrated symbolist writers such as – D. H. Lawrence, Virginia Woolf, and James Joyce. In an interview she confesses

When I first begin to work seriously and consciously on my novels it was D.H. Lawrence, Virginia Woolf and Henry James and Proust that influenced me more strongly; later the novels of Japanese writer Kawabata and more and more modern poetry particularly of Rimbaud, Hopkins and Lawrence (Srivastava, 1984: 217).

Desai relies more on imagery and symbols because her aim is not to depict surface reality but perpetually search for truth. To her "reality is merely one tenth visible section of an ice berg, that one sees above the surface of the ocean, and truth the remaining nine tenth of it that lie below the surface" (Sharma, R.S.1981: 1). The purpose of her entire writing is to explore this submerged truth which she does through the exploration of the psyche of her characters and elevates through images and symbols. She dives deep into the inner world of her protagonists as it is the depth that interests her. As she admits in an interview, "she is more interested in delving deeper and deeper in a character, a situation or a scene rather than going round about it" (Jain, Jasbir.1987:14). Following the footsteps of D.H. Lawrence, who believes that "the visible world is not true but that the invisible world is true and real, one must live and work from that" (Lewis, F.R. 1964: 18) Anita Desai too tries to capture that invisible world in her novels through images and symbols. Like Donne, Wordsworth and Blake, she reads the invisible world in the visible to explore the inner one for which the general narration is insufficient. Hence she applies images and symbols which give clarity to her vision and help the readers to understand the submerged truth. But her use of a symbol or an image is not conscious or chosen deliberately. She states that "I use symbol or image unconsciously. I mean, I employ metaphors and images which acquire significance and suggest deeper meanings and turn into symbols" (Srivastava, 1984:218). The symbols and images are such an integral part of her narratives that they lend a lyrical quality to her novels filled with numerous passages of lyrical beauty that can be compared with the poetic passages of Virginia Woolf, D.H. Lawrence and Joseph Conrad, who influenced and inspired her. Many passages in her novels reveal her gift of expressive description through a blend of prose and poetry with precision. We can not only read but hear and feel that poetical rhythm in her writings. In this context R.S. Sharma says that "her prose exquisite in form and evocateness, acquires the nature of lyrical poetry when she dwells on moods, feelings and emotions, lending her fiction a peculiar poetic quality" (Sharma, R.S.1981:14).

Thus the use of images and symbols is the foremost technique for the novelist in narrating her themes and for readers in understanding them clearly. The relativity between her imagery and her thought is really admirable that they enable her to establish the background, elevate the mood and give visual effect to her narration, clarify the emotions of her protagonists and build the atmosphere for her characters to develop. As Virginia Woolf asserts,

When a writer desires to express some genuinely new ideas or states of mind which she cannot adequately convey through the stiff and conventional medium of language in its literal capacity, he uses character, action, atmosphere, images, to evoke and to suggest them and these images acquiring added significance become symbols (Thakur, N.C.1965: 103).

Like Virginia Woolf, Anita Desai too tries to convey the intense emotional conflicts through symbols since she has obvious influence of Virginia Woolf on her.

Anita Desai picks her images from various sources and her most important source is nature which plays a significant role in her narrative. In the stark, barren and lifeless lives of the protagonists nature acts as a hope. The flowers, grass, the seasons and the hills, the animals and the birds all are inter woven to analyze the diverse feelings of the characters. Desai's novels abound the striking symbols of flowers and fruits that not only give the feeling of regeneration but also show the poetic ability and her sensibility. Gardens too form an integral part of her symbolic vision. They signify privacy, security and pattern. In the chaotic world of the protagonist it is the only benign aspect which lends harmony. In this respect even seasons form a distinctive symbolic version in her novels which is presented in both positive and negative aspects to suggest the inner turbulence as well as the happy and delight moments in a protagonist's life.

Imagery of landscape is also very vibrant and vital to her writings, and forms the base for many of her novels as she builds, narrates and concludes the whole psychology of her characters through the imagery of place. In her novels city stands for human vulnerability, insecurity and violence. The imagery of house is yet another recurring image which resonates through her narratives. It is an organic imagery which evokes a sense of desertion and incarnation and highlights her thematic vision. Not only houses but what goes into the interiors of a house like walls, furniture and tapestries which are also presented in a symbolic way are supportive in depicting the psychology of the characters.

Again the color imagery which mostly suggests the positive and negative aspects of the psyche of her characters plays a prominent role in her works. The use of vibrant colors like white, black, grey, green, yellow, pink, red suggest different moods of her protagonists. The prey and predator imagery suggests the writer's tragic vision and characters' negative approach towards the outer world. In her novels we also come across animal imagery frequently relating the qualities of humans with those of animals and vice - versa. She also uses images of traps, bonds and cages that she associates with images of dream and nightmare which also play a very crucial role in elevating the inner conflicts of her characters. By and large the images employed by Desai are fresh and alive marked by the keen observation and the exceptional insight of the novelist. As Wimsatt and Brookes suggest in Anita Desai's fiction "every color sound, odour, emotion and every visual image has its correspondence in traits of human self" (Pathak,1990:101).

Desai's reflective style meets the demands of her complex and artistic vision as is seen in her use of symbol and imagery that originated from her experiences of life. As Amina Amin points out Anita Desai's novels abound in symbols through which she tries to capture and concretize a wide range of experience. She has large variety of symbols which she uses with consummate skill. They lend vividness to the situations she tries to describe, the characters she delineates, and the events she narrates (Amin, Amina. 1989: 226).

Desai uses certain images again and again that they acquire the significance of symbols like the imagery of train which appears in most of her novels as symbolic of desire for an escape in her protagonists. Desai employs symbols of aesthetics and mythology which bring her close to existential philosophy. She as a master in psycho analysis, portrays the psychological symbols too. She has analyzed the psychological conflicts faced by the characters in depth by way of appropriate symbols which unveil the mystery of the inner life of her characters, who unable to amalgamate themselves with the society undertake an inner voyage for self discovery. In Desai's novels the theme of alienation is presented symbolically, which forms a different language of communication between reader and author. Most of the Desai's images suggest the identification of human beings and their psychology with nature and surroundings.

We find many cultural symbols too which present the different cultural aspects of our country as well as some other countries outside. Like in *Fasting, Feasting* she depicts Indian food, Indian marriages, style of dressing, dowry system, and rituals in our country while in the second part she deals with American culture and life style. In *The Zig Zag way* too she portrays Mexican life style and rituals symbolically. She presents persons as symbols to differentiate morality and immoral aspects. Like in *In Custody* Deven is symbolic of morality and Murad is a symbol of deceitful nature. We find social symbols, which show the connection of the protagonists with the society around them and social reality. The novelist also exploits the gestures and movements to suggest the inner revolutions and experiences of her characters, to us symbolically. Again discourse, which is universal feature of fiction, plays a symbolical role in Anita Desai's works. She uses two types of discourse symbols - one is dialogue and the other one is situation. In some of her novels the dialogue discourse symbolically elevates the gap between the relations and the conflicts in their minds. According to S.P. Swain, In Desai's novels we come across the symbolic link between different images, which form an inter face, a common bond. Symbol is primarily used to capture and crystallize a wide range of experiences. Most of the symbols are sharply condensed and having clear and strong features that they resemble a piece of painting (Swain, S.P. 2000:36)

The symbols of isolation the novelist portrays are simple but powerful in creating a rhythm to add splendor to her novels. They are highly functional and reveal a world inside. In the words of Madhusudhan Prasad "Desai's imagery which is chiefly anticipatory, pre-figurative or demonstrative in nature is always functional, lusciously lyrical and her magic patterns are singularized in interrelatedness and continuity (Prasad, 1981:142). Desai's symbols trace the growth of the self from a state of despair to a state of spiritual consolation. For her, images are not confined to art alone but they are related to Psychology and science too. Because her use of condensed symbol her art comes close to a painting. According S.P. Swain in Anita Desai's novels "imagery suggest the protagonist's totality of experience and buildup overall tonality of the novel" (Swain, 2000:38). In her novels there are a number of symbols which have contextual significance, where characters think in images and symbols and the whole narration revolves around them. The themes of despair, desolation, psychic and socio cultural aspects get translated into the language of imagery which presents the changing moods of her introvert characters, and their mental alienation in a sensible way. Botanical, zoological, and color images which appear in cluster to elevate the alienation of her characters add beauty and textual density to her works.

The distinct feature of her fictional artistry is her use of imagery and symbolism to carry the theme and create the feeling of wholeness. Says Desai "I like to have this pattern and then fit in the characters the scene – each rich in keeping with the other so as to form a balanced whole" (Desai, Anita.1978:5). All her novels are studded with delicate and picturesque images and powerful symbols, which not only enhance the beauty of her novels but also contribute to the development of the structure. Like each of her individual novel deals with different concepts, in a similar way we find different types of images and symbols to suit her fictional purpose. The earlier six novels elevate the common theme of women's predicament and their sense of suppression, where we rightly find a common imagery and symbols related to gloom, despair and deprivation but in the later novels we find that most of her protagonists are men whose reactions to what life offers them are vastly different from what we find in the earlier novels. In the earlier novels we find opulent imagery woven with delicacy and lyrical beauty and rich array of symbols drawn from nature and its objects but coming to the later novels, we find a little dryness and barrenness in the imagery and symbols employed to keep with the demands of the themes which are more concerned with the portrayal of social reality rather than the psychological dynamics as in the previous novels. The later novels deal with different themes and hence with different imagery.

Anita Desai is a writer, who is concerned more with thought, emotion and sensation than with action. The use of symbols intensifies her vision and lends density to her fictional world and compensates the absence

of action in her narratives. Unlike the symbolists, who use intellectual symbolism to express the vague and mysterious thoughts, Anita Desai uses symbols related to emotions. Lawrence rightly observes "a complex of emotional experience is a symbol" (Lawrence, D. H. 1965: 282). Desai's symbolic technique is sole ingredient of her art. We can say that symbols and imageries are breath of Anita Desai's narratives. The themes may vary from novel to novel but the common factor we find in all her novels are is the emphasis she lays on the use of symbolism and imagery that places her in a commendable position among the Indian English writers. Thus Anita Desai is undoubtedly a master of symbolic technique.

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