

## **Configuring the Spatial in Anita Desai's Novels: A Study Through Imagery**

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**Abstract:** In a literary text, place plays an organic role that defines and becomes an ontological determinant of the characters. Anita Desai has frequently treated natural landscape as a scenological extension of the characters' psyche. The "sepulchral silence" pervades the pages echoing the character's psychology vis-à-vis nature. She has acknowledged the importance of nature in her fiction. She said in an interview that natural objects are of primary importance to her. Dr. Sandhyarani Das avers, "Nature in Anita Desai's fiction plays an important role in shaping the spirits of the protagonists" (206).

In addition Desai draws her characters using images and symbols to foreground the character traits of her protagonists. Visual images, sounds, smells, and textures of familiar places are her material. Also use of images such as houses, trees, animals, etc. constitute a vital part of her narrative strategy. One of the most important images, in several of her novels, is drawn from the world of flora and fauna: as Maya is shown to love flowers and fruits, grass and the trees; in *Fire on the Mountain*, the barren, deserted landscape of Kasauli is symbolic of Nanda Kaul's lonely and "pared" existence. Neeru Tandon calls Desai "A High Priest of Nature" and asserts "the nature and the natural environment are the material on which she weaves her tragic tales" (172). This paper attempts an analysis of nature and literature through a study of the images used in Anita Desai's novels.

**Keywords:** House, Place, Storm, Image, Symbol

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--Eudora Welty

In a literary text, place plays an organic role that defines and becomes an ontological determinant of the characters. Anita Desai has frequently treated natural landscape as a scenological extension of the characters' psyche. The "sepulchral silence" pervades the pages echoing the character's psychology vis-à-vis nature. She has acknowledged the importance of nature in her fiction. She said in an interview that natural objects are of primary importance

to her. Dr. Sandhyarani Das avers, “Nature in Anita Desai’s fiction plays an important role in shaping the spirits of the protagonists” (206). Desai’s novels are an expression of her private vision. Her preoccupations as a novelist, made it possible for her to give a new turn to the Indian novel in English, an interiority comparable to the Modernist novel as developed in the continent by authors who influenced her most—Henry James, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, D.H. Lawrence and Marcel Proust. Anita Desai’s distinctively individual achievement is the novel of consciousness, the psychological novel, which is, according to her, the natural expression of woman’s vision.

As she observes in “The Indian Writer’s Problems,” writing for her “is not an act of deliberation, reason and choice, it is rather a matter of instinct, silence and waiting” (14). The creative act is for her “a secret one” and “to make it public, to scrutinize it in the cold light of reason, is to commit an act of violence, possibly murder” (12). Anita Desai’s “poetics of the novel” is organist, romantic-symbolist in nature and for her “it is the images that matter, the symbol, the myth, the feat of associating them, of relating them, of constructing with them” (14). The central concern of Anita Desai as a novelist is the exploration of the woman’s consciousness in its conflict with the traditional, patriarchal family and social set up. She is directly concerned with the effect of such an environment on the feminine consciousness rather than an analysis of its causes or remedy. The latter is indirectly suggested by her portrayal of the woman’s consciousness in stress.

As in a poetic psychological novel, characters are drawn using imagery and symbols, analysis of leit-motifs, images and symbols used in the narrative have been done to foreground the character-traits of the protagonists. The novels use symbols like the house, the mountain, and quoted poems. The house, considered as the abode of peace, love, safety and nurture takes on fatalistic hues in these novels.

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### **Place/Space**

Place (space), as Cheryll Glotfelty and Fromm say, is the redemptive force (xviii-ix) of life. Eudora Welty once observed, “The truth is, fiction depends for its life on place” (Bradbury 8). Place/space is valued as an intrinsic aspect of literature or any cultural endeavour (Glotfelty and Fromm xviii-ix). Space becomes an ontological determinant in shaping up the personae of a character. The frequently delineated space is—house. House--the symbol of safety, security, and also a sense of belonging becomes the centre of activity of all Desai characters.

Maya, the central character of Desai’s first novel *Cry, the Peacock*, is a homing pigeon, who does not want to abandon her duty and place as a wife, but her mind keeps flying back frequently to her childhood home with her father. In contrast to the aristocratic grandeur of her childhood home, the atmosphere of her husband’s home is marked by banality and insensitivity.

In *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* the central character Sita escapes to rediscover herself in the pristine beauty of her childhood home on an island. Desai shows how internal peace can be achieved through optimal living in harmony with nature. Sita, the central character has a unitive experience--a total integration of mind, body and soul when she plays with mud which enables her to rise above her alienated self. The house on the island in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* is the focal point of Sita’s consciousness and also serves as the objective correlative of the growth of her psyche. When she arrives on the island, the house was pitch-dark, but in the penultimate stage, when she accepts the reality of life and existence, she sees the “window pane of the house on the knoll lit by the setting sun to a mysterious brilliance...” (152). Thus the house as a symbol stands for the illumination that has come to Sita when she acknowledges the reality of life and the value of pleasure and pain with equanimity and peace.

*Clear Light of Day*, one of Anita Desai’s most loved novels, has “place” as its central focus. *Clear Light of Day* is the story of Bim, one of the four Das children of Old Delhi. Though as children Bim and Raja, her brother, had promised to be together always, Raja and Tara left to

find their own niche leaving the retarded Baba in her care. They are only occasional visitors in her house. This has created a deep gash in her psyche and has sapped her strength to life. She has not moved nor grown but stays in the same old house. Bim's dusty, dirty, crumbling house stands for her cluttered thinking and stilted growth. Like the house, she is fixed, unchanging and decaying through years of neglect. In *Clear Light of Day* the house is made the central symbol of the story. Bim's attachment to her brothers and sister and later her grouse against them moves around the house. Like the house, Bim's garden is also in a state of total dereliction. The wilted rose plants, the dusty bougainvillea, the overgrown hedge, all become objective correlatives of Bim's listlessness and apathy. This effect is reiterated through the geographical parallelism of Old Delhi: the city that "does not change. It only decays," (5) aptly presents the "atrophied, or calcified"(149) state of a once bright, dynamic girl.

In *Fire on the Mountain*, through the character of Nanda Kaul, Desai presents the traumatised psyche of an aged widow. She has now withdrawn to Carignano, a dry, dreary house in the foothills of Kasauli. The description of the vegetative world of Carignano mirrors Nanda's existence:

She had drifted about the garden... she revelled in its barrenness, its emptiness. (33)

Thus the dreary house and the untended garden in its barrenness stand for Nanda's barren existence. The word "revelled" reveals her unwillingness to change. The house, considered as the abode of peace, love, safety and nurture takes on fatalistic hues in this novel.

This house of Nanda is not a "home." It is a place to which both Nanda and Raka have been banished. The arrival of Ila Das, Nanda's childhood friend, completes the picture of the deserted and dilapidated house. Each of them has erected a smoke-screen to hide herself from the outer world. Raka is interested in the charred houses on the knoll, Nanda wants to maintain the sparseness of Carignano, and Ila Das wants Nanda's company that would provide succour to her dismal existence, by reminding her of her glorious past. Thus the difference between their professed need for a shelter and the reality brings out the pathos of their lives. Raka, the quiet child of *Fire on the Mountain*, recovers from the harrowing experiences of her home in the soothing lap of nature.

## Storm

The emotional upheaval of almost all the characters finds a reflection in the dust storm. The reference to dust storm, prior to unravelling of some mystery or confusion, finds a place in all the previous novels. In *Cry, the Peacock*, the storm unhinges Maya's last remnants of lucidity; in *Fire on the Mountain* the dust storm precedes the breakdown of Nanda's self-delusion. In *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* the experience with the stormy rainy season washes away the vestiges of Sita's self-doubt and makes her determined to say the big "No." Finally in *Clear Light of Day*, the dust storm raging outside finds a parallel in Bim's violent eruption of rage. The storm thus becomes a symbol of Bim's inner turmoil that forces her to accost her "life-lie."

## Symbols

Mrs. Desai uses leit-motifs, symbols, images and hallucinating vision and dreams to probe and unravel the secret recess of the central consciousness. She uses literal, metaphorical and symbolical images. Her characters seem to think in images that articulate their estranged sensibility and reflect their mental isolation. The central symbol of Maya's self-narrative is the cry of the peacock. This is related to Maya's frustrated passion. Sita's physical features especially the presentation of her eyes play a pivotal role in the delineation of her character. There have been several references to Sita's beauty and her brilliant eyes:

He saw her eyes start from her head so exaggeratedly that he was made to see their immense size and extraordinary brilliance. (17)

If the eyes of a person are a window to his/her soul, Sita's brilliant eyes would stand for her extraordinary intelligence and sensitivity. But, despite the brilliance of her eyes, the same are opaque and blind to the vision of truth and reality:

The woman disregarded its [pond] filth, its solid green layer of germs and disease, and thought beautiful for there were women closely wrapped in saris of scarlet and crimson on the stone steps . . . (23)

The image of the pond underlines the irony in the perceptions of Sita and Moses. Moses, living on the island, thinks it dirty and sees only the scum, while Sita sees only the colourful women and not the pond full of slime and disease. This selective vision and its attendant

incapability to comprehend differences are poetically represented through the image of the house:

So they walked towards the sky which was a vast pink Japanese lantern swinging low over the sea in the great mass of surrounding darkness . . . Here she halted for the house was pitch dark. (26)

Sita's consciousness is foregrounded through geographical contiguity. Her house, the supposed place for her regeneration being in darkness prophesies the failure of her endeavour. The metaphor of the Japanese lantern underlines, however, a little ray of hope. As S. Rimmon-Kenan observes: "Landscape can be analogous not only to a character trait but also to a passing mood" (Kenan 70). Thus, the sky as vast pink Japanese lantern and the pitch-dark house reflect Sita's confusion at the moment of her arrival on the island. But gradually the house would become the hermitage (*ashrama*) of her *sadhana* for redemption and transformation. The hermitage of life (*Jiban ashrama*), her home on the stormy island is symbolically dark at the beginning but Sita's life in that home would lead her to the ultimate vision of light--a perfect understanding of her experiences and the resultant wisdom. The island house as the locale of her penance is set in contrast with the "other house" where she lived on the mainland that was darkened for her by her experience of pervasive violence and her sense of alienation from the members of her family.

The use of animal and nature imagery bestows realism on the depiction of the inner world of the characters. The theme of Maya's passionate longing for love that is thwarted time and again by Gautama provides the dominant leit-motif in the design of the novel. The mating cry of the peacock reverberates throughout the novel mirroring Maya's desperate yearning for love. When Maya hears the peacock's cry, she recollects the albino astrologer's explanation that the peacocks fight furiously before mating. Knowing well they would die before the end of monsoon, they indulge in love as they love life. Maya, thus, finds her life to reflect that of the peacock. Her basic emotion is that of yearning, expectation, a search for love and living--the personal, the indefinable needs to be satiated by the husband, without which she feels her life would be as doomed as the peacocks.

Nanda's thoughts regarding Raka, vivify Raka's physical features as much as they throw light on Nanda's astute observation and astringent humour. Nanda's musings over Raka begin with her name. "Raka meant the moon, but this child was not round-faced, calm or radiant . . . she

looked like one of those dark crickets . . . or a mosquito, minute and fine, on thin, precarious legs (43).

The trials and tribulations of Sita's life are delineated through the symbol of the voyage. Ensnared among three voyages, the story takes the shape of a spiritual journey leading to psychic regeneration and brings to the mind D. H. Lawrence's *The Woman Who Rode Away*. Sita also goes through both physical and emotional turmoil before her complete regeneration. Nanda Kaul in *Fire on the Mountain* is averse to human relationships. Neither relationship nor responsibility engages her. So when her great-granddaughter Raka is sent to Kasauli to recoup from typhoid, she feels disturbed and annoyed. The novel charts out Nanda's growth: her change of heart from aversion of responsibility, to grudging involvement, to admiration and then attachment for Raka. But soon after she grows attached to Raka she thinks of her as a "demon" (70), "the elusive fish, the golden catch" (108). It underscores the sea-change in her attitude towards Raka. Her eyes are also "extravagantly large and somewhat bulging" (43) like that of a fly. She compares Raka to a "mosquito flown up from the plains to tease and worry" (44). All these images bring out not only Raka's emaciated looks but also Nanda's irritation with this fresh burden on her.

In probing the consciousness of her heroes and heroines, Mrs. Desai is very much influenced by the practices of James Joyce, Virginia Woolf and D.H. Lawrence. Like her predecessors, Mrs. Desai is writing poetic-psychological novels. Since Maya is not a rebel against patriarchy and male chauvinism but a conformist who looks upon a loving and happy family as the mainstay of a woman's life, there is no question of the novel adumbrating Feminist rhetoric. Maya's tragedy is wrought by the failure of her marital life with Gautama and it is Gautama who is squarely to be blamed for her insanity and death as is alleged by Maya herself.

In the novel *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* Anita Desai again raises the question of domestic values as against existential angst. The house also serves as the objective correlative of her psychic growth. When she arrives in the island the house was pitch-dark, but in the penultimate stage, when she accepts the reality of life and existence, she sees the "window pane of the house on the knoll lit by the setting sun to a mysterious brilliance . . ." (152). Thus the house as a symbol stands for the illumination that has come to Sita when she acknowledges the reality of life and the value of pleasure and pain with equanimity and peace

of mind. The use of animal and nature imagery bestows realism to the depiction of the inner world of the characters.

In the character of Nanda Kaul, Anita Desai has again succeeded in bringing out the untold agonies and trauma of a woman's life. The symbols, the images, the thought presentation all bear proof of Nanda's barren existence as opposed to her busy past life. Cheated by the husband and deserted by the children, she suffers ignominy of her lonely existence. Her forced exile takes away the remnant of self-respect. She shuns human company and weaves a world of fantasy around her to sustain her crumbling ego. But her life changes in relation to her attitude towards Raka which forces her to go through the cleansing fire of self-analysis that purges off all her anger, affectations and agony.

It would not be an exaggeration to say that all of Anita Desai's previous works lead to and culminate in *Clear Light of Day* where the themes of the preceding three novels converge into a final statement as is often observed by critics. "Anita Desai seems to have asked her readers to read the novel in the entire perspective of her work as it has evolved in time" (Sharma 130). The contrast between Bim's alert mind and her slovenly manner, her independent spirit and obsession to cling on to the past, confuses Tara. The description of the surrounding reinforces the impression of Bim's overall lackadaisical attitude. This self-deception is a manifestation of her psychic state which is symbolically represented through her shabby, neglected house. The representation of the house stands as a key character indicator. Like the house, Bim's garden is also in a state of total dereliction. The wilted rose plants, the dusty bougainvillea, the overgrown hedge, all become objective correlative of Bim's listlessness and apathy. This effect is reiterated through the geographical parallelism of Old Delhi: the city that "does not change. It only decays" (5) aptly presents the "atrophied, or calcified"(149) state of a once bright, dynamic girl.

Bim despite her feelings and failings displays her capacity to overcome her restrictive situation in life through abundant love and intelligence. Thus the deft handling of symbols and images helps Anita Desai in her quest for an ideal woman: a woman who is strong, intelligent, independent, affectionate, and protective as the personae of Bim.

Joseph Conrad commenting on the novelist's art in the Preface to *The Nigger of the Narcissus* makes a characteristic observation:

... it is only through complete, unswerving devotion to the perfect blending of form and substance: it is only through unremitting care for the shape and ring of sentences that an approach can be made to plasticity, to colour, and that the light of magic suggestiveness may be brought to play for an evanescent instant over the common place surface of words .... (70)

Thus, through the vivid play of words, images and symbols, Desai brings in the plasticity that encapsulates her ideal woman and her robust optimism.

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