

A Thematic Study of Alienation and Repression in the Short Stories of Anita Desai

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to study the themes of alienation and repression in the short stories of Anita Desai. The stories taken for purpose of study are from the volume, 'Games at Twilight and Other Stories' published in 1978. In 'Games at Twilight', and 'A Devoted Son' the central characters experience the feeling of being left out and alienated. Anita Desai was bestowed the Sahitya Akademi Award for her novel, 'Fire on the Mountain' in 1978 and was shortlisted for the Booker prize on three occasions for 'Clear Light of Day' in 1980, 'In Custody' in 1984 and 'Fasting Feasting' in 1999. She was born in 1937 in Mussoorie, to an Indian father and a German mother, and raised alongside her three siblings. She grew up multilingual and spoke German, Bengali, Hindi, Urdu and English. She gravitated towards writing from early childhood. Her first novel 'Cry, the Peacock' was published in 1968. She taught at several colleges in the U.S.A. namely, Mount Holyoke College, Bharuch College and Smith College and is professor emeritus of Humanities at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Keywords- Alienated, Repression, Multilingual, Devotion, Left out

Short-stories written by Desai have a lot of wisdom and are a fusion of many contemporary themes – globalization, self-assertion, violence, struggle between tradition and modernity. Her stories are woven together with concrete detail and reality; transcending all the boundaries of geographical limitations she has wonderfully interpreted the human mind and there is an intense imagination as well as imagery in almost all her writings. She is the representative of a culture in transition; and from tradition to modernity. (Chauhan 790)

In the story, 'Games at Twilight' Ravi's alienation comes to the fore. The children of a household after being caged in for the better part of the day are finally granted permission by their mother to go out and play. They start out by playing hide and seek, in which the onus is on Raghu to seek out all the rest who are hiding. Ravi hides in a dark shed near the garage, in which their non functional domestic appliances are stored. He is immensely frightened of being in the dark shed and recalls a past experience where he had got locked in the linen cupboard. Sitting on the edge of an old bath tub he decides to wait it out till he can come out, declare himself unconquered and be the winner. Time passes and the hot afternoon gives way to a cooler evening and twilight gradually dawns. Ravi then realises that in order to win; he should have gone to the veranda, touched the white pillar and said, "Den". This oversight upset him and he made his way out of the shed to claim victory. By the time he reached the veranda, he is filled with misery and resentful tears. The other children, who were happily singing and chanting on the lawn, are startled by his sudden appearance and emotional state. He rushed in their midst and shouted that he had won. He is informed that the game was over and they had moved on to other games and activities. His heart breaks that his absence went unnoticed. He had been savouring the prospect of being treated like a champion only to realise that his presence or absence did not make a difference.

"But he had been forgotten, left out, and he would not join them now. The ignominy of being forgotten—how could he face it? He felt his heart go heavy and ache inside him unbearably. He lay down full length on the damp grass, crushing his face into it, no longer crying, silenced by a terrible sense of his insignificance." (Desai)

Ravi is crushed when he realises that the ordeal he went through was for nothing. He is bereft of a sense of belonging. While he was biding time in the shed, all the others were happily playing games, plucking fruit, helping in washing the car and had fun watering the garden beds. They were joined by their parents and were playing, singing and chanting. In this atmosphere, of togetherness and bonding, he was totally forgotten, not just by his brothers and sisters, but also by his parents. None of them noticed that he was missing and went looking for him. Though part of a large bustling family, he feels alone and alienated while at the receiving end of

ignorance and apathy. Ravi is dejected at being deprived of the recognition due to him, for having successfully eluded being found by the older and heftier Raghu. He feels repressed when all the others fail to acknowledge his impressive game. His mother is annoyed at him and the other children too are inconsiderate towards him.

“Don’t be a fool,” Raghu said roughly, pushing him aside, and even Mira said, “Stop howling, Ravi. If you want to play, you can stand at the end of the line,” and she put him there very firmly. (Desai)

The story ends with a dejected Ravi, who had faced his fear of the dark to savour the sweetness of victory. However, recognition and acceptance dodged him and all around him the other children carried on with their games blissfully. The only feelings that he was left with were of alienation and insignificance. In the story ‘A Devoted Son’, Rakesh, the offspring of illiterate parents, is an exemplary son. He excelled in studies and went on to pursue studies in medicine, becoming a doctor. He worked in the U.S.A for some years before returning home and taking up work at the city hospital, where he eventually became the director. He set up his own clinic and soon earned a reputation for being the best doctor in town. His father took pride in the fact that his son bowed to him and showed respect by touching his feet. His mother was delighted that he didn’t turn up with an American wife. She promptly got him married to an illiterate girl, the daughter of her childhood friend. Rakesh continues to be a devoted and obedient son. The situation changes when his mother passes away and his father, now an old man, is beset with ailments. The father literally feels exploited and we can see that Rakesh’s identity is completely outshone by the doctor’s identity: he does not have the benevolence of a son, only the attention of the doctor. His point of view is too medical and not human enough and Varma’s life becomes a prison from which he can escape thanks to death only. His wish to die is linked to two aspects: first he wants to get rid of his boring life in which he cannot eat what he wants, and second he is sick of old age and the pains that go with it. The behavior of his son isolates Varma and death is his solution against alienation, here it is really perceived as a relief. (Cubille 32)

The dutiful son, out of concern, imposes a strict diet for his father. The diet is limited to certain foods and restricted in amount, in addition to being devoid of sugar, oil and spices. He is given only two frugal meals a day and misses his wife and the way she used to cook for him. The old man finds the food unpalatable and bristles under the onslaught of his new diet. He is also forced to take a good amount of medicines and it became a regular part of his diet. Despite not wanting to go out to the garden in the evening, he is forcefully carried out by the servants and made to sit up, on orders from his son, that it be done so. So there he sat, like some stiff corpse, terrified, gazing out on the lawn where his grandsons played cricket, in danger of getting one of their hard-spun balls in his eye, and at the gate that opened onto the dusty and rubbish-heaped lane but still bore, proudly, a newly touched-up signboard that bore his son’s name and qualifications, his own name having vanished from the gate long ago. (Desai) The father is completely isolated in his own home. His son is only interested in his father’s survival, not in his happiness. The daughter-in-law has a smirking attitude towards him. The old man experiences trauma and agony, heaped on him by his own son, who is considered a model of a devoted son. It is ironic that the son’s devotion has only succeeded in alienating the father and repressing him in such a way that he longs for escape in the form of death. Deprived of food, screamed the old man on the bed, “his wishes ignored, taunted by his daughter-in-law, laughed at by his grandchildren—that is how I live.” But he was very old and weak and all anyone heard was an incoherent croak, some expressive grunts and cries of genuine pain. Only once, when old Bhatia had come to see him and they sat together under the temple tree, they heard him cry, “God is calling me—and they won’t let me go.” (Desai)

In the short story, ‘Studies in the Park’, Suno, a young man is under constant pressure from his family to study for his university entrance examination. He is disturbed by the din in his home and longs for quietness to study. Though his family members tell him to study, they do not create a congenial atmosphere at home where he can study peacefully.

“Remember, Suno, I expect good results from you. Study hard, Suno.” Just behind him, I saw all the rest of them standing, peering in, silently. All of them stared at me, at the exam I was to take. At the degree I was to get. Or not get. Horrifying thought. Oh study, study, study, they all breathed at me...” (Desai)

Fed up, he seeks a park to study and starts going there every day. One day, he sees a beautiful but sickly young woman lying on a park bench with her head resting in another man’s lap. Witnessing this tender moment, something that he was unfamiliar with in his family, between the couple brings about a sudden transformation in the way he views life. This vision of tender relationship between the couple creates an emotionally moving moment. Suno’s extreme reaction to tension is both distressing and horrifying. He develops an apathy towards studies. He feels that it is a useless burden in the face of love and kindness. Life becomes for him a search and is

no longer a race'. This story depicts the universal theme of parents' ambition and society's competitiveness which sandwich students like Suno. (Rao and Abraham)

Suno experiences alienation in his family and finds the environment at home stifling. He doesn't have a sense of belonging though he is surrounded by his parents, siblings and relations. Parental ambitions are thrust on him and he is constantly advised to work hard for a better future. Once he takes his decision to pursue life as an adventure, his parents refuse to understand his point of view and plead with him to focus on academics. In the stories taken up for studying the themes of alienation and repression, we find a common strand unifying Ravi, the dejected little boy, sad and forlorn Varma and the young man, Suno. All of them have been subject to isolation and repression. Ravi and Varma succumb to it, whereas Suno is inspired by the touching episode he witnessed and embark on living life the way he wants to, without the burden of filial expectations.

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