
How to Avoid the Paradigm of Censorship: Self-Consciousness, Mimetic Desire and the Empathic Style of Anita Desai

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Abstract

Anita Desai and her writings have surfaced undoubtedly as a significant expression of contemporary domestic atmosphere – voicing suppressions, subjugations, embedded violence, and/ or culturally dominant structural family patterns. It is without a doubt then, her writings too have been subjected to censorship binaries, but somehow passing through them is voicing the emanant. What then she embedded in her writings, how she had codified the narratives, which even though stands in antagonism to the prevalent cultural patterns – still is finding an outlet without obscurity? The answer lies in the narrative choice of her stories. The plots, instead of featuring an alien story features a familiar story (a characteristic feature of mimetic desire). Amalgamated with this is her unique capability of using semiotics of self-consciousness. Combined, both these devices make her readings a direct apprehension of a phenomenon in a not-so-direct manner. This paper thus proposes to analyze selected works of Anita Desai's to understand her use of self-consciousness and mimetic desires of her characters as a potential device to penetrate the censorship stigmata.

Keywords: *Apprehension, Diachronic Temporality, Embeddedness, Anti-Expression, Enumeration*

Introduction: To understand how Anita Desai's work fully nullifies the recent explosion of censorship, one must be back into the functioning of censorship as a cultural apprehension. What were the 'censoring' bodies talking about when Anita Desai marred with devastated plights of contemporary existence had decided to voice them? Censorship all began with a truth that ideological freedom of artistic endeavor can challenge and thereby disrupt the 'formally' accepted meanings coded by cultural practices over a diachronic temporality (Moore 1). Societal shapes, patterns, relationships all carry their own culturally embedded hierarchy – and hence 'meaning' – for all human beings. Some critics among censorship have argued for discarding the counting of 'human meanings' for the construction of a pure societal structure (Paret 361). However, nothing is more human than the love of creating 'abstract' censoring to control the human species and dominate over them. The censoring binaries that were established, or discovered, or invented, like the forms we find in the physical world, were there because who pursued them found them worthy of pursuit to control the chaos of human imagination, even if it was at the cause of studying that 'chaos' through a pursuit of it.

The censoring paradigmatic conception of 'permitted', 'allowed', or 'functional' interest in defining a human factor proved confusing to literary writers, when they have compared the 'ideal' as proposed by the censorship and the 'real' that these censorships are trying to prevent. In this regard, works of 'fictional literature', even though long been subjected under censorship for a proper definition of *fictional* (which should be in compliance with the accepted cultural modulations), still responded as a proper medium to Anita Desai's love for the 'actual'. But they often come laden with other interests. The conception at censorship is not a modern compassion, its antiquity has made humans to follow its structures – whether in compliance or not – therefore, what one refers as critical judgement of a conscious individual (probably in antagonism with cultural censorship) also is constructed through censorship ideologies. The space in that is being propelled by a tendency of absolute imitation – human senses only function in it by being subjected to it. Adorno and Horkheimer has commented on this gyre nature of censorship with respect to their understanding of the cultural industry: "culture mockingly fulfill the notion of a unified culture which the philosophers of the individual personality held out against mass culture...anyone who resists can survive only by being incorporated" (103-104). As a result of this, the very act of making even the most anti-censorship work imports into it meanings that carry both the making and applying of censorship other than a pure contemplation of a literary narrative, "sooner or later every writer must therefore struggle with the problem of how to deal with the scandal of what is often called "content" for expression" (Booth 14).

Every writer who has pronounced boldly for a purified literary expression, away from the confinements of censorship has been confronted by the problematic fact that all actual works of literary (as well as non-literary) expressions are already being subjected to censorship aspects. This parameter became even more pressing when the 'messages', opposing the censoring signifiers are blatantly obvious; as the expressions for the untouchables in Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* (1935). But it is equally problematic when the literary work fully disguises the 'anti' sentiment, as in *Bravely Fought the Queen* (1991) or in *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* (1998) – censorship critics can easily discern the embedded 'anti' elements and can criticize them limiting their exposures to a restricted academic circle. A whole history of literariness within the Indian demography has been written and distorted by these factors. The authors as well as the engaged critics caught themselves into a parabolic gyre – failing to expunge the lingering impurities of 'censorship'.

Of all the authors, contemplating for a way out, but has been caught by the censorship model, Anita Desai's fiction has been more resistant to the dictatorship of censorship. Her writings are so obviously built with censorship models many critics have misunderstood the appearance of her characters by categorizing them with the prevalent censored criticism. Therefore, Arun and Uma from *Feasting, Fasting* have been identified under the binaries of "fire and water" (Volna 3), Sita from *Where Shall We Go This Summer* as "nervous, sensitive" (Manimozhi and Shanthi 18), Nanda's epistemology from *Fire on the Mountain* as a "reclusive existence" (Batts 22) and so on. Since, Desai have understood, to tell a 'story' is in itself a confession to censorship model, the probable thing to do is to frustrate the story in some way: by leaving the characters purged of emotional empathy (as in Maya); by telling everything in a complexed manner (as in Uma), by imposing various word games and tricks with point of view (as in Nanda's). Her genius lies in explicitly inviting the readers that the fictions they are exposed are 'generated' not by an interest in character portrayals (even though it can be a method of anti-expression) and how the characters relate with each other, but by number of multifarious modalities, which can be shuffled. But the contour is that, as soon as a character is named, an

incident is described, immediately it conforms to censorship model of expression – thereby, all the effort ‘against’ has gone down the drain.

This mode of critical composition has relevance when enumerating Anita Desai’s compositions. She has summed up the novelist’s major discoveries in the realm of anti-censorship as the depiction or rather the re-recreation of the self-developing idea, inseparable from personality. On this paradigm, Maya appears to be the ‘role character’ on whom the development of an idea and her personal enumeration about them are inseparable. The depth is so much in her that her cognition about the summer smell and the attraction of snakes by the smell attains a thesis-antithesis conjecture even when she is deciding the connotation of everyday subjects for her. She exhumes: “I lay back in my chair and breathed deeply, lay there waiting – for summer? For snakes? For the moon? I did not know” (10).

Desai overlaps her own ideas in a curious way, for her the unity of the ‘becoming’ (developing) the idea is the crux, the source of a certain internal open-endedness in her compositions. Internal open-endedness is a part of her theme (viable for the generation of multiple point of views to batter censorship), and the external open-endedness a feature of its exposition (to convey a conformity with cultural paradigm). Therefore, when Maya (*Cry, the Peacock*), Monisha (*Voices in the City*), Sarah (*Bye-Bye Blackbird*), and Sita (*Where Shall We Go This Summer?*) acted out against the traditionality of a submissive wife it is an allusion to the internality; while at the same time, her denotative criticism for being a psychological victim conforms to the external structures, therefore, the crust of the argument remained nullified within censorship.

It is sufficing to say that, this complex amalgamation of internal and external has something to do with Desai’s conception of wholeness of a literary work. But, the wholeness for Desai is not a finished entity; it is always a relationship. She understood that within censorship an aesthetic creation – or for that matter, any existence of human or the non-human – acquires wholeness only when an individual, by conceptualizing within censorship structure assumes a concrete attitude towards it. Thus, what she is aspiring is to make the ‘whole’ never be finalized. When a whole is realized (at the level of external features), it should be by definition open to change in an internal structure. Therefore, the cathartic effect of her writings consists in the realization that: “...nothing conclusive has yet taken place in the world, the ultimate word of the world and about the world has not yet been spoken, the world is open and free, everything is still in the future and will always be in the future” (Bakhtin 166).

Parallel Synthesis: The Mimetic Aspirations of Her Characters

In this regard the protagonists of her works interest Desai not as some manifestation of reality that possesses fixed and specific socially typical or individual characteristic traits, nor as a specific assembled profile of censorship, the application of which can answer why the ‘action’. On the other hand, the characters interests Desai as an atom of particularity in symbiosis with oneself and on the world – as in the position, enabling a character to interpret and evaluate their own self and their surrounding reality in an effort to forget their censorship pre-inheritance – a presence, that is there even before the conception of the character(s). It is in this coax that nothing can be affected by censorship. No more credits, no more borrowing from censoring. So if one is to understand the functioning of the character(s), it is only achievable in the unleashed overflowing, by employing all logical forms, one ought to recognize it by nothing other than the

excess of “this untimely dis-identification, therefore by nothing that is. By nothing that is presently identifiable” (Derrida 165).

For this reason, what is important to Desai is not how her protagonists appear in the world but first and foremost how the world appears to her protagonists, and how the protagonists appear to themselves. On several occasions, her characters have aroused their self-consciousness by enumerating their ‘desires’ to be free – while being conscious of any form of ‘human’ desire is potentially contagious and mimetically censored. They have understood that human desire being a culturally censored phenomenon, sometimes it becomes very hard to detect its presence, for the human desire follows the most absent ways in order to spread from one person to another; “it gains support from the obstacles we set in its way, from the indignation it arouses, from the ridicule we try to heap on it” (Girard 98). This is a very important and fundamental feature of the way a fictional character is perceived to portray the ‘anti’ by staying within a demographic censorship. The protagonists as a point of view (against censorship), as an option on the world and on themselves requires utterly special methods of discovery and artistic characterization. This is because, for Desai, what must be discovered and characterized to construct an anti-sympathy is not the specific entity of the protagonists, not their fixed images, but their sum total of consciousness and self-consciousness, ultimately the protagonists’ final word on themselves and on the world. Consequently, those elements out of which the protagonists’ image is composed are not features of reality – features of the protagonists themselves or of their everyday surroundings, but rather the significance of these features lies for the protagonists themselves, for their self-consciousness.

All the stable and objective qualities of the protagonist – their social positions, the degree to which they are sociologically and characterologically typical, their habitus, their spiritual profile and even their physical appearance – that is, everything that usually serves an author to conjure an anti-atmosphere – in Desai is the object of the protagonist’s own introspection, the subject of their self-consciousness. At a time for other authors when the self-consciousness of a character becomes merely as an element of their reality, as merely one of their integrated images, here for Desai, on the contrary, all of reality becomes an element of the character’s self-consciousness – allowing the characters to justify their entropy against a censorship deed. For this reason, Desai retains for herself, that is for her exclusive vision for a free ambiance of existence, not manipulated by censorship, not a single essential definition, not a single trait, not the smallest feature of the protagonists: she enters it all into the field of vision of the protagonists themselves, she casts it all into the amplification of the protagonist’s self-consciousness.

One must not interpret the self-consciousness of the protagonists on the societal plane and merely see it as a new trait against censorship. That is how exactly Bindhu and Kumar have understood Lila (from *Village by the Sea*) as the victim of women’s suppression, Anamika (from *Fasting, Feasting*) as a victim of social evils, or Nirod from *Voices in the City* as a “dominating figure” (7). Desai have realized that the self-consciousness, as the ‘artistic prominence’ governing the construction of the protagonist, cannot lie alongside other features of the characters (suppressions due to conformity); it absorbs these others into itself as its own material and deprives them (the logocentric censorship) of any power to define and finalize the protagonist.

Self-consciousness can be made the dominant feature in the representation of any character(s). But, not all the characters are equally favourable material for such a representation. In this respect, the male counterparts offered too narrow a potential perspective. When Maya craved: “is there nothing in you that would be touched ever so lightly” (114), Gautama presented

a detachment theory completely in conjugation of a censored understanding: “he who, controlling the sense of the mind follows without attachment the path of action with his organs” (p 114). Consequently, the other narratives are also restrictive in their depiction of a male voice against censorship – they are designed to communicate the censorship binaries, against which the other voices emerge. As a result of this, Monisha (*Voices in the City*) is having a parallelism with her brother’s, Sita is being shaped and reshaped by her father.

Anita Desai sought a protagonist who would be occupied primarily with the task of becoming conscious, the sort of protagonist whose life would be concentrated on the pure function of gaining consciousness of themselves and the world. And at this point, in her works there began to appear the metaphors “neurotic maya” (Chaudhari 79), Bim in *Clear Light of Day* with “melancholic, disillusioned, withdrawn” (Bala 644). The consciousness of a disillusioned or a neurotic person – who are not personified and cannot be personified (as the adjectives are of pluralistic connotation) – is the most favourable soil for Anita Desai’s creative purpose. For it allows her to fuse the artistic dominant of the representation with the real-life and characterological dominant of the represented person. As she exclaimed: “my stories are generally about those who can’t, the kind that are trapped in situations over which they haven’t control” (Bliss and Desai 524).

For instance, Maya not only dissolves in herself all possible fixed features of a censorship depiction, making them all the object of her own introspection (triggered by the death of her dog), but in fact, she no longer has any such traits at all, no fixed definitions, there is nothing to say about her, she figures not as a person taken from life, but as the subject of consciousness and dream (thereby non categorizable). And for Desai, as well they (the characters) are not a carrier of traits and qualities that could have been neutral toward her (Desai’s) self-consciousness and could have finalized them (characters). No, what the author visualizes is precisely the protagonist’s self-consciousness. Thus, the real-life censorship definition of Maya (as a neurological exhibitor) or any other such characters, and the artistic dominant of her image (against the categorization of censorship) are fused into one.

Self-consciousness as the artistic feature in the construction of the protagonist’s image is by itself sufficient to break down the censorship unity of the world – but, only on condition, that the protagonist, as self-consciousness is really represented and not expressed, that is, does not fuse with the author, does not become the mouthpiece of the voice. Only on condition, consequently, that accents of the protagonist’s self-consciousness are really objectified and that the work itself observes a distance between the protagonist and the author. However, the censorship criticisms are functioning to retain her works within the norms. The prevalent mode is to restrict her understanding within a pre-given data set. For example, Kaur observed (by following the multitude critics) that the roles her characters play at the surface are their true value set and are governed by the male domination for a female action – therefore they are nothing ‘new’. Even the space and time of her creation are also dominated by societal favouritism. As a consequence of this on any reading of her novels, the reader would be left with the sense of powerlessness of the characters “not only in the public sphere but also in the domestic sphere where their autonomous existence is dominated by either the parents or the husbands” (Kaur 798). If this umbilical cord uniting the protagonist to their creator is not cut, then what one has is not a work of art (battering censorship) but a personal document.

Desai’s works are in this sense profoundly objective – because the protagonists’ self-consciousness, once it becomes the dominant, breaks down the censorship binaries (while at the

exterior level reflecting the conformity). The protagonists become relatively free and independent, because everything in Desai's design that had defined them (characters), as it had sentenced them everything that had qualified them to be once and for all a completed image of censorship, now no longer functions as a form for finalizing them, but operate as the material of their self-consciousness.

In a censorship design, the protagonists are closed and their semiological boundaries are "a kind of condenser of all the principles of sign-ness and at the same time goes beyond sign-ness. It is a mediator between different spheres of semiosis, and also between semiotic and non-semiotic reality" (Lotman, 111). They act, experience, think and are conscious within the limits of what they are, that is, within the limits of their image defined as reality. They cannot cease to be themselves, that is, they cannot exceed the limits of their own characters, typicality or temperament without violating the author's censorship design (for achieving cultural success) concerning them. For this reason, the 'crowd' which encompasses the mass of common creation tends towards active violence by coming away the natural causes of censorship and directing their actions towards something which they possess under them. Since by definition, the crowd cannot exist by eliminating the natural causes of censorship and at the same time live with them – those who make the 'crowd' always tend to blame others for their misfortunes and this "they dream of purging the community of the impure elements that corrupt it, the traitor who undermine it". (Girard 30-31)

The self-consciousness of the protagonist is inserted into this rigid framework, to which the protagonist has no access from within and which is part of the authorial consciousness defining and representing them – presented against the background of a censorship conformity, these models achieve relatively high popular cultural demands for their categorization nature. However, Anita Desai renounces all these conformity premises. Everything that the censored driven authors kept for their creation, to reflect the ultimate unity of a work and the world portrayed in it, Desai turns over to her protagonists, transforming all of it into an aspect of the protagonist's self-consciousness.

There is literally nothing that one can say about the protagonists of Desai. Maya from *Cry, the Peacock*, even though was reflecting deep psychological impulses was aware of her typicality of her time and social group, of the sober psychological or even psycho-pathological delineation of her internal profile, of her understanding of the category of characters to which her consciousness belongs, her comic as well as her tragic side, all possible moral definitions of her personality, and so on – all of this, in keeping with Desai's design, the protagonist knows perfectly well herself, and she stubbornly and agonizingly soaks up all these definition from within. Any point of view from without is rendered powerless in advance and denied the finalizing word.

Because the dominant of representation in this literary work of Desai coincides maximally with the dominant of that which is represented, the formal task of Desai can be very clearly expressed in the content of how she is creating a paralogical set of consciousness against censorship. What Maya thinks about most of all is what others think or might think about her; she tries to keep one step ahead of every other consciousness, every other thought about her, every other point of view on her. At all the critical moments of her confessions she tries to anticipate the possible definition or evaluation others might make of her, to guess the sense and tone of that evaluation, and tries painstakingly to formulate these possible words about herself by others, interrupting her own speech with the imagined rejoinders of others:

‘Stop them, tell them, tell them to stop’. I begged, when in this state. And then, in the convalescent calm that followed, wondered if such drum existed. In all my sane life – and surely there were times when I was no longer sane! – I had not heard such a rhythm – uneven, so that it could not be an accompaniment to a dancer, or, at any...I searched for the dancer then, then powerful dancer gone berserk, but found only shadows, for he had danced his dance, departed to dance elsewhere, leaving only the rhythm pounding in my ears (130-131).

And this not merely a character trait of a single protagonist’s self-consciousness, it is also the dominant governing principle of the author’s construction of her protagonists. Desai does not indeed leave the final word to her protagonists. And precisely that final word – or, more accurately, the tendency toward it – is necessary to conquer the censorship model. She constructs her protagonists not out of words foreign to the protagonists, not out of neutral definition; she constructs not a character, nor a type, nor a temperament, in fact she constructs no objectified image of the protagonist at all, but rather the protagonist’s discourse about them and their world.

Desai’s protagonists are not an objectified image (of censorship model) but an autonomous discourse, pure construct. One does not see them but hear them; everything that one sees and know apart from their discourses are nonessential and is swallowed up by Desai’s employment of discourse as a raw material, or else remains outside it as something that stimulates and provokes. Thus, all these compositional devices in fact perform the function of nullifying the realization of censorship conformity. The serious and deeper meaning of this revolt might be expressed this way: a living human being cannot be turned into the voiceless object of some censorship, by finalizing the cognitive process. In a human being there is always something that only she herself can reveal, in a free act of self-consciousness and discourse, something that does not submit to an externalizing censorship definition. In Desai’s subsequent works, the characters no longer carry literary censorship model with a denotatively fixed definition, but they all do furious battle with such definitions of their personality in the mouth of the other censorship people. They all acutely sense their own inner unfinalizability, their capacity to outgrow the censor, as it were, from within and to render untrue any externalizing and finalizing definition of them. As long as the protagonists are alive, they live by the fact that they are not yet finalized by cultural model, and can therefore violate any regulating norms which might be thrust upon them.

Conclusion: One way to fight censorship is to seek expressions that can function as a taint on that pure censorship form. In the mid-20th century, Raja Rao was already dwelling on a literary expression of ‘nationalism’ (the binaries of which is defined by literary censorship) in his *Kanthapura* (1938), in which censorship for expressions of a nationalistic fervor was very well tuned with an anti-censorship elemental feature: nationalism and its principles cannot bring unity to all individual. Murthy’s action at last to renounce the Gandhian principles of nationalism in favour of a new one shows a conscious search for free expressions. In post independent India, the factor of ideal conception of an ‘anti’ space became even more elusive, when ‘literary expressions’ were not questioning the ‘actual’, but the past ‘content’ (partition) for its upholding as necessity by the censorship culture to alter or draw away the focus from the problematics of the domestic, the everyday phenomenon to a ‘lived’ national sympathy. The challenge then that was presented before Anita Desai (to voice the ‘living’ experience) required an entirely different level of encounter. This challenge had little to do with whether or not Anita Desai claims privileges over literary censorship of expression or exercises inside views. Indeed,

it had nothing to do with Anita Desai's effort to produce a single unified work. Her subject was not the ordering of technical vocabulary to create a synthesis for the mass appeal, as much as the 'effects' of the quality of the author's imaginative gift – the ability or willingness to allow voices into the work that are not fundamentally under censorship control and can process its own ideology.

This problem lies deeper than the question of authorial discourse on the superficial level of composition, and deeper than a superficially compositional device for eliminating authorial discourse by means of first-person narration (as in *Cry, the Peacock*) or by a narrator's introduction (as in *Fire in the Mountain*), or by constructing the novel in scenes and thus reducing authorial discourse to the status of a stage direction. All these compositional devices for eliminating or weakening authorial discourse at the level of composition do not in themselves tackle the essence of the problem of censorship; their underlying meaning can be profoundly different, depending on the different artistic tasks they perform.

For Anita Desai, the notion of diverse tasks is quite different from other literary writers, who intend to produce an artistic effect like tragedy, comedy, satire or eulogy. Anita Desai's essential task was not simply to make the most effective work possible, as viewed in its kind, proposed by censorship argumentations. It is rather to achieve a view of human existence superior to all other views, fiction of the right kind, pursuing the right tasks – is the best instrument of understanding that has ever been devised by Anita Desai. It is indeed, the only conceptual device that can act 'justice', by achieving a kind of objectivity quite different from that hailed by censorship critics, to the essential, irreducible, multi-centeredness of human life. In freeing the readers from narrowly subjective view of censorships, the best novels of Anita Desai achieve a universally desirable quality, regardless of the particular effects of censorship which at the surface structure her writings reflect. Like the universally desirable 'sublimity' pursued by Longinus, the artistic quality pursued by Anita Desai is a kind of sublimity of freed perspectives within the narrow ambiance of censorship – that will always, on all fictional occasions be superior to every other.

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