

THE ARTIST OF DISAPPEARANCE – A DEPICTION OF HUMAN RELUCTANCE

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Abstract

The Artist of Disappearance is a compilation of three novellas. In the trio of novellas, titled, "The Museum of Final Journeys", "Translator Translated", and "The Artist of Disappearance", Anita Desai, an acclaimed feminist writer departs from her routine feministic themes to become a post-modern commentator over the inertia of human life. All people cannot be the winners and the losers. There are many who end their lives fighting for some cause or pursuing an ambition. There are also people who recoil from challenges. The fear of failure kills the confidence in them to undertake the tough tasks. Time and Circumstance serve an easy excuse for their frailty. *The Artist of Disappearance* displays the isolation and dissolution of three characters, a Junior Officer, Prema, and Ravi when the guilt haunts them for their inaction, despite their potentiality to tackle the challenges in their lives. This paper interprets the nature and causes of incongruity between human potential, its virtualization and the reward to the talent.

Keywords: Inertia of Human life, Time, Circumstances, Guilty, and Human Potential.

She is born on June 24, 1937, in Mussoorie, India. Anita Desai can be described as the second generation of Indian writers in English following the first generation which comprises the male triumvirate – Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao, R.K. Narayan and female writers – Kamala Markandaya and Ruth Parwer Jhabavala. Ruth Jhabavala was first to notice the writer in Anita Desai and encouraged then school going Anita to become a creative writer and publish.

The suppression and oppression of Indian women were the subjects of her first novel, *Cry, the Peacock* (1963), and a later novel, *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* As do most of her works, the novel reflects Desai's essentially tragic view of life.

Other novels by Desai include *In Custody* (1984; film 1994) and *Journey to Ithaca* (1995). Desai also wrote short fiction-collections include *Games at Twilight, and Other Stories* (1978) and *Diamond Dust, and Other Stories* (2000)-and several children's books, including *The Village by the Sea* (1982). *The Artist of Disappearance* (2011) a collection of three novellas is the last literary production to come into the literary market from Desai's pen.

The writings of Desai sail gently with precision, mystery, and intimacy as can be found in poetry which combines with the epic reach of the novel. Her literary craft bagged many awards and rewards which are; Royal Society of Literature Winifred Holtby prize, 1978; Sahitya Academy award, 1979; Guardian award, for children's book, 1982; Hadassah Magazine award, 1989; Tarak Nath Das award, 1989; Padma Sri award, 1989; Literary Lion Award, New York Public Library, 1993. Fellow, Royal Society of Literature, 1978; Girton College, Cambridge, 1988; Clare Hall, Cambridge, 1991. Writing is the spiritual breath of Desai. Explaining the importance of artistic writing to her she said,

It is a necessity to me: I find it is in the process of writing that

I am able to think, to feel and to realize at the highest pitch.

Writing is to be a process of discovering the truth- the truth

That is nine-tenths of the iceberg that lies submerged beneath

The one-tenth visible portion we call Reality. Writing is my

Way of plunging to the depths and exploring this underlying

And convey the true significance of things.

Life is a challenge. Commercialization and materialism make it all the more hard and impossible to lead a sensible and sensitive living. Living for a cause that demands action against the material time where artificiality and commerciality are more valued than the genuine talent and aesthetics is all the more depressing and arduous. Very rarely, a handful of people succeed in triumph over these conditions and make the good of the humanity victorious. Some melt away their mortal years to convince the existing system and society to the idea of their sensibility and perish before accomplishing their life motto. Usually, these winners and fighters of time and life are entertained as the heroes of the art and the literature. Yet critically and refreshingly Anita Desai chooses three facile and reserve characters as central characters of her trio of novellas in *The Artiste of Disappearance*. In this work, she brings out human reluctance in an extant situation to express and exercise individual sensibility freely and happily in fear of failure and contempt. The author opts to draw this extraordinary dimension of human survival as she reckons her writings as avowed by her as below,

They are part of my effort to seize upon the raw material of
Life-its shapelessness, its meaninglessness, that lack of design
That drives one to despair-and to mold it and impose on it a
Artist and also as a human being who longs for the order.

The novellas are very distinctive from one another in context and place. Desai takes her real-time experiences and incidents to give rich pulp around a seed of thought, "One thing alone does not exist- Oblivion", spelled by Jorg Luis Borges, an Argentine writer. Her pen sheds light on the potentiality in people that remain enclosed in themselves due to their frailty to gather their guts to collide the circumstances in order to let themselves virtualize the canny in them.

The germs of the first novella "The Museum of Final Journeys" has been planted into the mind of the author while she is visiting the Oriental Museum in Venice. There she has listened to a story about the gallery in the museum that contains a collection accumulated by a Venice youth who traveled far and wide and sent the priceless items and objects to his family. But the son of the family never returned home. As the items occupied the entire space in the home the family of the youth shifted them to Venice authorities. Now those antique pieces are displayed to the visitors with a narration of their finder, the Venice Young Man.

Anita Desai trans-places this continental story in a remote part of India in the decades of nineteen hundred which witnessed the crumbling and vanishing of Zamindar wills and Villas.

A young and very Junior Officer moves to a sincere request of an old chowkidar of Mukherjee bungalow to go to see the museum maintained at the bungalow and suggest him about the ways to do with it. The Junior Officer having been grown up reading Robert Louis Stevenson or Arthur Canon Doyle or Wilkie Collins is nostalgic and has a taste to antiques. So, decides to call upon the chowkidar at the Mukherjee Bungalow. The bungalow is inhabited no more by Zamindari, Srimati Sarita Devi, the widow of Sri Bhupen Mukherjee. It has the antiques from South East and Europe sent by ever abroad son of Sarita Devi, Sri Jiban. The chowkidar receives the officer and takes him through every piece and finally leads him to the last received item from Sri Jiban, an elephant. In front of a heavy elephant that is like a dependent baby of the chowkidar, the weathering way person beseeches the officer to negotiate with the government authorities to take the museum in return of a pat to keep the elephant till its last breath. The ground under the feet of the Junior Officer slips on listening to this pathetic plea. At a matured age, after this stage, as a Senior Officer, that person remembers this scene in Mukherjee bungalow and narrates like this,

I could not think of what to say, how to meet his request,
His evident need. I mumbled something about it being late,
About having to get back, about how I would think about
What could be done and how I Would let him. Know as
soon, as soon a-----.(Page-38)

This character refrains from the task thrown at him partly by his job and partly by his aesthetic inclination to antiques. He has as sensitive as to empathize the old chowkidar's duty-bounded nature. His heart springs back from possible legal litigation involved in working out required government assistance. He escapes from the job which he assumes has unsurpassable legal hurdles. His empathy and aestheticism does not stand aground against the feebleness explodes in him in relation to tackling the situation of the poor old man and the elephant. He does not give a second thought regarding the degree of difficulty in the issue. Time helps him by posting him in urban and some other places. What so ever his coward conscious haunts him forever. He is lonely and mute in his grief on his inertia.

Post-Independent Indian writers in English were posed with a moral question whether to continue to write in English, the colonial language or to yield to the public mood to give up the colonial language in favor of regional languages. Being part of that period, Anita Desai, always, ever since, has been tickled by this question. The second novella "Translator Translated" emerged from this feeling of the writer. However the Language – Literature is a sub-theme of the novella. The center plot is about the psychology of an average woman

whose gratified life requires her to break the dominating trend and draw a new yardstick of literary achievement.

Prema Joshi is a middle-aged teacher with a Ph.D. degree in her mother's language Oriya, the most unglamorous language in academics or in the literary market. But her sentiment towards Oriya, the language of her early deceased mother, stimulated a fire in her to popularize it. She has a grip and bent to create works in that language. Since she lacks the knack and glamour to persuade a publisher to her remote regional language, she lapses back from her desire to write original works in Oriya and chooses a passive way to translate an Oriya writer, Suvarna Devi "A writer whom she never has seen only read her works and imagine and admire her." into English. The translation episode is utilized by the Desai to highlight the difference in the spirit of any two languages which makes improvisation in translation inevitable. Prema improvises the novels of Suvarna Devi as the instinctive writer in her pounces forth and overpowers her translation. Tara a very famous and trendy school friend of Prema publishes the Translations of Prema. The nephew of the Suvarna Devi complains about the trans-creation of the translations. Owing to this further publication of copies of translation is ceased.

Suvarna Devi the Oriyan writer is too preoccupied with her reclusive surroundings that she has neither words nor actions to thank Prema the sole reason for the fame Devi is having. Prema is disappointed by her original writer and the developments. She is seriously hurt by the complaint of Devi's nephew about the differences in the text and the translation which she believes have enriched the works. Now she makes up her mind to write her own novels in English by sidelining her adherence of half of her life to Oriya.

Prema has everything that needs to be a successful writer in Oriya. Her apprehension over her talent deflects her. She does not boldly step forth to realize her Zeal. By the end of the novella, she removes the disbelief and warms up and prepares to write original work. At the same time, she makes another meek compromise with her genuine potentiality to produce writings in Oriya. Therefore she herself becomes the cause for the Oriya writer in her not see the fame and light. Thus fails her true worth.

The real story of an Engineer, who, working on a road project saved the remains of the road construction material and built a museum with them in a remote place. "The Artist Disappearance" the last novella is sprouted out this real story that has appeared in the newspapers. The Author turned it into a fantastic narration of a neglected young boy who grows a garden in a matchbox to save it from a film crew that has wandered into the forest where the boy stays. Ravi is adopted by a well of a couple. They ill-treated him. The adopted father of Ravi longs to mingle with the Colonial circles and recognized as one among them. Owing to his desire, the couple will not miss any party. Therefore, Ravi has his adopted parents always absent on him. His care is left to a servant. He filled his emotional vacuum by

immersing in the enchanting wonders of nature in and around the Himalayas. Ravi's fascination for nature is conveyed to the reader in the below description,

Extra-ordinary life that teemed in it – minute, multifarious

And totally unlike any earthbound equivalent.

He muses on time by wandering at the Himalayan Mountain feet. Once again like in *Fire on the Mountain* the author places her story in hilly background. This time the story runs in Mussoorie the birthplace of Anita Desai. The marvels of nature kindled in him an inspiration to create a beautiful garden, secretly in the deepest forest of Mussoorie as

Spider-like, Ravi set to work spinning the web of his

Vision over the hidden glade. And each it had to be

Done before night fell. (Page-127)

A film crew with an ambition to shoot the extraordinary landscape of Himalayas, lands in Mussoorie. One of the crew members Shalini runs into the secret garden of Ravi. The garden is the overwhelmed aesthetic response of Ravi to the magical nature. The film crew could picturise the colorful beauty and bent in the garden. Viewers of the programme could throng to the place and photograph themselves amidst a garden, at the heights of their appreciation of the garden. They would carry with them the memories manifested in the photos. But the aesthetic truth and peace prevailing abundantly in his garden do not appeal to the modern senses which are overridden by capitalistic materialism. This firmly rooted belief in Ravi dissuades him to disclose his garden to Shalini. He further hides from any second eye by growing his garden, the symbol of his "art for Art sake" spirit, in a matchbox.

Anita Desai is a feministic writer. In this book, she is a post-modern writer. The three novellas show the failure and weakness of humankind. Answering in an interview, Desai remarks on *The Artist of Disappearance* in the below terms

I think all the characters in this little book are

Characters who cannot meet the challenge so

How do you deal with that? The Failure.

The Junior Officer is afraid of the task. Prema is in two minds. In the same heart and mind where Prema's creative determination lays, her doubts over her capacity to deal with physical obstacles like finding a publisher, handling the media, etc also exists. She spends the first half of her life with ambiguity over her creative strength. At the end of the novella, she begins the rest of her life with dubiety of her lifelong ambition of writing in Oriya. Human

disillusionment is the subject of the last novella. Ravi lost faith in the humanity that people can appreciate the pure artistic spirit embodied in the garden he grows. So, he adamantly hides his garden in a fantastic place as Matchbox.

An artist has a sensitive heart which registers minute phenomenon in the universe. All three characters have artistic hearts. The irony in the book is the response and pulse of their hearts do not execute themselves into concrete actions. This goes to mean that the artist in them relegates to darkness, into the disappearance. Wherefore, the title of the book is very apt. And this disappearance is because of Junior Officer's, Prema's and Ravi's reluctance.

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