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THE INCARCERATED SELF AND THE DERELICT HOUSE

HOUSE IMAGERY IN ANITA DESAI'S NOVELS

S.P. Swain

THE house is a recurring image that resonates in the novels of Anita Desai. In Attia Hossain's *Sunlight On A Broken Column*, the house stands for country, home and families divided against each other and in Arun Joshi's *The Last Labyrinth*, it is the symbol of dirt and squalor. It is a whore : "... money was dirt, a whore. So were houses ...".¹ But in Desai, the house stands for the individual self divided from within. It is the symbol of despair and desolation. House imagery in Desai evokes a sense of desertion and incarceration. It throws light on the workings of the lacerated self's immured existence. In her novels, the house occurs as an inorganic imagery serving as the focus of her thematic vision.

In *Voices in the city*, there are allusions to the Victorian houses "screened by Royal palms", which indicate gloomy and dejected minds, languishing in self-isolation and solitary confinement. "The houses here have aged with grace, and faintly lit by low gas lamps glowing a pale blue in the foliage."² Nirode fears his isolation from his own past, his childhood home. The image of the house is projected through the symbol of a "shell". Nirode is encaged in his "small shrunken shell."³ But he steps out of it for self-expression.

The house to Monisha is a prison. In the first few pages of the novel, the concept of her husband's house as a prison, cage comes across very strongly. She does not belong to it, does not relate to it. Her husband, on the other hand continues securely in his own cage. To him, the house is a symbol of safety and shelter. The house to Monisha is also an object of intimidation. The four tiered balconies with metal railings were so intricately criss-crossed that one could not so much thrust one's head through them. "Enclosing shadows like stagnant well water", it was enough to depress her. She longs to thrust her head out of the window but the bars are too closely set. After all

what was there to see. Other houses, other walls and other bars. In the privacy of her room, she is oppressed by a terrifying sound that repeats like the motif of a nightmare, from which there seemed no escape. The atmosphere in and around the house seemed to stifle her self expression. She is engaged in the house. Like Nirode, she cannot step out of it. It is impossible to avoid any corner of this house, "the damp pressure of critical attention."

In *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*, Desai makes an artistic and symbolic use of the house imagery. The house here is linked with the pale and melancholic psychic life of Sita. In Bombay, she lived in a flat on a height, but now isolating herself from the hubbub and commotion around, she retreats to the house built by her father in Manori Island. She has the desire to set the house right but she discovers, to her amazement, the house abandoned in a sorry and awful state:

... a waste of ashes she saw, the cold remains of the bonfire her father had lit here to a blaze. Ashes, white and waste. Dust lay as casually as sand on a beach, spider webs spanned the corners of the unfurnished room like skeletal palm leaves. The odour was of bats and mildew, and silence boomed like the silence of undersea caves. It had no air of providing shelter from the sea or the beach ... it was as much a natural part of them as an abandoned shell or lump of twisted driftwood.⁴

The house, besides exposing the battered and fractured self of Sita, projects her wish to withdraw into an isolated and illusory world of impregnable silence and muted movements. But later, realising the futility of her living in an imaginative world of illusions, she compromises with the harsh realities of existence and returns to Bombay.

The house in *Fire On the Mountain* is a static and iterative image appearing in clusters with the image of the garden and other botanical and inorganic images as portrayed in the picture of the Carignano; the house that consoles Nanda and satisfies her :

She turned around and gazed at her house instead, simple and white and shining on the bleached ridge. On the north side, the wall was washed by the blue shadows of the low, dense apricot trees. On the east wall the sun glared, scoured and sharp. It seemed so exactly right as a house for her, it satisfied her heart completely.⁵

Nanda Kaul's house becomes her refuge. Desai sharply contrasts this with "that house—his house, never hers," the perfect house she

dutifully ran for her husband and family but to which she never really belonged.

Carignano, the desolate and haunted house in Kasauli inscapes the life of Nanda. But unlike Sita, she does not live in Carignano by choice. She lives there under compulsion deserted by her sons and daughters after the death of her husband. Yet she is content with its stark, secluded and sunny splendour. Symbolically, the seclusion and serenity of Carignano defines the stillness and freedom. Nanda has been able to achieve in her old age. Carignano is Nanda and Nanda Carignano. The humming and hectic part of Carignano is made out of Nanda's own past—the past that goes back to her days as a housewife. It is juxtaposed with her awfully busy life in the past—ordering “too many servants,” entertaining “too many guests” and tending “so many children” and grandchildren. But Carignano, like Nanda, is buried in the silent spaces of inner vastness.

The image of the burnt house “at the top of the hill” used in Chapter-18, Part-II, of the novel, mirrors the wild and unbridled nature of Raka with her irrepressible desire to set the forest on fire and her irresistible attraction towards “the ravaged, destroyed and barren spaces in Kasauli.” The house imagery used in this novel is chiefly functional in nature.

In *Clear Light of Day*, the house throws light on the variegated moods of Tara and the behavioural eccentricities of Bim. The image of empty rooms suggest “abandoned husbands”. The old unchanged house in Old Delhi to which Tara returns evokes the feeling of stagnation and the resultant sense of boredom and nausea.

In Part II of the novel, we have the subtle image of a house abandoned by Hyder Ali. Bim, too, is abandoned by Raja and Aunt Mira. Look at the neighbours derelict houses in Chapter—I :

On the eitherside of their garden were more gardens,
neighbours houses, as still and faded and shabby as theirs, the
gardens as overgrown and neglected and teeming with wild,
uncontrolled life ...

Throughout, the house image figures as an ominous and threatening presence characterised by a detonating and a palpitating silence. This static image of the house symbolically projects Bim's stifled anger and acerbity, her longing for silence and staticity. The house lingers long in the reader's mind.

In *Village By the Sea*, Hari's house in the village, Thul, serves as a symbol of neglect and abandonment :

The hut should have been re-thatched years ago—the old palm

leaves were dry and tattered and slipping off the beams. The earthen walls were crumbling. The windows gaped, without any shutters. There was no smoke to be seen curling up from under a cooking-pot on a fire as in other huts—

The house image brings out the forlorn self of Hari as well as the rural folk of Thul who crushed under poverty and despair, live split lives on the verge of decay and death.

The derelict house in *In Custody*, reflects on Deven's failure to form congenial and harmonious conjugal ties. It also reveals the couple's marital isolation and conjugal chaos leading to insanity.

Siddiqui's dilapidated and blackened house, which has 'neither lights nor curtains to colour the gloom,' symbolises his incarcerated and immured self seeking an escape into the open and lucid atmosphere of Delhi. The kitchen in the house which is "unspeakably filthy" serves as an image of waste and putrefaction projecting the isolation and neglect into which the house has fallen.

The house is concerned with the quest for self identification. Be it Nanda, Sita or Devan, the house serves as a symbol of consummation. Having relinquished her present self, Nanda Kaul totally merges with the house. The organic alien identifies with the inorganic alien—the derelict house. This identification of Nanda with the House is an assertion of self. For most of the protagonists in Desai the house is the symbol of their decaying and moribund self. Disgruntled with their self existence, the characters have a frantic desire to assert their identity with the forlorn and forsaken house. Besides portraying the sickening self of the alienated protagonists, the house image brings to the surface their straying into the world of death and desolation, of illusions and longings, in quest of meaning and value. It lays bare the inner rumblings of their psychic life. The house brings about a spatio-temporal continuity to the alienated self in its quest for identity in a world as menacing and lonely as the house in which the lone self strives and thrives. The house in Desai's novels is not only a symbol of shelter and protection but also of incarceration and laceration. It is the house that fails to house the houseless. □

References

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3. *Ibid.*, p. 114.
4. Desai, Anita. *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*— Second edn. (New Delhi : Orient Paperbacks, 1982) p-28.
5. Desai, Anita. *Fire On The Mountain*, (New Delhi : Allied Paperbacks, 1981) p-11.