

The Absent Mother Archetype in the Select Novels of Anita Desai: A Study of the Plight of the Motherless Children and Childless Mothers

¹HEPHZIBAH SWARNAKALA S., ²S. AZARIAH KIRUBAKARAN

¹Ph. D. Research Scholar, Department of English, Bishop Heber College (Autonomous), Affiliated to Bharathidasan University, Thiruchirappalli, Tamilnadu. India, ORCID: 0000-0002-7247-9669, s.hephzibahtitus@gmail.com

²Assistant Professor of English, Bishop Heber College (Autonomous), Affiliated to Bharathidasan University, Thiruchirappalli, Tamilnadu. India, ORCID: 0000-0002-1608-7724, sak.bhc@gmail.com

Abstract

The role played by a mother is irreplaceable. Anita Desai discusses in her novels how, many families were broken because of the loss of the mother, either physically or psychologically. This paper intends to analyse the absent mother motif with reference to the select novels of Anita Desai, and will focus on the predicament of motherless children, who because of the role of the Absent mother had been neglected and abandoned, making them emotionally insecure. This paper will also throw light on how children were affected by the loss of the mother and also the woes of childless mothers and the prejudice it involves. The paper reinforces the urgent need for cultivating and having a relook at archetypes especially the mother archetype, with a plea to include the absent mother archetype as well. The paper concludes with a note encouraging humankind to imbibe the principles of motherhood to sustain humanity.

Keywords: Absent mother trope, archetypes, childless, trauma, principles of motherhood.

INTRODUCTION

A Mother's role is very indispensable for children especially in their formative years. This paper seeks to analyse the sufferings, the mental agonies of motherless children and the negative impact on their psyche as they grow into adulthood. Mother Archetype has been a very common trope in literature, however there is a lack of sustained critical engagement or insightful research endeavours as regards the Absent Mother trope. The motherless children sadly miss out on the precious source of encouragement, care and concern and valuable motherly advice from the closest person on earth. So, this paper will throw light on how in the present times a mother's role becomes absent in the life of a child though they are physically alive owing to the modern changed lifestyle of people. The plight of the motherless children

and childless mothers have been discussed here with reference to the select novels of Anita Desai namely Cry the Peacock, Voices in the City, Where Shall We Go this Summer, Fire in the Mountain, Clear Light of Day, Village by the Sea and Fasting, Feasting.

The word archetype is derived from a Greek word meaning an original recurring universal pattern. It is an ancient image, personality, array of situations or settings that persists and repeats all the way through literature and thought regularly adequate to be considered a universal conception, notion or perception. Carl Jung one of the great psycho-analysts of the past century has dealt extensively with the mother archetype as part of his four archetypes. Conferring to Jung the archetypes of the shared unconscious, instinctively appear as dreams, imaginings, and visions. Rendering to classical Jungian belief the

archetypes originate in the mythologies and art of “the most widely separated peoples and races” (Jung, 1990, par. 147). This indicates that the dialect of archetypes is implicit to be equally personal and collective.

Absent mother syndrome is a convenient technique for the novelists and dramatists to add to the pathos of the turbulent lives of the heroines who have lost their mothers, who are the fountain head of tradition, culture and values. So, the absence of mothers is suggestive of the forth coming calamities in the lives of the protagonists. Shakespeare and Charles Dickens had used many absent mother characters in their works in their successful literary works. Shakespeare’s absentee mothers could not lessen the import and charm of his heroines and the forlorn girls who had never enjoyed the comforting presence of their mothers. Right from Cinderella, Hansel and Gretel every child’s wonder land to *Oliver Twist* and *Tom Sawyer*, the Absentee mother theme is exploited to the core to achieve a convincing dramatic effect. The foremost reason is that the motherless children especially girls, are the most vulnerable, malleable, sensitive and sensational characters that a writer can eye on whose goal is to underscore the tragic plight of such children in real life situations.

The mother archetype appears under boundless assortment of facets. It stands for the mother as well anything with mother like qualities. “The archetype is often associated with things and places standing for fertility and fruitfulness” (Jung, 15). As the affectionate mother, she shows fostering, understanding, abundance, progress, and revival. On the other hand, she is the ‘terrible’ mother (Jung, 1990, par. 157), gulping her children, harming, scorching and throttling. Consequently, the mother archetype embodies this incorporated credit of mothering. Jung said, “all those influences which the literature describes as being exerted on the children do not come from the mother herself, but rather from the archetype projected upon her, which gives her a mythological background and invests her with authority and numinosity” (Jung, 1990, par. 139). The best example for this is Nirode’s mother, which can be observed in the end of the novel, *Voices in the City*.

A child may have to go motherless for various reasons. One obvious cause may be the death of the mother; others might involve divorce or

heath issues. Now in the modern age in which we live, a new type of mother has emerged as explained in an article by Clarity Clinic, “an absentee mother”. She “is either a woman who is present but neglects to care for her child or a person who leaves the child entirely” (“The Effects of Being Motherless”).

In the very first novel of Anita Desai, the readers encounter Maya, the protagonist of *Cry the Peacock* who is a motherless child as well as childless mother. Maya is very much attached to her pet dog Toto. The death of her pet dog shatters her and makes her feel lonelier as there is less understanding in the marital life of Maya and Gauthama. Maya thinks, “Childless woman do develop a fanatic attachment to their pets, they say. It is no less a relationship than that of a woman and her child...” (Desai, *Cry the Peacock* 15). Childless women are often attributed to having pets and treating them as their children. After the death of Toto her favourite dog, a cat takes the place of it. Maya fondles her sister-in-law’s baby and carries it for a long time till her arms start hurting. All through the novel she longs for love, warmth and touch, which is hard heartedly denied to her.

Maya’s mother-in-law and sister-in-law take her for a shopping. They have so much fun. Maya is so pleased to be in such motherly company. When her mother-in-law plans to go back to her place, she tries to persuade her to make her stay longer. She holds her hand and caresses and begs her to stay longer. Maya yearns for her mother’s affection and tries to fulfill the gap by becoming close to her mother-in-law. “And I yearn for her to hold me to her bosom. I could not remember my own mother at all” (CP 138). Maya had only seen her dead mother in a photograph and didn’t know or remember anything of her mother. She longs for her mother and tries to connect with her mother-in-law, “longing for her arms, hating her detachment” (CP 137). All her mother-in-law gives her is disappointment and detachment.

“The father’s income, the nature of his job, the length and stability of the marriage are also relevant” (Flaig 35) and decide, how healthy the child would grow up without a mother. If the child is with a loving father and having genuine relatives to care for, the child would not miss the role of the mother much. Maya is fortunate to have a loving father yet she misses the tender touch of her mother. Maya is fondled and pampered by her father. He liked the world to be

“a toy specially made” (Desai, *Cry the Peacock* 35) for her and made the whole world dance to her tune and tempo. In contrast her husband and mother-in-law treat her like a toy, “... for I was their toy, their indulgence not to be taken seriously...” (Desai, *Cry the Peacock* 45). Many a time Maya is seen crying especially during her childhood days. This can be seen as an emptiness she experiences on the loss of her mother.

Maya is childless. This is not because she is barren, she calls herself as “virgins of the night” (Desai, *Cry the Peacock* 107). Though she has been married for four years she is stuck up in a fruitless marriage. The article titled, “Being childless by choice in the Indian society” in *Times of India* states, there are couples who make a personal choice of remaining childless but the case of Maya and Monisha here throws light on how the inordinate and egotistic and probably impotent husbands like Gautama and Jiban out of selfishness have lived an unconsummated marriage. They tried to hide their inadequacy by passing on the blame to their counterparts. Maya, Monisha and Sita have never had the chance of being advised or counseled by patient and caring exemplary mothers. They were least prepared to face life with such cold blooded perverted and introverted men. These unfortunate young women seethed and raved inwardly in anger protest and frustration. They resisted and revolted. The swelling psychic reverberations were so violent and vigorous that they culminated in suicide, murder or be murdered. Maya makes advances and tries to make him understand her yearning but he least understands and in a fit of unfulfilled pressure, Maya casually pushes her husband Gauthama off the terrace.

Monisha in *Voices in the City* is also stagnant in a similar situation like Maya. Seeing her childless state Monisha’s sisters-in-law discuss about her ovaries, they treat her like a servant maid. She is made to cut vegetables and make chapattis all day. She is made to babysit and take the children for sightseeing. As Bhattacharji, highlights in his book, *Women and Society in Ancient India*, “It was also the women who condemned and ridiculed the unfortunate childless woman because women had internalised the male social values regarding the merits of having a son” (31). She is asked to

massage her mother-in-law’s legs not to relieve her pain but to relieve her ego. Monisha declares in her diary, “I grow smaller every day, shrink and lose more and more of my weight ... I am already too small to be regarded much by anyone I will be invisible yet” (Desai, *Voices in the City* 138), venting her anguish and agony.

In her very first novel, *Cry the Peacock*, the first shocking image Desai presents is that of a motherless, helpless and timid child facing a nasty and perverse albino in a dark room with scarce light the albino strikes her like a thunder bolt with a prophecy of doom. Since then, everything becomes a symbol of calamity to the wild imagination and trepidation of Maya. Scared and lonely with no mother as friend guide and companion, she was haunted by ‘the fears dancer... the man demon of kathakali ballet’ and ‘the deafening roar of silent drums and ‘the limpid appellation of the moon’ (Desai, *Cry the Peacock* 29). The piercing love cry of the peacocks deeply disturbed her. Maya and Sita are the victims of motherless existence which had driven them to insanity.

In the case of Maya and Monisha, only the women are blamed for their infertility and the men who are responsible remain unaffected. As Neha Gupta rightly points out, “Not being able to bear a child was always considered a sin by the keepers of the society. Never was it considered that the man also could be responsible for the same.” (Gupta). Childlessness was considered to be a serious curse in women. Only women were affected and not their husbands by this superstition.

Anamika the sweet cousin of Uma is given in marriage to a family which least recognizes her sweet nature and gentle heart. The mother-in-law beats her up daily and in one of the occasions, there is a miscarriage and it is declared that Anamika can no longer bear any children. Anita Desai points out the state of childless women very vividly here, “Now Anamika was flawed, she was damaged goods. She was no longer perfect, would she be sent back to her family?” (Desai, *Fasting, Feasting* 72). Childless women were considered as blemishes, cast aside and made to do all the household chores. “The reactions of in-laws, and especially the mother in-law, also make childlessness difficult to bear.” (Van Balen, F, and H M W Bos). After twenty-five years of marriage, after squeezing out all the potential

and energy in her, Anamika is murdered by her mother-in-law. She sets fire to her in the early hour of the day and makes it appear like a suicide to the rest of the world.

In novels like *Fire on the Mountain*, *Clear Light of Day*, *The Village by the Sea*, *Fasting Feasting* and *Voices in the City*, though the mother is physically alive, the spiritual supportive mother's love is missing and the children seem to live a motherless existence where they are left alone to fend for themselves. Jasmin Lee Cori, the author of the book *The Emotionally Absent Mother* gives a definition of this type of mother,

An emotionally absent mother is not fully present and especially not to the emotional life of the child. She may be depressed, stretched too thin and exhausted, or perhaps a bit numb. Many of these mothers were severely under mothered themselves and have no idea what a close parent-child relationship looks like. They are doing the outer things they think a mother should do, but have no clue how very big the job of mothering is. (Meyer para 3)

In *Fire on the Mountain*, Raka, the great grandchild of Nanda Kaul is sidelined as a problem and abandoned in the hill station with her great grandmother whom she meets for the first time in her life. Tara and Rakesh the parents of Raka live an unfulfilled life and their family is about to split and be separated. Her mother Asha tries to patch up by arranging a time of togetherness to let go all misunderstanding and set up a home in Geneva. Raka, the little girl who is recovering from a severe typhoid attack is in her recovery stage. It is in this pathetic stage when she needed her mother the most, that she is abandoned in an unknown place with an unfamiliar driver. She is carelessly handled and dumped into a Taxi alone and delivered to Nanda Kaul like an unwanted parcel. Tara remains an Absent mother in the life of her daughter, Raka and without any real love and care she alienates herself from human presence. Raka is very much affected by the poor relationship between her father and mother.

In *Clear Light of Day*, the children Bimla, Tara, Baba, Raja and Baba, lived a motherless existence because of their mother's indifference towards them. Their mother had long ago handed over her responsibilities to Mira Masi the poor abandoned widow. The sole being of their parents existed in going to parties and

clubs. They always played card games daily in the club or at home. As adults, the children recall their house to be "the empty, hopeless atmosphere of childhood" (Desai, *Clear Light of Day* 33). The negligence of the mother towards Baba even as he is in the womb, leads to the deformity of the child. Even this deformed angel doesn't seem to melt the indifferent heart of their mother. In their frustration, Raja swears to leap on the card and set them on fire and Bimla as well flashes her scissors and swears to rip the cards into pieces. The Absent mother here least cares for them, Bimla sacrifices all her future and dedicates her life for her unstable little brother Baba. Also, their mother dies early because of her sickness of an immobile existence. Even as a small child Bhimla declares, "I shall earn my own living – and look after Mira Masi and Baba and be independent. There will be so many things to do – when we are grown up..." (Desai, *Clear Light of Day* 215).

In *Fasting, Feasting*, Uma the protagonist has a mother who is alive in flesh and blood, but doesn't consider her to be her eldest child. She treats Uma by all means like a servant maid. Uma is not very good looking and a slow learner. The mother uses her short comings and belittles her all the time. Uma feels helpless without anyone to emotionally support her. Uma becomes very attracted and attached to Mira Masi the widow, a visitor whose visits were rare and the most enjoyable days for Uma who lies on her lap and enjoys the warmth of motherhood, being around her. One day she manages to get away with Mira Masi on a pilgrimage but is brought back to her bondage in a month's time.

Mrs. Joshi is Uma's kind neighbor. She lovingly takes care of her children and is very loving to Uma as well. Uma is always amazed at the total contrast between Mrs. Joshi and her own mother. Uma feels like a motherless child as her mother doesn't genuinely love her and care for her. She likens Mrs. Joshi as her mother and asks her, "Won't you adopt me, Aunty? Won't you let me be your daughter now Moyna is gone?" (Desai, *Fasting, Feasting* 135).

In *Where shall we go this Summer* Sita, the protagonist of the story is motherless, the Absent mother trope fits well her as we don't know the whereabouts of her mother, there is a subtle indication given in the novel that her mother had

just left them. This has a great impact on Sita's life. She always felt that she lived in the midst of a crowd. As her father was an important leader in the freedom struggle. Sita recalls many nights where she was sitting and playing with the crowd listening to "endless speeches". Tired with playing with garland and tinsels she would lie down on a bolster and sleep and would be carried to someone's house each day and she in utter dejection expresses "it scarcely matters which one" (Desai, *Where shall we go this Summer 77*). The mothers of Monisha, Uma, Bimla and Anamika are very present but the most indifferent and loveless of their sort.

Sita never felt she was a part of a family and also feels that there was no need to be so. Sita lacks a sense of belonging as she doesn't have a mother to take care of her. Sita doesn't have a proper schooling; she grows up with least care and attention. This motherless belongingness state where her presence scarcely mattered has a negative impact in her life. She is not able to fit herself into the family unit. She is not able to comprehend the bond in familial relationships. Though she wants to connect herself to her family members, many childhood traumas haunt her. As the article "The Effects of Being Motherless" pinpoints, "An individual's mental health may be affected at any age or circumstance due to the lack of a mother" (Clarity Clinic).

Sita had never seen or heard about her mother and believed her to be dead. She didn't even possess a photograph of her. Sita accidentally discovers that her mother and father were actually separated. Sita's mind starts searching for her mother. She obtains information from her brother Jivan that her mother had ran away and had left to Benares. From that day Sita gets obsessed with the thoughts of her mother. She starts wondering what she would look like and what her mother's thoughts would be living away from her family. "Sita found herself turning into a wanderer always in search of the ghost. Who, what was she?" (Desai, *Where shall we go this Summer 77*). She was always engrossed in thoughts where her mother would be living at the present moment. Her heart started yearning for a chance to meet her lost mother. Lots of trauma and enigma remained unanswered. Even after she grew up and married Raman, she made him search the whole of Benares. She tries to trace out the identity of her

mother. However, the pursuit is in vain and no information is obtained to identify her mother. The non-existent mother like Sita's who fled in search of liberation from a fanatic, patriotic, idealistic husband leaves a legacy of a psychic wreck.

In an article titled, "How to Heal from an Emotionally Absent Mother: 5 Things for Daughters to Do", Meyer comes out with five effective ways to heal oneself from a hurt past of an absent mother's neglect and the evolved psyche and become an effectual and emotionally attached mother.

5 Ways to heal from an emotionally absent mother

1. Find a Mother Figure
2. Mother Yourself
3. Examine and Forgive
4. Make Your Home Child-Centered
5. Give Yourself Permission to Feel Everything. (Meyer)

The solutions that Meyer provides here spring out of her own personal experiences. She herself had gone into depression because of her emotionally distant mother and found herself healed out of this trauma by trying the above steps.

The present life threatening Covid-19 pandemic, has given rise to many motherless children. An article titled "Covid-19 second wave leaves many children orphaned and vulnerable across India" by India Today states the misery many children are undergoing because of the sudden demise especially of mothers due to the pandemic. There are threatening cases of violence and incest especially when a girl child becomes vulnerable when she is left motherless. The health issues related to Covid-19 is horrendous apart from that, a lot more is happening around us and within us. This paper brings out the reality of the day. It opens the eyes of people to see things in a broader perspective. Also, there are reports stating fetal deaths premature impairing of the womb permanently for a few. In the absence of a mother, children are exposed and defenseless. The India Today report voices concern of how "the relatives of a minor girl wanted to get her married. "Her mother died due to Covid. Now we will get her married soon so

that she can be with her husband and not our responsibility,” the report quotes the relatives” (Shuja-ul-Haq).

What can be done to make these helpless and hapless children live a secured future is the question before everyone. This paper can be concluded with the powerful words of an article titled "Malavika's Mumbaistan: Motherless Children." circulated in The Hindustan Times, "we are all motherless children, abandoned and alone." Here she tries to convey the fact that all the people have become motherless as they have stopped seeking the welfare of their fellow living beings with whom they share the space on this planet. Each one should have a mother like heart. If people act in a self-centered way it is equal to smothering themselves. During this global crisis all have to join hands to fight the unseen enemy. She drives home the fact that, "the planet would be better served if all manmade constructs of nationhood, economy, jurisprudence, administration, and leadership were predicated on the principles of motherhood" (Sangghvi).

Nobody seems to heed to take care of the planet they live in. They litter the earth least mindful of the harm they are causing to the future generations. Echoing the words of Malavika, "Motherhood is a verb. It means to love, to protect, to shield, to shelter; to put another's interests ahead of one's own. It calls for courage, sacrifice, heroism, unconditional love and deep reservoirs of empathy and compassion." (Sangghvi). If each person irrespective of their gender lives a life imbibing the principles of motherhood there will be peace, prosperity and nothing less than a paradise on the planet Earth.

The upper middle-class mothers had the main job of pampering their husbands and going out with them to clubs to play cards, tennis and smoke and drink. They hated their household duties. This is undoubtedly a colonial fall out. Just a generation ago women were deeply devoted to their husbands as well as children. They were very home bound and looked after their children with genuine care and concern. Ottima and Mrs. Das were obviously fed up with their children. The children of Das family sadly lacked the love and comfort of their mother. The typical image of Mrs. Das was "I'm just going to the club. I'm waiting for the car" (Desai, *Clear Light of Day* 132) the mother said irritably when approached.

Anita Desai presents an ideal mother in Mira Masi in *Clear Light of Day* who was a child widow and was exploited as a maid servant in her husband's house. The Das children immediately struck a chord of love in her and bonded with her readily with joy. When they asked for "mango sherbat with a yell they streamed out as in wild celebration at this new season in their lives, the season of presents, green mangoes and companionship" (Desai, *Clear Light of Day* 161). Desai's description of Mira Masi as the surrogate or proxy mother of Das children is one of the rarest and most ebullient and exuberant anthems, hymning the glories of motherhood in a very ordinary widow. Desai effuses about Mira Masi "She was the tree that grew in the center of their lives and whose shade they live" (Desai, *Clear Light of Day* 169). "She fed them with her own nutrients. She reared them in her own shade, she was the support on which they leaned as they grew" (Desai, *Clear Light of Day* 170). Of all her novels, this passage of model motherhood which is found to be in a poor widow who never was a mother herself, Desai has summed up all the fine attributes in this wonderful eulogy of motherhood.

The traditional image of mothers as the guardian angels is being thwarted as modern life is full of stress and strain to allow mothers and women to lead a life of peace and content. Anita Desai's solution is that women as mothers must make amends and let life flow on. The finding of this research article is that as such there is no archetype to represent the Absent Mother trope. There is not much engaged systematic research endeavour in the field of the Absent Mother trope. Hence from this paper it can be gauged that there is need to sensitize the literary world and the literary fraternity to the disadvantages of an absent mother and to re-engage with literary texts through the template or the perspective of the Absent Mother Archetype.

References

- [1] Bhattacharji, Sukumari. *Women and Society in Ancient India*. 1994.
- [2] Desai, Anita. *Clear light of Day*. Penguin Random House India, 2007.
- [3] ---. *Cry, the Peacock*. 21st ed., Orient Paperbacks, 2014.

- [4] ---. Fasting, Feasting. Random House India, 2008.
- [5] ---. Fire on the Mountain. Random House India, 2008.
- [6] ---. Voices in the City. Orient Paperbacks, 2014.
- [7] ---. Where Shall We Go this Summer. Orient Paperbacks, 2007.
- [8] Flaig, Nicki. "Motherless families." *Nursing Standard*, vol. 3, no. 46, 1989, pp. 35-37, journals.rcni.com/nursing-standard/motherless-families-ns.3.46.35.s44. Accessed 4 May 2021.
- [9] Gupta, Neha. "Being Childless by Choice in the Indian Society - Times of India." *The Times of India*, 16 May 2017, timesofindia.indiatimes.com/life-style/relationships/soul-curry/being-childless-by-choice-in-the-indian-society/articleshow/58695326.cms.
- [10] Jung, C.G. *Four Archetypes*. Routledge, 2014.
- [11] Meyers, McKenna. "How to Heal From an Emotionally Absent Mother: 5 Things for Daughters to Do." *WeHaveKids*, 24 Sept. 2016, wehavekids.com/family-relationships/Learn-7-Ways-to-Survive-an-Emotionally-Absent-Mother-and-Lead-a-Joyful-Life.
- [12] Sangghvi, Malavika. "Malavikaâ€™s Mumbaistan: Motherless Children." *Hindustan Times*, 8 May 2021, www.hindustantimes.com/cities/mumbai-news/malavikas-mumbaistan-motherless-children-101620399960888.html. Accessed 10 May 2021.
- [13] Shuja-ul-Haq. "Covid-19 Second Wave Leaves Many Children Orphaned and Vulnerable Across India." *India Today*, 4 May 2021, www.indiatoday.in/coronavirus-outbreak/story/covid-19-second-wave-children-orphaned-vulnerable-across-india-1798621-2021-05-04. Accessed 19 May 2021.
- [14] "The Effects of Being Motherless." *Clarity Clinic*, 16 Apr. 2019, claritychi.com/the-effects-of-being-motherless/. Accessed 4 May 2021.
- [15] Van Balen, F, and H M W Bos. "The social and cultural consequences of being childless in poor-resource areas." *Facts, views & vision in ObGyn* vol. 1,2 (2009): 106-21.