



# Uncovering Self-discovery, Belongingness and Cultural Dynamics in Anita Desai's *Rosarita*: A Thematic Analysis

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**Abstract** — This paper elucidates a variety of themes such as identity, self-discovery and gender disparity coupled with the role of memory and cultural past in shaping Bonita's journey. Bonita, who embarks on unearthing her Mother's intriguing past not only discovers her hidden artistic talents but also her perpetual struggle to find her place in a male-driven household. The story also unravels the interwoven similarities between the lives of the protagonist and her mother in their relentless determination to forge their own paths. Desai also highlights Bonita's continuous efforts, with the help of the Stranger, to resolve the challenges of understanding one's place in the society while reconciling with a fragmented past. The striking imagery, symbolic elements and second person narration help in comprehending Bonita's emotional and psychological state. Furthermore, the juxtaposition of the Mexican Revolution and Partition highlights the constant struggle between different cultures and individual lives. Desai skilfully digs into gender roles, lack of feminine agency and societal obligations to mark the woman's journey. The unresolved conflicts between familial duties and individual desires urge both Bonita and Mother to carve out a niche for themselves. In this way, *Rosarita* deals with multiple themes, emphasising the never-ending pursuit of self-awareness by referencing Desai's interviews, autobiographical elements and comparisons with her other works.



**Keywords**— Belongingness, Cultural displacement, Gender Roles, Identity, Memory, Past, Self-discovery

## I. INTRODUCTION

Anita Desai, renowned for her three Booker Prize nominations, makes a remarkable comeback after a long hiatus with her evocative novella *Rosarita*. The clarity and conciseness of this short but delectable piece of writing not only sheds light on the interplay of identity, memory and alienation but also exhibits a quest for self-discovery and human connection. The protagonist's migration and cultural shift further broaden our understanding of the intermingling of personal and cultural overtones.

Bonita, a student of the Spanish language, comes to the city of San Miguel, Mexico, and embarks on the journey of discovering the mysterious past of her Mother as unravelled by a Stranger, named Victoria. This woman insists on knowing her Mother as an artist and starts creating an image of her Mother by drawing parallels to

their identical features. She says, "But you have her looks, her manner- what to say, her comportment. The mouth, the eyes. You cannot not be my dearest amiga's daughter" (2)! This baffling revelation emboldens Bonita's efforts to give certainty to the past about which she had now till been ignorant. And, this itch for belongingness and self-realisation compels Bonita to believe "Trickster's" side of the story and undertake the meandering path of secrets and surprises.

An introspective journey marked by the use of powerful imagery and emotions, urges Bonita to collect pieces of her fragmented self. Accosted by the stranger, who claims to have known her Mother when she had come to San Miguel de Allende, Mexico to practice art, Bonita tries to avoid the conversation, "It makes you press your sandals together and wish you could draw your dark glasses out of your bag

so as to screen yourself from her and hide. But hide from whom- this stranger or your Mother" (4)?

She resists any discussion on remembering her and the baffling questions of how, when and why she would ever have traversed into this foreign land and met this foreign woman. To conceive of Mother as an artist is an unimaginable reality which impels Bonita to recall her childhood memories in which a sketch of a woman seated on a park bench with a child playing in the sand at her feet was hung on the wall. Nobody takes notice of this faded painting: it is just there. But this encounter with the Stranger, discloses the complexities of a parent-child relationship, and Bonita feels compelled to discover the hidden self of her Mother as well as her artistic life. In this undertaking of a journey of self-awareness, she portrays her Mother's experiences through the lens of her subjectivity and her own escape from the mundanity of life.

Also, marriage to a dominating Father in a patriarchal household suppresses the Mother's desire to realise her true potential as an artist. Her continuous visits to the Mexican embassy and the appreciation of art help Bonita not only in understanding her Mother's yearning to forge her own path of self-discovery but also her own struggles in another country. Their interconnected paths of self-reflection help them navigate the intricacies of personal growth and understand their true selves.

In *Clear Light of Day*, the four Das siblings also reflect on the role of memory in shaping their sense of self and belonging.

## II. A SEARCH FOR THE PAST

When Bonita recalls her childhood memories, the expansive images of her grandparents' bungalow in the old, obsolete Delhi are fading away. The premium collection of objects such as carpets from Kashmir, silver filigree fingerbowls, lithographs in foxed browns and greys, framed in gilt, Moghul, Rajasthani, Pahari paintings, etc., are moved to a new dwelling (New Delhi) in order to preserve the richness of the past and stamp the authority of a successful legacy. All these artefacts have a strong connection to the British, from where these must have been transported back to India to represent colonial history. In addition, she also tries to gather evidence for her Mother's artistry by looking at all these pieces of marvel but finds no trace except that faded sketch as mentioned, "that pastel sketch of the woman on a bench in a park with a child playing at her feet, was the most recent, the only unimportant, valueless item amidst all the elaborately framed artwork, collected specifically to create an effect of success" (17-18).

Amidst nature in the grove of dusk, she imagines her Mother's deplorable condition of being neglected and her artwork packed in the old battered boxes. She ponders, "What had they contained? Her own artwork, sketches, pastels, remnants of it? And if so, what happened to them when the boxes were needed for a move" (24)? All these daunting speculations driven by the past provide an impetus to her journey with the Trickster to the artists' commune, Colima, and ultimately to La Manzanilla for unfolding the present.

Bonita continues to search for the mystery of the past, which seems totally elusive, as also delineated by Supriya Chaudhuri in her review, "*Rosarita* remains out of reach, a shadowy figure who will never yield to the curiosity of posterity, while her daughter must cope with the increasingly psychotic behaviour of her eccentric friend, and with the obscurity and intransigence of the past."

## III. ALIENATION, ISOLATION AND CULTURAL CONFLICT

The avoidance of encounter with the Stranger and anything that halts Bonita, only deepens her state of isolation and estrangement. Even ordering a meal at a restaurant becomes a herculean task because of the sense of loneliness experienced at having lost the touch of reality. The constant struggle to find the truth about her Mother's enigmatic past takes a toll on her physical and mental well-being. "Out on the street you find yourself still in a state of agitation. You hesitate, not wanting to return to your room; its emptiness will only oppress you..." (26).

Her sense of isolation also comes from the mix of her cultural identities, as she is looking for answers both from her life in India and her present life in Mexico, but is unable to find any. Also, there is an absolute desire to feel a human connection with her Mother as she waits eagerly, "Stay, sit, you tell yourself. Wait, here, now, she will appear and you will see her as she had never shown herself and you had never seen" (27).

Commonalities can also be drawn with Anita Desai's life in America which she describes as, "America is alien, too. It's just not my country. And other people here see me as a stranger, too. It suits her, somewhat, as a background condition – always being apart. Perhaps that is being a writer. One is always an observer rather than a participant" (Desai).

This displacement of hers can be realised significantly in the novella itself, which reveals a similar disconnect between two disparate cultures of India and Mexico.

#### IV. IDENTITY AND BELONGINGNESS

The concept of identity has always played a pertinent role in Desai's novels as well as her personal life. Born to a German Mother and Bengali Father, she has delved into this enigma of identity in a detailed manner. In an interview with PTI, she asserts, "I am still a foreigner here, I am still an outsider here, and I have accepted it. Well, that's what a writer's life is: to be the outsider. India has changed so much. I don't understand those changes. There are many occasions where I feel I don't belong in India" (Desai).

In the same way, Bonita persistently tries to weave the threads of her mythical Mother's identity into a tangible reality as a Mother, wife, daughter-in-law, and, essentially, a woman. "You had resisted her fantastical tale but now find you would like to believe it. Could she like a wizard or a magician, bring your Mother to life again even if it is a life you never knew or suspected" (40)?

She cannot let it go now and is on fire to unravel the truth- or the falsehood of what she's being told.

Even in the Indian household, *Rosarita*, name given by the Stranger to her Mother, searches for her identity in an oppressive and patriarchal environment. Also, her family was never mentioned except a brief reference of "railway people", with no fixed address, constantly moved from one 'railway colony' to another, entered in one school for one term, in another the next." Everything about the family was "transient- like railway carriages" (21). They had no address and a place to call their own. Only after taking the plunge to move to Mexico, her individuality and emotional resonance with her Mother's family begin to take a distinctive form. And in this pursuit of identity, Bonita finds herself deeply connected to her Mother than ever before.

Desai's parents also experienced an identity crisis when they relocated to India, highlighting the autobiographical elements woven into *Rosarita*, "My Father was from what was then East Bengal, says Desai. And when he came back from Germany, East Bengal became Bangladesh; so, he lost his ancestral land too. Both my parents had a sense of starting strange new lives in north India, which belonged to neither of them. A strange place to both" (Desai).

#### V. GENDER ROLES AND SOCIETAL EXPECTATIONS OF WOMEN

While listening to the murmur of bees and observing the gardener sweeping dead leaves off the street, Bonita recalls scenes of household activities in the presence of grandparents. Grandmother is the matriarch of her own appointed territory and takes pride in setting, "her household on wheels and letting it run by itself" (14). Her domestic placidity is in complete contrast with Mother's

unwillingness to sacrifice her own desires in a house dominated by an authoritarian husband. Described as a 'company wife' (18), she feels stifled by the mundane routine of domestic life. On the other hand, men exude "power, possession and defiance- who would dare challenge them" (17)? In this gender powered and patriarchal structure, Mother gets totally subsumed by the obligatory duties of a wife imposed by a callous and domineering husband. "If there was a god, it could only be The Husband" (15).

Her "unsuitability as a wife" (20), as defined by the rigid norms of society, induces feelings of disappointment, distress and failure in her. She feels smothered by the traditional gender expectations and silencing of her feminine agency.

The invitation to a cultural event at the Mexican embassy provides her with an opportunity to stimulate her curiosity and cultivate it. After witnessing the turmoil and relatable patterns between the violence of the Mexican Revolution and the Partition, she flees. Nevertheless, this ignites her buried desire to follow her artistic ambitions and explore new avenues, defying all the barriers. "Her relief so keen she almost moans aloud at a thrust at her ribs of revelation. Every moment of her life so far has been removed, wiped out, allowing this moment. The rest of her life will be a pursuit of the recovery of it" (36).

The subjugation of rights and authority can also be witnessed in the author's life as well where she was not allowed to be vocal about her opinions. "I had to train myself to express my thoughts and opinions. I wasn't used to that. I was never asked my opinion in India; I just kept quiet and listened to others. And then I'd go back to India and start expressing my thoughts and they'd all look at me and say, what's happened to her? She laughs. Why is she telling us what she thinks?! That still happens, frankly. After all these years. When we go back, Kiran and I, we have to be very careful not to express too much of our thoughts" (Desai).

This denial of agency makes a palpable connection amongst the characters and the author where they are perpetually trying to blaze their own trail.

Manjira Majumdar notes a similar portrayal of the unhappy wife in *Cry the Peacock* who is mentally obsessed with a terrible astrological prediction that has a surprise ending.

#### VI. PARALLELS BETWEEN MEXICAN REVOLUTION AND PARTITION

The novel *Clear Light of Day* also touches upon the central theme of Partition and its brutal impact on both Muslims

and Hindus. Here, Desai draws a poignant picture of atrocities committed in the Mexican Revolution and the freedom movement and Partition. The artworks of Mexican muralists, inspired by the violence and killings of the Revolution, were showcased at the cultural event. The depiction of tableau where scenes of carnage: “a knife-thrust here, a skull smashed open there-guts ripped from living bodies, drawing more and more blood” (31) jolted Mother and made her confront the dark chapter of her past. It was her face-off with what she has always known and lived with. “Some wound that had been stitched up had split open then. Were those trains she saw on the screen with their unspeakable cargoes, the ones that could have carried the Muslims of India to Pakistan and the Hindus of Pakistan to India, also the ones that carried her family across some savage new border from which few arrived alive” (32)?

Was it the acceptance of her own history which was so “carefully guarded” (32)? Bonita deliberates over the never-mentioned family of hers. Why was the permission denied to share her ancestral history? Her Mother never uttered a word about her family, home and location. All these disturbing questions make Bonita feel culturally displaced and alienated and become a driving force in uncovering her Mother's expeditionary venture. Confronted with horrific images of violence, including of trains oozing more and more blood (31), she flees from the event.

Desai keeps coming back to Mexican life as also seen in the novel *The Zigzag Way* where Eric unfolds impact of history and memory on human relationships. She has a deep connection with the place as told in The Guardian interview, “When she got off the plane in Oaxaca, she practically squealed with delight. Everything about it was Indian; the dust, the smells, the bougainvillea. The small houses. It was so familiar to me. It's a very Indian country: the family life, the religious life. All of it. Mexico, she says, is a country that gets me writing, always” (Desai).

## VII. FROM WILDERNESS TO SELF NATURE AS A MIRROR

The natural elements play a central role in Desai's works in reflecting the moods and conditions of the characters. In *Rosarita*, Bonita tries to conjure up and believe in her Mother's ‘flowering’, “in this great abundance of light that makes the leaves of the laurel trees shimmer, the pigeons murmur and coo in the expression of mounting ecstasy...” (9). The unveiling of her Mother's talents resonates with the natural beauty that validates her worthy pursuit of becoming an artist.

The journey to the town of La Manzanilla covers mountain ranges, forests, plunging cliffs and exotic birds which are described in great poetic detail. Graphic descriptions of flora and fauna and landscapes mirror Bonita's constant quest for finding autonomy and meaning in her life. The symbols of sea and waves depict the inner chaos in their lives and the absolute need for identity and belongingness. The wilderness serves as an intense reflection of the emotional breakthrough and the psychological states of both the characters.

## VIII. SYMBOLIC ELEMENTS

The evocation of symbols exhibits the human predicament and the emotional states of both Mother and daughter. The sea serves as a metaphor for inner turmoil and loss of connection. Its secrets are revealed through the unearthing of the artistic talents of the Mother. “You stay, pondering the question as you collect a handful of shells, shake them free of sand and toss them out to sea: the remains. You have come as far as you can, you tell yourself: you can go no further” (94).

This encapsulates the reconciliation between the fragments of the past and the inner conflict of the present. There is an acceptance of boundaries and unresolved dilemmas, which may or may not be real, yet it makes room for embracing the promise of growth and transformation.

The Pacific Ocean at La Manzanilla opens up new horizons, and Bonita starts gathering pieces of the fragmented self. “You want to throw out your arms, run like a bird across the sand, cry out with relief, the relief that feels like joy. You have arrived, in one instant you have recovered what you thought was lost: clarity, clarity, the promise of clarity” (79).

The ominous arriving of trains, “some carrying troops and their arms, others packed with passengers slaughtered along the way, blood oozing out of carriages when they are opened, then more blood and still more” (31) opens up a darker chapter of history in Mother's life. It reminds her of the days of Partition and may be the transportation of her family from one border to the other.

Even the passage of life moving through various trials and tribulations is represented by, “an endless train journey, with never a stop and no place of arrival” (32). It represents a never-ending cycle of finding certainty and meaning in life.

The waves bring out the concealed and vibrant human emotions to the forefront and initiate a meditative communication between humans and nature.



## IX. THE CONFLICT BETWEEN FAMILIAL OBLIGATIONS AND PERSONAL GROWTH

Desai illustrates how family relationships are always in conflict with an individual's life. The entrapment of familial duties becomes an obstacle for the Mother in exploring her true self. She feels suffocated by her monotonous routine life, which stifles her individuality and personal growth. On the other hand, Bonita is constantly searching for her Mother's family by recalling her childhood days. "And what of family? Father had family, dominant, domineering. But what of hers? Presses lips, guarded eyes, leading to a suggestion that there was something disreputable about it" (21-22).

The persistent efforts fuelled by the stranger's emphasis on her Mother's artistic adventure in Mexico, help in discovering troubled family relationships shared among grandparents, Father, Mother and children. The absence of Motherly love continues to torment Bonita, creating an intense emotional chasm. The complexity of human relationships observed since childhood makes Bonita feel disconnected and distrustful of all the other characters in the novella.

Desai's intricate exploration of familial bonds not only shapes Bonita's understanding of herself, but also her place within the broader framework of society.

## X. SECOND PERSON NARRATION

The experimentation with the second person, provides Desai a unique way of storytelling. It establishes a direct connection with the readers where they participate in untangling the enigmatic mysteries of the Mother's and daughter's life. She writes, "Your Mother never lived in San Miguel, never even visited Mexico. You know that – the absurdity of such a suggestion" (5)!

By using this narrative technique, Desai universalises the need of belonging and identity which transcends any boundaries between fictional and real life.

On the contrary, it also reflects the sense of displacement and alienation where the protagonist wishes to escape from her confrontation with the truth and unpleasant memories of the past as described by Desai in the interview with the Guardian, "If you keep describing people as 'you', you are distancing yourself. In other words, not getting too involved, yes. She wanted to get at the tenuousness of life, a deceptively modest ambition within which lies a much greater truth: that we are not as bound to our circumstances as we may like to believe. Well, what does one have? Just a few threads to hold one. After that, memories. Which may or may not be quite true".

## XI. CONCLUSION

*Rosarita* is a testament to Desai's enduring brilliance not only as a writer of human relationships but also as a profound explorer of the dilemmas of the inner self. This novella offers a contemplative examination of the psychological states of the characters, emotional upheavals and their perpetual yearning for belonging. The blending of elements of fact and fiction raises questions about the fickleness of memory, the creation of identities and the blurred boundaries between reality and imagination. In the end, Desai's tour de force goes beyond the intertwined journeys of the Mother and daughter and becomes a successful exploration of cultures, histories and places that harbour more secrets than any one individual can comprehend. It also reflects that the construction of meaning is invariably shaped by the cultural influences, interpersonal relationships and the indelible weight of the past that we carry within ourselves.

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