

Short Fiction in Indian Literature
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Lecture – 12C

Childhood anxiety at Play in Anita Desai's Games at Twilight – Overview

Hello and welcome to this conversation on Anita Desai's games at Twilight. I have with me Ms. Gayathri who is a MA student at IIT Madras. Welcome Gayathri. Thank you, madam. So did you make at the story. It is I think Anita Desai she uses imagery quite a lot. You feel like you are actually in this story. You can feel the sun which is hot it is scorching heat and it is a very talking of Indian sensibilities.

I think I could relate it to much more than I could relate to lot short stories because I have been one of the children who has been playing through scorching heat and we do not care about what parents say. We have been there outside throughout the day and I think I could relate it to a lot more than lot of other stories. So the Indian sensibility in turns of the children's reaction to disciplining of the parents during hot summers is very much understandable.

And we could relate to it as well, but there is a kind of a subversive note to this games that are been played in this particular story and Anita Desai really manipulates us into kind of you know lulling us into believe into believing all these games, but then she has an ulterior motive to attain through this games at twilight. So there is something we need to keep in mind as well. So let us start about the relevance of the title, Games at Twilight, but it starts in the morning and there is very passing reference to twilight.

So what do you think? It is a gradual beginning in fact I am reminded of Anita Desai's own comment which I kind of highlighted in one of my lecture sessions which is that she is not very rigid in terms of structuring the story. She does not set up perhaps not like Khushwant Singh who has a definite beginning, a definite middle, and a definite ending everything is neatly in order in a Khushwant Singh's story, but here she says that when she talks about her writing style.

She says that I like the story flow and then it evolves through relationship between the characters and that is where interest because we do not see Ravi until well into the story. He is not introduced right at the beginning quite artificially by the writer and as you say we do not begin at twilight that is also very interesting to note. We begin in the late afternoon or in the afternoon and let me read the very first line here of the story.

It was still too hot, too hot to play outdoors. They had their tea, they had been wash, and have their hair brush, and after the long day of confinement in the house that was not cool, but at least a protection from the sun the children strain to get out. So we can assume that this is late afternoon. The children have gone through the ritual of cleaning themselves you know they had their tea and they want to go out, but it is still very hot. So there is a mismatch there.

The evening does not mean that it is you know the earth is getting cool down at least not in India, in the north during the summer and you are quite right to point out that the idea of twilight comes pretty late in the story and that is when Ravi wants to get out of the shed. He wants to get out of the shed because it is twilight and he could hear the voices of the children and they seem to be singing and chanting and not fighting for the first time.

So that is what he imagines the children to be doing from inside the shed and that is where we see twilight and this is how twilight is described by Desai and towards the close of the story. She says it grew darker in the shed as a light at the door grew softer, fuzzier turn to a kind of crumbling yellow pollen that turn to yellow fur, blue fur, gray fur and I am really struck when I am reading this now I am struck by the choice of words fuzzier again twilight.

Neither this nor that, neither day nor night in between the state of being in the middle of thing something that is transient so that is very interesting because the state of mind itself is fuzzy and that what is used here and crumbling yellow pollen something that is deconstructing within itself falling apart that sense is being a kind of woven in the narrative isn't it and again yellow, blue, grey, and the colour grey is a kind of a blue colour isn't it.

Again it is neither here nor there it is neither black nor white. Absolutely, the in-betweenness. So children they are not exactly babies nor are they adults, but in between state and where there is a lot of confusion where they aspire to be grown ups, but they are not, so that state is also very interesting and she says evening. That one single word evening, twilight, the sound of water gushing, falling, the scent of earth receiving water, slaking its thirst in great God's and releasing that green scent of freshness, coolness.

So the earth is like a human being you know quenching its thirst and releasing that you know coolness into the air and this is the I think the only moment in the story where there is peace, there is calm and there is a scent of pleasantness about you know at the moments the narrative something subversive, something negative, pessimistic is a kind of blended with all the words and ideas.

Through the crack Ravi saw the long purple shadows of the shed and garage lines are still across the yard. Beyond that the white walls of the house. The bougainvillea had lost its lividity hung in dark bundles that quaked and twittered and seethed with masses of homing sparrows. The lawn was shut off from his view. Could you hear the children's voices it seemed to him that he could? It seemed to him again it is not very definite.

It is seemed, it is probable, it is likely, it seemed to him that he could hear the chanting, singing, laughing, but what about the game, what had happened? Could it be over? How could it when it was still not when he was still not found. So the interesting thing here once again which have made reference to in my lectures is the description of the trees the bougainvillea tree that is what I want to ask. In the beginning the bougainvillea trees were again it was described very beautifully and again here it says it has lost its lividity.

So is this is a premonition for something which is going to come. yes, yes, perhaps, perhaps because lividity as I explained earlier is a colour that is associated with injury with hurt you know with strangulation that bluish grey colour that appears on your skin when you are hurt or wounded or attacked so that colour is associated with this bougainvillea tree with really striking colours that is a bizarre and really contrasting idea to kind of force it on this particular tree.

And as you said this could be a premonition in the sense that Ravi is not going to get what she was wants. His heart's desire is going to be disappointment so and again the last image that we have of Ravi is lying on the ground like a dead person you know so the prone figure is again very, very tragic and it has associations of death. So that could be indicated and again the injury that he suffers to the psyche could be compared to the lack or the lividity that is associated with bougainvillea and she says it had lost its lividity.

So it becomes some other colour which is worse than that striking colour and that colour itself has associations of injury and being wounded. So it is a very, very imagistic you know story and all these images have associations of something really not very pleasant or healthy or joyful and that is very interesting in the context of children's games and children's play that she writes about. Coming to what you said children's play.

Childhood is often very it is romanticized by a lot of authors even when we are talking about Ruskin Bond's Blue Umbrella we were talking how childhood is very they are pure and all that and but Anita Desai here she uses very apparently very innocent scene of children playing to reveal a more sinister reality. Yeah, quite right. In the case of Bourne, it does not very subtly too subtly for us to detect in fact we really have to use our spy glass to go after some of the clues.

And that tell us that all is not well in that mountain village and there are fractures there. There are social fractures, gender discriminations; you know class divide and all these elements are there. He did not beneath the veneer of beauty of nature and he it is rather a more apparent I would say, but we would tend to limit that problem or the struggle or the fight within the playground.

It is children squabbling amongst themselves, but if we take a closer look that is squabbling is really harsh and fears almost while and shirt sleeves are torn. they are pushing, they are shoving, they is kicking, and there is 1 moment in the story when we have Ravi thinking that he can get out of the shed and that is when he hears Raghu bearing down on a girl that is very disturbing

image to have in the context of a teenager you know approaching a girl and we think of so many other associations especially in terms of you know sexual assault.

And other things so that is always there, lurking in the corner. So the children's games are not merely children's games it just spills over and makes us think of other things and it also makes us wonder about the adult world that they are in touch with what sort of adult world is this the thing that we they have us models and how is that impacting on the children who are playing in that big household so these questions are provoked by the games of these children play.

Let us talk about the adults in the story. I think there is a tinge of dysfunctionality to the family. Ravi has gone so long and the family did not when he comes back she is annoyed that is what Desai says. She isn't even and he is crying there. She comes and she is annoyed and she asks him to keep quiet and they do not even find out that he is not there for so long. So what do you think about their attitude and again this using Raghu bears down on a girl is he mimicking the adults because he is in that age he wants to become an adult, but he is not an adult so.

Absolutely you hit the nail on the head, especially in terms of the mother not reacting in an appropriate manner to the agony suffered by a young kid. Let us go back to that line so this is what Ravi sees when he comes out. How can we learn the children stop chanting? They all turn to stare at him in amazement. Their faces were pale and triangular in the dusk. The trees and bushes around them stood inky and sepulchral, spilling long shadows across them.

They stared wondering at its reappearance, his passion, his wild animal howling, the mother rows from her basket chair and came towards him worried, annoyed, saying stop it stop it Ravi do not be a baby have you hurt yourself and then seeing him attended to the children went back to clasping their hands and chanting the grass is green, the rose is red. So we have Ravi terribly disappointed by the lack of you know attention that has been given to him by the rest of the children.

And he charges towards them and crying all the time as well and the mother is slightly worried but she is also annoyed and how worry is only towards his physical well being something that I

made mention of earlier. So she worries about his physical state rather than about the psychological state and the state in which he is in the crying that he does is swept aside it is a kind of ignored by her and she says stop being a baby just be a grown up behave like an adult.

Or behave like a child and again is it because he is a boy yes that is another very good question so boys are not supposed to cry very good and it is very interesting that we also see Mira another girl mirroring the attitude of the mother if you look at the next big where is that point and she says you know do not cry. Mira says Mira is the one who early on separated the boys who are fighting and she comes up with the strategies saying that we can decide who is going to be seeker through this game.

And she is the one who puts Ravi in his place now after he has come out from stresses join the line, be at the end of the line you know do not cause trouble. So we have female figures endorsing the hierarchy ultimately. They want everybody to follow the social order that has been put in place. They mix small interventions, that is what they are. The interventions are small. The internalization of patriarchy again they are mimicking what the adults do.

Absolutely, so we do not see the father figure until the very end and he is quite silent in the sense that he sits on the you know garden and he just sees all the games being played out and he is very silent, but he is very authoritative as well in the sense that the children behave you know they seemed to behave really well. They do not seem to create any kind of havoc when the father is around and if you notice the car is being washed with the help of the children and that is the only 1 activity in which they do not cause any trouble.

Is this because the father is around so that is the question that we can also speculate on and we talked a lot about the imagery when I think we have to talk more because it is very evident everything from the beginning paragraphs you can actually imagine it without using too many of your own assumptions. She just leaves nothing a lot imagination. She writes so beautifully so her language is very lucid yet you can understand what is happening there.

So can you talk more about it? It is very rich as I said and it is very dense. You can lose yourself for several hours within a small paragraph you know using a small paragraph and I just pick 1 to do a little bit of close reading something that I have talked about earlier, but it is worth looking at again so this is the part about the shed. The shed was not opened more than once a year when Marr turned out all the broken bits of furniture and rules of mopping and leaking buckets.

And white anthills were broken and swept away and filth sprayed into the spider webs and rat holes so that the whole operation was like the looting of a poor wind and conquered city. The green leaves of the door sacked. They were really off their rusty hinges. The hinges were large and made a small gap between the door and the walls only just large enough for rats, dogs, and possibly Ravi to slip through.

So the association of creatures and stuff is fantastically done and I am really struck by this figurative language, the simile employed to talk about all these defunct household goods and all these creepy crawlies and comparing them to a poor looted conquered city and using the mother image as the conqueror to do it and that is very shocking it makes perfect sense. It does makes perfect sense because if we look closely at Mira or the mother they are less likely less sympathetic towards the downtrodden young children in this household.

And that is how see even Ravi being conflated being put together with rats and dogs you know the lowest of the low in every order seemed to be lump together so the imagery in this particular story is not the merely for effect. It is not merely to create a striking you know ascends among the readers. It is therefore a specific purpose and I think that she is employing this world of children and the hierarchy in that world to talk about other hierarchies.

And how there are people in the society were also implicated in this kind of you know establishment or the reinforcement of the hierarchy and how we look at those figures and mother figures are very interesting because they are spun with all these idealisms and she kind of unravels it at moments in the story and that is done very effectively and subtly and again talking about hierarchies. Do you think the sibling hierarchies mirror the hierarchies which are present outside, the social hierarchies it could?

It could mirror. For example, if we look at the conversation here the beginning conversation where they decide to play this game of hide and seek I mentioned as earlier to there, there was no speech prefix for that conversation. We do not know who is doing talking but we can guess there is a senior, there is a junior so that category is established. Seniors trample down on the juniors you know the superiors trample down on the inferiors the social superiors trample down on the social inferiors.

And you can put all the different kinds of categories and their orders in that conversation and this is the conversation. They say let us play hide and seek who will be it. You be it. Why should I. You be. You are the eldest. That does not mean. So the eldest does not easily buckle down to any kind of pressure and it is very apparent that even when Raghu loses the game he does not take the outcome pretty easily. He says you cheated, Mira cheated, he cheated.

So that anger is easily expressed and he has that space to express that anger and get away with it and that is very interesting and when he is on the losing side he also seeks other authority to back him up. He says that Ma said we go to play in the veranda in the posh not go out. So he resorts to you know getting the help from other higher orders. So that is very interesting. Let us talk a bit more about Raghu's character.

He whistles and there is 1 scene where he says I am not going to leave you alone. He kicks somebody. Yes. Whistling and the kicking I will just pick on those. This whistling is a sound that we do when we are happy usually that is what we do in it is also associated with police absolutely it is also associated with police which is what he does and if you look at the positive spin it is done when you are in a cheerful mood it can also be used to bully, threaten, harass other people, people who are inferior to you and that is what he does.

His whistling becomes sharper, angrier when he is on the hunt for the other kids who are hiding so it is almost as if there is a hunt there and we mind it of William Golding's work where he uses all the boys the school boys to talk about the pressures, and the conflicts and the war driven

landscapes, yeah the Lord of flies especially and the boy's kind of play out all the discriminations and all the horrors that the adults play out in the main stream society.

So that kind of similarities also evident here when Raghu tramples down he kind of crushes all the brushes and the shrubs. He uses a stick to whack a wall to threaten and even the language that he uses as part of the game you are dead that is very, very symbolic as well and again we have huge number of associations with death, sepulcher, coffin like situations and all these are really played out through language.

It is very morbid when you think very, very morbid especially the shed. The physical you know appearance of the shed it is a claustrophobic space. A space which is compatible through a coffin you know and early on there is a reference there is an embedded narrative which talks about Ravi being caught in a linen cupboard so he felt more familiar there because it has associations of his mother, but again the idea of being confined in tiny spaces and even the home is not very conducive or congenial the writer says.

The third person narrator says house was not cool, but at least a protection from the sun, at least a protection. It is not the ideal, cliché, homely home, with lots of comforts around so that various specialty seem to indicate this. The home, shed, the linen cup broad where he is trapped. So the idea of being trapped is also there. Ravi is need for validation by the society. It is not just Ravi's it is for an adult as you would talk about golden.

When we talk about adults we think it is very obvious, but when it is imposed on the children, when children do it we are shocked for it. So I think it is a good comparison. Is that why Anita Desai used children to bring up all these contradictions and horrors and brutalities? Brutality is an image that is there everywhere in the behaviour of Raghu and sometimes even associated with Ravi himself because if we look at the description pretty closely when he gets out of the shed he charges, charge like an animal right a ram would or some kind of predator would.

The charging is an interesting choice of work and again he cries and that cry is associated with animal howling. So the primitive instincts are just beneath the skin and it erupts when you are

provoked or pushed into a corner so that element should also be recognized you know the capacity to be wide and violent is then everybody and perhaps more with the male children than with the female children who kind of use their cleverness and subtlety to get away with all the problems in society.

So that is also there. Did I answer all your queries there? So the validation, the point about validation, early on, he just wants victory. he wants to be the one who has succeeded amongst all these older children so that is what he craves and he waits quite a long time inside the shed for a small boy surrounded by all these old stuff you know dusty things and creepy, crawlies, he imagines snakes you know crawling around and things like that and then he comes out hoping for victory.

And he does not get it and he is terribly disappointed, but even more than that the disappointment is at everybody has forgotten about him that is the horror of horrors. How could they forget me as you mentioned early on even the parents have forgotten about it and that is dysfunctionality for you when they could not spot a missing child both the parents are there, the mother and the father and they do not notice Ravi until he comes out crying and even then he does not get any sympathy and what about the father.

He does not make any kind of reaction to this his child. Why is he quiet? Why he is letting his wife do the talking may be he is letting her do it because that is her chore that is her task so we have gender roles there neatly divided and parceled out. So all these you know questions crop up in our mind and so we think about these things deeply. So that is there. So that insignificance is what hurts him most and it is very sweet and tragic to see that he lies full length on the damp grass crushing his face into it no longer crying silence by terrible sense of his insignificance.

And it is very sweet in the sense that he is seeking comfort from mother earth when his own mother is not providing the comfort that is necessary for this young child and earth becomes that you know huge mother figure and very interestingly his posture suggest dead so there is this you know idea that you will get the ultimate comfort only when you are dead and buried and very close to nature so all these ideas are inevitably come up for us to worry about.

Again we might even talk about the death of innocence yes absolutely. He will never see the world the same anymore. That loss of innocence anything he does is futile. I think that would keep on recurring and yes absolutely that there is lots of innocence is a very interesting point. His realization that he will not get any help from the people around him from the community around him so very interesting and important lesson for him in this society where leading a life is nowhere easy.

You now navigating life becomes really difficult and he learns the painfulness at that young age itself. So it can be seen as you know a lesson in growing up and initiation into the adult world where you got to navigate your life on your own not depend on others for comfort solace or validation. One last question breaking it down, breaking the entire story down may be oversimplifying it the theme can it be put as an expectation versus reality.

That could be one of the themes that could be there are several themes as I said you know mucking around the corner and every rich passage will tell you new things, newer things about life and how it functions in the society, but expectation versus reality is also a very important theme because Ravi this young boy has a very simplistic set of expectations. He thinks that if he helps for a long time he will get the reward of being recognized and that would be his laurels and he shyly you know smiles about it.

That is innocence for year it is very formulae his expectations are, but then he realizes that is not how life is going to be because you know it changes the outside world has changed so drastically. The children go on from game to game and he does not know that so he lives with his own world within his own mind. So his realities are completely different. So he needs to think outside of his mind too if he wants to you know square things.

If he wants to lead a peaceful, comfortable existence in this world so there is a big chasm between expectation and reality at least in the context of innocent, vulnerable, inferior, powerless people who really have to think hard in order not to be disappointed. Thank you so much for

your questions. I hope you had a very enjoyable time listening to this conversation. Thank you for watching. I will catch up with you in the next session.