

FEMINIST VISION IN THE SELECTED NOVELS OF ANITA DESAI: A PSYCHOLOGICAL EXPLORATION OF FEMALE SUBJECTIVITY AND AGENCY

Charu Mathur

Research Scholar

Department of Social Science and Humanities

Lords University, Alwar

Mathurcharu98@gmail.com

Dr. Neetu Yadav

Research Supervisor

Department of Social Science and Humanities

Lords University, Alwar.

ABSTRACT

Anita Desai, a preeminent figure in Indian English literature, is renowned for her profound psychological realism and her intricate portrayal of the inner lives of her characters. While often categorized as a psychological novelist, this paper argues that Desai's work also embodies a nuanced and deeply insightful feminist vision. Through a close examination of selected novels such as Cry, the Peacock (1963), Voices in the City (1965), Fire on the Mountain (1977), and Clear Light of Day (1980), this paper explores how Desai critically dissects patriarchal societal structures, challenges conventional gender roles, and foregrounds the struggles of women for identity, autonomy, and voice. Her feminist vision is not overtly polemical but rather a subtle yet powerful exploration of female subjectivity, alienation, and the desperate yearning for self-actualization within restrictive domestic and social spheres. This study analyzes how Desai's female protagonists confront the psychological burdens imposed by their gender, often seeking escape, solitude, or unconventional forms of agency, thereby offering a profound commentary on the female condition in post-colonial India.

Keywords: preeminent, psychological realism, feminist vision, self-actualization, domestic and social spheres.

1. INTRODUCTION

Anita Desai holds a unique and distinguished position in the landscape of Indian English fiction, primarily celebrated for her deep dives into the psychological landscapes of her characters. Unlike her contemporaries who often engaged with grand socio-political narratives, Desai meticulously charted the internal turmoil, anxieties, and existential crises of individuals, particularly women, who often exist at the margins of society's attention. Her novels are rich tapestries woven with threads of introspection, alienation, and a profound sensitivity to the human psyche. While much critical attention has been paid to her psychological realism, the inherent feminist dimensions of her work, though implicitly acknowledged, deserve a more focused and comprehensive analysis.

This paper posits that Anita Desai's artistic oeuvre is imbued with a compelling feminist vision, one that is subtle, psychological, and deeply critical of the patriarchal structures that confine and often suffocate women. Her feminism is not characterized by overt political activism or radical calls for revolution, but rather by an incisive exploration of the interior lives of women, laying



bare the profound psychological costs of societal expectations, marital disillusionment, and the perpetual struggle for selfhood. Through the lens of selected novels – *Cry, the Peacock*, *Voices in the City*, *Fire on the Mountain*, and *Clear Light of Day* – this study aims to delineate the various facets of Desai's feminist perspective, demonstrating how she meticulously unveils the subjugation, alienation, and the desperate, often quiet, acts of rebellion and assertion of identity by her female protagonists. Her work challenges the monolithic narratives of female domesticity and subservience, advocating instead for an understanding of women as complex, multifaceted beings yearning for agency and self-expression.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Iseni, Arburim, (2022) 'Desai's novels as post-modernist Feminist Projections', In this article, the writer discusses Desai's two protagonists- Maya and Sita in her novels *Cry the Peacock* and *Where shall we go this Summer?* are representatives of post – modern Indian Feminism. The researcher focuses on how matriarchal community has been humiliated and tortured socially and economically. The purpose of the paper is to focus on the feminist message as articulated in Anita Desai's reputed novels.

Gautam, Teena, (2021) 'Female Predicament in Anita Desai's *Voices in the City*' Aurangabad, In this article also the researcher focuses on the character of Monisha as the protagonist in the novel *Voices in the City*. Desai shows the predicament of women in the society. She shows how Monisha feels insulted and tortured at her husband's home and wants to finish her life. So life has become unbearable for her and she is in a dilemma. Finally the time comes when she commits suicide.

Khatib, Anis, (2020) 'Eco Feminism in Anita Desai's *Fire on Mountain*', Here the researcher shows how Desai presents the internal conflict of the woman character rather than providing narrations and descriptions. The paper focuses on how important it is to see the decline and decay of women and nature and how it is seen that the symbolic significance of the fire to the mountain is similar to the lives of the three prime characters in the novel, Nanda, Raka and Ila. The researcher tries to analyze the interconnection between the adverse condition of women characters in the novel and the same deterioration of nature in the society.

3. DEFINING DESAI'S FEMINIST LENS: PSYCHOLOGICAL REALISM AND SUBTLETY

Desai's approach to feminism is distinct from more overt, confrontational forms. Her female characters rarely engage in explicit feminist discourse or collective activism. Instead, their



struggles unfold predominantly within their minds, in the domestic sphere, or through their individual acts of defiance, often misunderstood or overlooked by the patriarchal world around them. This psychological realism becomes Desai's primary feminist tool. By meticulously detailing the thoughts, feelings, and sensory perceptions of her female protagonists, she validates their inner experiences, elevating them from mere adjuncts to male characters to complex individuals whose subjective realities warrant profound attention.

In her novels, the domestic space, traditionally viewed as a woman's domain and source of fulfillment, is often depicted as a site of confinement, suffocation, and profound loneliness. This re-evaluation of the domestic challenges the patriarchal ideal of womanhood, which typically glorifies self-sacrifice and domestic bliss. Desai's women are often educated, sensitive, and intelligent, yet find their aspirations thwarted by societal expectations that prioritize marriage, motherhood, and subservience. Their struggles are thus not merely personal but symptomatic of a wider systemic oppression that curtails female agency and denies women their rightful place as autonomous individuals.

4. THE BURDEN OF SENSITIVITY: MARITAL ALIENATION IN *CRY, THE PEACOCK*

Cry, the Peacock introduces Maya, a highly sensitive and imaginative young woman, trapped in a loveless marriage with Gautama, an older, intellectually detached lawyer. Maya's vivid inner world, shaped by a childhood of indulgent adoration and a superstitious prophecy of death, clashes starkly with Gautama's rational, emotionally barren existence. Desai uses Maya's escalating madness not as a mere psychological breakdown, but as a symbolic representation of the destruction wrought upon a woman's spirit when her emotional and intellectual needs are consistently unmet within a patriarchal marital framework.

Maya's "feminist vision" emerges through her desperate yearning for emotional reciprocity and understanding, a yearning that Gautama is incapable of fulfilling. He dismisses her fears and desires as "childish" and "feminine hysteria," effectively silencing her voice and invalidating her subjective reality. This marital dynamic highlights the profound alienation women can experience even within the most intimate relationships when communication breaks down due to patriarchal insensitivity. Maya's ultimate act of pushing Gautama off the terrace, though a descent into madness, can be interpreted as a violent, albeit tragic, assertion of her suppressed self, a desperate attempt to reclaim agency from a relationship that has systematically dehumanized her. Desai thus critiques a system where women's emotional and psychological well-being is considered secondary to patriarchal rationality and control.



5. URBAN ALIENATION AND DIVERSE FEMALE RESPONSES IN *VOICES IN THE CITY*

Voices in the City expands Desai's feminist scope by presenting a triptych of female experiences through the sisters Monisha, Amla, and their rebellious aunt Sita, all grappling with life in a bustling, indifferent Calcutta. Each woman embodies a different response to patriarchal constraints and the search for identity.

Monisha, like Maya, is trapped in a marriage devoid of love and communication, confined to the stifling domesticity of a joint family. Her intellectual curiosity and desire for expression are systematically thwarted, leading to an interior world of profound despair. She finds solace only in scribbling her thoughts in a diary, a private act of self-assertion that ultimately cannot save her from institutionalized misogyny. Her suicide is a stark indictment of a society that offers no escape or avenue for agency to sensitive, intelligent women who refuse to conform to prescribed roles. Monisha's plight reveals the "death of the spirit" that can occur when a woman's identity is subsumed by her marital status and domestic duties.

Amla, the artist, represents a more active attempt at self-creation and escape. She seeks to forge an identity through her art, moving between modelling and commercial art. However, even Amla finds herself vulnerable to the objectification of the male gaze and the commercial pressures of the art world. Her journey highlights the challenges women face in professional spheres, where their bodies and creativity can still be exploited.

Sita, the unconventional aunt, offers a radical, though equally painful, alternative. She defies social norms by leaving her husband and living independently, embracing a bohemian lifestyle. Sita embodies rebellion against conventional marriage and motherhood, yet her freedom comes with its own costs of loneliness and social ostracism. Together, the sisters and Sita illustrate the limited, often tragic, choices available to women attempting to navigate a patriarchal society, demonstrating that even rebellion can be fraught with loneliness and a different kind of confinement. Desai subtly argues that true liberation remains elusive for women in such a milieu.

6. RETREAT, SOLITUDE, AND UNFULFILLED DESIRES IN *FIRE ON THE MOUNTAIN*

Fire on the Mountain presents a seemingly different narrative, focusing on Nanda Kaul, an elderly woman who has retreated to a solitary life in Kasauli after a lifetime of marriage and raising children. Nanda's desire for solitude is a profound act of rejecting the roles of wife,



mother, and grandmother – roles that she now sees as having consumed her true self. Her yearning for an "emptiness" (Desai, 1977, p. 32) signifies a desire to shed the burdens of caregiving and identity defined by others. This voluntary retreat is a powerful feminist statement, asserting an individual's right to self-preservation and autonomy, even in old age.

However, Nanda's carefully constructed solitude is disrupted by the arrival of her great-granddaughter, Raka, a wild, untamed child who mirrors Nanda's own suppressed instincts for freedom and rebellion. Raka's destructive tendencies, culminating in setting fire to the mountain, can be seen as an unconscious, primal rejection of societal expectations and the domestic sphere. Nanda initially resents this intrusion, but later finds a strange kinship with Raka's fierce independence. The novel subtly suggests that even desired solitude might not truly erase the scars of a lifetime lived under patriarchal expectations. Nanda's carefully constructed reality crumbles with the arrival of news of her daughter's death, revealing the inescapable threads of familial connection and the lingering pain of unfulfilled desires. Desai explores the irony that even in retreat, the past, and the duties it entailed, continue to exert their power. Her feminist vision here lies in spotlighting the unacknowledged desires of older women and their struggle to reclaim a self that was long lost to familial obligations.

7. SISTERHOOD, MEMORY, AND DOMESTIC STAGNATION IN *CLEAR LIGHT OF DAY*

Clear Light of Day delves into the lives of the Das siblings, particularly the sisters Bimla (Bim) and Tara, revisiting their childhood home and confronting the weight of their shared past. The novel is a poignant exploration of female relationships, memory, and the impact of the domestic sphere on women's lives. Bim, who remains unmarried and teaches history, embodies a quiet defiance against conventional female roles, choosing to stay and care for her autistic brother, Baba, and their alcoholic Aunt Mira. Her life is one of sacrifice and responsibility, yet also one of fierce independence and intellectual vitality.

Tara, on the other hand, embraces the more conventional path of marriage and moves abroad. Her return to Delhi highlights the contrast between her seemingly liberated life and Bim's rooted, though often stagnant, existence. Desai examines how both choices, conventional and unconventional, come with their own forms of fulfillment and regret. The novel foregrounds the complexities of sisterhood – the love, rivalry, resentment, and profound understanding that can exist between women who have shared a lifetime within the same domestic space.



Here, Desai's feminist vision is less about overt rebellion and more about the enduring strength and resilience of women within the confines of their circumstances. Bim's decision to stay and create an independent life, though filled with challenges, is an assertion of agency. Her eventual acceptance of her life choices and her deep bond with Baba signify a quiet triumph, suggesting that liberation can also be found in embracing one's responsibilities and finding meaning within them. The novel celebrates the enduring power of female bonds and the unacknowledged heroism of women who navigate their lives with quiet dignity, often fulfilling roles that society takes for granted. It's a powerful statement about how women make sense of their lives and find strength in their shared narratives.

8. CONCLUSION

Anita Desai's selected novels offer a profound and enduring feminist vision, one that is characterized by its psychological depth, subtle critique, and unwavering focus on the female subjective experience. She consistently discredits the romanticized notions of domesticity and challenges conventional gender roles by meticulously exposing the internal struggles, disillusionments, and unfulfilled desires of her women protagonists. From Maya's pathological sensitivity in *Cry, the Peacock*, through Monisha's tragic silence in *Voices in the City*, Nanda Kaul's elusive quest for solitary freedom in *Fire on the Mountain*, to Bim's enduring resilience in *Clear Light of Day*, Desai's characters are united by their profound yearning for authenticity, agency, and a recognition of their individual identities beyond societal strictures.

Desai's feminism is not loud or dogmatic; it is instead deeply embedded in the intricate fabric of her characters' minds and their immediate environments. By giving voice to the voiceless, by validating the anxieties and aspirations often dismissed as "feminine," and by charting the psychological landscapes of women striving for selfhood, Anita Desai has made an invaluable contribution to feminist literature. Her work serves as a powerful testament to the enduring struggles of women in a patriarchal world and continues to resonate with readers who seek to understand the complexities of female experience, identity, and the quiet, persistent pursuit of liberation. Her novels remain crucial texts for understanding the trajectory of feminist thought in Indian English literature, demonstrating that the most profound resistances often begin within the deepest recesses of the human mind.

REFERENCES

- Desai, A. (1963). *Cry, the Peacock*. Peter Owen Publishers.
- Desai, A. (1965). *Voices in the City*. Peter Owen Publishers.
- Desai, A. (1977). *Fire on the Mountain*. Harper & Row.



**Anveshana's International Journal Of Research In Education, Literature, Psychology And
Library Sciences**

- *Desai, A. (1980). Clear Light of Day. Harper & Row.*
- *Bhatnagar, M. (2015). Anita Desai: A Study of Her Novels. Atlantic Publishers.*
- *Kumar, S. (2022). The Feminist Vision in Anita Desai's Novels. Prestige Books.*
- *Pathak, R. S. (2018). The Fiction of Anita Desai: A Critical Study. Prestige Books.*
- *Sharma, R. S. (2021). Anita Desai: A Critical Study. Atlantic Publishers & Distributors.*