

# Psychological Conflict and Female Alienation in the Novels of Anita Desai

Joshi Raiben.G<sup>1</sup>, Dr. Nareshkumar A. Parmar<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1,2</sup>*Shri. K.R. Anjana Arts & Commerce College, Dhanera. Banaskantha, Gujarat*

**Abstract**—This paper examines the psychological dimensions of female identity in the novels of Anita Desai through the lens of feminist literary criticism. Anita Desai is widely recognized for her profound exploration of the inner emotional lives of women and their struggles within patriarchal social structures. Unlike many traditional narratives that focus on external conflicts, Desai's fiction emphasizes the psychological experiences of female protagonists who face alienation, loneliness, and existential anxiety. The study analyzes four major characters Maya in *Cry, the Peacock*, Bim in *Clear Light of Day*, Nanda Kaul in *Fire on the Mountain*, and Sita in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* to understand how Desai portrays women negotiating identity, autonomy, and emotional fulfillment. Through feminist theoretical perspectives, particularly the ideas of Simone de Beauvoir and Elaine Showalter, the paper explores how patriarchal expectations shape women's psychological realities and restrict their individuality. The analysis demonstrates that Desai's female characters often respond to oppression through introspection, silence, and emotional withdrawal, which function as subtle forms of resistance. Ultimately, the study argues that Anita Desai significantly contributes to feminist literature by presenting complex portrayals of women seeking selfhood and autonomy within restrictive social environments.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Indian English literature has witnessed a remarkable transformation in the representation of women, particularly with the emergence of women writers who challenged the traditional patriarchal narratives embedded in literary discourse. Earlier literary works often portrayed women through stereotypical roles such as devoted wives, obedient daughters, or self-sacrificing mothers, reflecting the cultural expectations of a male-dominated society. Feminist literary criticism has questioned such portrayals by highlighting how literature historically constructed women as secondary figures whose identities were

defined primarily in relation to men. Simone de Beauvoir famously argued that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman," emphasizing that womanhood is socially constructed through cultural and patriarchal norms (Beauvoir 267). This insight has become central to feminist literary analysis, enabling scholars to examine how female characters negotiate identity, autonomy, and resistance within oppressive social structures.

Within the context of Indian English fiction, feminist themes gained prominence during the second half of the twentieth century, when women writers began exploring the psychological and emotional experiences of female protagonists. Unlike earlier narratives that emphasized external social struggles, modern feminist fiction increasingly focused on the internal conflicts faced by women living within restrictive domestic environments. Writers such as Kamala Markandaya, Nayantara Sahgal, and Shashi Deshpande contributed significantly to this literary shift by portraying women's struggles for identity and self-expression in patriarchal societies. However, among these writers, Anita Desai occupies a distinctive position because of her deep exploration of psychological realism and her nuanced portrayal of female consciousness. Desai's novels frequently depict women who are emotionally isolated, intellectually sensitive, and psychologically conflicted, reflecting the complex interplay between personal identity and societal expectations.

Anita Desai's contribution to Indian English literature lies primarily in her ability to represent the inner lives of women with remarkable depth and sensitivity. Her narratives move beyond conventional feminist concerns by focusing on the psychological fragmentation experienced by women trapped in oppressive domestic structures. Rather than presenting overt political rebellion, Desai often portrays subtle

forms of resistance that emerge through silence, introspection, and emotional withdrawal. Critics have noted that her protagonists frequently experience alienation and existential anxiety as they struggle to reconcile their personal desires with societal norms. According to Elaine Showalter, feminist literary criticism seeks to analyze how women's experiences are shaped by cultural and psychological forces, thereby uncovering the underlying structures of patriarchal power within literature (Showalter 7). Desai's fiction exemplifies this approach by exploring how patriarchal expectations shape the mental and emotional landscapes of her female characters.

One of the defining features of Desai's novels is the portrayal of female alienation. Many of her protagonists experience profound loneliness within the institution of marriage, which often becomes a site of emotional repression rather than companionship. In *Cry, the Peacock* (1963), the protagonist Maya struggles with intense psychological distress resulting from her unfulfilled emotional needs and the indifference of her husband. Similarly, *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* (1975) presents the character of Sita, who escapes to a remote island in an attempt to resist the suffocating pressures of domestic life. These characters embody the psychological consequences of patriarchal structures that deny women emotional autonomy and self-expression. Through such portrayals, Desai highlights how the domestic sphere can become a space of alienation and existential conflict for women.

Another significant aspect of Desai's fiction is her exploration of silence as a form of resistance. Unlike overtly rebellious protagonists found in many contemporary feminist narratives, Desai's characters often resist patriarchy through introspection and withdrawal. In *Fire on the Mountain* (1977), Nanda Kaul retreats into isolation after a lifetime of fulfilling socially prescribed roles as wife and mother. Her withdrawal symbolizes a quiet rebellion against the expectations imposed upon women by patriarchal society. Similarly, in *Clear Light of Day* (1980), Bim represents a different form of resistance through her independence and refusal to conform to conventional marital expectations. These characters illustrate how Desai portrays female agency not necessarily through direct confrontation but through psychological resilience and emotional self-assertion.

The psychological depth of Desai's fiction is further enhanced by her distinctive narrative style. She frequently employs stream-of-consciousness techniques, symbolic imagery, and introspective narration to capture the complex inner worlds of her protagonists. Such narrative strategies allow readers to engage intimately with the emotional and mental struggles of her characters. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar argue that women writers often create alternative narrative forms to challenge patriarchal literary traditions and express female subjectivity more authentically (Gilbert and Gubar 45). Desai's experimental narrative style reflects this feminist impulse by prioritizing the inner voice of the female protagonist and emphasizing psychological realism over conventional plot structures.

This paper examines the psychological dimensions of female identity in the novels of Anita Desai, focusing on how her protagonists negotiate alienation, emotional repression, and the search for selfhood within patriarchal society. By analyzing selected novels such as *Cry, the Peacock*, *Clear Light of Day*, *Fire on the Mountain*, and *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*, the study explores how Desai represents the complex inner lives of women and challenges traditional representations of femininity in Indian literature. Through the lens of feminist literary criticism and psychological analysis, the paper argues that Desai's fiction provides a profound exploration of female consciousness and contributes significantly to the development of feminist discourse in Indian English literature.

## II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK ON

### A. Feminist Literary Criticism

Feminist literary criticism provides a significant theoretical perspective for examining how literature represents women and constructs gender identities within patriarchal societies. It emerged prominently during the twentieth century as part of the broader feminist movement that sought to challenge the marginalization of women in social, cultural, and intellectual domains. Feminist critics analyze how literary texts reflect and reinforce patriarchal ideologies and how women writers resist these structures by creating alternative narratives of female identity and agency. Through this approach, literature

becomes a space where gender roles and power relations are critically examined.

One of the most influential thinkers in feminist theory is Simone de Beauvoir, whose groundbreaking work *The Second Sex* (1949) argues that womanhood is not an inherent biological condition but a social construct shaped by cultural expectations and patriarchal norms. Beauvoir famously states that “one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman,” emphasizing that society plays a decisive role in shaping female identity (Beauvoir 267). This concept has become fundamental to feminist literary criticism, as it encourages scholars to investigate how literary texts depict women within socially constructed roles that often limit their autonomy and individuality.

Similarly, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, in their influential work *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), examine how women have been represented in patriarchal literary traditions. They argue that female characters in literature have historically been confined to restrictive stereotypes such as the “angel” and the “monster,” which symbolize obedience and rebellion respectively (Gilbert and Gubar 17). These archetypes function as mechanisms through which patriarchal societies regulate women’s behavior and reinforce traditional gender norms. Feminist criticism therefore seeks to dismantle such binary representations and highlight the complexity of women’s experiences in literature.

In the context of Indian English literature, feminist criticism provides a valuable framework for understanding how women writers challenge patriarchal traditions and explore the realities of women’s lives. Scholars such as Susie Tharu and K. Lalita argue that Indian women’s writing has played a crucial role in revealing the cultural and ideological structures that have historically limited women’s freedom and self-expression (Tharu and Lalita xiv). Through narratives that address themes such as gender oppression, identity, and resistance, women writers have contributed to the development of a distinctly Indian feminist literary tradition. Authors like Anita Desai, in particular, portray female protagonists who struggle to assert their individuality within restrictive social environments, thereby challenging conventional representations of womanhood.

#### B. Psychological Approach to Female Identity

While feminist literary criticism focuses on the socio-cultural construction of gender, the psychological approach to literature examines the inner emotional and mental experiences of characters. This perspective is particularly useful in analyzing the works of Anita Desai, whose novels often explore the psychological complexities of women living within patriarchal societies. By depicting the internal struggles of her female protagonists, Desai reveals how social pressures influence women’s emotional lives and sense of identity.

The psychological approach to literary analysis is largely influenced by the psychoanalytic theories of Sigmund Freud, who emphasized the role of the unconscious mind in shaping human behavior. Freud argued that individuals often suppress their desires and emotions in order to conform to societal expectations, a process he described as repression (Freud 45). In literary narratives, such repression frequently manifests through psychological tension, alienation, and emotional conflict. Women living within patriarchal societies may experience these forms of repression more intensely because their identities and aspirations are often constrained by traditional gender roles.

In feminist literary studies, psychological analysis has been used to explore how women internalize patriarchal values and how this internalization shapes their emotional experiences. Elaine Showalter emphasizes that feminist criticism must examine not only the social structures that oppress women but also the psychological impact of these structures on female identity (Showalter 12). Female characters in literature often struggle with feelings of alienation, frustration, and existential anxiety as they attempt to reconcile personal desires with societal expectations.

The novels of Anita Desai vividly illustrate these psychological struggles. Her female protagonists frequently experience emotional isolation and internal conflict as they confront the limitations imposed upon them by patriarchal norms. For instance, Maya in *Cry, the Peacock* suffers from intense psychological distress due to the emotional neglect within her marriage, while Sita in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* attempts to escape the pressures of domestic life by retreating to an isolated island. Similarly, Nanda Kaul in *Fire on the Mountain* withdraws from social life in an attempt to reclaim her autonomy and

personal space. These characters embody the psychological consequences of gender oppression and highlight the complex relationship between social structures and individual identity.

By integrating feminist literary criticism with psychological analysis, this study seeks to explore the multidimensional portrayal of female identity in Anita Desai's fiction. Feminist theory helps reveal the socio-cultural forces that shape gender roles, while psychological criticism uncovers the internal emotional conflicts experienced by women living within patriarchal systems. Together, these theoretical perspectives provide a deeper understanding of how Desai's novels depict the struggle for identity, autonomy, and self-expression among women in modern Indian society.

### III. FEMALE ALIENATION IN ANITA DESAI'S FICTION

Female alienation is one of the most prominent themes in the novels of Anita Desai, whose works focus on the psychological struggles of women living within patriarchal social structures. In Indian English literature, alienation often arises from the conflict between individual desires and societal expectations. Women are traditionally expected to fulfill prescribed roles as obedient wives, devoted mothers, and dutiful daughters, leaving little space for personal identity or emotional fulfillment. Anita Desai's fiction critically explores this condition by portraying female protagonists who experience profound loneliness, emotional repression, and psychological isolation. Through her narratives, Desai reveals how patriarchal structures can create a sense of alienation that affects women both internally and externally.

The concept of alienation in feminist literary criticism is closely related to the idea that women have historically been marginalized within social and cultural systems dominated by men. Simone de Beauvoir argues that women are often positioned as "the Other," whose identities are defined in relation to male authority rather than through their own individuality (Beauvoir 267). This marginalization results in a psychological and social distance between women and the world around them, leading to feelings of isolation and dissatisfaction. In literature, such alienation is frequently expressed through female

characters who struggle to articulate their desires and assert their autonomy within restrictive environments. Anita Desai's novels vividly portray this sense of alienation through deeply introspective narratives that emphasize the inner emotional worlds of her female protagonists. Unlike many earlier writers who focused primarily on external social conflicts, Desai delves into the psychological experiences of women trapped within oppressive domestic spaces. Critics have observed that her fiction often portrays women who feel disconnected from their surroundings, unable to communicate their emotional needs or find fulfillment in traditional roles. According to Elaine Showalter, feminist literary criticism seeks to uncover how women's experiences are shaped by both social and psychological forces that limit their agency (Showalter 12). Desai's fiction exemplifies this approach by highlighting the emotional consequences of patriarchal expectations.

One of the clearest examples of female alienation in Desai's work appears in *Cry, the Peacock* (1963), where the protagonist Maya experiences intense psychological distress due to her emotionally distant marriage. Maya's husband Gautama represents a rational and detached worldview that contrasts sharply with Maya's sensitive and imaginative personality. The lack of emotional connection in their relationship intensifies Maya's loneliness and eventually leads to her mental breakdown. Maya's alienation is not only a personal psychological condition but also a reflection of the broader social structures that deny women emotional fulfillment and intellectual companionship. Similarly, Desai explores alienation in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* (1975) through the character of Sita, who feels suffocated by the routine of domestic life and the expectations imposed upon her as a wife and mother. Unable to reconcile her inner turmoil with the demands of society, Sita escapes to the island of Manori in search of peace and self-understanding. Her retreat symbolizes a desire to distance herself from the pressures of patriarchal society and reclaim her sense of individuality. However, this physical withdrawal also reflects the psychological isolation that many women experience when their emotional needs remain unrecognized.

Another significant portrayal of female alienation appears in *Fire on the Mountain* (1977), where the character of Nanda Kaul seeks solitude in the hills of Kasauli after years of fulfilling her duties as a wife and

mother. Nanda's isolation represents both a rejection of societal expectations and a search for personal autonomy. After a lifetime of suppressing her desires and conforming to social norms, she attempts to construct a life defined by independence and self-reflection. Yet her solitude also reveals the lingering emotional scars left by years of repression and neglect. Through these characters, Anita Desai demonstrates that alienation is not merely a psychological condition but a structural consequence of patriarchal society. Women who attempt to assert their individuality often find themselves isolated from both family and society, creating a conflict between personal identity and social expectations. As Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar suggest, women in literature have often been depicted within restrictive roles that suppress their individuality and creativity (Gilbert and Gubar 45). Desai challenges these traditional representations by presenting female characters whose inner struggles expose the emotional costs of such limitations. Ultimately, female alienation in Anita Desai's fiction reflects the broader challenges faced by women seeking autonomy and self-definition in patriarchal societies. By focusing on the psychological experiences of her protagonists, Desai offers a profound exploration of how gender roles shape women's emotional lives. Her novels reveal that alienation, though painful, can also become a catalyst for self-awareness and resistance. Through her nuanced portrayal of female consciousness, Desai contributes significantly to feminist discourse in Indian English literature by giving voice to the silent struggles of women navigating the complex terrain of identity, freedom, and social expectation.

#### IV. STUDY OF MAJOR CHARACTERS

##### Maya in *Cry, the Peacock*

In *Cry, the Peacock* (1963), Anita Desai presents Maya as a deeply sensitive and emotionally vulnerable protagonist whose psychological deterioration reflects the oppressive nature of patriarchal marriage. Maya's alienation stems from her intense emotional needs and her inability to find understanding or companionship within her marital relationship. Her husband Gautama is portrayed as a rational and detached figure who fails to recognize Maya's emotional turmoil. This lack of communication creates a profound sense of loneliness

and isolation, which gradually drives Maya toward psychological instability.

The prophecy of death that Maya hears during childhood intensifies her anxiety and shapes her perception of life and marriage. As she becomes increasingly obsessed with the prophecy, her emotional dependence and psychological fragility become more evident. Critics have observed that Maya's mental breakdown symbolizes the emotional consequences of a society that suppresses women's voices and denies them emotional fulfillment. According to Simone de Beauvoir, patriarchal structures often confine women to roles that limit their individuality and psychological freedom (Beauvoir 267). Maya's tragic end reflects this confinement, demonstrating how emotional neglect and patriarchal indifference can lead to psychological alienation.

##### Bim in *Clear Light of Day*

Unlike Maya, the character of Bim in *Clear Light of Day* (1980) represents strength, independence, and resilience. Bim remains unmarried and dedicates her life to caring for her family and preserving her independence. Her character challenges traditional expectations that women must seek fulfillment through marriage and domestic life. Instead, Bim creates her own identity through intellectual engagement and personal responsibility.

However, Bim's independence is also accompanied by emotional struggles, particularly her resentment toward her brother Raja, whose decisions disrupt family relationships. Through Bim's character, Desai explores how family dynamics can contribute to emotional isolation even within intimate relationships. Bim's refusal to conform to societal expectations demonstrates a different form of female resistance, where autonomy and self-respect become central aspects of identity.

Feminist critics argue that literature often portrays women who reject traditional roles as socially marginalized or emotionally isolated. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar suggest that women in literature have historically been confined to limited archetypes that restrict their individuality (Gilbert and Gubar 17). Bim's character challenges these limitations by presenting a woman who asserts her independence and maintains control over her own life.

#### Nanda Kaul in *Fire on the Mountain*

In *Fire on the Mountain* (1977), Anita Desai presents Nanda Kaul as an elderly woman who retreats into solitude after spending most of her life fulfilling socially prescribed roles as a wife and mother. Nanda's decision to live alone in the hills of Kasauli represents her desire to escape the responsibilities and expectations imposed upon her by patriarchal society. After years of emotional neglect and social obligations, she seeks peace and independence through isolation.

Nanda's character illustrates how alienation can become both a refuge and a consequence of patriarchal oppression. While her solitude provides temporary freedom, it also reveals the emotional emptiness created by years of suppressed desires and neglected individuality. The arrival of her great-granddaughter Raka disrupts Nanda's carefully constructed solitude, forcing her to confront unresolved emotional conflicts. From a psychological perspective, Nanda's withdrawal reflects a response to long-term repression and emotional exhaustion. Sigmund Freud's concept of repression suggests that individuals often suppress painful experiences in order to cope with social expectations (Freud 45). Nanda's isolation thus becomes a symbolic attempt to reclaim autonomy after a lifetime of emotional restraint.

#### Sita in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*

In *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* (1975), Anita Desai portrays Sita as a woman struggling to reconcile her emotional sensitivity with the rigid expectations of domestic life. Sita experiences a profound sense of alienation within her marriage and family, feeling trapped by the responsibilities associated with motherhood and societal expectations. Her decision to retreat to the island of Manori reflects her desire to escape the pressures of urban life and regain a sense of inner peace.

The island becomes a symbolic space where Sita hopes to protect herself and her unborn child from the harsh realities of society. However, her escape also highlights the psychological turmoil caused by her inability to adapt to conventional social roles. Sita's alienation reflects the broader experience of many women who struggle to balance personal identity with societal expectations.

Elaine Showalter argues that feminist literary criticism must examine how social structures influence

women's psychological experiences and shape their identities (Showalter 12). Through Sita's character, Desai illustrates how patriarchal pressures can create deep emotional conflicts that lead women to seek refuge in isolation or imagination.

#### V. THEMES OF PSYCHOLOGICAL CONFLICT

In the fiction of Anita Desai, psychological conflict emerges as a central thematic concern through the interconnected experiences of loneliness, existential anxiety, silence, and the continuous search for selfhood among her female protagonists. Desai's women often exist within restrictive domestic environments where emotional communication is limited and personal desires are suppressed, leading to profound feelings of isolation. Characters such as Maya in *Cry, the Peacock* and Sita in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* experience deep existential anxiety as they struggle to reconcile their inner emotional worlds with the rigid expectations imposed by patriarchal society. Their psychological turmoil reflects the tension between individual identity and social conformity, a condition that feminist theorist Simone de Beauvoir describes as the consequence of women being historically positioned as "the Other," whose identity is defined in relation to male authority rather than personal autonomy (Beauvoir 267). In Desai's narratives, silence frequently functions as a subtle yet powerful form of resistance. Rather than openly rebelling against social norms, many of her protagonists retreat into introspection and emotional withdrawal, using silence to assert a degree of personal agency within oppressive circumstances. Nanda Kaul's deliberate isolation in *Fire on the Mountain*, for example, represents a rejection of the lifelong domestic roles that once defined her existence, while Bim in *Clear Light of Day* embodies a quieter but firm resistance through her independence and refusal to conform to conventional expectations of marriage. Such portrayals illustrate what Elaine Showalter identifies as the psychological dimension of feminist literature, where the inner emotional struggles of women reveal the deeper impact of patriarchal structures on female identity (Showalter 12). Ultimately, the search for selfhood becomes the driving force behind Desai's female characters, who seek meaning, autonomy, and emotional fulfillment beyond the confines of traditional gender roles.

Through these complex psychological portrayals, Desai highlights how loneliness and silence, though often perceived as signs of weakness or withdrawal, can also become pathways through which women confront existential dilemmas and attempt to construct an independent sense of identity.

## VI. CONCLUSION

Anita Desai's novels occupy a significant place in Indian English literature for their profound exploration of female consciousness and psychological realism. Through her nuanced portrayal of women's inner lives, Desai moves beyond conventional depictions of women as passive figures confined to domestic roles. Instead, she presents complex female protagonists who grapple with emotional isolation, existential anxiety, and the struggle for self-identity within patriarchal social structures. Characters such as Maya, Bim, Nanda Kaul, and Sita illustrate how women experience alienation when their individuality and emotional needs are suppressed by societal expectations. By focusing on the internal conflicts of her characters rather than overt social rebellion, Desai offers a unique feminist perspective that highlights the psychological dimensions of gender oppression. As Simone de Beauvoir argues, patriarchal societies often construct women as "the Other," limiting their autonomy and defining their identities in relation to men (Beauvoir 267). Desai's fiction challenges this framework by foregrounding the subjective experiences of women and revealing the emotional consequences of such marginalization.

Furthermore, Desai's narrative style contributes significantly to feminist discourse through its emphasis on psychological depth, introspection, and symbolic imagery. Her use of stream-of-consciousness narration and detailed interior monologues allows readers to engage intimately with the emotional struggles of her female characters. In doing so, Desai expands the scope of feminist literature by demonstrating that resistance to patriarchy can manifest not only through social activism but also through internal awareness and the search for personal autonomy. Critics such as Elaine Showalter emphasize that feminist literary criticism must examine how women's experiences are shaped by both social and psychological forces (Showalter 12), a perspective that Desai's works strongly embody.

Ultimately, Anita Desai's contribution to feminist literature lies in her ability to illuminate the silent struggles of women and present them as individuals seeking meaning, independence, and self-realization. Through her deeply introspective narratives, Desai has enriched Indian English literature and provided a powerful voice for the emotional and psychological realities of women navigating the complexities of modern society.

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