



## A Study of Feminine Identity Crisis in Anita Desai's Fictional Work

Ferdousi Akter

Islamic University, Bangladesh.

**Corresponding Author:** Ferdousi Akter [ferdousipritey73@gmail.com](mailto:ferdousipritey73@gmail.com)

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### ABSTRACT

This research delves into Anita Desai's literary exploration of the feminine identity crisis, examining how her novels depict women's battles against societal and familial restrictions. Through an intersectional feminist perspective, Desai's works, including *Fire on the Mountain*, *Cry the Peacock*, and *Voices in the City*, are analyzed to reveal the enduring perception of women's inferiority and their roles as sacrificial figures within the family structure. Employing a descriptive methodology and drawing from primary sources and socio-psychological frameworks, this study interprets Desai's portrayal of women's struggles for autonomy amidst societal pressures. Through thematic exploration and character analysis, it uncovers the nuances of female experiences, their quest for identity, and the entrenched influence of patriarchal norms. Ultimately, the research illuminates Desai's depiction of women's resilience and their journey toward emancipation in the face of systemic oppression.

## INTRODUCTION

Anita Desai, a prominent figure in Indian literature, intricately weaves narratives that unravel the complexities of women's lives within the confines of societal and familial expectations. Through her selected novels, *Fire on the Mountain*, *Cry the Peacock*, and *Voices in the City*, Desai challenges ingrained notions of female subservience and presents a compelling exploration of women's search for autonomy and identity. In traditional Indian society, women are often relegated to subordinate roles, expected to embody virtues of devotion and sacrifice while being denied agency over their own lives. Desai's works serve as a poignant critique of such patriarchal norms, illuminating the struggles faced by her female protagonists as they navigate through oppressive structures.

Drawing from intersectional feminist perspectives, this research endeavors to delve deeper into the representation of women in Desai's novels, examining the socio-cultural contexts that shape their experiences. By employing a descriptive methodology and incorporating socio-psychological frameworks, this study aims to unravel the multifaceted dimensions of women's oppression and resilience portrayed in Desai's literary landscape. Through thematic analysis and character exploration, it seeks to elucidate the intricate interplay between social constraints, familial dynamics, and women's quest for emancipation.

In a society where women are often silenced and marginalized, Desai's novels offer a poignant portrayal of their inner turmoil, aspirations, and struggles for self-realization. By shedding light on the intricate web of societal expectations and familial pressures, this research endeavors to contribute to a deeper understanding of women's experiences in Desai's literary universe, underscoring the enduring relevance of her works in contemporary discourse on gender and empowerment.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Social development hinges on the active engagement of both women and men, given that women comprise half of the global population. Across ages, cultures, and regions, women have encountered varying societal roles, often falling short of parity with men for centuries. Despite ongoing struggles spanning decades, women persist in advocating for equal treatment across all domains of life. Yet, while mankind has achieved remarkable feats such as reaching the moon, women continue to be marginalized. In many instances, Indian culture reflects patriarchal norms, with oppression against women justified in the guise of morality, values, norms, customs, tradition, and culture. The patriarchal norms, often unjust towards women, deprive them of a distinct identity, autonomy, and self-determination. Women are consistently defined in relation to men rather than as autonomous individuals. In patriarchal societies, women are conditioned to be submissive, passive, and reliant on the approval of others. They are expected to endure endless hardships without complaint. Germaine Greer, in "The Female Eunuch," suggests that women have historically been burdened with deceitfulness and insincerity, unable to fully express themselves authentically. Similarly, Betty Friedan, in "The Feminine

Mystique," highlights how women's identities are predominantly linked to their roles as wives and mothers, while men have more diverse occupational identities. Mary Wollstonecraft, in "A Vindication of the Rights of Woman," discusses how confinement to domestic roles can lead to negative traits such as despotism and pettiness.

Feminist writers have emerged in response to society's patriarchal constraints on women, particularly in traditionally male-dominated cultures like India. In Indian English literature, authors such as Kamala Markandaya, Nayantara Sahgal, Anita Desai, Bharati Mukherjee, Shashi Deshpande, Githa Hariharan, Arundhati Roy, Manju Kapur, and Shobha De have become prominent voices. In this study, Anita Desai's works, including "Fire on the Mountains," "Cry the Peacock," and "Voices in the City," will be examined to explore themes of feminist struggle, aspiration, and assertion.

## METHODOLOGY

The present research work will be conducted depending upon the primary sources that are the original works by Anita Desai, which will be read, analyzed and interpreted critically. By using the descriptive method, it will be presented in order to find out the ways in which Anita Desai has presented her views on the image of woman and her consciousness, by collecting the data from her selected novels. The socio psychological factors will be used as the base, module for a study of her novels. Social status of women in India will also be discussed in this present study. This study will use the analytical, interpretative and comparative research methodology for conducting the research. In addition, secondary data will be collected from research reports, journals articles and criticisms on Anita Desai.

## DISCUSSION

Anita Desai's novels offer a portrayal of feminism that resonates universally. Her works delve deep into the psyche of women, revealing the oppressions, suffering, and violence they endure within Indian society. Through her plots and characters, Desai explores themes of strained relationships, isolation, the quest for independent identity, and the pursuit of genuine existence. She has carved out a niche for herself by addressing the enduring psychological impacts on women within familial and societal structures, examining their attitudes and choices, whether they compromise or resist. A study on Desai's literature aptly observes that "Anita Desai, employing various literary devices such as diverse imagery, metaphors, symbols, and myths, delves into the inner realms of the human psyche, uncovering obsessions, inner motives, latent desires, and dormant impulses of the human mind" (Biswas and Talukder 549). She delves into the inner workings of her protagonists' minds, exposing their deepest thoughts and emotions while situating them in moments of intense tension, thereby unveiling the fundamental human experience. Her novels *Fire on the Mountain*, *Cry the Peacock* and *Voices within the City* are the representation of girls from intersectional feminist perspective. Thus, this present study will be determined to explore,

examine and analyze women's representation in Anita Desai's selected novels from intersectional feminist perspective.

Anita Desai's novels primarily focus on the challenges faced by women in a society dominated by men. Many Indian English writers have similarly explored feminist themes in their works, depicting women breaking free from traditional roles and seeking identity. Desai's novels often reflect these issues, offering ample opportunities for research into the representation of women, given the significant roles they occupy in her narratives. She sheds light on various aspects of feminism, portraying women as central characters in her writings. This study aims to analyze and interpret the depiction of women in Desai's selected novels from an intersectional feminist perspective, acknowledging the complexities of gender, class, and other intersecting identities.

Desai is credited with introducing a psychoanalytical approach to novel writing among Indian feminist writers. She adeptly portrays the human condition, exploring the harmony between inner and outer selves. Regarded as a skilled analyst of women's psyche, Desai creates vivid characters embedded in social contexts across her novels. From her debut novel to her latest works, protagonists like Maya in "Cry the Peacock," Monisha in "Voices in the City," and Nanda Kaul in "Fire on the Mountain" yearn for a way of life that fulfills their deepest desires for emancipation and dignity. Gajendra Kumar rightly observes that Desai's recurring themes include women's struggle for self-realization and self-definition, their quest for freedom, equality, and transcendence, as well as their resistance against oppression at various levels.

In "Cry the Peacock," Desai explores marital disharmony and the lack of emotional connection in Maya's marriage to Gautama. Maya's yearning for understanding and freedom reflects the suffocating societal constraints placed upon women who do not conform. Desai illustrates how non-conforming women are marginalized and ignored.

Throughout her novels, Desai portrays socially liberated women with modern outlooks, yet none of them fully embodies the attributes of self-sufficient liberation or possess distinct identities. Characters like Nanda Kaul in "Fire on the Mountain" exemplify this, as they withdraw from familial duties and embrace solitude. Nanda Kaul's elegant demeanor belies her detachment from familial bonds, preferring solitude even to the company of the postman or maid. "She had been glad to go away it behind, within the plains, sort of a great, heavy, difficult book that she had read through and wasn't required to read again" (Desai Anita. *Fire on the Mountain*: 30).

She reaffirms to herself,

"Is it wrong?", "have I not done enough? I would like no more. I would like nothing; am I able to not be left with nothing?" (Desai Anita. *Fire on the Mountain*: 17).

Germaine Greer (2006) has opined in this regard'

"The housewife voluntarily serves in her husband's household in exchange for the security of being a permanent resident: her situation epitomizes the worker who accepts lower pay for job security. However, just as

low-paid workers are often laid off, so too are wives. They lack savings, transferrable skills, and face the stigma of being unemployed." (Greer, 31)

Raman suggests, "Nanda Kaul's life mirrors the experience of many women who prioritize the needs of others—children, husbands, families, and society—over their own." (Rahman, p. 28).

In "Voices in the City," the protagonist Monisha, a sensitive and practical woman, finds herself trapped in an incompatible marriage and suffocating household environment. Her situation parallels that of Maya in "Cry the Peacock," as both are childless, delicate, and suffer in unsuitable marriages. Simone de Beauvoir aptly notes, "Women's solidarity stems from their shared identification with each other; yet, paradoxically, this same identification breeds rivalry." (Beauvoir, 39).

Monisha lacks a sense of belonging in her marriage, struggling to carve out her own identity. She describes herself as "trapped in an emotionally sterile and joyless marital bond with no means of escape." (Desai, "Voices in the City," 16). Rahman observes that Monisha gradually retreats into her own private world (Rahman, 30). Monisha expresses her alienation by stating, "I am different from all of them. They have encased me in steel, in a thick glass box, and I have lived within it all my life without feeling any love, hate, or warmth. I am isolated from them all; they cannot touch me." (Desai, "Voices in the City," 109).

Her alienation from her husband, family, and society reflects the inner yearning for emancipation, leading her to reject life as a whole—a life dedicated to nothing.

Characters like Maya in "Cry the Peacock," Nanda Kaul in "Fire on the Mountain," and Monisha in "Voices in the City" embody women's struggle for clear identity, individuality, and autonomy in a male-dominated society. Michelene Wandor notes, "The dominant male culture imposes silence on women. A woman's fragmentation, isolation, and lack of identity make it challenging for her to relate her situation to that of other oppressed groups or to seek liberation." (Wandor, 7-8).

The novels of Anita Desai are basically related to female orientation. She represents their problems, be it of a mother, a daughter a sister or a wife. At the same time, she represents the psyche of their creations and analyzes their relationship with society at large. Therefore, the present study will intend to focus on Anita Desai's female protagonists and their attempts for individual liberty from intersectional feminist perspective. Desai is very reputed and distinct female novelist among the female novelists. Her novels are addressed to and deal with mainly women. She brilliantly presents the grinding suppression of women in India. Her characters comprise women of almost all the ages and groups. She has represented a very crucial aspect of the feminine consciousness. Anita Desai has been regarded as a pioneer of Indian feminism because she has focused lights on the traumas and problems of middle-class Indian women and for her writings many novels and portraying different aspects of the human feminine psyche through them. She has tried to search the psychological aspects of the protagonists and portrayed the complications in

the man-woman relationship. It is hoped that the present research work will be useful and will help the researchers to conduct researches in future on Desai's work from this point of view. The present study will try to make a modest attempt to focus upon the representation of women from intersectional feminist perspective as it relates itself to the novels of Anita Desai.

Thus, Anita Desai's novels represent women's suffering and women's struggle for emancipation and autonomy in patriarchal society and culture. Feminist discourse of this present research will enable to discern the patriarchal control and its extraction of women's subservience. Desai's works reflect the standard portrayals of women to meet the rolls expected of them by patriarchy both within the household and therefore the property right. In the chosen novels, this study will analyze the displacement of women within society and their endeavors to break free from the adversities predominantly encountered in the domestic sphere. Through an examination of Anita Desai's portrayal of women in both domestic and public realms, the research aims to argue that Desai depicts women subjected to varying degrees of oppression and suppression. By delving into the outcomes of these characters' quests for independence, the study will contend that while many achieve some level of self-determination, they remain haunted by past traumas and experience social isolation. Subsequently, the research will explore whether the women depicted in Anita Desai's novels can attain complete liberation through their struggles against dominant male figures.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Anita Desai's literary exploration of women's struggles against societal and familial constraints stands as a powerful testament to the enduring resilience and agency of female characters in the face of patriarchal oppression. Through her selected novels— *Fire on the Mountain*, *Cry the Peacock*, and *Voices in the City*—Desai delves deep into the complexities of women's lives, portraying their quest for autonomy and self-realization amidst oppressive structures. This research, conducted through an intersectional feminist lens, has illuminated the multifaceted dimensions of women's experiences depicted in Desai's works, shedding light on the pervasive influence of gendered power dynamics, societal expectations, and familial pressures. By engaging with Desai's narratives, readers are invited to confront the injustices faced by women in society and to reflect on the complexities of gender, class, and culture in shaping individual agency. Moving forward, further exploration of Desai's novels could deepen our understanding of their impact on contemporary discourse on gender and empowerment, as well as their relevance in inspiring feminist thought and activism. Ultimately, Desai's portrayal of women as resilient beings striving for self-realization serves as a timeless reminder of the enduring struggle for gender equality and the transformative power of literature in challenging societal norms and fostering social change.

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