

CROSSROADS OF CULTURE AND IDENTITY: FEMINIST EXPLORATION IN THE NOVELS OF ANITA DESAI

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the evolution of female subjectivity in Anita Desai's novels, with a particular focus on the thematic transitions. Through a detailed examination of Desai's narrative strategies and character development, the study highlights how the author broadens her literary scope from a primarily Indian context to an international framework, reflecting both personal and cultural displacements. The paper argues that while Desai's narrative becomes more decentralized and inter-subjective, it remains deeply anchored in the exploration of identity, particularly in relation to gender. The paper positions Desai's work within the broader context of feminist literature, emphasizing her nuanced understanding of the role of cultural and spiritual pilgrimage in shaping female agency and subjectivity.

Keywords: feminism, subjectivity, narratology, identity, culture, displacement

1. INTRODUCTION

Anita Desai is frequently described as a subjective writer, emphasizing personal emotions over external realities. Though often recognized for her focus on the interior language, this categorization misses her deep, nuanced understanding of the relationship between individuals and society. This awareness is evident in the conflict between personal desires and societal expectations within her characters, and Desai's own views on the novelist's societal role. While she may employ narrative techniques that emphasize social realism, this does not mean she avoids social responsibility. Desai observes that society often feels uneasy around writers, viewing them as critics or truth-tellers who expose uncomfortable realities. She argues that a writer must embrace this role, even if it is not willingly given, and persist in it despite resistance—particularly for women, who are often seen as unsuited for such a role. Desai occupies a doubly marginal position. Like many writers who are not part of the mainstream, she remains on the periphery, observing and critiquing without always being welcomed. This sense of exile is intensified by her attempt, as a woman writer, to assume a role traditionally reserved for men. Her diverse cultural background further enhances her sense of alienation.

Desai's debut novel, *Cry, the Peacock* (1963), written in a stream-of-consciousness style, exposes the limitations of this approach by exploring the conflicting demands of romance and reality. *Voices in the City* (1965) experiments with multiple narrative perspectives depicting the effects of isolation and extreme subjectivity on its four protagonists. *Bye-Bye, Blackbird* (1971) explores the cultural conflicts inherent in the East-West confrontation experienced by its characters. *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* critiques escapism, a theme Desai continues to explore in *Fire on the Mountain* (1977). *Clear Light of Day* examines the creation of hybrid identities and the roles of time, history, and memory. *In Custody* (1984) addresses the politics of language in post-Independence India, while Baumgartner's *Bombay* (1988) expands on the theme of hybridity by focusing on a German Jew and Holocaust survivor in India. *Journey to Ithaca* broadens Desai's fictional world across three continents. *Fasting, Feasting* (1999) delves into family dynamics in both India and the United States, highlighting women's anger and silence, while *The Zigzag Way* (2004), set in Mexico, incorporates a supernatural element into the protagonist's search for the past. In addition to her novels, Desai has published collections of short stories, children's literature, essays, and journal articles.

Desai's mixed heritage and diasporic experience place her in a cultural borderland, preventing her from fully embracing any single set of social norms. This multifaceted marginality makes it difficult to categorize her fiction as purely historical or apolitical. As an Indian woman novelist writing in English, Desai's work requires a nuanced, contextual understanding. She resists labels, viewing them as reductive. For example, she avoids strong associations with the feminist movement, stating her interest lies more in individuals than in mass movements. Desai has also sidestepped the challenge of writing in English as an Indian author by focusing on the language of the interior, which she considers universal. For her, postcolonial issues are largely irrelevant, as she has lived in an environment where cultures have blended rather than clashed.

While Desai may seem to distance herself from the cultural and societal contradictions inherent in her background, her novels tell a different story, deeply engaging with issues of gender, language, and history—issues she cannot ignore as a writer in her position. Desai's portrayal of female subjectivity in her novels reflects these tensions, indicating her acute awareness of them. Her apparent avoidance of identity politics may stem from a distrust of overly

simplistic formulas. Instead, her creative work actively engages with the challenges faced by Indian women writing in English.

Language plays a significant role in some of her later works, such as *In Custody*, which explores the marginalization of Urdu, and Baumgartner's *Bombay*, where the German language haunts Holocaust survivors in India. These novels expand the context in which her use of English can be understood, moving beyond the conventional binary of English as the colonizer's language versus marginalized native Indian languages.

Desai's reluctance to label her works as postcolonial is a more nuanced understanding of contemporary India, where postcoloniality is just one of many factors at play. Similarly, her dismissive attitude towards the women's movement reflects her distrust of oversimplifications. Throughout her work, Desai questions patriarchal values, but she also situates gender within a broader context that includes other intersecting factors contributing to female subjectivity. Like Doris Lessing, Desai resists making gender the sole determinant in the lives of her female characters, advocating for a more sophisticated approach to feminism.

In analyzing three of Desai's novels—*Where Shall We Go This Summer?*, *Clear Light of Day*, and *Journey to Ithaca*—this paper explores how subjectivity is constructed in these works. Despite belonging to different phases of Desai's writing career, these novels demonstrate her ongoing engagement with issues of women's subjectivity and its relationship with broader social issues.

In *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*, Sita's unconventional childhood offers an opportunity to examine several stereotypical female roles within the family, such as daughter, sister, wife, and mother. Sita, along with her siblings Jivan and Rekha, are the children of a freedom fighter and were abandoned by their mother early on, leaving them without a normal family life. Sita grows up under the shadow of her father, who, posing as a saint or magical healer, exerts a powerful influence on the local villagers and becomes obsessed with power. This creates a complex and somewhat sinister dynamic, including hints of an incestuous relationship between her father and Rekha. Sita's unusual upbringing leaves her ill-prepared for life in a joint family after her marriage. She struggles with the monotony of domestic life and is frustrated by her husband's conventional values and lack of self-awareness. The lack of understanding between Sita and her husband, Raman, reflects a broader critique of middle-class Indian marriage, which leaves little room for a woman to express her desires. Sita's obsession with a foreign hitchhiker and her fleeting memory of an old man's tenderness toward a young, ill woman symbolize desires she has repressed due to the constraints of her mundane life with Raman. Sita's attempt to escape to a magical island, where she hopes to prevent the birth of her child, reflects her desire to revive a part of herself that she had long suppressed. This journey symbolizes her rebellion against the violence and insensitivity she perceives in the world around her, but it also highlights her detachment from reality. The island, which she imagines as a safe haven, ultimately becomes a trap, symbolizing her self-delusion and escapism rather than true liberation. The novel concludes ambiguously. When Raman arrives on the island to bring Sita back, she agrees to return to Bombay, acknowledging the futility of her isolated existence. This return is not a radical feminist rejection of patriarchal values but rather a reintegration into society with a deeper understanding of her situation. Sita resumes her roles as wife, parent, and mother-to-be, but with a renewed awareness of the complexities of life. The ending has been interpreted in various ways—some see it as a defeatist concession to traditional systems, while others view it as a validation of critical realism over myth. However, the text does not fully resolve Sita's internal conflict, suggesting that her return to domestic life is recognition of the unresolved contradictions in her life, rather than a sudden surrender to convention. Sita's return reflects a willingness to accept the "shades of grey" in life, rather than seeing things in black and white.

Sita's divided subjectivity is a central theme throughout the novel. She struggles with two phases of her life: her early years on the island with her father, characterized by magic, fantasy, and escape, and her adult life in Bombay with her husband and children, marked by routine, responsibility, and conformity. This internal division is mirrored in the novel's exploration of the tension between reality and illusion, individuality and community, tradition and modernity. Desai's critique of traditional representations of motherhood in Indian literature does not imply a rejection of the maternal role. Instead, the text presents an ambivalent view of maternity, acknowledging its importance while also challenging the conventional association of femininity with motherhood. Sita's desire to protect her unborn child from the violence of the world reflects her tenderness and capacity for nurture, qualities often associated with motherly love. In a manner akin to ecofeminism, Sita's sensitivity to the needs of others is linked to her affinity with nature. Her identification with wounded animals and her yearning for the idyllic atmosphere of her childhood island reflect closeness to natural elements that the modern, "civilized" world has forgotten. However, the text also questions the nature/culture divide, revealing that the island idyll is ultimately a delusion.

In *Cry, the Peacock* and *Clear Light of Day*, she explores the intricate layers of female subjectivity, challenging conventional narratives of femininity, motherhood, and marriage. Both novels delve into the complexities of women's lives, highlighting the tensions between individual desires and societal expectations, and offering a more nuanced portrayal of women's roles within the broader social and historical context. In *Cry, the Peacock*, Sita grapples with the conflicting aspects of her identity, ultimately seeking a vision of inclusiveness where divisions and boundaries dissolve. Her survival depends on transcending extreme or partial views and embracing the interconnectedness of self and society, as well as nature and culture. This theme of interconnectedness is further developed in *Clear Light of Day*, where Desai critiques stereotypical images of marriage and motherhood through the lives of the sisters Bim and Tara. Bim's rejection of traditional feminine roles and her struggle against a stagnant existence are central to the novel's exploration of female subjectivity.

Desai's critique extends to nationalist narratives that equate the conquered territory with the violated female body, a trope appropriated by right-wing political groups in contemporary India. In *Clear Light of Day*, Bim's disenchantment with her life after Independence questions the rhetoric of progress and liberation commonly associated with nationalist histories. This skepticism is mirrored in the novel's deconstruction of romantic love and marriage, particularly in the hollow and oppressive nature of Tara and Bakul's relationship.

Desai's novels challenge the glorification of traditional gender roles, offering instead an alternative vision where love, nurture, and connectedness are seen as regenerative forces. In *Clear Light of Day*, Bim's journey towards self-awareness culminates in a recognition of the interconnectedness of personal memory and public history. This awareness is linked to a broader critique of radical individualism, suggesting the need for a feminism rooted in shared responsibility and mutual caring within the framework of an extended family—a concept that is culturally specific rather than universal.

Desai's work is thus a powerful commentary on the limitations of conventional historiography and the need for alternative models of heroism and subjectivity, particularly for women. Through her complex and intertextual narratives, Desai offers a vision of female empowerment that is both critical and deeply rooted in the cultural and historical realities of India.

In Anita Desai's *Journey to Ithaca*, the theme of pilgrimage is intricately woven into the narrative, reflecting the characters' quests for self-discovery and spiritual fulfillment. The novel marks a significant departure from Desai's earlier works, expanding from the intimate setting of Old Delhi to a transcontinental narrative that spans Europe, Egypt, India, and America. This shift also reflects Desai's broader literary and cultural engagement, moving from a localized Indian perspective to an international one, while still retaining India as a central reference point. The novel's two female protagonists, Sophie and Laila (later known as the Mother), embody contrasting approaches to life—reason and emotion, practicality and spirituality—yet their journeys reveal a shared underlying quest for identity and understanding. Sophie's initial rejection of the Mother's spiritual influence and her focus on rationality ultimately give way to a deeper recognition of the interconnectedness of their experiences. This realization reflects a feminist deconstruction of rigid boundaries, suggesting that true growth and understanding come from embracing the Other within oneself. Laila's story, spanning various countries and cultures, highlights her rebellion against conventional roles and her search for a deeper meaning in life, culminating in her spiritual transformation. Sophie's journey, on the other hand, is marked by her struggle with the expectations of traditional female roles, her rejection of domesticity, and her eventual acceptance of the need for responsibility and commitment. Through these parallel narratives, Desai explores the complex dynamics of female subjectivity, rebellion, and the search for self-fulfillment. *Journey to Ithaca* thus continues Desai's exploration of female consciousness, but within a broader, more global context. The novel's feminist underpinnings are evident in the way it portrays the characters' struggles with societal expectations and their eventual transcendence of these limitations through their personal quests. The narrative's intertwining of reason and emotion, rationality and spirituality, reflects Desai's nuanced understanding of the complexities of identity and the process of self-discovery.

2. REFERENCES

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