

Silence and Suppression: Gendered Identity in Anita Desai's Female Characters

Shivani Verma (Research Scholar) English

FS University, Shikohabad, (Firozabad)

Abstract

Anita Desai illustrates the silence and suppression of women and depicts the existential insecurity, alienation, and anguish of uprooted individuals. In her novels, the challenges stemming from alienation, immigration, or expatriation can be comprehended best through the lens of the two interconnected, yet opposing, terms 'exile' and 'home'. 'Home' signifies a place of belonging, one that grants cultural and spiritual identity. Exile refers to an enforced or lamented absence from one's homeland or home. For an exile, home epitomizes everything that has been lost: nationality, identity, and culture. Estrangement sharpens the significance of home more intensely for the exile. The twentieth century is known as the era of alienation. The modern individual had to contend with psychological issues like the damaging effects of alienation. He had to grapple with inner turmoil, isolation, randomness, and a sense of meaninglessness in life. The spirit of man had dwindled. He experienced confusion, frustration, disintegration, disillusionment, and alienation, as a consequence of powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, isolation, and self-estrangement. Man feels alienated because he is burdened by the realities of contemporary impersonal life. Alienation pertains to physical actions rather than emotions. The roots of alienation for individuals are economic, technological, sociological, philosophical, existential, and psychological challenges. The perceived outcomes are numerous, including psychosis, suicide, psychosomatic disorders, ethnic bias, civil unrest, and political protests and upheavals. The issue of alienation is also connected to the loss and search for one's identity. The title of this paper clearly signals a focus on feminist literary criticism and states the importance of examining silence and suppression as both literal and metaphorical tools of gendered identity.

Keywords: Identity, Estrangement, Disintegration, Disillusionment

Introduction

Anita Desai, born on June 24, 1937, is a distinguished Indian novelist and academic, celebrated for her profound psychological insights and compelling narrative style. Hailing from Mussoorie, India, she was raised by a German mother and a Bengali father, which afforded her a distinctive cross-cultural

viewpoint. In her formative years, she communicated in German at home, Hindi in her community, and English in her educational environment. Desai pursued English literature at the University of Delhi and made her literary debut with the novel *Cry, the Peacock* in 1963, which established her thematic emphasis on introspection, existential dilemmas, and issues pertinent to women. Her subsequent work, *Where Shall We Go This Summer* (1975), explores the prenatal anxieties of a sensitive middle-class woman grappling with a male-dominated, unloving, and harsh marital relationship. She has been nominated for the Booker Prize on three occasions, for her works *Clear Light of Day* (1980), *In Custody* (1984), and *Fasting, Feasting* (1999). Anita Desai's female characters often inhabit a world where silence and suppression are both imposed and internalized, reflecting the gendered struggles of identity formation within patriarchal Indian society. Through her nuanced portrayals, Desai critiques societal expectations and explores the psychological impact of these constraints.

She is regarded as a feminist author, Desai delves deeply into the psychology of women, their struggles, and the societal constraints they face. However, her approach to feminism is nuanced and psychological rather than overtly political. Her narratives frequently illustrate women ensnared in patriarchal systems, confronting isolation, mental distress, and emotional neglect. While she does not partake in explicit activism, her exploration of women's internal conflicts and societal limitations resonates with feminist themes, shedding light on the stifling realities of traditional femininity while also highlighting the emotional strength of her female protagonists. Many of Desai's protagonists grapple with a sense of alienation, either due to societal norms, family expectations, or their own internal conflicts. In *Cry, the Peacock* (1963) Maya, the protagonist experiences a psychological breakdown as she struggles to find meaning in her life. Her inability to reconcile her emotional needs with her husband's indifference leads to tragedy. In *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* (1975) Sita, the protagonist, feels suffocated in her marriage and attempts to reclaim her independence on an island, symbolizing her search for identity. Anita Desai often portrays silence not as the absence of voice, but as a charged inner state a way of negotiating identity in a world that demands conformity. Her characters' silence speaks volumes about the repression. Her works reveals how silence functions as a deeply expressive and often painful mode of existence for her characters, especially women. Desai's narratives often dwell in the inner landscapes of her protagonists, where silence becomes both a symptom and a strategy for coping with oppressive familial, social, and cultural structures.

Analysis and Discussion

Desai's stream-of-consciousness style and rich interior monologues allow readers to access the silent turmoil of her characters. While they may not voice their struggles outwardly, the narrative dives into their repressed thoughts, desires, and memories—revealing silence as a loaded psychological state rather than a

void. The disappearance of one's sense of identity may result in feelings of rootlessness or alienation. R. S. Pathak in "The Alienated Self in the Novels of Anita Desai" classifies alienation into two categories. He states: "There can be multiple layers and types of alienation. He identifies two distinct forms of alienation, namely social alienation' and 'self-alienation.'"¹ Social alienation emerges from the feeling of estrangement that follows the abrupt realization that the social system is either oppressive or insufficient concerning one's desires and ideals. Conversely, self-alienation refers to the detachment of individual selves from any inclinations or ambitions that do not align with existing social norms, which leads individuals to conform to societal demands or feel powerless to direct their own actions. Thus, to be self-alienated signifies being less than what one could ideally be if societal circumstances were favorable. Self-alienation appears to have more profound effects on an individual compared to social alienation. The former represents a more fundamental type of rootlessness and can obstruct an individual's mental and emotional growth in a troubling way. It has become the focus of numerous psychological and philosophical inquiries. The topic of identity is intricate to understand in common way. The term 'identity' encompasses both internal and external elements, including the self, personality, and role of an individual. It also embraces the dual aspects of the individual self and its connections to others. It has been recognized as a dynamic concept, subject to adaptation and change, and capable of harmonizing various aspects in a healthy coexistence. Identity includes both the uniquely individual and the outwardly expressed social dimensions. Discussing how identity is portrayed in Desai's novels, Neeru Chakraverty in *Quest for Self-Fulfilment in the Novels of Anita Desai* asserts: "The essential quest for identity can be observed as embedded in two types of narratives by Anita Desai: one regarding the East–West encounter and the other presenting a discouraging world where a considerable gap exists between desire and reality."²

These narratives of Desai position this quest against debilitating feelings of alienation and estrangement. She moves away from the confined, morbidly introspective world of her previous female protagonists to examine other facets of the human experience and adaptation. Self and identity are perceived as relational constructs. Psychologists underscore that individual existence and identity are shaped by both individual distinctiveness and a broader interconnection. David Krech in *Individual in Society* notes: "The desire to engage in an activity or group greater than one's self, to gain acceptance, "sense of belonging significantly influences the individual's self-worth: his 'subjective status' reflects his 'objective status' within the group."³ In postcolonial and diasporic theory, significant focus is placed on the most apparent phenomena of migration or exile. This involves leaving one's homeland and understanding the reasons for doing so, the initial experiences when settling in the host country, and the varying levels of acculturation and assimilation across different immigrant generations. It also encompasses those who opt or are compelled to remain in their homeland; nevertheless, they participate in and are profoundly impacted by the migration of others. The intricate migrant situations in the west are

mirrored by the equally complex social, economic, and community circumstances that the migrants have departed from. Identity is asserted not only in individual, community, social, and racial dimensions but is perceived as something to be redefined to surmount the feeling of disconnection and fragmentation.

Silence is imposed and internalized, especially by women. It becomes a tool for survival but also a symbol of powerlessness and narratives of Desai in a nuanced manner, not as a deliberate, intellectual endeavor by the individuals but rather as an internal agitation and sporadic insurgence against conventionally upheld roles, particularly regarding women. The tension between the dispositions of attachment and detachment, alongside the quest for identity, constitutes two significant motifs in her novels. Navigating through the conflicting dispositions and fragmented identities, her characters strive to maintain their individual autonomy by cultivating a life of their own. "As a novelist, Desai succeeds in revealing the subtle and intense expositions of human psyche first in *Clear Light of Day*, in *In Custody* and then in Baumgartner's *Bombay*. Baumgartner's *Bombay* brings into being the emotional states of a European Jew who explores the fundamental question of identity as an Indian citizen."⁴ Desai's characters embark on a search for identity. They yearn to assert their identity. This is connected to the discontented individuals' pursuit of self-fulfilment. Desai's novels examine the question of identity through various lenses. They emphasize the anguished endeavors of individuals striving for fulfilment through achieving desires pertaining to their lives and illuminate their immaturity in attempting to define themselves through a singular perspective. They naively consider that only an external catalyst can transform their circumstances. This would allow them to adopt a new, desired persona more adept at navigating the complexities of existence. Many of them endeavor to substitute the 'perceived self' with the 'ideal self,' yet they fail to critically assess their situational or characteristic dilemmas. Consequently, they emerge as characters deficient in self-esteem and self-assertion. They retreat into themselves to preserve their sense of self and maintain their identity.

Conclusion

The writer often portrays the inner lives of women and explores the psychological and emotional struggles they face, especially in a patriarchal and tradition-bound society. Many of her female characters experience suppression, isolation, and identity crises like Maya, Monisha, Sita and Raka. Desai's literary works, notably "*Clear Light of Day*" and "*Cry, the Peacock*," delve deeply into the complex psychological landscapes of her characters. Through her narratives, she adeptly portrays self-reflection as a crucial means of understanding one's identity. This exploration often unfolds through the themes of introspection and emotional turmoil. The protagonists in her stories confront profound feelings of isolation and face existential dilemmas, which compel them to seek a sense of self amidst the rigid societal expectations that

dictate their roles. In this context, Desai's characters embark on a journey of self-discovery, navigating the tensions between personal desires and societal constraints, ultimately striving to define themselves in a world that often seeks to confine them.

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