

---

## **AMALGAMATION OF SOCIAL & SELF ALIENATION IN THE THEMES OF ANITA DESAI**

**Anamika Thapa, Research Scholar (English Literature),  
Gurukul Kangri Vishwavidalaya (Deemed to be University)  
Haridwar, Uttarakhand.**

**Dr. Ambuj Kumar Sharma  
Professor (M.A., M. Phil., Ph.D.)  
Indian English Fiction**

### **ABSTRACT**

*Anita Desai is popularly regarded as one of the most influential female authors in the genre of Indian English fiction. Her novels are widely written on the theme of alienation, illuminating the characters' inner lives through the eyes of both self- and social alienation. Because of the embittered ness from the families and societies, many of her characters go through loneliness and contemplation. Desai's characters struggle to make a balance between their inner needs and desires and the society's expectations made from them, which leads to a deep sense of social and self-imposed isolation. In *Cry, the Peacock*, Maya alienates herself from her spouse and society because of her emotional distress, which shows her inner commotion and her inability to find comfort in her marriage. Similarly, Nanda Kaul in *Fire on the Mountain* escapes the turbulence of family life by leaving them and finding peace in the solace of the mountains. Through reflective narration, Desai's characters fascinate and captivate readers into their inner worlds, which shows the emotional sufferance of her characters. Because of the social exclusion, her protagonists often suffer inwardly, resulting in shattered and disrupted personality, unable to balance self and their designated social roles. The theme of self and social alienation is admirably and skillfully crafted in Desai's artwork, which demonstrates how it can both be a survival strategy and cause severe mental suffering. By emphasizing on these concepts, she elucidates on how difficult it is to know one's own identity and the complex interrelationship between social belonging and self-identity, also showing how her protagonists look for hope even in the face of acute loneliness.*

**keywords:** *Self Alienation, Social Alienation, Estrangements, Identity*

---

## INTRODUCTION

Anita Desai, is a distinguished Indian writer and a professor of humanities at MIT. She was born on June 24, 1937. She is been shortlisted for Booker Prize thrice. Her 1978 book “Fire on the Mountain” was honoured with a Sahitya Akademi Award by India's National Academy of Letters, the Sahitya Akademi. She was awarded the British Guardian Prize for her work “The Village by the Sea”. With many of her successful works she is considered a prominent figure in contemporary Indian English literature.

The writings of Anita Desai are majorly written on the themes of social and self-alienation, brimful of contemplative people whose inner issues mirror their detachment from society. The psychological deaths of Desai's protagonists and characters are explored in great detail. These protagonists often find themselves in conflict with the expectations of society, the conventions of culture, or the structures of their families, which causes the character's inner seclusion from the society and self. It is not only a physical separation from other people that causes this alienation; rather, it is a more of a separation which causes a feeling of not belonging or of being misunderstood. As a result of their failure to adapt to the roles that society expects of them, her characters, such as Maya in *Cry, the Peacock* and Nanda Kaul in *Fire on the Mountain*, struggle with the burden of their identities and the alienation that arises from this inability of coping with conventional society. This alienation becomes worse for Maya as a result of her obsession with death and her inability to quell her fears and superstitious belief, which ultimately results in her catastrophic separation from reality. As a means of self-preservation, Nanda Kaul, on the other hand, withdraws to the solitary confines of Kasauli, away from her family and the commitments she has to her social circle. [1-2] However, she unexpectedly finds herself faced by her own repressed weaknesses. Desai emphasizes on the turbulence of inner landscapes of her characters. These people have a strong desire to comprehend the world around them, yet they find themselves trapped in a cycle of reflection that further isolates them. Desai examines the fragility of the human psyche and the battle for individual identity within repressive societal structures via the use of these themes of alienation. He demonstrates how solitude may serve as both a defence mechanism and a source of intense sorrow. Through her work, she demonstrates how the pursuit of self-discovery may often cause individuals to become alienated from the same relationships they seek, leaving them caught in a never-ending cycle of social and self-alienation. Her work connects with the common experience of feeling estranged. Conflict and estrangement between spouses are shown in the novel's opening chapters. This is achieved by illuminating the connection between Maya and Gautama, the two protagonists. The theme of estrangement arises as a major outcome of Desai's female characters' hypersensitivity and their failure to create a point of touch with their spouses. [3]

The source of tension in her story is transferred away from the exterior world and toward the interior world. An astrological prediction that one of the spouses will pass away in the fourth year

---

---

of their marriage has caused the main character, Maya, to become preoccupied with the dread of death. This obsession has tormented her. Despite the fact that her spouse, Gautama, is emotionally distant, rational, and twice her age, she is unable to develop strong spousal bond. It is because of her husband's indifference to her agonizing situation and the fact that she does not have any children that she feels an increased sense of alienation and loneliness. As a result, she murders him in a fit of irrational rage. The main character, Maya, is treated with animosity and indifference, rather than with sensitivity and care. Desai portrays the alone existence, sorrow, and shadowy realm that Maya inhabits in her every day life.

The marriage between Maya and Gautama is more or less a marriage of convenience, or what we may call a marriage of conventional tie. The marriage has been fixed as a result of her father's connection with Gautama. Nevertheless, Maya is not aware of the painful truths that exist in life. However, it is paradoxical that she is married to a lawyer who is not of the Brahmin caste and whose family does not know the joy of life. Instead of discussing the individual's sentiments and the urgency of the situation, they talk about major events and national happenings. [4]

“Without exception, no one in Gautama's family ever spoke about love,

Very little affection is shown. If one talked, then they spoke about,

Cases of bribery and corruption are being discussed in the parliament,

Corruption revealed in government....(P.46).”

In order to achieve this quest and completion, the self, which serves as the focal point of the empirical experiences, is an essential component. By conceiving of her characters as the residents of the modern world who are under pressure, who are aware of their identity and expectations, who are either confused about the path that life has taken or indifferent toward it, who are either reconciled to their fates or reb against it, Anita Desai reveals the paradoxes that govern life through the dilemmas that her characters face with their lives. Her philosophical thesis revolves around the concept that people are mental prisoners for a number of reasons, including defective self- and world-knowledge, harmful early experiences, and naturalistic training. Her argument is centered on the premise that individuals are trapped in their brains. These logical times have stripped existence of all supporting illusions and myths, and they have reduced man to leading mechanical lives. [5]

Her characters, with their fractured identities and damaged psyches, are looking for the best way to survive in these times. Due to the fact that these people are so sensitive, it appears that existential melancholy is a continuous companion of theirs. What makes them noteworthy, however, is the fact that they are conscious of the limitations that are inherent to human existence and that they have a strong desire to provide meaning to their lives according to their own standards. Survival

---

---

is linked to a recognition of their true selves and determining their course in a chaotic world where powerful flux threatens the permanence of any achievement. Not only does Anita Desai bring to our attention and validate the psychic conflicts that lie beneath the surface of every individual's life, regardless of where they are in life, but she also gives dignity to the agonized perceptions, fears, and anxieties of characters who are ordinary human beings, distinguished only by their extraordinary sensibility. [6]

## OBJECTIVE

1. An analysis of estrangement in a few of Anita Desai's books.
2. To explore Anita Desai's theme of Self and Social-Alienation.

A lot of Anita Desai's stories deal with themes of isolation and loneliness, but she often presents them from a philosophical perspective. The protagonists in her stories seem to find that the only way to find happiness and peace is to accept life's dilemmas and contradictions in all their multitudinous shades, and to find their place in the family and the community at large. Instead, then worrying about abstract philosophical or theological questions, she focuses on the challenges of daily life. Protagonists in works by Anita Desai strive for happiness without knowing who they really are or how to deal with the pressures and stresses brought on by societal expectations. In the works of Anita Desai, the characters' perceptions serve as both a prison and a way out of their predicament. It integrates with the outside environment and becomes the organizing component of a person's personality. Both philosophical and psychological frameworks see perception as a key to making sense of the universe. Due to its emphasis on the interplay between humans and their natural surroundings, the modern era has cast doubt on the idea of absolute reality and its associated customary beliefs and practices. Human experience and perception are encased in a multitude of frames, and any one method can only impose limits. Contemporary thinkers and authors, in opposition to the Enlightenment's scientific logical tradition, sought under the surface of things to uncover a deeper truth about the human mind.[16]

Anita Desai has made an effort to showcase her concepts inherently by making appropriate changes and alterations in terms of style and perspective. The outcome is her novel's obvious comparative advantage above comparable works written by Indian women authors in English. Various responsibilities that women take on inside their families are covered along with various facets of family interactions have been investigated by Anita Desai. As one would expect from a writer of her calibre, family plays a central role in the majority of her works, albeit to varying degrees. In her books, she explores the plight of Indian women. Class and caste are societal hierarchies that have a role in power interactions between men and women, as well as between women in the same household resulting in estrangements of protagonists. Indian culture places a strong emphasis on

---

group and familial identity. Traditions surrounding extended family further complicate already complex family relationships. [7]

Because of the importance placed on group identification, battered women may think twice about ending abusive relationships until they hear the opinions of other important family members, such as grandparents, before acting. These societies still often practice arranged marriages. For shame and disgrace to the family, it may not be acceptable to think about the families' connection, separation, divorce, or remarriage. Furthermore, family members may pressurize the battered person to make amends and stay in the same house. In order to preserve the dignity of the family, Indian households adhere to stringent privacy regulations. No one outside of the immediate family is privy to family affairs. "Man and wife do not, as a rule, live together; they only breakfast together, dine together, and sleep in the same room."

These connections also delve into female relationships, sometimes in the context of remembering women from different generations. They show a realistic range of the challenges that mothers and daughters face, especially the central theme in Indian popular culture—the relationship between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law. An increasingly prevalent topic in Indian culture, especially among politically conscious and educated women, is the struggle between fulfilling one's own needs and those of one's community. This tension is echoed in nearly all of the stories. As a result of their education, elite women feel the friction between their yearning for independence and the constraints placed on them by familial relationships more acutely. Westerners find gender roles in Indian society to be paradoxical, as there are severe restrictions on women's independence and empowerment alongside practices such as devotion to a Mother Goddess and the election of a female prime minister.

### **Recurring Themes of Alienation and Loneliness in the Fiction of Anita Desai**

In “Voices in the City” There are four distinct sections, the narrative of a brother, two sisters, and their mother is where it all began. However, Nirode, the protagonist, remains the main character throughout the whole book. In order to create an atmosphere of dramatic rigidity and chance, the author often overworks the topic of characters' loneliness, alienation, and impairment of recognition after the beginning. [9]

The main focus of Anita Desai's story is human connections and how people suffer when they don't have meaningful interactions. She examines the cognitive pressure that might lead someone to create significant, long-lasting connections and how it is magnified if he is unable to do so. One of the main characters, Nirode, ruminates that his mother is a she-cannibal and is fixated on her relationship with Major Chadha. She had an affair in Kalimpong, which in and of itself indicates that there is strife in the marriage. There is a love-hate connection between Nirode and his mother.

---

We have hinted at his mother-fixation, which psychiatrists believe is frequently a psychological defence strategy to free oneself from stifling incest. According to Desai, Nirode's anguish lies in his love-hate connection with the mother, whereas Maya's tragedy in *Cry, the Peacock*, is rooted in her attraction with a father figure.

Monisha and Jiban's unsuitable marriage is a similar theme in *Voices in the City*. The prisoner of predictable culture is Monisha's husband. Under the supervision of a strict mother-in-law, he muses that a woman's most significant responsibilities, aside from carrying children, are chopping vegetables, cooking, serving food, and combing the hair of young children. Monisha understands that she is not being kept secret and that her husband is too preoccupied with his middle-level government position to spend time with her or express her affections.

The concept of alienation in this novel is in the context of mother-child relationships, which in turn is a source of conflict in husband-wife relationships. Monisha has a life that is both chaotic and ravenous. She is estranged from both her spouse and his mother. Her lengthy and introspective journal entries might be used to create a graph of her mental life. Isolation and a lack of communication are the only things that make her marriage to her husband difficult. Jib and his spouse are deemed to be worthless. Even if he realises that some money is missing from his pocket, he doesn't bother to question his spouse. Monisha is pushed to the limit by her mismatched marriage, loneliness, infertility, and the stress of having an unaffected husband in the same household as her. She eventually kills herself because she lacks the element of love in her life.

The feeling of self-estrangement and poor communication in marital life has been revisited by Anita Desai in *Where Shall We Go This Summer*. Sita feels dejected from both her husband and kids. She has been ignored since childhood. She belongs to dysfunctional household and yearns for affection and attention. After getting married, her situations don't change and she still feels inner loneliness. Her husband, Raman remains busy. There is poor understanding between the two resulting in marital discord. [11]

As an exciting contribution to Anita Desai's success as an Indian author writing in English, *Where Shall We Go This Summer* has received a lot of praise. In order to usher in victory over the turmoil and pains of her quite peculiar presence, Desai isolates a true and unhappy picture of a charming married lady in her story. She presents her favourite topic, which is the perception of a timorous and sensitive lady who yearns to escape into meaningless and sterile loneliness because she is wearied and dissatisfied by her mundane and quiet life. She chooses marital strife as the topic and emphasises how communication breaks down between a husband and wife because one is unable to express one's feelings, anxiety, and sorrow. This estrangement between husband Raman and wife Sita is exacerbated by many strategies, personal issues, and anxieties, which leads to marital discord. [10]

Desai's story is a reliable attempt to delve further into the peculiar inner life of its protagonist, Sita. Here, Desai uses the stream-of-consciousness technique to portray Sita's personality via the layers of thinking in her observations. Like Mrs. and Mr. Ramsay, Sita and Raman are diametrically opposed individuals with irreconcilable personalities and outlooks on life. The friction between husband and wife is what provokes the mismatched pair. Raman has a practical and realistic approach towards life, whereas Sita represents tenderness and feminine sensitivity. Sita is a middle-aged, sensitive, and impulsive woman. She feels the need to escape reality constantly and even hesitates to do everyday tasks. Because her husband keeps himself occupied in his career and the kids are becoming more independent, Sita finds that her own existence is in danger and she is getting closer to a monotonous life.

Raman represents the lexicon of reality in the midst of struggle. He creates logic, testability, and a respect for social norms and ethics. He fails to comprehend the intensity and passion with which Sita reacts to each situation. Raman reacts to his wife's frequent outbursts with a mix of perplexity, fatigue, anxiety, and ultimately a resigned acceptance of her oddity. Her ennui and her annoyance at her presence are beyond his comprehension.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Anita Desai's study of social and self-alienation illuminates the link between an individual's identity and society's perception of an individual. Her characters, who often find themselves bound between tradition and modernity, finds it difficult to cope with the conventional society's expectation. Desai elucidates psychological and emotional effects of alienation through her distinctive craft. She describes preoccupations of her characters disrupts self and social relationships ending up in disastrous escapes from their miserable conditions like murder and suicide. Desai explores social and self-alienation to better comprehend her characters and humanity. Her stories let readers to reflect on their own emotions of solitude and the yearning to belong and be accepted. Desai emphasises the need of empathy and understanding in overcoming inequities and modern issues by explaining alienation's complexity. Desai's depiction of loneliness is compelling and vital in a fractured culture because it demonstrates the nuances of social interactions and the value of actual connections. In our desire for self-awareness and community, she emphasises empathy and solidarity to help us transcend alienation and recognise the universality of the human experience. She also urges us to recognise human universality. Anita Desai's novels have endured because they explore these timeless topics and encourage readers to navigate modern life for personal growth and meaningful relationships.

## REFERENCES

1. Bergonzi, Bernard. *The Situation of the Novel*. London: Macmillan, 1970. 36-37.
2. Bradbury, Malcolm. *The Novel Today: Contemporary Writers on Modern Fiction*. Glasgow: Fontana Paperbacks, 1977. 9-10.
3. Daiches, David. *The Novel and the Modern World*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960. 10-11.
4. Desai, Anita. "Replies to the Questionnaire." *Kakatiya Journal of English Studies*, vol. 113, no. 1, 1978, pp. 79-80. <https://doi.org/10.1093/res/XXIX.113.79>.
5. Horney, Karen. *Neurosis and Human Growth: The Struggle Towards Self-Realisation*. London: Routledge, 1965. 18-19.
6. Iyengar, K. R. Srinivasa. *Indian Writing in English*. New Delhi: Sterling, 1983. 164-165.
7. Jain, Jasbir. *Stairs to the Attic: The Novels of Anita Desai*. Jaipur: Printwell Publisher, 1987. 10-11.
8. King, Bruce. *The Commonwealth Novels since 1960*. London: Macmillan, 1991. 12-13. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-64112-3>.
9. Macquarrie, John. *Existentialism*. London: Penguin, 1973. 216-217.
10. Malim, Tony, Ann Birch, and Alison Walsh. *Perspectives in Psychology*. London: Macmillan, 1992. 40-41.
11. Mukherjee, Meenakshi. *Twice Born Fiction-Themes and Techniques of the Indian Novel in English*. New Delhi: Heinemann, 1971. 29-30.
12. Nandakumar, Prema. *Sombre the Shadows and Sudden the Lights: A Study of Anita Desai's Novels*. New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 1985. 174-175.
13. Pathania, Usha. *Human Bonds and Bondages: The Fiction of Anita Desai and Kamala Markandaya*. Delhi: Kanishka Publishing House, 1992. 9-10.
14. Rodway, Allan. *The Truths of Fiction*. London: Chatto and Windus, 1970. 163-164.
15. Wilson, John, editor. *Contemporary Novelists*. London: St. James Press, 1976. 355-357.
16. Woolf, Virginia, editor. "Modern Fiction From *The Common Reader*." *Modern British Fiction: Essays in Criticism*, London, 1961. 10-11.