

# An Exploration of Female Psyche in Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain* and *Fasting, Feasting*

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## Abstract

Anita Desai is considered one of the most prominent novelists in Indian Writing in English. Desai is well known for her nuanced and poignant portrayal of contemporary women and their psyche in the patriarchal social set up of India. Desai explored the themes of female identity, culture, family dynamics, relationships, social hierarchy, class structure, tradition and psyche of contemporary Indian women through her novels. She is known worldwide for novels like *Fire on the Mountain* (1977), *Clear Light of Day* (1980), *In Custody* (1984), *Fasting, Feasting* (1999) etc. where she has explored the complexities of Indian society and problems faced by women in patriarchal set up. Her novels offer a profound exploration of the inner world of women, delving into the complexities of their emotions and struggle. Through a nuanced analysis of her Sahitya Akademi Award winning novel *Fire on the Mountain* and *Fasting, Feasting*, this paper tries to uncover the web of complex thoughts and feelings of the female characters that shape their psyche. Through her novels, one can gain an insight into the cultural and societal expectations that are expected from women in the patriarchal setup which directly influence their identity and thoughts and how they protest to create a path breaking identity for themselves. Desai's female characters present their innermost turmoil by exposing their psyche.

**Keywords:** Psyche, Female, Women, Patriarchy, identity, trauma.

## Introduction

Anita Desai, a Sahitya Akademi Awardee is one of the prominent women novelists in Indian Writing in English who has been brought up in a multicultural milieu. Desai is known for her nuanced and poignant portrayal of contemporary women in the patriarchal social set up of India. Desai's novels explore themes as women's identity, culture, family dynamics, relationships, social hierarchy, class structure, tradition and psyche of contemporary Indian women. She is known worldwide for her novels like *Fire on the Mountain* (1977), *Clear Light of Day* (1980), *In Custody* (1984), *Fasting, Feasting* (1999) etc. where she delves into the intricacies and complexities of Indian society and encounter the challenges faced by women in a patriarchal society. Her writing style is characterized as lyrical prose and she uses stream of consciousness to express the flow of the emotional state of her characters. She gives a much-nuanced description of the characters and their inner selves through the use of metaphors and symbolism. Her writing is a blend of realism and introspection of human life especially women in Indian society. Some of her novels that explore the psyche of Indian women includes *Cry, the Peacock* (1963), *Voices in the*

*City (1965), Where Shall We Go This Summer (1975), Fire on the Mountain (1977), Clear Light of Day (1980), In Custody (1984), Fasting, Feasting (1999)* etc. Dr. Piu Sarkar in her research article ‘Torn between two worlds: Exploring the feminine psyche in Anita Desai’s fictional works’ states that:

In her novels, she skillfully explores the emotional ecology of her protagonists who, while combating the ubiquitous forces of absurd realities, feel terribly oppressed with the burden of living helplessly in contemporary chaotic conditions. Going deeper into the complexities of human existence, she endeavors to evaluate the various formidable factors that make existence uncomfortable and unendurable... Desai’s novels are distinguished by her focus on the inner life of her characters and her concern with people previously marginalized in Indian fiction, primarily women, children and the elderly. She prefers the private to the public. (359)

Her multi-splendored art and timeless themes demand a wide range of critical analyses from various perspectives. For her, literature is an exploration and an inquiry rather than a way to escape reality or a platform for expressing her political, social, religious, and moral beliefs.

### **Main Part**

Desai’s *Fire on the Mountain* explores the themes of isolation, loneliness, and search for identity through characters like Nanda Kaul, Raka, and Ila Das. The plot basically revolves around a woman named Nanda Kaul who was living a life of solitude in Kasauli. But soon her isolation ends as her great-granddaughter Raka joins her in the home at the hills. At first, she becomes irritated by the fact that she has to look after her when she has just decided that she would break all her ties from everyone and live the rest of the life in peace, far from everyone and everything. She was also disrupted by the arrival of her long-lost friend Ila Das. The novel was set against the backdrop of Nanda's self-imposed exile. It highlighted the need of connection for Nanda as she has not experienced the bliss of true human relationships throughout her life. The life journey of Nanda Kaul raises questions about identity, sense of belongingness, and finding one’s place in the contemporary world. Desai has portrayed Nanda’s character with depth and the complexities of her character have been strongly expressed. Nanda has purposefully isolated herself from the world to escape her painful past memories. But the presence of Raka forces Nanda to confront her past life and memories, and soon realized that she started looking at the world through Raka’s eyes.

Cathy Caruth in her work *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narratives and History* said “in its most general definition, trauma describes an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed and uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucination and other uncontrolled phenomenon.”(11). Nanda Kaul was traumatized by the behaviour and betrayal of her husband as well as children for whom she has sacrificed all. This was a setback therefore she detached herself and led an isolated life in Kasauli. Nanda’s past has been reflected through flashbacks and introspection. She was traumatized because of the abusive relationship of her parents and moreover has to suffer as a mother too. She has been cheated by her husband with another woman. She could not do anything even after knowing the fact that she has been betrayed by her partner. Moreover, she has to pretend as if nothing has happened and maintained her social life as the wife of a vice chancellor. She has suppressed all her desires and anger. All her children have settled in their career and they don’t care about their mother-Nanda. She has been living an isolated life in spite of having a big family. She has been discriminated as a woman, wife, and a mother as well. She has never been cherished, loved or pampered by her husband, she was only subjugated and kept quiet by her husband

“while he carried on a lifelong affair with Miss David, the mathematics mistress, whom he had not married because she was a Christian but whom he had loved, all his life loved. And her children – the children were all alien to her nature.” (Desai, *Fire on the Mountain* 145) Nanda did not choose to live alone she was compelled to live all alone. She has enchanted Raka with all those ‘graces and glories’ which are nothing but lies. This consoled her consciousness and acted as ‘tranquillizers and pills’ which helped her to sleep at night.

The influence of Freudian and Lacanian theory can be seen in the works of Desai as it also explores the interplay between conscious and unconscious desires, forgotten memories, and the struggle for identity. The narrative of Nanda Kaul showcases the fragmented nature of the female self. Nanda Kaul’s past trauma and repressed desires are reflected in her disjointed narrative and also illustrating the tension between conscious and unconscious mind. Her migration to the isolated mountains symbolizes her quest for solitude and self- discovery which hints at the Freudian concept of ‘ID’ that seeks liberation from the societal norms and conditions.

Desai’s basic interest lies in unravelling the depths of the female psyche. Her characters are portrayed as individuals who single handedly face the challenges of existence. Dr. C Ramya in her article “Anita Desai - Psychological Exploration of the Inner Psyche of Her Existential Characters.” opined:

The most significant aspect of her fiction is her manner of individualizing the character. She presents each individual as an unsolved mystery. Almost all her protagonists are oversensitive, solitary and lost in thought. Her heroines are seen withdrawing into a world of isolation and solitude. Even if they enjoy material prosperity, their emotional and intellectual aspirations remain unsatisfied. All heroines are suffering individuals. They suffer because they refuse to conform due to the fact that they all possess abnormal consciousness. (31)

*Fasting, Feasting*, on the other hand explores the complexities of family dynamics and individual aspirations. In the first half of the novel, Uma’s predicament in the patriarchal family has been revealed where her marginalized status has been exposed. She has been deprived of education by her parents who only wanted to provide good education to their son- Arun. They wanted Uma to babysit her brother. In addition, Uma has experienced discrimination from her family due to her physical appearance, while her younger sister Aruna received accolades for her attractiveness and her "successful" marriage. Uma was always compared to her sister for everything which created a sense of inferiority complex in her mind. She was perceived as an average looking woman who was not suitable for marrying any man. She struggled to find her place in her family and society. Uma was emotionally and mentally traumatized. Throughout the novel, Desai explores the themes of identity, gender discrimination, cultural heritage and tension between tradition and modernity. Lacanian theory would view Uma’s condition in relation with the “mirror stage” where her self-perception was shaped by the societal expectations. She was perceived as an unsuitable match in the patriarchal society.

Desai’s female characters are burdened with societal expectations as well as personal aspirations which reveals their conflict between individuality and conformity. Through her novels she exposes the constraints imposed on women by the norms of the patriarchal society which includes the gender roles, marital obligation and limited choices. The protagonist of *Fire on the Mountain*, Nanda Kaul and other women in the novel can be seen facing problems due the patriarchal social setup as they all are trapped in the web of societal expectations and oppression. The patriarchal norms dictate their identity and try to make them subordinate to their male counterpart. Nanda Kaul struggles to find solitude in her old age when she thought she would not be disturbed by any other person. However, she is constantly reminded

of her duties as mother, grandmother and wife. Raka, her grand-daughter, does not want to conform to the socially acceptable idea of women's behaviour and was suffering from neurosis. She was also a victim of childhood trauma as she had seen the abusive relationship of her parents which hugely created an impact on her tender mind. Her mother was a victim of marital abuse and she has seen her mother being physically abused by her father. Ila Das's plight refers to the journey of a lonely but strong individual who has been targeted by the society for her strong instincts and initiatives. The novel highlights how patriarchal norms deny the voice of women and try to dominate the identity of women. Their experiences showcase the disturbing consequences of patriarchal oppression and lost identity. The portrayal of women in the novel serves as a powerful critique of male dominated society. Ila Das was betrayed by her brothers and she was left moneyless, homeless and literally on the road along with her mother and sister. Her brothers exploited her economically and emotionally. Later, she was raped which was a threat for entire womankind, which would create a deep impact on the psyche of other women.

Jung in Introduction of the book *Psychology of the Unconscious* advocated:

...an overwhelming effect on the destiny of the children is exercised by the influence of the parents, the frequent over anxiety or tenderness, the lack of sympathy or understanding, in other words, the complexes of the parent reacting upon the child and producing in him love, admiration, fear, distrust, hate, revolt. The greater the sensitiveness and impressionability of the child, the more he will be stamped with the familial environment, and more he will unconsciously seek to find again in the world of reality the model of his own small world with all pleasures and satisfactions, or disappointments and unhappiness with which it was filled. (xxxii- xxxiii )

This was evident in the case of Raka and Uma both. Likewise, it is easily visible that Uma, the protagonist of *Fasting, Feasting* was also a victim of the patriarchal societal expectations and norms. She struggles to break from the societal expectations as she has been facing rejection and disappointment in her own family. Her parents enforce the rigid gender roles and expectations on her and try to silence her voice and desires. Her brother was given all the luxuries of the life but she has been devoid of even the basic need of education only because her parents wanted her to look after her brother. It is easily evident that her parents value their son over their daughter. The novel exposes the horrific effects of patriarchy where women are advised to suppress their desires and ambitions because it is not acceptable to the patriarchal norms.

Desai has unsurpassed when it comes to deal with inner lives of the female characters along with revealing their emotions, inner conflict, and desires which are often suppressed by the patriarchal force. Her novels are the amalgamation of all these traits. The impact of cultural heritage and tradition on women's lives, both positively and negatively, is described in detail in her novels. Through her characters one can see how a woman in Indian society navigates her identity while balancing her traditional role and how she embarks upon the journey of self-discovery and emerge as a modern woman, as Nanda Kaul embarks on a journey of self-discovery and make herself free from her responsibilities and societal expectations. She claims her independence by abandoning the city life and embracing the solitude of the village. Her life-changing decision of living alone in the mountains symbolizes her quest for independence and solitude and her rejection to the socially assigned role to her. It creates a space in her life for pursuit of personal interests and passions. Ila Das and Raka also exhibit empowerment through questioning traditional roles and expectations and seeking education and economic independence. The suffering of Nanda Kaul has been suppressed and the rage was exhibited in mind however, Ila Das' experience of violence, both physical and psychological, show an elevation to

construct a female subject. “Unfortunately, the formation of the female self cannot get the full face because of her inherited volatile present position and power which are not only fragmented but also distorted.” (Saha 238) Raka, Nanda Kaul's great-granddaughter, was affected by the violent internal and external experiences. Although Raka personally does not witness any instances of female struggles, but because of her unbreakable bond with her roots, she senses and inherits them instinctively. Her great-grandmother's untrue tales about how patriarchy (father, husband, and children) treats women (mother, wife, and children) serve as the foundation for her future female identity. Raka does not protest despite realizing the falsehood. Raka was a sensitive and sensible girl, a child of a broken family who suffers from mental agony and trauma.

On the other hand, Uma embodies the struggle that she has been facing since childhood in her own house. However, despite facing disappointment and rejection from her parents, she asserts her independence by making her own choices that defy the expectations. She rejects the idea of living with a man who has betrayed her; she pursued education again later in her life and seeks financial independence which symbolizes the resilience and determination of women seeking empowerment. Through these characters, Desai tries to emphasize the importance of a free identity for women and self-awareness. The portrayal of female psyche in *The Fire on the Mountain* and *Fasting, Feasting* recognizes the psyche of women through their experiences and their paths to empowerment. She also shows how Indian women can be empowered and get on to the journey of self-discovery even with their quiet acts of resistance. Her female characters showcase remarkable resilience and adaptability through which they are able to navigate the complexities of Indian patriarchal society with strength and determination.

Desai explores marriage as an ultimate mechanism through which women are being oppressed by men in the Indian patriarchal system. Through her novels she scrutinizes the institution of marriage along with highlighting the challenges, compromises, and transformations that women have to face in their marital relationships. The nature of the marital relationship is crucial to the psyche of women as it decides how their life is going to turn in the future. A loveless and inconsiderate partner can become the reason of women's problematic psychological predicament. In *Fire on the Mountain*, Desai masterfully exposes the marriages in Indian patriarchal society which functions as a tool to subjugate women. Through the life of Nanda Kaul, it is revealed that marriage serves as the societal construct that confines her to socially given roles. Her married life showcases the ways in which women are expected to sacrifice their desires and individuality. Her husband was a sheer product of patriarchy. He was distant, uncommunicative, and dismissive of Nanda's needs and desires. Their relationship was marked by a power imbalance, giving all the control to her husband's hands. Through Nanda's marriage, Desai challenges the romanticized notion of marriage as a liberating institution. Instead, she reveals marriage as a complex web of societal expectations, power dynamics, and financial dependency that bound women's hands.

Uma, in *Fasting, Feasting*, faces the consequences of failed marriage. She was the victim of the lies of her husband and in laws after which she was bound to come back to her parents. Her failed marriage marked the beginning of deteriorating situations in her life. She was treated as a burden to her parents. They wanted her to remarry as soon as possible. She was compared to her younger sister Aruna every now and then as she was successfully married in the eyes of the society and also wins the beauty standards made by the patriarchal society which is why she was treated well by her parents. All this chaos and disturbing elements in the daily lives of women became a reason for emotional and mental

breakdown. Desai gives a nuanced description of the psyche of the contemporary Indian women, revealing the insights into their minds particularly about the trauma and suffering they have to undergo in order to survive in the patriarchal social set-up of India. Her female characters often seem to have unconscious desires and motivations which ultimately becomes the driving force behind their actions, revealing the unconscious mind's influence on their behaviour. "Memory was a double-edged sword, cutting both ways, healing and wounding." (Desai, *Fasting, Feasting* 318) Along with the hidden desires, she talks about the repression of those desires as well. Her works shows the denial of the desires, feelings, and memories, highlighting the psychological consequences of such repression. Social expectation, norms and conditions, and class distinctions are the major impact on her characters.

Her female characters like Raka and Uma are the victims of the childhood trauma which shaped their entire life and experiences. She examines how these traumatic experiences from their childhood influence their life decisions and behaviour. She also examines the relationship dynamics into a family including parental influence and generational conflicts and how it impacts their overall growth in life. They carry the emotional scars from their childhood such as fear of loss and abandonment or physical or mental abuse which have a direct impact on their adulthood. She also explored the passing of the generational trauma where the chain of physical, emotional, and mental abuse continues to the future generation which ultimately creates a whole cycle of trauma, generation after generation. The trauma of childhood leads a person to unhealthy urge to seek validation from others especially their family members and it also leads them to struggle with intimacy issues. It becomes extremely difficult for them to connect with people easily as they don't feel themselves to be worthy of any kind of relationship responsibility.

### Conclusion

Desai scrutinizes the dynamics of familial relationships along with analysing the complex web of emotions and conflicts that arises in the relationships of Nanda Kaul, Raka, Ila Das and Uma. She highlights the disappointment and emotional distress that arises from the toxic household. The issue of gender discrimination is largely seen in the four walls of the house as the dynamics of gender is revealed to a child within the house. A girl and a boy are treated differently in the same household which conditioned them in a manner they get aware of their gender roles imposed by the society. Additionally, it exposes the power dynamics within the same family, as men dominate the lives of the women.

Due to the societal norms and condition that are imposed on women, Indian women are often seen to struggle for their identity. They experience fragmentation and disintegration which reflect the tension between societal expectations and personal desires. Societal and personal desires are the major factors in shaping their individual behaviour. Both the novels offer profound insights into the complexities of female psyche and Desai has skilfully shown complex web of emotions, desires, and struggles that shape their lives. She fully explored the tension between traditional expectations and modern aspiration through the characters of Nanda Kaul and Uma. Both the novels reveal the lasting impact of childhood trauma, societal pressure, and familial expectations. The reflective narration of Nanda Kaul in *Fire on The Mountain* highlights the struggle for individuality and self-expression, whereas Uma's story in *Fasting, Feasting* underscores the unfulfilled potential and rejected dreams. Desai's works advocate for women's empowerment and self-determination by giving voice to the silenced section of the patriarchal society.

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