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83

**A Comparative Study of the Portrayal of Women and Family in the Novels  
of Anita Desai**

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**ABSTRACT:**

This research paper presents a comparative analysis of the portrayal of women and family dynamics in the novels of Anita Desai, a distinguished Indian author known for her insightful exploration of human relationships and cultural conflicts. Desai's works, deeply rooted in the Indian context, offer a nuanced understanding of the evolving identities of women against a backdrop of traditional and contemporary societal values. This study delves into the intricate interplay between gender roles, familial expectations, and societal attitudes towards these constructs within the Indian cultural milieu, highlighting the persistent coexistence of traditional patriarchal values alongside emerging egalitarian views.

Anita Desai's literature serves as a reflective mirror to the socio-cultural landscape, particularly emphasizing the psychological and emotional realms of her female characters. Through a meticulous examination of novels such as "Cry, The Peacock," "Clear Light of Day," and "Fasting, Feasting," this paper explores Desai's portrayal of women's struggles



within familial frameworks, their quest for identity, and the emotional void in marital relationships. Desai's protagonists, often trapped in unfulfilling marriages and constrained by societal expectations, illuminate the complex dynamics of family life and the pursuit of personal autonomy and emotional fulfillment.

**Keywords:** Anita Desai, Women, Family, Feminism, Social roles, Narrative techniques

## 1. Introduction

The dynamic and intricate interplay between societal values, gender roles, and familial expectations has long been a focal point in literature, offering profound insights into the diverse tapestry of human experiences. This research paper embarks on a comprehensive exploration of the portrayal of women and family dynamics in the novels of the renowned Indian author, Anita Desai. Through her insightful works in English literature, Desai delves into the complexities of human relationships, cultural conflicts, and the evolving identities of women within the Indian context.

As a backdrop to this study, we navigate the broader landscape of Indian attitudes towards gender roles and family responsibilities. Despite a significant discourse advocating for shared responsibilities, there persists a nuanced coexistence of traditional, patriarchal values in the societal fabric. This intricate web of beliefs is evident in the dichotomy observed, where a substantial portion supports the idea of both men and women contributing to family income, yet a considerable number still adheres to the notion of men as primary earners. Moreover, the prevalence of views endorsing the obligation of a wife to always obey her husband further underscores the complexity of gender dynamics in the Indian cultural milieu.

Differences in these perspectives across religious groups add an additional layer to the examination, with Sikhs and Buddhists emerging as proponents of egalitarian values, while Muslims often exhibit less egalitarian attitudes. The exploration of generational and educational nuances in these beliefs further enriches the understanding, revealing that younger Indian adults, despite living in an era marked by social transformations, do not necessarily embrace more progressive views on gender roles. However, a glimmer of change



is observed among college-educated individuals, especially within specific religious communities, suggesting the potential influence of education in fostering more gender-equitable perspectives.

In this context, the spotlight turns to Anita Desai, a literary luminary whose novels serve as poignant reflections of the socio-cultural landscape she navigates. Her works, characterized by a nuanced exploration of identity, cultural clashes, and the intricacies of human relationships, provide a unique lens through which to scrutinize the evolving roles of women and family structures in India. As we embark on this comparative study, we seek to unravel the thematic threads woven into Desai's narratives, shedding light on the intricacies of her portrayal of women and families, and discerning the resonance of her literary insights with the broader societal tapestry.

## 2. Objective

The main objective of the research is to critically analyze and compare the depiction of women and family dynamics in the literary works of Anita Desai. The research aims to explore the nuanced representation of female characters and the complexities of familial relationships as depicted by Desai across her various novels. By examining Desai's portrayal of women and families, the research intends to uncover recurring themes, cultural influences, and social contexts that shape the author's perspectives. The study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of gender roles, societal expectations, and familial structures as reflected in Desai's body of work, shedding light on the broader implications for literature and society.

## 3. Discussion

Born on June 24, 1937, in India, Anita Desai, with an Indian father and a German mother, bore witness to her mother's struggles and mental anguish, experiencing traumatic situations at home. These personal encounters, coupled with the profound influence of Indian culture, significantly shaped Desai's literary prowess. K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar acknowledged her



contributions, stating that she brought "a new dimension to the achievement of Indian Women writers."

Desai's accolades include the 'Winifred Holtby Memorial Prize' and 'The Guardian Children Fiction Award,' with three nominations for the Booker Prize. Her unique perspective is evident in her portrayal of women and family, marking her as the first Indian English-language author to delve deeply into feminine themes, the female condition, and their relationships with men. Unlike her contemporaries Kamala Markandaya and Nayantara Sahgal, who focused on external social and political circumstances, Desai concentrated on the internal and psychological exploitation of her oppressed heroines.

To conduct a critical and comparative study of women characters and family as depicted by Anita Desai, it is essential to explore the prevailing conditions that influenced her and her literary counterparts. Desai's work stands out for its profound examination of the inner recesses and psychological conditions of her female characters, contributing significantly to the landscape of Indian women's literature.

In the intricate depiction of familial relationships, particularly focusing on the lives of women within these frameworks, is meticulously examined. Anita Desai's narratives often delve into the complexities of family life, highlighting the struggles and estrangement faced by women, alongside the lack of emotional intimacy in marital relationships. This study scrutinizes how Desai's novels, such as "Cry, The Peacock," illuminate these themes through the experiences of their protagonists.

In "Cry, The Peacock," Desai crafts the story of Maya, a character whose initial bliss in her father's home starkly contrasts with her life after marriage to Gautama, a middle-aged lawyer. Maya's profound longing for her husband's love and attention, encapsulated in her words, "Because when you are away from me, I want you," underscores the emotional chasm between them. This gap eventually leads Maya down a path of psychological unraveling, culminating in the tragic end of both her and her husband's lives. Through Maya, Desai articulates the tragic and often desolate condition of many Indian women, trapped within the confines of unfulfilling marriages and societal expectations.



The theme of familial tension and the fragile nature of sibling relationships are further explored in Desai's "Clear Light of Day." Here, the complex bond between Tara and Bimla is depicted, illustrating how, despite the strains and misunderstandings that can afflict family ties, the inherent value and indispensability of these connections eventually come to light.

"Fasting, Feasting" presents another facet of Desai's exploration into family dynamics, portraying the patriarchal pressures and the intense yearning for emotional fulfillment experienced by the children within these households. The protagonist, Uma, suffers under the weight of her parents' expectations and mistreatment, her role in the family diminished to that of a mere servant. Through Uma's experiences, Desai highlights the oppressive conditions many women face, constrained by their roles within the family and society at large.

This comparative study reveals Anita Desai's nuanced understanding of the tensions and challenges inherent in family relationships, particularly from the perspective of women. Through her portrayal of characters like Maya, Tara, Bimla, and Uma, Desai provides a poignant commentary on the quest for identity, love, and autonomy amidst the complex web of familial and societal expectations.

“As long as they can do that, they themselves feel busy and occupied”

While there are notable similarities among novelists in various thematic contexts, such as the portrayal of oppressors and the oppressed, exploitations, deteriorating social values, human emotions, and feminist perspectives, it is important to acknowledge the nuanced differences in their works. In the case of a comparative study focusing on Anita Desai's novels, she distinctively concentrates on the lives of middle-class individuals, with a particular emphasis on the conditions of women in Indian society. Unlike Desai addresses a broader spectrum, delving into both middle-class and affluent settings. For instance, in "Purple Hibiscus," Adichie portrays Enugu as a wealthy location with factories and its own newspaper. Furthermore, Adichie's work delves into ethnic chaos and emphasizes the significance of history for societal growth. In contrast, Desai's narratives are more focused on illustrating the challenges faced by women within the Indian societal context. This comparative analysis



highlights the unique thematic nuances present in Anita Desai's exploration of women and family dynamics in her novels.

#### 4. Conclusion

Anita Desai's portrayal of women and family in her novels offers a deeply insightful and nuanced perspective on the challenges, struggles, and resilience of women in Indian society. Her focus on the psychological rather than the sociopolitical sets her apart from her contemporaries and enriches the field of Indian English literature. Desai's narratives are a testament to the enduring strength and complexity of familial and personal relationships, making her work an essential study for those seeking to understand the intricate tapestry of human emotions and societal constraints.



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