

Cultural Identity, Memory, and Gender in the Select Novels of Anita Desai

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Abstract: *This paper examines the interconnections between cultural identity, memory, and gender in select novels of Anita Desai, a voice in Indian English fiction. Renowned for psychological realism and portrayals of female consciousness, Desai depicts women negotiating cultural, social, and familial expectations in postcolonial India. The study analyzes *Cry, the Peacock, Where Shall We Go This Summer? Fire on the Mountain, and Clear Light of Day*, showing how memory functions both as narrative method and as a means of shaping identity, while gender becomes a site of negotiation and resistance. Drawing on feminist criticism, postcolonial theory, and memory studies, the paper argues that cultural identity emerges as fluid and fragmented, formed through historical context, personal recollection, and gendered experience. The study underscores Desai's challenge to notions of Indian womanhood and her articulation of a gendered postcolonial consciousness.*

Keywords: Anita Desai; Cultural Identity; Memory; Gender; Indian English Fiction

1. Introduction

Indian English literature has developed as a critical medium for exploring questions of identity, culture, and social transformation. While early writers such as R. K. Narayan, Raja Rao, and Mulk Raj Anand emphasized social realism and nationalism, post-independence authors increasingly focused on psychological and emotional dimensions of experience. Anita Desai occupies a distinctive place in this literary landscape, owing to her focus on the inner lives of individuals, particularly women, navigating cultural and familial expectations.

Desai's novels foreground the tensions between tradition and modernity, individual desire and social obligation, as well as collective memory and personal identity. Cultural identity is depicted as fragmented and evolving, memory functions as a connective tissue linking past and present, and gender emerges as a critical site for negotiating autonomy within patriarchal frameworks.

This paper examines how cultural identity, memory, and gender intersect in Desai's fiction. By analyzing *Cry, the Peacock, Where Shall We Go This Summer?*, *Fire on the Mountain*, and *Clear Light of Day*, the study illuminates Desai's contribution to feminist and postcolonial literary discourse. An interdisciplinary approach is adopted, drawing on feminist literary criticism, postcolonial theory, and memory studies to provide a holistic analysis of her work.

2. Review of Literature

Critical reception of Anita Desai's fiction consistently emphasizes her psychological realism and attention to female consciousness. Early critics, such as M. K. Naik (1982), highlight her as a novelist of "interior landscapes," noting her focus on emotional and cognitive worlds rather than external events. Naik observes that her novels foreground the subjective experiences of individuals negotiating personal and social challenges.

Feminist scholarship has provided in-depth analyses of Desai's portrayal of women. Jain (2003) argues that Desai's female characters resist binary categorizations as either passive victims or radical rebels. Instead, they negotiate complex identities within social and familial constraints. Belliappa (2005) underscores Desai's sensitivity to the emotional lives of women and her critique of domestic institutions, highlighting her nuanced depiction of marriage, motherhood, and societal expectations.

Postcolonial criticism situates Desai within the broader discourse of Indian English literature that addresses issues of identity and belonging in post-independence India. Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin (2002) note that although Desai's fiction is not overtly political, it engages with the psychological effects of historical and cultural change. Her works depict the alienation and negotiation of identity in a rapidly transforming society, particularly through the lens of women's experiences.

Recent scholarship emphasizes the role of memory in her fiction. Ricoeur (2004) and Halbwachs (1992) provide conceptual tools for understanding memory as both a narrative structure and a mechanism of identity formation. In novels such as *Clear Light of Day*, memory allows characters to reconcile personal and familial histories, reflecting the interplay between subjective recollection and collective experience.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study employs an interdisciplinary framework incorporating feminist literary criticism, postcolonial theory, and memory studies. Feminist criticism allows examination of the representation of women and the construction of gendered identity. De Beauvoir's (1952) concept of woman as the "Other" elucidates the systemic marginalization of female characters, while Showalter's gynocritical method emphasizes female-centered narrative strategies.

Postcolonial theory informs the analysis of cultural identity. Bhabha (1994) introduces concepts of hybridity and

liminality, which are instrumental in understanding characters negotiating between traditional and modern cultural norms. Said's (1978) ideas on cultural representation provide further insight into identity construction within historical and societal contexts.

Memory studies, informed by Halbwachs (1992) and Ricoeur (2004), offer a lens to explore how recollection shapes identity. In Desai's novels, memory functions not merely as retrospection but as an active process that influences decision-making, perception, and personal development. By integrating these theoretical perspectives, the study provides a comprehensive reading of cultural identity, memory, and gender in Desai's fiction.

4. Cultural Identity in the Select Novels

Cultural identity in Desai's work is depicted as dynamic and frequently contested. In *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* Sita experiences alienation in her urban environment and marital life. Her retreat to Manori Island symbolizes an attempt to escape societal expectations and assert personal agency. The island serves as a liminal space, offering the protagonist the opportunity to question traditional roles and redefine her sense of self.

In *Fire on the Mountain*, Nanda Kaul's relocation to Carignano represents a deliberate disengagement from social obligations. Her solitude emphasizes the tension between autonomy and cultural expectation, while her memories of the past demonstrate that cultural identity is inseparable from personal and social history.

Clear Light of Day situates cultural identity within familial and historical contexts. The Das family's experiences, particularly during and after the Partition of India, illustrate the interaction between collective and personal memory in shaping identity. Desai portrays cultural identity as a multifaceted and evolving construct, influenced by historical, social, and familial factors.

5. Memory as Narrative Strategy and Theme

Memory occupies a central place in Desai's novels, serving both as a thematic concern and as a structural device. Her narratives frequently oscillate between past and present, highlighting the enduring influence of recollection on consciousness and action. Through memory, characters interpret their experiences, navigate personal traumas, and negotiate identities within a larger social and cultural framework.

In *Clear Light of Day*, memory structures the narrative, allowing the reader to observe the intergenerational conflicts within the Das family. Bim, the protagonist, reflects on her childhood experiences, including her emotional neglect, sibling rivalries, and the displacement brought on by Partition. These recollections are not passive; they actively shape her perceptions of family dynamics and inform her choices in adulthood. Memory, therefore, functions both as a lens through which the past is re-experienced and as a mechanism through which personal identity is negotiated.

In *Cry, the Peacock*, memory assumes a more psychological and intense function. Maya's recollections are intertwined with obsession, fear, and a sense of impending doom. Her fixation on a childhood prophecy and past experiences of emotional neglect exacerbate her alienation and contribute to her psychological instability. Here, memory is both inescapable and intrusive, illustrating Desai's capacity to portray its dual role as a source of understanding and a mechanism of anxiety. The narrative structure itself mirrors this psychological fragmentation, with shifts between recollection and present experience creating a claustrophobic effect that mirrors Maya's inner turmoil.

Similarly, in *Fire on the Mountain*, memory plays an ambivalent role. Nanda Kaul, the elderly protagonist, has deliberately attempted to distance herself from her past and the social constraints associated with her gendered role in society. Yet, the memories of her previous life—the emotional sacrifices, familial relationships, and personal regrets—continue to intrude upon her self-imposed isolation. These recollections highlight the inescapability of memory in constructing identity, emphasizing that one's cultural and personal history cannot be wholly ignored or suppressed. Through these examples, Desai demonstrates that memory functions simultaneously as a narrative strategy and as a central theme in exploring consciousness and identity.

Across Desai's fiction, memory is intricately linked to narrative voice and temporal structure. Non-linear narratives, frequent flashbacks, and introspective monologues all serve to foreground the subjectivity of memory. By privileging personal recollection over objective chronology, Desai underscores the role of memory in shaping perception, constructing meaning, and influencing the self. This focus on memory also highlights the tensions between personal and collective experience, as characters' recollections are influenced by cultural, familial, and societal contexts.

6. Gender and Female Subjectivity

Gender occupies a crucial place in Desai's exploration of identity. Her female protagonists navigate patriarchal constraints, often negotiating emotional, social, and familial pressures while seeking personal autonomy. These narratives highlight the intersection of cultural norms, memory, and gender, illustrating how women construct subjectivity in restrictive environments.

In *Cry, the Peacock*, Maya's psychological distress is intensified by her marriage to Gautama, whose emotional detachment exemplifies patriarchal indifference. The novel portrays the subtle but pervasive ways in which gendered expectations shape female consciousness. Maya's sense of alienation reflects both the constraints imposed by societal norms and the limitations of interpersonal relationships, demonstrating the psychological toll of restricted agency.

Where Shall We Go This Summer? presents Sita as a character who resists the normative roles of wife and mother. Her emotional and psychological autonomy is expressed through her withdrawal from urban domestic life to the liminal space of Manori Island. Desai portrays Sita's

resistance not as overt rebellion but as a nuanced negotiation of identity, emphasizing the psychological dimensions of gendered experience. The narrative foregrounds internal struggle, highlighting how women navigate the tension between cultural expectations and personal fulfillment.

Fire on the Mountain presents Nanda Kaul, an older woman who has deliberately chosen isolation as a form of autonomy. Her withdrawal underscores the limited avenues available for women to assert independence within a patriarchal framework. Yet, the intrusion of memory and the presence of Raka, a younger female visitor, demonstrate that gendered experience is not uniform; responses to societal constraints vary across generations. Desai uses these contrasting female characters to explore the fluidity of gendered identity and the evolving nature of female subjectivity.

In *Clear Light of Day*, Bim exemplifies an alternative model of female agency. By choosing independence over marriage, she challenges social norms and asserts control over her life choices. Desai's depiction of Bim underscores the potential for women to redefine their roles and identities within postcolonial society. Across these novels, gender emerges not simply as a fixed category but as a site of negotiation, resistance, and reinterpretation.

7. Intersection of Culture, Memory, and Gender

In Desai's fiction, cultural identity, memory, and gender are deeply intertwined. Female characters' experiences of social expectation, personal desire, and historical memory converge to shape identity. Memory enables them to interrogate inherited roles, reassess relationships, and imagine alternative modes of being. Gender operates as both a constraint and a lens for interpreting cultural and personal history.

In *Fire on the Mountain*, the generational differences between Nanda Kaul and Raka illustrate the shifting nature of responses to cultural norms and emotional demands. Nanda represents a traditional, cautious negotiation of autonomy, whereas Raka embodies a more radical detachment and openness to self-exploration. Memory mediates these differences, as both characters reflect on past experiences to inform present action. This intersection highlights the complexity of negotiating identity in postcolonial contexts, where culture, history, and gender interact in multifaceted ways.

Desai's novels consistently portray women navigating these intersecting forces with varying degrees of awareness and agency. By foregrounding the interplay of culture, memory, and gender, Desai challenges reductive or essentialist understandings of Indian womanhood. Her characters demonstrate that identity is constructed through reflection, negotiation, and engagement with both personal and social histories.

8. Detailed Analysis of Memory and Gender Across Novels

Desai's fiction demonstrates that memory is not merely a personal repository of past experiences but a lens through which cultural and gendered identities are continually negotiated. In *Cry, the Peacock*, memory operates as a psychological trigger. Maya's recollection of childhood fears, her obsession with prophecy, and her internalized sense of vulnerability converge to create a claustrophobic mental space. Here, gendered expectations exacerbate her alienation. Maya's role as a wife in a patriarchal household conflicts with her emotional needs, and memory amplifies this dissonance, showing how deeply personal recollection is intertwined with cultural norms.

In *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*, Sita's memory of urban life and domestic monotony frames her retreat to Manori Island. The juxtaposition of past and present experiences illuminates her dissatisfaction with imposed social roles. Desai uses memory to chart Sita's inner rebellion, not as overt political defiance, but as psychological and emotional self-preservation. Sita's engagement with her own recollections highlights the gendered dimensions of spatial freedom: the island becomes a metaphorical space where she can negotiate identity free from domestic expectation. The interplay of memory and environment underscores the cultural and gendered pressures faced by women navigating postcolonial Indian society.

Fire on the Mountain presents Nanda Kaul's retreat to Carignano as a deliberate distancing from both social and familial responsibilities. Memory intrudes upon her solitude, reminding her of past sacrifices and emotional compromises. The novel examines how gendered social structures constrain women's ability to achieve autonomy and how memory can both reinforce and destabilize these constraints. The arrival of Raka introduces intergenerational dialogue about gender roles, freedom, and the negotiation of identity. Memory, in this context, functions as a bridge between past experiences and present self-understanding, shaping both Nanda's and Raka's subjectivity.

In *Clear Light of Day*, memory operates on multiple levels—personal, familial, and historical. The Das siblings' recollections of childhood are filtered through their gendered experiences. Bim's reflections reveal how societal expectations for women influence personal choices and emotional development. Tara and Raja's memories further illustrate the interplay of gender and cultural expectation, demonstrating that memory is crucial to understanding the evolution of individual identity within collective history. The novel situates personal recollection within the larger framework of postcolonial transition, emphasizing that gendered identity is inseparable from cultural and historical context.

9. Gendered Spaces and Psychological Landscapes

A recurrent motif in Desai's fiction is the use of space—both physical and psychological—to explore gender and identity.

Physical settings, such as Manori Island in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* or Carignano in *Fire on the Mountain*, function as liminal spaces where female characters temporarily escape restrictive social structures. These settings provide opportunities for self-reflection and negotiation of autonomy, demonstrating the intersection of gender, memory, and cultural expectation.

Psychological landscapes are equally significant. In *Cry, the Peacock*, Maya's inner world is shaped by her recollections and fears, producing a mental landscape that is simultaneously private and culturally informed. Memory structures the narrative and reflects the gendered pressures of her environment. Desai's ability to depict these psychological spaces illustrates how cultural identity and gender operate in tandem with memory to define selfhood.

Similarly, in *Clear Light of Day*, the domestic space of the Das household serves as a site where gendered norms, memory, and familial history intersect. The siblings' interactions within the home reveal how past experiences shape present behavior, and how women negotiate personal agency within confined domestic and cultural spaces. These spatial representations underscore the interplay between environment, gendered identity, and memory, emphasizing the complex relational dynamics in Desai's work.

10. Cultural Identity, Hybridity, and Liminality

Postcolonial theory provides insight into the fluidity of cultural identity in Desai's fiction. Bhabha's concept of hybridity and liminality is particularly relevant, as her characters often inhabit transitional spaces between tradition and modernity, urban and rural life, or domestic expectation and personal desire. Memory serves as a mechanism for negotiating these liminal identities. Characters' recollections mediate between the cultural past and present aspirations, allowing them to articulate identities that are neither fixed nor monolithic.

For instance, Sita in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* negotiates the tensions between her domestic role and her desire for personal freedom. Her memories of urban life and domestic dissatisfaction shape her engagement with the island, creating a hybrid identity that is both culturally informed and self-determined. Similarly, Bim in *Clear Light of Day* embodies a liminal figure, negotiating postcolonial familial expectations while asserting personal autonomy.

Desai's depiction of female identity within these liminal spaces reflects the broader postcolonial condition: cultural identity is multiple, negotiated, and often in tension with dominant societal narratives. Memory allows characters to interrogate inherited norms, engage critically with their cultural heritage, and construct identities that navigate between tradition and individual agency.

11. Psychological Realism and Narrative Technique

Desai's exploration of memory and gender is inseparable from her narrative technique. Her use of free indirect discourse, non-linear chronology, and introspective monologues provides readers access to the psychological landscapes of her characters. By privileging interiority over external action, Desai foregrounds the subjective experience of cultural and gendered constraints.

In *Cry, the Peacock*, the oscillation between Maya's present experience and her recollections of prophecy and childhood creates a tense psychological environment, heightening narrative suspense while offering insight into the character's consciousness. In *Fire on the Mountain*, the interweaving of Nanda Kaul's present isolation with her past experiences emphasizes the enduring influence of memory on identity formation. These narrative strategies allow Desai to depict the complexity of female subjectivity and the interplay of culture, memory, and gender.

Moreover, Desai's psychological realism facilitates an empathetic engagement with her characters. Readers gain insight into the subtle ways in which cultural and gendered pressures influence thought, behavior, and emotional response. This narrative approach underscores the interdependence of memory, identity, and gender, revealing the profound effects of cultural context on individual consciousness.

12. Intersections of Culture, Memory, and Gender

Anita Desai's fiction consistently portrays the interconnection of cultural identity, memory, and gender, illustrating how these forces shape the interior lives of her characters. Memory operates as both a personal and social mechanism, linking past experiences to present identity, while gender situates individuals within societal and familial expectations. Cultural identity, in turn, is both informed by and contested through memory and gendered experience.

In *Clear Light of Day*, the Das siblings' differing recollections of childhood and family history underscore the interplay between personal memory and collective cultural experience. Bim's reflections emphasize her navigation of gendered expectations, while Raja and Tara's memories reveal the ways in which familial and social pressures shape male and female identities differently. The novel portrays cultural identity as a dynamic, negotiated construct, shaped by the interaction of memory, gender, and historical circumstance.

13. Negotiating Female Agency

Across her novels, Desai foregrounds female agency within the constraints of patriarchal culture. Her characters negotiate autonomy not through overt rebellion but through subtle acts of self-determination and introspection. Sita's retreat in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* Nanda Kaul's seclusion in *Fire on the Mountain*, and Bim's choice of

independence in *Clear Light of Day* exemplify this nuanced negotiation of gendered identity. These acts are deeply intertwined with memory: recollection of past experiences informs present decisions, providing characters with the perspective needed to assert autonomy.

By highlighting these strategies, Desai's novels challenge essentialist notions of womanhood. Female characters are not uniformly defined by domesticity, compliance, or social expectation. Instead, they occupy complex positions shaped by personal history, cultural norms, and internalized memory. The negotiation of gendered identity, therefore, becomes a central lens for understanding cultural and personal subjectivity in her fiction.

14. Cultural and Historical Contexts

Desai's work reflects postcolonial Indian society's negotiation between tradition and modernity. Cultural norms, familial expectations, and societal transformations influence her characters' experiences of gender and memory. In *Clear Light of Day*, the backdrop of Partition informs the siblings' recollections, highlighting how historical upheaval intersects with personal and familial memory. Such contextual embedding underscores the inseparability of cultural history and individual identity in Desai's fiction.

In *Cry, the Peacock*, urban and domestic contexts intensify Maya's psychological tension, reflecting societal expectations for women within middle-class Indian households. Desai captures the pressures of cultural conformity and the emotional consequences of restricted autonomy, illustrating the intersection of personal psychology and social norms.

By situating her characters within these cultural and historical frameworks, Desai highlights how female subjectivity is constructed and constrained. Memory allows characters to reconcile personal desires with inherited norms, while gender functions as both a framework for limitation and a site for potential agency.

15. Comparative Discussion Across Novels

A comparative reading of the four novels demonstrates recurring thematic and structural patterns. Across her work, Desai consistently employs memory as a narrative tool and a thematic concern. Characters' recollections shape understanding of self and others, illuminate psychological complexities, and enable negotiation of cultural and gendered constraints.

Spatial and psychological settings, such as Manori Island (*Where Shall We Go This Summer?*) and Carignano (*Fire on the Mountain*), serve as liminal zones in which women temporarily escape societal expectations and reflect on their identities. In contrast, domestic and urban settings, such as the Das family home (*Clear Light of Day*) or Maya's city household (*Cry, the Peacock*), reinforce social constraints and highlight gendered limitations.

Gendered experience is a unifying concern. Desai's female characters, whether young or old, negotiate autonomy within

the bounds of patriarchal culture. Memory mediates these negotiations, allowing characters to reflect upon the past, understand social expectations, and imagine alternative possibilities. Across novels, Desai emphasizes the diversity of female responses to similar cultural pressures, illustrating the variability of identity construction within the postcolonial Indian context.

This comparative perspective also reveals generational contrasts. Younger characters, such as Raka (*Fire on the Mountain*), often exhibit a more radical sense of autonomy and challenge traditional norms more directly than older characters, such as Nanda Kaul. Memory mediates these differences, highlighting the ways in which historical and familial experience influence gendered subjectivity over time.

16. Memory, Identity, and Psychological Depth

Desai's narrative technique, characterized by psychological realism and introspective narration, foregrounds memory as a lens through which identity is constructed. Characters' internal dialogues, recollections, and reflections provide insight into the complex interplay of personal experience, cultural norms, and gendered expectation. Memory is both a tool for self-understanding and a source of tension, revealing the ambivalence and multiplicity inherent in identity formation.

The psychological depth of her female protagonists allows readers to perceive the subtle ways in which cultural and gendered pressures influence thought, emotion, and behavior. For example, Maya's obsession in *Cry, the Peacock* illustrates the interplay of memory, fear, and social constraint, while Sita's contemplative withdrawal in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* demonstrates how memory informs reflective negotiation of identity. These examples underscore Desai's mastery in linking psychological realism with broader cultural and gendered concerns.

17. Synthesis of Findings

Anita Desai's fiction demonstrates a consistent engagement with the interplay of cultural identity, memory, and gender. Across her novels, female protagonists navigate complex social, familial, and cultural landscapes, negotiating autonomy and subjectivity in ways that are deeply informed by memory and personal history. Memory functions as a mechanism for self-reflection, enabling characters to reassess past experiences and make informed decisions about their present lives. At the same time, memory often reinforces constraints, highlighting the enduring influence of social and cultural norms.

Cultural identity is depicted as dynamic, negotiated, and multifaceted. Characters inhabit liminal spaces- both physical and psychological- where they confront and question inherited norms. Sita's retreat to Manori Island, Nanda Kaul's seclusion at Carignano, and Bim's assertion of independence in *Clear Light of Day* exemplify ways in which women navigate between societal expectations and personal desires. These liminal spaces provide opportunities

for reflection, negotiation, and, in some cases, transformation of identity.

Gender is central to this negotiation. Desai's female characters operate within patriarchal frameworks, yet they find varying degrees of agency through subtle resistance, introspection, and engagement with memory. By portraying the diversity of female experience, Desai challenges reductive or monolithic constructions of Indian womanhood, demonstrating the interplay between personal subjectivity and societal expectation.

18. Implications for Postcolonial and Feminist Literary Studies

Desai's novels contribute significantly to postcolonial and feminist literary discourse. They offer nuanced portrayals of women negotiating cultural and gendered constraints within a postcolonial context. By emphasizing memory as a structuring device, Desai foregrounds the role of personal and collective recollection in shaping identity, highlighting the ways in which history, culture, and gender intersect.

From a feminist perspective, Desai's work challenges essentialist definitions of female subjectivity. Her characters' varied responses to societal norms illustrate that gendered experience is neither uniform nor predetermined. Memory, cultural context, and personal agency interact to produce complex and nuanced forms of female identity, providing valuable insight into the dynamics of autonomy and constraint within postcolonial Indian society.

Postcolonial theory is further illuminated by Desai's exploration of hybridity and liminality. Characters inhabit spaces between tradition and modernity, personal desire and social expectation, reflecting the fluid and contested nature of cultural identity in a society undergoing rapid transformation. Memory mediates these experiences, linking personal history to broader social and cultural narratives

19. Conclusion

This study has examined the interconnections of cultural identity, memory, and gender in select novels of Anita Desai: *Cry, the Peacock*, *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* *Fire on the Mountain*, and *Clear Light of Day*. Drawing on feminist literary criticism, postcolonial theory, and memory studies, the paper highlights the ways in which Desai portrays the interior lives of women negotiating societal, familial, and cultural pressures. The texts- *Cry, the Peacock*, *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* *Fire on the Mountain*, and *Clear Light of Day*-were selected as representative works because they span different phases of Anita Desai's literary career and centrally engage with themes of memory, identity formation, and gendered experience within evolving socio-cultural contexts.

Memory emerges as a central narrative and thematic device, shaping identity and mediating the negotiation of autonomy within gendered and cultural frameworks. Cultural identity is portrayed as dynamic and multifaceted, influenced by historical, familial, and societal factors, while gender serves as both a constraint and a lens for understanding the

construction of subjectivity. Desai's psychological realism, nuanced narrative technique, and attention to interiority allow for a sophisticated exploration of these interrelated themes.

Ultimately, Desai's fiction challenges reductive representations of Indian womanhood and postcolonial identity. Her work illuminates the diversity of female experience, the complexity of memory and recollection, and the fluidity of cultural and gendered identity. By integrating these dimensions, Desai contributes to ongoing scholarly discussions in feminist, postcolonial, and literary studies, offering enduring insights into the negotiation of selfhood, autonomy, and agency in contemporary Indian English fiction.

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