

## RESEARCH ARTICLE: EXPLORING THE SENSE OF ALIENATION IN ANITA DESAI'S FICTION.

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### **Abstract:-**

Anita Desai frequently explores the theme of social and psychological isolation among her protagonists, particularly women, who navigate the limitations imposed by domestic life and societal norms. Her characters often find themselves attempting to reconcile their inner desires with the external world, all while reflecting on their lives within emotionally barren environments. This research delves into Desai's portrayal of alienation by providing a deep psychological insight into characters who feel uprooted, overlooked, or misunderstood. Desai highlights the theme of emotional detachment in her novels—including 'Cry, the Peacock', 'Where Shall We Go This Summer?', 'Voices in the City', and 'Fire on the Mountain'—as a response to societal gender expectations, the chaos of urban life, familial estrangement, and the absence of meaningful relationships. In the context of post-independence India, where traditional values and modern realities intersect, leading to fragmented identities and isolation, this analysis also explores how the complexities of cultural identity contribute to feelings of alienation.

To demonstrate how Desai's employment of internal monologue, a fragmented narrative format, and symbolic settings such as mountains, islands, and ancient structures reflect the inner turmoil of her characters, this study adopts both a psychoanalytic and feminist perspective. Additionally, it situates Desai's work within the broader framework of existential alienation found in postcolonial literature, illustrating how the solitude experienced by her characters conveys both suffering and nuanced forms of resistance.

In the end, the feeling of alienation in Desai's literature is a reflection of the larger social upheavals encountered in a changing India, rather than merely a personal suffering. A reassessment of the individual's position in a world where connection is desired but rarely achieved is encouraged by Desai's nuanced discussion of identity, memory, and silence.

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### **Keywords:-**

Alienation, psychological isolation, Emotional estrangement, Inner conflict, Female identity, postcolonial literature, Fragmented self, cultural dislocation, Existential crises, Feminist perspective, Urban loneliness, Silence and solitude, Identity crises, Introspective narration, Domestic space and confinement, Displacement, Memory and trauma, Symbolism in fiction, Social detachment.

### **Introduction:-**

In contemporary literature, the concept of alienation is prevalent, especially in 20th-century existential and psychological works. Anita Desai is unique among Indian English novels in that she delves deeply into the inner lives of her characters, many of whom experience extreme estrangement. Desai focuses inward, depicting emotional distance, loneliness, and fragmentation as fundamental human experiences, in contrast to her colleagues who emphasize social or political issues. Her main characters, particularly women, are frequently entangled in a web of competing identities, societal norms, and individual aspirations. In Desai's fiction, alienation is an inner psychological state rather than just a response to social pressures. Desai depicts loneliness in a delicate and moving way, whether it is through Maya's existential fear in *Cry, the Peacock*, Monisha's oppressive home life in *Voices in the City*, or Nanda Kaul's withdrawal from interpersonal relationships in *Fire on the Mountain*.

Desai illustrates how alienation becomes a way of life for people who are unable to make sense of their inner selves in relation to the outside world through her reflective narratives and poetic prose. This essay aims to investigate the multiple ways alienation appears throughout her works of fiction, showing how it affects relationships, identity, and the pursuit of meaning in a disjointed and frequently uncaring world.

### **Alienation in the context of Anita Desai's writing :-**

A profound psychological understanding of the inner lives of her characters, especially their feelings of alienation, is a defining characteristic of Anita Desai's literary work. Desai opted to examine the inner and psychological landscapes of people, particularly women torn between tradition and modernity, in contrast to many other writers of her era who concentrated on exterior social and political subjects. Her protagonists frequently feel cut off from their families, society, culture, or even themselves, making alienation a major theme rather than merely a background issue in her books. Characters by Desai are usually depicted as sensitive, reflective people

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who can't or won't fit in with society's expectations. A split between the individual and their environment is frequently caused by this nonconformity, which leads to emotional isolation. Marital discontent, generational strife, displacement, cultural hybridity, and existential sorrow are some of the causes of the alienation she depicts in her literature.

Instead of being portrayed as an external protest, alienation is often portrayed in her works as a quiet, interior journey. Characters that withdraw into themselves, such as Sita (*Where Shall We Go This Summer?*), Nanda Kaul (*Fire on the Mountain*), and Amla (*Voices in the City*), demonstrate how internal estrangement can appear as detachment, withdrawal, and quiet. Desai stands out from more openly political Indian novelists with this subdued, psychological portrayal.

Another level of complication is added by Desai's emphasis on feminine isolation. She draws attention to the ways that patriarchal expectations cause women in particular to feel estranged from both society and their own identities and ambitions. Her books challenge the roles that Indian families and society assign to women, showing how these duties can cause emotional exile and mental breakdown.

### **Psychological Alienation:-**

The study of psychological alienation is a key theme in Anita Desai's novels, which features emotionally distant characters from their family, society, and even themselves. In her work, psychological alienation is subtle, internal, and intensely personal, in contrast to overt societal or political estrangement. As the protagonist's struggle with unresolved emotions and existential fears, it depicts their inner agony, mental conflict, and silent suffering. Through the use of stream-of-consciousness techniques and introspective narration, Desai skillfully explores the interior thoughts of her characters. Her characters frequently experience loneliness and detachment as a result of feeling misinterpreted, confined, or suffocated in their relationships and environments. Her female characters, who suffer from emotional neglect, marital oppression, and social expectations, are particularly affected by this.

Sita, the main character in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* suffers from a sense of alienation from her husband, kids, and the rapidly evolving world. Her separation is internal and psychological rather than overt or combative. Her flight to Manori Island turns into a metaphorical retreat into herself as she battles an internal struggle between her need for tranquility and the bustle of the city. *'She had always felt like a ghost, drifting about in a world that was not hers.'*<sup>1</sup>

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Similar to this, years of emotional neglect in her marriage and the pressure to fulfill prescribed responsibilities are the causes of Nanda Kaul's psychological alienation in *Fire on the Mountain*. Her choice to live alone at Carignano is an attempt to find mental calm, but the unseen wounds and repressed memories that plague her seclusion reveal the unseen scars of emotional trauma.

Desai discusses urban alienation and its psychological ramifications in *Voices in the City*. In the midst of the bustle, commotion, and impersonality of the city, the characters—Monisha, Amla, and Nirode—struggle to find purpose in their lives. The terrible result of Monisha's deep psychological alienation and her imprisonment in a shared family system that suppresses her individuality is her suicide. Desai's use of symbolism—lonely dwellings, dilapidated structures, silent mountains, and empty spaces—that mirror the characters' inner landscapes heightens her depiction of psychological isolation. Her lyrical, poetic prose mirrors the inner chaos and fragmentation her characters experience.

*'Nirode prefers negation to acceptance. He does not want to continue and feels as if he was born with his heart emptied out. He feels isolation and cherishes this isolation; he closes himself in his world and withdraws from the outside world.'*<sup>2</sup>

### **Social and Cultural Alienation:-**

The profound conflicts that people feel when they are torn between tradition and modernity, East and West, or personal desires and social expectations are reflected in Anita Desai's examination of social and cultural alienation. Alienation is not just psychological distress in her fiction; it is frequently ingrained in the social structures and cultural displacements that influence her characters' lives. Desai's writings usually show how cultural expectations, strict family structures, and social norms cause alienation, particularly for women and diasporic people. When people believe they do not fit in with the cultural norms or values of their surroundings, alienation results. The characters struggle to define themselves in a changing world and frequently find themselves physically, emotionally, or culturally displaced.

Desai explores the cultural alienation that Indian immigrants in England face in *Bye-Bye Blackbird*. Adit, the main character, is caught between two worlds: the Western culture he tries to adopt and the Indian customs he has abandoned. As she attempts to fit in with Adit's Indian heritage, his wife Sarah, a British woman married to an Indian man, also feels a sense of cultural alienation. This book does a good job of showing

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how cross-cultural interactions can lead to misunderstanding, conflict, and alienation. *'He no longer felt at home in India, but he could not feel at home in England either.'*<sup>3</sup>

In *Clear Light of Day*, characters like Bim and Tara grapple with the shifting social climate of post-partition India, providing yet another compelling illustration. Family members become emotionally detached as a result of the conflict between historical customs and contemporary realities. While the elder generation clings to outdated memories and ideals, the younger generation's desire to reject tradition distances them from their heritage. Desai also looks at how cultural alienation results from urbanization and the dissolution of traditional family structures. The contemporary urban setting of Calcutta serves as a metaphor for the loss of cultural continuity and spiritual emptiness in *Voices in the City*. In a city that is expanding but lacks emotional ties, the protagonists feel lost and alone among the people.

Furthermore, patriarchy causes social alienation for women in Desai's books. They have limited space for self-identity because their roles as mothers, wives, and daughters are socially defined. They become even more socially isolated when they try to show their discontent or assert their independence because they are perceived as outcasts.

### **Gendered Alienation:-**

Gendered alienation—the distinct feeling of emotional exile, repression, and estrangement that women endure as a result of patriarchal expectations, familial responsibilities, and social conditioning—is one of the most fascinating and recurrent themes in Anita Desai's writing. Desai portrays her female characters as profoundly reflective people who suffer not only from their situation but also from society's denial of their right to self-determination. Alienation is not only a psychological state but also a gendered experience in Desai's fiction, influenced by the roles that women are expected to play. Her female characters—wives, mothers, and daughters—are frequently portrayed as emotionally suffocated in the home. They are supposed to be selfless, quiet, and caring, with little regard for their own needs or preferences. They encounter miscommunication, rejection, or loneliness when they try to express their inner discontent or break free.

For instance, after years of fulfilling the expected roles of hostess, mother, and wife, Nanda Kaul, an elderly widow, withdraws to the Kasaul hills to live alone in *Fire on the Mountain*. She wants to reclaim her identity free from the constraints placed on her by her gender, and her physical withdrawal is a reflection of a deeper

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emotional alienation. She is nevertheless plagued by her past and the roles she had to play, even when she is by herself. *'She had done her duty. She had served. Now she wanted only to be left alone, to be quiet, to be at peace.'*<sup>4</sup>

Where Should We Travel This Summer? Sita is alienated from her husband, her children, and society. Her incapacity to play the cool, collected role of a wife and mother contributes to her sense of loneliness. Her psychological and symbolic escape from a society that demands emotional fortitude and submission is symbolized by her retreat to the island.

*'Sita, who an account of her irreconcilable and incompatible temperament and diametrically, opposite view-point to that of her husband, children, and other members of the family, is to face the loneliness of a woman, a wife an another.'*<sup>5</sup>

In a similar vein, Monisha in *Voices in the City* is denied emotional connection, privacy, and agency because she lives in a joint family. In addition to being a personal failure, her tragic suicide serves as a potent commentary on the damaging consequences of gendered oppression and alienation.

Instead of depicting her female characters as helpless victims, Desai shows them as subdued rebels who defy social norms by withdrawing, being silent, or reflecting. They frequently use their alienation as a form of protest, refusing to keep up their façade or conformity. In a society that doesn't acknowledge it, it turns into a means of claiming their humanity.

Additionally, the reader can closely observe the emotional and intellectual depth of Desai's female characters thanks to her poetic and sensitive narrative style. She uses them to criticize the patriarchal system that separates women from both society and themselves. The inner struggles of women attempting to live authentically in a society that stifles their individuality are revealed by gendered alienation in Anita Desai's writing. Her fiction is a profound examination of the female condition because it captures the cost of imposed roles and the silent suffering that innumerable women endure.

### **Existential Alienation:-**

Existential alienation is a recurring theme in Anita Desai's fiction, which mirrors the characters' deep sense of inner emptiness, alienation, and meaninglessness. Existential alienation results from a deeper, internal struggle—the pursuit of identity, purpose, and authenticity in an uncaring or oppressive world—as opposed to social or cultural alienation, which is caused by external circumstances. The main characters in

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Desai's works are frequently presented as people who are acutely conscious of their own consciousness. They doubt the very reason they are here, the roles they are supposed to play, and the relationships they are a part of. They experience anxiety, internal conflict, and feelings of detachment as a result of this existential questioning. The quiet hopelessness and spiritual loneliness of people who no longer find purpose in traditional family, marriage, and social structures are depicted in her writing.

Sita's retreat to the island in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* serves as both a symbolic rejection of a world that seems emotionally and purposelessly empty as well as an escape from the physical chaos of Bombay. Her pregnancy turns into a metaphor for her profound existential crisis; her refusal to have a child in a world without understanding and peace represents her rejection of both social norms and the continuity of life.

Nanda Kaul's decision to live alone in *Fire on the Mountain* is motivated by her disenchantment with a life full of façades. Her retreat is existential as well as physical; she no longer sees the value in social interaction or human connections. Her alienation is not tranquil, though; it is characterized by loneliness, repressed pain, and an unmet desire for connection.

Desai uses urban life as a metaphor for existential alienation in *Voices in the City*. The male lead, Nirode, is disillusioned by the artificiality of contemporary life. Unable to find meaning in his relationships or career, he wanders the city. He recognizes the futility of the world around him and the emptiness inside himself, which makes his alienation profoundly existential. *'There was no meaning to anything. Not to life, not to love, not to death.'*<sup>6</sup>

Desai's characters are regular people who find themselves in extraordinary emotional and philosophical predicaments; they are neither revolutionaries nor heroes. Their introspective nature, which makes them acutely aware of their discontent but unable to escape it, exacerbates their existential alienation. This awareness frequently results in passivity, retreat, or, in the worst situations, self-destruction. Additionally, the disoriented mental state of Desai's characters is reflected in her narrative technique, which is characterized by stream-of-consciousness, fragmented chronology, and symbolic imagery. The external environment appears hazy, unimportant, or dangerous, and the internal landscape takes center stage as the site of conflict. The human condition—the anguish of being conscious in an unconscious world, the fight for identity in a society that expects conformity, and the pursuit of meaning in the face of emotional and spiritual emptiness—is powerfully explored in

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Anita Desai's existential alienation. Desai gives voice to the silent suffering of people who are lost—not just in the outside world, but also in themselves—through her moving depictions.

### **Urban Alienation:-**

The emotional and psychological alienation that results from living in contemporary cities is eloquently captured in Anita Desai's depiction of urban alienation. The city is more than just a location in her works of fiction; it is a metaphorical place that represents disorder, disarray, impersonality, and spiritual emptiness. Her characters frequently struggle to establish stable identities and meaningful connections, which leaves them feeling incredibly alone, especially in urban settings. In Desai's novels, urban areas are usually portrayed as emotionally desolate, overwhelming, and alienating. Cities become symbols of social and personal disintegration rather than places of opportunity and advancement. Her characters' internal desire for calm, closeness, and authenticity stands in stark contrast to their sense of disorientation in the midst of the bustle, noise, and fast-paced urban environment.

Calcutta emerges as a menacing, oppressive force that molds the lives of the three main characters—Nirode, Monisha, and Amla—in *Voices in the City*, which is arguably Desai's most direct examination of urban alienation. As a failed scholar, Nirode grows more and more disillusioned with the artificiality of the city. A mental breakdown results from Monisha's lack of emotional and personal space while living in a conservative joint family. Her loneliness is exacerbated by the city, and she eventually turns to suicide as a last resort to fill the emotional void she experiences. *'The city was a monster - loud, greedy, and blind. It crushed the spirit slowly, daily.'*<sup>7</sup>

Desai employs the urban environment as a metaphor for the inner states of her characters, using the city as a maze to represent their disorientation, anxiety, and confusion. Their internal crises are thus reflected in the outside world. Homes are full but emotionally empty; streets are packed but cold. The sense of social alienation and emotional displacement is heightened by this contradiction.

In *Clear Light of Day*, the deteriorating Das family is set against the backdrop of Delhi, both old and new. Their home's physical structure as well as their familial ties are in danger due to the intrusion of urban modernity. The main character, Bim, experiences the loss of previous closeness and battles the alienation that comes with time, change, and the deterioration of morals in a changing urban environment.

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In Desai's writing, urban alienation encompasses more than just physical seclusion; it also refers to existential, cultural, and moral loneliness. Her characters frequently struggle to keep real relationships going. They feel more like spectators than participants as they move through social events, workplaces, and family get-togethers. In a city that discourages authenticity and demands performance, emotional numbness turns into a survival strategy. Desai also criticizes how gender-based alienation is exacerbated by urbanization. In particular, women are depicted as being doubly alienated—by the apathy of the city and by the patriarchal roles that are forced upon them in urban domestic life. Even though they live in urban areas, they are still emotionally trapped.

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### **Conclusion:-**

In Anita Desai's literary universe, the study of alienation as a basic human experience is deeply embedded. Her fiction sensitively and powerfully portrays the ways in which alienation—whether psychological, social, cultural, gendered, existential, or urban—affects the lives of her characters and reflects the greater crises of modern identity and human disconnection. Through her introspective prose and nuanced character studies, Desai creates a literary space where solitude becomes both a symptom of suffering and a survival strategy, and where silence speaks louder than words. Desai's ability to internalize alienation and transform it into a deeply personal, lived experience rather than just a social condition is what makes her unique. Although her characters, who are frequently women, are not heroic in the conventional sense, their battles against cultural displacement, patriarchal pressures, emotional neglect, and pointless routines are both tragic and noble. In Desai's fiction, alienation is quiet, psychological, frequently invisible, and thus more profound than it is loud or violent. It exists in everyday quietness, suppressed memories, unspoken desires, and the fear of confrontation or connection.

Desai's work is consistent with the existential tradition because her protagonists often experience a division between the inner self and the outside world. Desai's alienation, however, is firmly grounded in the sociocultural realities of postcolonial

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India—urban chaos, crumbling family structures, cultural hybridity, and the oppressive weight of tradition—in contrast to Western existentialists who frequently place the individual in cosmic isolation. Her depiction of alienation thus connects culturally specific struggles with universal psychological experience. Desai does not portray alienation as a one-dimensional phenomenon, which is significant. It is depicted as a dual force—a source of suffering and a means of resistance—in numerous of her novels. Characters like Sita and Nanda Kaul decide to withdraw in order to recover their inner selves, implying that alienation can be a means of self-discovery, independence, and even empowerment. The emotional toll of choosing to live apart in a connected world is highlighted by the fact that this retreat is frequently tinged with sadness and loneliness.

*'I only want to be left alone. That is all I have ever wanted.'*<sup>9</sup>

By immersing readers in the thoughts of her solitary characters, Desai's nuanced narrative style—characterized by lyrical prose, symbolism, and psychological depth—reinforces the theme of alienation. While cities, crowds, and families become sources of noise, conflict, and alienation, nature, silence, and space are commonly used as metaphors for emotional distance.

In conclusion, Anita Desai's writing conveys a philosophical as well as a thematic sense of alienation. The fragmented modern self, the emotional toll of social conformity, and the human need for authenticity and meaning are all reflected in it. In addition to giving voice to the unsaid pains of many, Desai transforms alienation into a profound commentary on human existence by emphasizing the inner lives of alienated people in her fiction.

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