

A Review of Alienation and Identity Crisis in the Selected Novels of Anita Desai

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Abstract

Anita Desai occupies a central place in Indian English fiction for her sustained exploration of the inner lives of individuals, particularly women, caught between tradition and modernity, self and society, home and the world. This review surveys scholarship published between 2016 and 2024 on the themes of alienation and identity crisis across Desai's major novels, including *Cry, the Peacock*, *Voices in the City*, *Bye-Bye Blackbird*, *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*, *Fire on the Mountain*, *Clear Light of Day*, and *Fasting, Feasting*. The review organises existing criticism around psychological, social, and feminist perspectives, tracing how critics have understood Desai's protagonists as figures of psychic fragmentation, familial estrangement, and gendered confinement. It identifies recurring patterns in the literature—an emphasis on female interiority, the recurring motif of withdrawal into solitude, and the search for autonomy within patriarchal structures—while also noting comparatively limited attention to intersections between alienation and identity crisis as a single, mutually reinforcing psychological process. The review concludes by outlining gaps that merit further scholarly attention, including comparative and cross-novel studies, diachronic analysis of Desai's evolving narrative technique, and interdisciplinary approaches drawing on trauma theory and existential psychology.

Keywords: Anita Desai; Alienation; Identity Crisis; Female Psyche; Indian English Fiction

1. Introduction

1.1 Background and Context

The condition of alienation and the crisis of identity have remained two of the most persistent preoccupations of twentieth-century fiction, arising from the disintegration of traditional certainties under the pressures of modernity, urbanisation, and shifting gender relations. In the Indian context, these themes acquire a distinctive inflection: the postcolonial subject negotiates not only the universal anxieties of the modern self but also the specific tensions of a society suspended between inherited custom and the aspirations of change. Alienation, understood broadly as a state of estrangement from one's environment, relationships, or even one's own selfhood, and identity crisis, understood as the anxious and often unresolved search for a coherent sense of self, are frequently intertwined in the literature of this period, particularly in narratives centred on women's experience within the Indian family and social order.

Anita Desai's fiction has been consistently read by critics as a sustained meditation on these very conditions. Her protagonists are rarely comfortable within the roles assigned to them; they withdraw, they fracture, they seek escape into memory, nature, or silence, and in doing so

dramatise the psychological cost of social conformity. This review draws together recent scholarship to assess how these themes have been studied, interpreted, and, in places, left insufficiently examined.

The period selected for this review, 2016 to 2024, is significant in its own right. It coincides with a renewed international and Indian academic interest in women's writing, feminist literary theory, and postcolonial identity studies, all of which have generated fresh readings of Desai's fiction that extend and, at times, revise earlier critical assessments dating from the 1980s and 1990s. Reviewing this more recent scholarship allows the present study to capture how contemporary critical vocabularies—drawing on trauma studies, ecofeminism, and diaspora theory—have been brought to bear on a body of fiction that, though written across several decades, continues to generate active critical debate.

1.2 Anita Desai and Indian English Fiction

Anita Desai emerged in the 1960s as one of the earliest Indian English novelists to shift the centre of narrative gravity from external plot and social panorama toward the inner psychological terrain of her characters. Beginning with *Cry, the Peacock* (1963) and continuing through *Voices in the City* (1965), *Bye-Bye Blackbird* (1971), *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* (1975), *Fire on the Mountain* (1977), *Clear Light of Day* (1980), and *Fasting, Feasting* (1999), Desai consistently foregrounded the emotional and psychological interiority of individuals, especially women, negotiating the demands of family, marriage, and cultural expectation. Critics writing in the period under review continue to describe her as a pioneer of the psychological novel in Indian English writing, noting her reliance on stream-of-consciousness narration, symbolism, and closely observed domestic detail to render the inner conflicts of her characters.

Desai's own biography—born to a Bengali father and a German mother, and educated in Delhi before living and teaching abroad—has frequently been invoked by critics to explain her recurring fascination with exile, hybridity, and the sense of not fully belonging to any single cultural world. This biographical frame has shaped much of the criticism reviewed here, particularly studies of *Bye-Bye Blackbird*, which read the migrant characters' cultural dislocation as an extension of Desai's own inherited condition of in-betweenness.

Within the wider history of Indian English fiction, Desai is generally credited with helping to shift critical attention away from the socially panoramic, plot-driven mode associated with earlier novelists toward a more introspective, character-centred tradition that later writers would extend and diversify. Scholars situate her alongside contemporaries and successors such as Manju Kapur, Shashi Deshpande, and Kiran Desai, noting a shared preoccupation with domestic confinement, gendered expectation, and the search for individual voice within family structures, even as each writer develops a distinct narrative idiom. This positioning matters for the present review because it clarifies that alienation and identity crisis in Desai's fiction are not idiosyncratic personal concerns but part of a broader literary conversation about the condition of the modern Indian woman, one that recent criticism continues to extend and refine.

1.3 Objectives of the Study

This review sets out to achieve the following objectives: first, to consolidate and synthesise recent critical scholarship (2016–2024) on alienation and identity crisis in Desai's selected novels; second, to organise this scholarship according to relevant conceptual and theoretical frameworks, including psychological and feminist perspectives; third, to identify recurring themes, patterns, and areas of critical consensus across the literature; and fourth, to highlight research gaps that remain inadequately addressed, thereby indicating directions for further study. In pursuing these objectives, the review does not attempt an exhaustive survey of the entire body of Desai criticism but instead concentrates on scholarship that engages directly and substantively with alienation and identity crisis as its central analytical categories, since these two concepts most consistently unite the diverse critical approaches—psychoanalytic, feminist, postcolonial, and existential—that have been applied to her fiction in the period under review.

2. Conceptual Framework

2.1 Alienation

Alienation, as employed across the reviewed literature, denotes a condition of estrangement operating at multiple levels: from the self, from significant relationships, from the family unit, and from the wider social order. In Desai's fiction, this estrangement is rarely presented as a single, dramatic rupture; rather, it accumulates gradually through the small disappointments and silences of domestic life. Scholars examining *Fire on the Mountain*, for instance, describe the protagonist Nanda Kaul's retreat into isolation as both a wound inflicted by decades of emotional neglect and a deliberate, if fragile, act of self-preservation. Similarly, readings of *Cry, the Peacock* treat Maya's alienation as arising from the incompatibility between her hypersensitive inner world and her husband Gautama's detached rationalism, a mismatch that produces psychological disintegration rather than mere unhappiness.

Across the literature, alienation is thus treated not as an incidental backdrop but as the very mechanism through which Desai's narratives generate their psychological depth, closely bound to feelings of loneliness, existential anxiety, and a sense of meaninglessness that recalls, as several critics note, the vocabulary of Western existentialist writing. Critics reading *Voices in the City* in particular draw explicit parallels with existentialist concerns of absurdity and moral ambiguity, arguing that Desai transplants a recognisably European vocabulary of alienation into the specific texture of urban, postcolonial Indian life, where the pressures of family obligation and economic precarity intensify rather than replace the more universal anxieties of modern selfhood.

2.2 Identity Crisis

Identity crisis, in the context of the reviewed scholarship, refers to the protagonist's unresolved and often anguished search for a coherent, self-authored sense of who they are, set against inherited roles—wife, mother, daughter, immigrant—that fail to accommodate their individual needs. Studies of *Bye-Bye Blackbird* frame identity crisis in explicitly diasporic terms, tracing how characters such as Adit, Dev, and Sarah negotiate competing claims of homeland and host country, tradition and assimilation. Studies of *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* and *Clear Light of Day* locate identity crisis instead within the domestic and familial sphere, where

protagonists such as Sita and Bim struggle to reconcile the self shaped by childhood memory with the self demanded by adult responsibility.

A recurring critical observation is that identity crisis in Desai's fiction is seldom resolved through triumphant self-assertion; more often, her novels close on states of tentative acceptance, unresolved ambivalence, or quiet endurance, which several critics read as a more psychologically realistic rendering of the search for selfhood than conventional narratives of liberation.

2.3 Psychological and Feminist Perspectives

The reviewed literature draws on two overlapping interpretive frameworks. The psychological or psychoanalytic approach reads Desai's protagonists through categories such as repression, trauma, and the unconscious, attending closely to interior monologue, dream imagery, and symbolic motifs such as fire, water, and enclosed domestic space. The feminist approach, meanwhile, situates the same psychological distress within the structural conditions of patriarchy, reading alienation and identity crisis as the felt, lived consequence of women's confinement within roles that deny them autonomy, education, or self-expression. Several studies explicitly combine both lenses, using theorists such as Simone de Beauvoir and, less frequently, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak to frame the systemic denial of female subjectivity in novels such as *Fasting, Feasting*, while retaining close psychological attention to individual characters' inner lives.

A smaller but growing strand of criticism supplements these two frameworks with postcolonial theory, particularly in readings of *Bye-Bye Blackbird*, where concepts such as hybridity and double consciousness are used to explain how migrant characters experience identity as split between two irreconcilable cultural affiliations. Although this postcolonial dimension is not the primary focus of the present review, it is noted here because it frequently intersects with, rather than displaces, the psychological and feminist readings that dominate the broader body of scholarship, suggesting that Desai's treatment of alienation and identity crisis resists confinement to any single theoretical model and instead invites the kind of multi-framework analysis that recent critics have increasingly attempted.

3. Review of Literature

3.1 Critical Studies on Anita Desai

A substantial body of recent scholarship approaches Desai's oeuvre as a coherent body of work unified by its psychological realism. Scholars have characterised her narrative method as one that privileges interior monologue, symbolic imagery, and closely observed domestic detail over external plot, arguing that this technique allows her to depict the inner conflicts of her characters with a precision unmatched by many of her contemporaries in Indian English fiction. Comparative studies situating Desai alongside other women novelists, such as Manju Kapur, similarly emphasise her sustained focus on the tension between individuality and independence on one hand and family duty on the other.

Other critical studies concentrate on Desai's use of natural imagery and symbolism as an extension of characters' psychological states, arguing that landscape in her fiction rarely functions as neutral setting but instead mirrors, amplifies, or ironically counterpoints her

protagonists' inner turmoil. This attention to technique, while not always framed explicitly in terms of alienation or identity crisis, nonetheless supports the broader critical consensus that Desai's formal choices are inseparable from her thematic concerns, reinforcing the case for treating her narrative style itself as a critical object relevant to the study of psychological estrangement.

3.2 Studies on Alienation

Alienation has attracted focused critical attention across several of Desai's novels. Readings of *Cry, the Peacock* trace Maya's psychological disintegration to her incompatible marriage and her inability to find emotional reciprocity, situating the novel's tragic conclusion as the logical outcome of prolonged emotional starvation (Aruna & Peruvalluthi, 2017; Kanderi, 2022; Tamanna, 2021). Studies of *Fire on the Mountain* read Nanda Kaul's withdrawal to the hills as a complex response to a lifetime of unacknowledged domestic labour and marital betrayal, positioning her isolation as simultaneously a wound and a chosen refuge. Work on *Bye-Bye Blackbird* extends the discussion of alienation into the diasporic register, describing how migrant characters experience a layered estrangement—from the host culture, from their country of origin, and, in Sarah's case, from her own community of birth after marrying outside it (Das, Chakraborty, & Biswas, 2020; Karthika Devi & Suhitha, 2024).

3.3 Studies on Identity Crisis

A parallel strand of scholarship foregrounds identity crisis, frequently intersecting with feminist criticism. Studies of *Fasting, Feasting* examine how the protagonist Uma's educational and marital opportunities are systematically foreclosed by her family, reading her arrested development as constitutive of, rather than incidental to, her fractured sense of self (Haque, 2019; Jackson, 2018; Komal, 2024). Comparable readings of *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* interpret Sita's flight to the island of her childhood as an attempt to recover a pre-marital, unmediated sense of identity, only for the novel to suggest that such recovery is at best partial and provisional (Sri Devi, 2020; Priyanka, 2022; Pipaliya, 2020). Elavarasi (2018) similarly frames the psychological unravelling of Maya in *Cry, the Peacock* explicitly as a case of women's identity crisis rather than individual pathology, linking her condition to broader patterns of gendered confinement in Desai's fiction.

3.4 Research Gap

While alienation and identity crisis are each well represented in the existing literature, comparatively few studies treat the two as a single, mutually constitutive psychological process operating across Desai's fiction as a whole. Much of the scholarship remains organised around single-novel case studies, with limited cross-novel or diachronic comparison of how Desai's treatment of these themes evolves from her early to her later fiction. There is also relatively little engagement with formal trauma theory or developmental psychology as an explicit analytical framework, despite the frequent use of psychoanalytic vocabulary in impressionistic terms. Additionally, male characters in Desai's fiction—Gautama, Raman, Adit—receive comparatively little sustained psychological analysis in their own right, with most studies treating them primarily as antagonistic or catalytic figures against whom the female protagonist's alienation and identity crisis are defined, rather than as subjects of alienation in

their own complex right. This review identifies these gaps as areas meriting further scholarly attention.

4. Alienation in Selected Novels

4.1 Psychological and Emotional Alienation

Psychological alienation in Desai's fiction typically manifests as a widening gap between a character's inner emotional reality and the composed exterior they are compelled to present to family and society. Maya, in *Cry, the Peacock*, exemplifies this pattern: her hypersensitivity, rooted in a childhood of excessive paternal indulgence, leaves her unable to reconcile herself to Gautama's emotional detachment, and the resulting psychic pressure builds toward the novel's violent climax. Critics reading the novel through a psychoanalytic lens emphasise the recurring imagery of confinement, omens, and premonition as external correlatives of Maya's disintegrating inner state, arguing that her alienation is less a response to any single event than the cumulative product of prolonged emotional neglect.

4.2 Social and Familial Alienation

Beyond individual psychology, Desai's novels repeatedly stage alienation as a function of family structure and social expectation. In *Fire on the Mountain*, Nanda Kaul's estrangement from her husband, whose long affair she was compelled to silently tolerate, and from her children, whom she raised out of duty rather than affection, is read by critics as a specifically gendered form of alienation, produced by a domestic arrangement that demanded her constant self-effacement. In *Bye-Bye Blackbird*, familial and social alienation take on a diasporic character, as Adit and Sarah's marriage becomes a site where two cultural worlds fail to fully integrate, leaving both partners suspended between competing loyalties to homeland and adopted country.

4.3 Loneliness and Isolation

Loneliness recurs across the reviewed scholarship as both a symptom and a strategy in Desai's fiction. Several critics note that her protagonists often actively seek solitude as a form of protest or self-protection, even as that same solitude compounds their suffering. Nanda Kaul's retreat to Carignano, her isolated house in the hills, is repeatedly read in this dual register: it is at once an assertion of autonomy after a lifetime of enforced sociability and a further deepening of her emotional isolation, since it leaves her without the human connection she both resents and, ultimately, craves. This ambivalent treatment of solitude—as refuge and as wound—is identified across the literature as one of the more distinctive features of Desai's representation of alienation.

5. Identity Crisis in Selected Novels

5.1 Female Identity and Selfhood

The formation, suppression, and eventual crisis of female selfhood constitutes the central preoccupation of the majority of studies reviewed here. Bim, the protagonist of *Clear Light of Day*, is frequently read as a figure whose identity remains suspended between the obligations of caregiving within her family and her own intellectual and professional aspirations, with critics tracing how memory and the family home in Old Delhi function as both anchor and constraint upon her sense of self. Sita, in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*, is similarly read

as a woman whose adult identity is destabilised by the resurfacing of childhood memory, prompting her retreat to the island of Manori in search of psychological integration.

5.2 Gender and Social Expectations

A substantial portion of the literature situates identity crisis explicitly within the structures of patriarchal expectation. Studies of *Fasting, Feasting* document how the protagonist Uma's identity is progressively foreclosed by her family's insistence on early marriage prospects over education, while her cousin Anamika's academic promise is similarly extinguished by familial demands, producing what several critics describe as a systemic, rather than individual, crisis of female identity (Haque, 2019; Jackson, 2018). These readings extend the discussion of identity crisis beyond individual psychology to the level of social critique, arguing that Desai's novels function simultaneously as case studies in personal psychology and as indictments of the gendered distribution of opportunity within Indian domestic life.

5.3 Search for Autonomy

Notwithstanding the frequently unresolved endings of Desai's novels, critics consistently identify a search for autonomy as a unifying thread across her female protagonists. This search takes varied forms: Maya's tragic and destructive assertion of will in *Cry, the Peacock*; Nanda Kaul's retreat into solitude in *Fire on the Mountain*; Sita's flight to the island in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*; and Bim's gradual, hard-won acceptance of her own life's shape in *Clear Light of Day*. Several scholars argue that Desai deliberately withholds full resolution in order to avoid a falsely redemptive narrative of liberation, instead presenting autonomy as a fragile, partial, and continually renegotiated achievement rather than a fixed endpoint.

6. Critical Discussion

6.1 Alienation and Identity Interrelationship

Taken together, the literature reviewed here suggests that alienation and identity crisis in Desai's fiction operate less as separate thematic strands than as two faces of a single psychological process. Estrangement from family and society precipitates, and is in turn deepened by, the protagonist's uncertainty about who she is apart from the roles assigned to her; the resulting identity crisis then further isolates her from those around her, who are frequently unable or unwilling to recognise her inner turmoil. This circular relationship is implicit in much of the criticism reviewed, even where individual studies do not name it explicitly, suggesting that a more integrated theoretical treatment of the two concepts would strengthen future scholarship.

6.2 Comparative Review of Selected Novels

Comparing across the novels considered in this review, a discernible pattern emerges in the locus of alienation and identity crisis. In *Cry, the Peacock* and *Voices in the City*, both early works, alienation is rendered in intensely psychological and near-gothic terms, culminating in breakdown or tragedy. In the middle-period novels, *Bye-Bye Blackbird* and *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*, alienation acquires a more explicitly social and cultural dimension, whether diasporic displacement or the tension between urban modernity and rural retreat. In the later novels, *Fire on the Mountain*, *Clear Light of Day*, and *Fasting, Feasting*, critics note a shift toward more restrained, quietly devastating depictions of familial and gendered confinement,

with identity crisis expressed through withdrawal and endurance rather than dramatic rupture. This trajectory, while noted piecemeal across individual studies, has not been the subject of sustained diachronic analysis in the literature reviewed.

This comparative pattern also has implications for how critics characterise Desai's narrative resolutions. Whereas the early novels tend toward catastrophic endings that resolve psychological tension through violence or breakdown, the later novels increasingly favour ambiguous, open-ended conclusions in which the protagonist neither fully overcomes nor is fully destroyed by her alienation and identity crisis. Scholars reading *Clear Light of Day*, for example, note that Bim's closing acceptance of her family and her past is deliberately underplayed rather than triumphant, suggesting a maturing narrative strategy that resists easy catharsis in favour of a more unsettled, and arguably more psychologically credible, sense of resolution. Recognising this shift more systematically, rather than as an incidental observation within single-novel studies, would strengthen the field's understanding of Desai's development as a novelist of the self.

6.3 Major Findings and Research Gaps

Three major findings emerge from this review. First, the overwhelming majority of recent scholarship on Desai continues to privilege single-novel, thematic readings, with comparatively few studies undertaking systematic comparison across her full body of work. Second, feminist and psychological approaches, while individually well developed, are more often juxtaposed than genuinely synthesised, leaving room for more integrated theoretical models. Third, despite the recurring critical vocabulary of trauma, repression, and existential crisis, few studies engage rigorously with the formal apparatus of trauma theory, existential psychology, or contemporary identity theory, relying instead on impressionistic psychological description. These findings collectively indicate that, notwithstanding the considerable volume of criticism on Desai published between 2016 and 2024, there remains substantial scope for more theoretically integrated and comparative scholarship on alienation and identity crisis in her fiction.

7. Conclusion

This review has surveyed recent scholarship on alienation and identity crisis in the selected novels of Anita Desai, tracing how critics have read her protagonists' psychological estrangement and unresolved search for selfhood through psychological, social, and feminist frameworks. The literature confirms Desai's enduring critical reputation as a novelist of interiority, whose sustained attention to the inner lives of women within the Indian family has generated a rich and varied body of criticism. At the same time, the review has identified notable gaps: the relative absence of integrated treatments of alienation and identity crisis as a single process, limited comparative and diachronic analysis across Desai's novels, and underdeveloped engagement with formal psychological and trauma-theoretical frameworks. Addressing these gaps offers a productive direction for future research, one capable of extending the already substantial critical appreciation of Desai's contribution to Indian English fiction.

Future scholarship would benefit from three broad directions suggested by this review. First, systematic comparative studies that trace the evolution of alienation and identity crisis across the full arc of Desai's career, from *Cry, the Peacock* to *Fasting, Feasting*, would help establish whether the shifts observed piecemeal in existing criticism constitute a genuine developmental pattern in her narrative technique. Second, more rigorous application of established psychological and trauma-theoretical frameworks, rather than impressionistic psychoanalytic vocabulary, would sharpen the analytical precision of future readings. Third, greater attention to Desai's male characters, and to the ways in which patriarchal structures also constrain and alienate them, would offer a more complete picture of the gendered dynamics her fiction so carefully renders. Pursued together, these directions promise to deepen an already rich critical tradition and to secure Desai's continuing relevance to the study of selfhood and estrangement in Indian English fiction.

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