
Exploring "shadow" or "absence" of the maternal figure in Anita Desai's work

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Abstract

This article critically examines the portrayal of the maternal figure in select novels of Anita Desai, specifically *Cry, the Peacock*, *Fire on the Mountain*, *Clear Light of Day*, and *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* Departing from the traditional Indian literary trope of the "nurturing mother," She presents mothers who are either physically absent, emotionally distant, or psychologically fragmented. This study argues that the maternal "absence" creates a void that the protagonists attempt to fill through neurotic obsessions or escapism, while the "shadow" of the mother, represented by inherited trauma or domestic failure, functions as a restrictive force. By utilizing psychological realism, she highlights how the failure of the maternal bond serves as a microcosm for the broader existential alienation of the modern Indian woman. This article examines the psychological and narrative significance of the maternal figure in her fiction, concentrating on how her "shadow" (the lingering negative influence) and "absence" (physical or emotional) impact the consciousness of her protagonists. The study further investigates the "Absent Mother" archetype, positing that the mother's inability to communicate or nurture stems from her own unresolved existential crises within a restrictive social structure.

Keywords: Anita Desai, Maternal Absence, Motherhood, Psychological Realism, Alienation, Female Subjectivity, Post-Colonial Literature.

Introduction

Anita Desai is widely acknowledged as a forerunner of the psychological novel within Indian English Literature. She holds a unique position in this literary sphere due to her profound psychological realism and emphasis on characters' inner experiences rather than overt social commentary. Her narratives frequently depict individuals, particularly women, engulfed in emotional turmoil stemming from ineffective communication and

broken family ties. The focus of her stories tends to shift from external societal conditions to the internal “mandscape” of her characters. Her literature delves deeply into the inner lives of her characters, especially women grappling with emotional solitude, fractured relationships, and psychological struggles. A central element of this psychological realm is the maternal figure.

Within traditional Indian culture, mothers are often idealized as the Ma-as-Goddess archetype. Classic Indian literature typically portrays mothers as selfless and emotionally supportive. Desai challenges this notion by illustrating maternal figures who exist as silent presences in the background or whose absence profoundly impacts their children. Nevertheless, she dismantles this myth. Among the most striking features of her narratives is the depiction of motherhood not as a nurturing or stabilizing force, but rather as an absent, ineffectual, or emotionally distant entity. In her literary world, the maternal figure is often associated with feelings of resentment or a haunting void that compels children, especially daughters, to navigate a landscape lacking emotional support. A recurring theme in her novels is the “shadow” or absence of maternal figures, manifested through emotional withdrawal, death, or psychological ineptitude. This absence deeply influences the identities and mental realms of her protagonists.

The analysis investigates how the maternal figure, often sidelined, voiceless, or emotionally absent, serves as a significant presence through its absence. By exploring her chosen works, such as *Cry, the Peacock*, *Fire on the Mountain*, *Clear Light of Day*, and *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* the analysis looks at how maternal absence contributes to feelings of alienation, neurosis, and the quest for self-identity in Desai’s literary realm. This article examines how Desai uses the absence or emotional inadequacy of the maternal figure as a narrative device to highlight themes of alienation, identity development, and psychological distress.

Analysis And Interpretation

Anita Desai’s debut novel, *Cry, the Peacock*, highlights the significant psychological impact of a mother’s absence on the emotional instability and tragic destiny of the main character, Maya. The character of Maya experiences severe psychological turmoil, which is, in part, a result of her upbringing. Although her mother is absent due to her early death, the emotional gap she left remains unaddressed. Maya is overly attached to her father, whose overindulgent care attempts to replace maternal nurturing but fails to provide emotional equilibrium. The character, Maya, is continually haunted by the complete lack of her mother. The absence of a maternal figure plays a crucial role in Maya’s struggles with adult relationships, particularly her marriage to Gautam. In this context, the mother only exists as a mere shadow, an absence that influences Maya’s emotional intensities and neurotic dependencies.

Maya was brought up without a mother, instead receiving excessive, indulgent affection from her father. This disparity in parental care, where the father's overprotectiveness fills in for maternal nurturing, hinders Maya's emotional resilience. The father's love, while profound, is more possessive and protective rather than stabilizing. As a result, Maya remains childlike, emotionally vulnerable, and ill-equipped to handle loss, grief, or death. Therefore, the missing mother becomes a symbolic emptiness, an incomplete source of emotional stability that Maya unconsciously seeks throughout her life. Raised by a father who treats her as if she were a "toy," this maternal absence has a direct effect on Maya's marriage to Gautam. Lacking maternal guidance in regulating emotions and engaging in adult intimacy, Maya anticipates the same level of attention and reassurance from her husband that she once received from her father. Maya is deprived of the maternal guidance needed to adjust to her husband Gautam's stern, rational realm. The mother's absence creates a void that Maya attempts to fill by obsessing over the death prophecy presented by the "albino astrologer." In the absence of a mother figure to exemplify psychological resilience, Maya spirals into a fatalistic existence filled with shadows and hallucinations. Maya fixates on her mother's lack of support, which leads her to be unhealthily preoccupied with her father's protection and the astrologer's ominous prediction.

Though the novel's unnamed and deceased mother never appears directly within the narrative, her absence serves as a haunting force that greatly affects Maya's character, fears, and relationships. From a Freudian perspective, Desai's depiction of Maya illustrates the death drive (Thanatos) as a reaction to the lack of nurturing love. Desai utilizes this absence to delve into how the deficiency of a mother's emotional backing can result in neurotic dependence, insecurity, and psychological fragmentation. Through Maya, Desai portrays how the "shadow" of an absent mother shapes one's identity, emotional reliance, and mental instability. Ultimately, the novel implies that without a mother's emotional support, a person may find it challenging to establish balanced relationships and confront existential anxieties, leading to tragic outcomes.

In *Fire on the Mountain*, Nanda Kaul symbolizes the mother who has consciously chosen "absence." After many years of meeting her obligations as a vice-chancellor's wife and mother to numerous children, she withdraws into the seclusion of Carignano. Nanda's solitude is an act of defiance against the "oppressive" societal expectations surrounding motherhood. Yet, her absence is profoundly felt by her great-granddaughter, Raka, who comes from a fractured home. The "shadow" here embodies the realization that motherhood brought neither joy nor contentment, but rather a burdensome facade, initiating a cycle of emotional detachment. This novel offers a more radical illustration of motherhood's absence through Nanda Kaul, who, after enduring years of emotional pain, discards her roles as wife and mother. Although she has children, her motherhood is characterized by emotional disconnection. Her retreat into solitude signifies her refusal to adhere to traditional maternal responsibilities. This solitude also acts as a barrier against the trauma caused by her husband's

long-term affair with Miss David. This betrayal transformed her marital role into an empty performance; she held the status of a "queen" yet functioned as a "toy." She sees herself reflected in the harsh, scorched landscape of the mountains and wishes to be like a "burnt tree trunk" or a "lizard on a stone wall"—forms of existence stripped down to their essentials, requiring no emotional exchange. Carignano serves as a "cocoon." Any outside communication, such as the postman's arrival or the "banshee-like scream" of the telephone, is seen as a violent disruption of her "small, limited, and utterly solitary life." For her great-granddaughter Raka, this emotional coldness intensifies her solitude and draws her towards destruction. The absence of nurturing maternal energy across generations underscores Desai's grim perspective on fractured familial connections. In this narrative, motherhood is diminished to a social role lacking emotional depth.

Although Nanda Kaul has children, she does not share any emotional bonds with them. This absence of maternal affection illustrates her weariness and disillusionment with the concept of motherhood, leaving her life void of emotional satisfaction. The dynamic between Nanda Kaul and her great-granddaughter, Raka, highlights the effects of an emotionally barren motherhood. Nanda anticipates that Raka's presence will offer her companionship, but she is incapable of providing authentic love. Raka, already traumatized by her parents' tumultuous marriage, experiences further isolation due to Nanda's emotional aloofness.

The generational absence of maternal warmth strengthens Desai's theme of emotional inheritance. Raka's destructive behaviors and fascination with fire symbolize the internal scars inflicted by continuous emotional neglect. Nanda Kaul's childhood friend, Ila Das, acts as a distorted reflection of motherhood. Although she is unmarried and without children, Ila strives to fulfill a nurturing and socially responsible role. Her violent death emphasizes the vulnerability of women attempting to assert moral or maternal authority in an unforgiving society. Ila's fate reinforces Desai's bleak portrayal of motherhood and caregiving in a patriarchal context—a reality that offers neither safety nor respect.

Desai presents Nanda Kaul as a casualty of patriarchal expectations that restrict women to being caregivers and homemakers. The emotional neglect she experiences from her husband further undermines her maternal identity. In this light, motherhood becomes a chore performed for social approval instead of genuine emotional satisfaction. Through the character of Nanda Kaul, Desai critiques a social structure that glorifies motherhood while simultaneously denying women their emotional independence. The depiction of motherhood is portrayed not as a source of nurturing strength, but as an experience of quiet suffering.

Anita Desai's '*Clear Light of Day*' offers a nuanced yet impactful depiction of family dynamics influenced by emotional neglect and silence. One of the most notable aspects of the novel is its portrayal of silent motherhood, characterized not by care or direction but by

emotional distance and passivity. Though the mother in the Das family is physically present for much of the story, her failure to communicate, nurture, or emotionally support her children effectively renders her absent. Desai employs this theme of silent motherhood to delve into issues of emotional isolation, evolving roles, and psychological burdens.

The Das parents are presented as a couple characterized by indifference. Mrs. Das is not literally absent; she resides in the house. However, her continual illnesses, lethargy, and emotional detachment confine her role to that of an uninvolved observer. She neither provides guidance nor offers comfort to her children and remains primarily relegated to her sickroom. Her silence cultivates an emotional void within the family, depriving the children of maternal reassurance and moral support. Mrs. Das is portrayed as a woman more focused on bridge games at the club than the lives of her children. This maternal neglect compels the eldest daughter, Bim, to forfeit her youth to take on the role of a "surrogate mother." The "shadow" of the mother's indifference lingers in the home long after her passing, evident in the family's deteriorating house and the resentment Bim harbors towards her siblings.

In the narrative, the mother is physically present but emotionally disconnected, particularly during her illness. She fails to provide her children with emotional direction, leaving them to navigate trauma and responsibility on their own. The eldest daughter, Bim, has to step into the mother's shoes, sacrificing personal fulfillment to care for her family. The most significant outcome of the mother's silence is the forced alteration of roles within the Das family. The eldest daughter, Bim, is obligated to assume the duties of both mother and father. She becomes the caretaker not just for her siblings but later for her mentally disabled brother, Baba. This early acceptance of adult responsibilities robs Bim of both personal freedom and emotional satisfaction.

Desai portrays Bim as a victim of silent motherhood—appearing strong outwardly, yet deeply wounded inside. The mother's emotional absence leads to a role reversal and a lasting sense of resentment. Desai employs this depiction to challenge traditional ideas of motherhood, illustrating that a mother's inaction can be just as harmful as physical absence. The "shadow" mother serves as a representation of the emotional neglect that fuels Bim's bitterness and feeling of captivity.

This showcases the parents' complete immersion in their own concerns (and card games), thereby leaving the children, Bim, Tara, and Raja, in a state of emotional neglect. The novel illustrates the strained connections within a family in Old Delhi, juxtaposing the innocence of their childhood with the disillusioned realities they face as adults following the Partition of India. Desai's evocative narrative highlights the complex, interdependent relationship between the two main sisters, Bim and Tara, who frequently struggle to establish their own identities apart from their shared, deeply connected family background.

Desai implies that this silence is more harmful than outright cruelty. The mother's passivity indicates emotional detachment, reinforcing the notion that motherhood lacking emotional connection fails to serve its nurturing purpose. Through this nuanced representation, Desai asserts that motherhood necessitates emotional involvement and communication; without these, it becomes a vague presence that haunts instead of nourishes. Therefore, the silent motherhood in '*Clear Light of Day*' stands as a significant critique of familial silence and patriarchal limitations.

In '*Where Shall We Go This Summer?*', Sita's journey to Manori Island represents her attempt to escape the burdens of motherhood. Manori stands as a symbol of her pre-maternal life. She believes that the island, along with the memory of her father, who was like a "magician," can provide an escape from the harsh realities of life. As she anticipates the arrival of her fifth child, she views childbirth in a violent world as an act of betrayal. For Sita, the act of bringing forth life has lost its creative significance. After having four children, her perception of the world has turned towards its inherent violence. Sita's internal battle arises from her struggle to reconcile her identity as a nurturing mother with her desire for personal autonomy. The abandonment of her family by her mother years prior indicates that "absence" is a legacy that is inherited. Her crisis stems from the contradiction that bringing a child into the world is akin to subjecting them to danger. She views the womb as the sole sanctuary and develops an intense desire to keep the child from entering the world permanently. She harbors resentment towards her body for its biological functions, seeing it as a mechanism governed by her husband Raman's "logical" and "traditional" worldview. Her attempt to escape is a quest to reclaim her body from its existence as a "passive medium." This journey is a "mental journey," allowing her to return to a time when she identified primarily as a daughter instead of a mother. By venturing back to the island, she seeks to remove the "layer of numbness" that has enveloped her life in Bombay.

Growing up without a mother has left Sita without a template for nurturing. She does not possess the emotional "strength" needed to address the needs of her children, which fosters "anger, fear, and rebellion" within her. She had idealized her father as a miraculous figure. Her retreat to the island represents a desperate effort to rediscover her ability to shield herself from the perils associated with childbirth. When Raman arrives to retrieve the children for school, Sita comes to realize that the island is "uninhabitable" and that its magic was merely an illusion. She recognizes that while she can extricate herself from her role as a wife, her responsibilities as a mother are an unavoidable biological and societal reality. Her return to Bombay signifies not a failure, but a journey of "self-discovery." She transitions from a neurotic rejection represented by "no" to a rational, albeit difficult, acceptance signified by "yes." She embraces the necessity of living within the "gray, egg-like world" of reality, even in its absence of the vivid essence of her inner self.

Desai presents a compelling and audacious exploration of motherhood through her nuanced characterization and thematic depth. Central to this is her main character, Sita, who grapples with the burdens of her fifth pregnancy. Rather than embracing the typical narrative arc that celebrates the joy and fulfillment often associated with motherhood, Sita views her condition as a profound burden—a punitive experience that feels like an endless cycle of sacrifice. To her, this pregnancy symbolizes not a blessing, but a "meaningless drain" on her identity and spirit, illustrating a stark contrast to the conventional portrayal of pregnancy in literature as a path to happiness and fulfillment. Throughout the story, Desai intricately weaves Sita's internal conflict, emphasizing the emotional turmoil and societal pressures that accompany her situation, ultimately challenging the reader to reconsider the complexities of motherhood and its societal expectations.

Conclusion

The maternal figure in Anita Desai's work is rarely a source of comfort; instead, she is a site of conflict. Whether through death, indifference, or deliberate withdrawal, the "absence" of the mother acts as a catalyst for the protagonist's psychological disintegration. The "shadow" of the mother represents the domestic entrapment that Desai's women both fear and inherit. Ultimately, Desai suggests that until the societal expectations of motherhood are reconciled with the individual needs of the woman, the mother-daughter relationship will remain a "troubled inheritance" of silence and shadows.

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