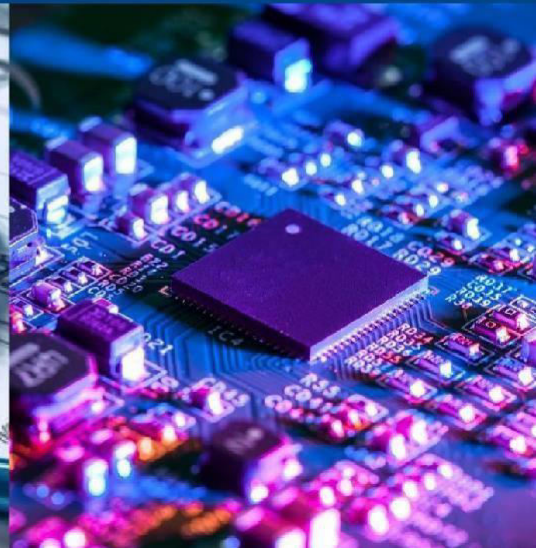
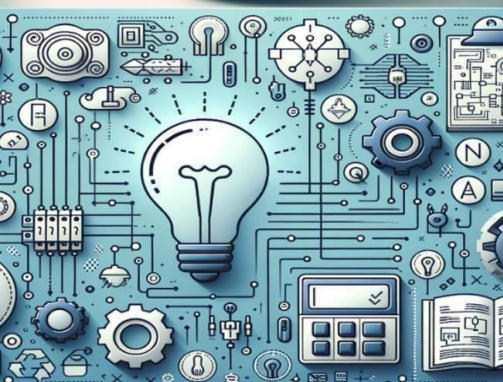




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Female Subjectivity under Patriarchal Constraint in the Novels of Anita Desai

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ABSTRACT: This paper examines the interrelation of female subjectivity and domestic space under patriarchal constraint in the selected novels of Anita Desai. Drawing upon postcolonial feminist theory and concepts specific to Indian feminist discourse, the study analyses the ways in which women's consciousness is formed within marital and familial structures characterised by emotional asymmetry, hierarchical regulation, and the ideology of duty. Parallel attention is given to the household as the primary site of gendered power, where mobility, labour, recognition, and selfhood are continuously managed. Through close reading of *Cry, the Peacock*, *Voices in the City*, *Fire on the Mountain*, *Clear Light of Day*, and *Fasting, Feasting*, the paper demonstrates that Desai's fiction consistently represents female subjectivity as socially produced and interiorly intense under conditions of limitation, while treating domestic space as simultaneously confining and constitutive of identity. Agency appears predominantly in residual and non-spectacular forms—silence, withdrawal, endurance, and limited self-clarification—rather than in decisive rupture or achieved autonomy. Comparative analysis across the novels reveals both deep continuities in Desai's feminist vision and a gradual shift from tragic extremity toward more nuanced mappings of partial self-possession within ongoing constraint. The study argues that the interrelation of subjectivity and domestic space constitutes a central achievement of Desai's contribution to feminist discourse in Indian English literature.

KEYWORDS: Anita Desai; female subjectivity; domestic space; patriarchal constraint; residual agency; Indian English fiction; feminist literary criticism.

I. INTRODUCTION

The novels of Anita Desai offer one of the most sustained and psychologically intensive engagements with the conditions of women's lives in Indian English fiction. Across several decades of writing, Desai has returned repeatedly to the ways female consciousness is shaped under pressure, to the unequal arrangements of marriage and family, and to the limited forms of selfhood available within social structures that systematically subordinate women's perceptions and needs. Two concerns emerge with particular force from this body of work and form the central focus of the present study: the representation of female subjectivity under patriarchal constraint, and the treatment of domestic space as a primary site of gendered power.

Female subjectivity in Desai's fiction is never presented as a free or self-originating substance. It is formed within relational and institutional arrangements—marital indifference, joint-family hierarchy, the ideology of duty and self-effacement—that continuously press upon the developing or adult self. The intensity of interior life that characterises so many of her women protagonists stands in direct relation to the limitation of external reciprocity and opportunity. When avenues of meaningful action, public participation, and confirmatory recognition are restricted, consciousness itself becomes the primary domain in which experience is registered, evaluated, and, to a limited extent, resisted. This turn inward is both a consequence of constraint and a compensatory concentration of psychic energy, producing forms of subjectivity that are heightened, vigilant, often tormented, and richly detailed.

Parallel to this exploration of consciousness runs a consistent attention to domestic space. The household in Desai's novels is never a neutral background for private life. It is a politically charged domain in which authority, labour, recognition, and constraint are distributed according to gendered principles. Rooms, thresholds, routines, and the organisation of care become the concrete medium through which patriarchal power is daily enacted. Domestic space confines mobility and absorbs unpaid labour; at the same time, it constitutes the ground of memory, attachment, and the



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residual forms of identity that persist even under limitation. The house is simultaneously prison and inheritance, site of surveillance and ground of limited self-possession.

The interrelation of these two concerns—subjectivity and domestic space—constitutes a central achievement of Desai's feminist fictional practice. The arrangements of the household enter into the very structure of female consciousness; the textures of interior life register the pressures of spatial and relational confinement; and the residual strategies of silence, withdrawal, and endurance through which women respond to constraint are themselves shaped by the domestic worlds they inhabit. Through close attention to selected novels spanning the early, middle, and later phases of her career, the present study examines this interrelation in order to clarify the distinctive contribution of Desai's fiction to the literary representation of gendered experience under patriarchal arrangements in modern India.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Any sustained examination of female subjectivity and domestic space in the novels of Anita Desai requires a clearly articulated theoretical framework capable of addressing both the psychological intensity of her fiction and the culturally specific forms of patriarchal power it represents. The present study draws upon feminist concepts of subjectivity, analyses of patriarchy and the private sphere, theories of domestic space as a site of gendered regulation, and postcolonial feminist perspectives that caution against the uncritical transfer of metropolitan categories to non-Western texts. These resources are integrated into an analytical approach that remains attentive to formal narrative strategies while testing theoretical concepts continuously against textual evidence.

Feminist theory has long insisted that subjectivity is not a natural or self-originating condition but a product of social relations and cultural meanings. Within patriarchal arrangements, female subjectivity is formed through processes of differentiation, subordination, and the internalisation of normative expectations that define women's value primarily in terms of relational service. Consciousness under such conditions is shaped by the continuous pressure of external demand and by the relative absence of confirmatory recognition. The result is often an intensified interiority: when outward avenues of action and reciprocal communication are limited, the inner life becomes the primary domain in which experience is registered and evaluated. This understanding of subjectivity as socially produced and asymmetrically positioned provides a foundational concept for the reading of Desai's women, whose consciousness is consistently rendered as formed within and against the constraints of marriage, family, and duty.

Patriarchy, in this framework, is understood not merely as individual male dominance but as a systemic organisation of power that operates through institutions, ideologies, and everyday practices. In the Indian contexts relevant to Desai's fiction, patriarchal arrangements are closely bound to kinship systems, the joint or extended family, and the moral regulation of female behaviour through the languages of duty and shame. Authority is distributed hierarchically not only between men and women but among women themselves according to age, marital status, and relation to the male line. The private sphere of the household becomes the primary domain in which these arrangements are enacted. Feminist analyses of the politics of the private sphere have demonstrated that domestic life is not a realm of natural harmony or pure affection but a field of power in which labour is extracted, recognition is unequally distributed, and subjectivity is continuously shaped. This insight is essential for interpreting the households that dominate Desai's fictional worlds.

Domestic space acquires particular theoretical significance within this framework. Spatial organisation is never neutral; it encodes and enforces social relations. The house regulates mobility, defines thresholds of inclusion and exclusion, and organises the distribution of time, labour, and visibility. Feminist spatial analysis has shown that domestic architecture and routine function as instruments of gendered control, confining women to spheres of unpaid service while investing those same spheres with profound cultural and emotional meaning. Domestic space is therefore double in character: it confines and it constitutes. It limits freedom of movement and self-definition while also providing the ground of memory, attachment, and residual identity. This double character prevents any simple reading of the household as pure prison or pure refuge and demands an analytical approach capable of sustaining both dimensions.

Postcolonial feminist perspectives further refine the theoretical orientation of the study. Critics associated with this tradition have exposed the universalising tendencies of much metropolitan feminist theory, which has often proceeded as though the experiences of Western, middle-class women could stand for the condition of women everywhere. Concepts such as agency, liberation, and the personal as political carry meanings shaped by particular historical formations and



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cannot be transferred unmodified to texts produced under different social logics. Postcolonial feminism insists upon the politics of location, the intersection of gender with race, nation, class, and colonial history, and the need to recognise culturally specific forms of constraint and resistance. In the Indian context, this insistence directs attention to kinship obligation, the ideology of self-sacrificing womanhood elaborated through nationalist discourse, and the residual force of duty and shame as mechanisms of regulation. It also cautions against measuring Desai's female characters against external standards of emancipatory success and encourages recognition of residual, negotiated, and non-spectacular forms of agency that remain available under severe limitation.

The analytical approach adopted in the present study integrates these theoretical resources into a contextual feminist reading practice. Theoretical concepts function as flexible instruments of inquiry rather than as templates for predetermined conclusions. They are retained only insofar as they illuminate the texts and are modified when the texts reveal their limitations. Close attention to narrative technique—interior focalisation, symbolic patterning, temporal organisation, and tonal understatement—ensures that formal strategies are recognised as active producers of meaning rather than as transparent vehicles for thematic content. The approach seeks to avoid both the imposition of external theoretical models and the inverse error of placing local arrangements beyond the reach of critical evaluation. It remains simultaneously attentive to the psychic intensity of female consciousness and to the social structures that shape that consciousness; to the particularities of Indian domestic organisation and to the formal means through which those particularities are rendered; to the severity of constraint and to the residual forms of meaning and self-possession that persist within it. Within this framework, the interrelation of female subjectivity and domestic space in Desai's novels becomes available for sustained and theoretically disciplined examination.

III. FEMALE SUBJECTIVITY UNDER PATRIARCHAL CONSTRAINT

The representation of female subjectivity constitutes one of the most persistent and carefully elaborated concerns of Anita Desai's fiction. Across the selected novels, women's consciousness is shown to be formed under conditions of constraint that shape both the content and the intensity of interior experience. Subjectivity does not appear as a free or self-originating substance; it is produced through continuous engagement with marital indifference, familial hierarchy, and the ideology of duty. The following discussion examines the principal dimensions of this representation.

3.1 Formation of consciousness within marital and familial structures

In Desai's fictional worlds, female consciousness is formed within specific relational and institutional arrangements that continuously press upon the self. Marriage frequently operates as a structure of emotional asymmetry in which the woman's perceptions, needs, and modes of expression are systematically undervalued or dismissed. The family, whether nuclear or joint, organises authority, labour, and recognition according to hierarchies that assign women positions of service, deference, and limited entitlement. A subjectivity shaped by continuous invalidation of feeling learns to doubt the authority of its own perceptions. A self organised around the performance of duty internalises the expectation that personal desire is secondary or illegitimate. The absence of interlocutors capable of receiving and confirming experience produces forms of isolation that deepen the turn inward. Across the novels, the reader encounters women whose interior lives have been constituted through precisely these processes. Constraint does not merely surround female consciousness from the outside; it enters into its very structure, determining the available languages of self-understanding and the range of feelings that can be acknowledged without cost.

3.2 Intensity of interior life as response to external limitation

One of the most striking features of Desai's representation of female subjectivity is the intensity with which interior life is rendered. This intensity stands in direct relation to the external limitations that organise the characters' existence. When avenues of meaningful action, public participation, and reciprocal communication are restricted, consciousness itself becomes the primary domain in which experience is registered, processed, and, to a limited extent, resisted. Sensory perception becomes acute; memory acquires obsessive force; emotional states intensify beyond the measure of ordinary social exchange. The richness of female interiority in Desai's fiction is inseparable from the poverty of external reciprocity. Intensity is the form that subjectivity takes when it is denied adequate outward expression and recognition. This pattern carries a double significance. It affirms the value and complexity of women's inner lives against social arrangements that treat those lives as secondary. At the same time, it reveals the cost of a situation in which interiority must bear a burden that relational and institutional structures refuse to share. At the extreme, the intensity of consciousness becomes a source of isolation and disintegration rather than of fulfilment.



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3.3 Invalidation of female perception and emotional experience

A recurring mechanism through which patriarchal constraint shapes subjectivity is the systematic invalidation of female perception and emotional experience. Male figures in the novels frequently meet women's expressions of need, fear, or desire with rational dismissal, philosophical abstraction, or mild irritation. Feeling is treated as excessive, childish, or irrational; the preference for detachment and logical consistency carries the authority of a gendered cultural hierarchy. This invalidation closes the primary channel through which recognition might have been secured and isolates the woman within the very relationships that social expectation presents as the foundation of her adult identity. The cumulative effect is the erosion of confidence in one's own mode of experiencing the world. Consciousness formed under continuous invalidation becomes hyper-vigilant, self-doubting, and increasingly enclosed within its own unshared intensity. Desai's fiction demonstrates with considerable precision how the devaluation of female emotional and perceptual styles within intimate relationships contributes directly to the isolation and, in extreme cases, the disintegration of the gendered self.

3.4 Variations across age, temperament, and social location

Although common patterns organise the representation of female subjectivity, the selected novels also display significant variations related to age, temperament, and social location. The young wife confronting the early years of an emotionally barren marriage inhabits a different temporal and psychic situation from the elderly woman who seeks withdrawal after decades of domestic service. The unmarried sister who has remained within the family home into middle age carries a history of accumulated responsibility that differs from the experience of the daughter still positioned as a permanent subordinate within the parental household. Temperament introduces further distinctions: extreme sensory responsiveness, ironic self-protective intelligence, and cultivated dispositions toward silence produce distinctive configurations of consciousness and distinctive trajectories of response. These variations prevent the reduction of Desai's women to a single type and confirm that subjectivity is always particular as well as patterned. Constraint assumes different forms and exacts different costs according to the stage of life, the resources of temperament, and the specific social location of the woman who endures it.

3.5 Common patterns in the representation of the gendered self

When variations are taken into account, a set of common patterns nevertheless remains clearly discernible. Female subjectivity in Desai's fiction is consistently relational in its formation, constituted through engagement with the expectations and failures of recognition that characterise marriage and family life. This relational formation occurs under conditions of asymmetry in which the woman's consciousness is shaped by relationships that carry less authority than those of male or senior figures. The response to asymmetry is characteristically a turn toward intensified interiority. The gendered self is marked by a persistent tension between residual desire and the powerful claims of duty, shame, and familial obligation. Desire is rarely extinguished entirely; it continues to operate as a source of unrest even when it finds no viable outlet. Finally, the representation of female consciousness is inseparable from the representation of its potential disintegration. States of fear, exhaustion, muteness, and psychic fracture testify to the limits of endurance under sustained constraint. These common patterns constitute the core of Desai's contribution to the literary representation of female subjectivity and provide the foundation for the subsequent examination of domestic space as the concrete domain within which such subjectivity is formed and tested.

IV. DOMESTIC SPACE AND GENDERED POWER

Across Anita Desai's selected novels, domestic space constitutes the primary terrain upon which patriarchal power is organised, experienced, and, to a limited extent, negotiated. The household is never a neutral background for the unfolding of private lives; it is a politically charged domain in which authority, labour, recognition, and constraint are continuously distributed according to gendered principles. The following discussion examines the household as the central site of regulation, the specific mechanisms of joint-family hierarchy and marital indifference, the unequal distribution of care, the double character of domestic space, and the continuities that link these concerns across the fiction.

4.1 The household as primary site of regulation

In Desai's fictional worlds, the most immediate and consequential regulation of women's lives occurs within the household. Public institutions and formal economic structures remain largely peripheral to the daily experience of the female protagonists. What shapes their existence is the organisation of rooms, routines, relationships, and expectations inside the domestic domain. The household determines who may speak and who must remain silent, who is entitled to rest and who must continue to serve, whose needs organise the common life and whose needs are systematically deferred.



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It controls mobility, defining the boundaries of legitimate movement. It organises time, filling the day with tasks that leave little residual space for self-directed activity. It manages recognition, distributing attention and emotional responsiveness according to hierarchies of gender and seniority. It shapes subjectivity itself, forming habits of deference, vigilance, and self-monitoring. When these mechanisms are viewed across the novels, the household emerges as the concrete institutional form through which the broader ideology of female duty is translated into the texture of lived experience.

4.2 Joint-family hierarchy and marital indifference

Within the general category of the household, the novels delineate specific structural arrangements that intensify the regulation of women's lives. The joint-family system, with its multiple generations and competing centres of authority, produces a diffusion of power that makes resistance particularly difficult. A woman entering such a household as a daughter-in-law confronts not a single oppressor but a network of expectations and hierarchical relations among women themselves. Seniority confers upon older women a measure of authority over younger ones, creating patterns of female participation in the enforcement of patriarchal norms. Marital indifference constitutes another recurrent mechanism of constraint. In several of the novels, the central marital relationship is characterised by a fundamental asymmetry of emotional investment and communicative reciprocity. The husband's detachment, rational dismissal, or simple inattention invalidates the wife's mode of experience and closes the primary channel through which recognition might have been secured. This indifference is not always actively cruel; its power often lies in its calm and systematic refusal to engage. The cumulative effect is the isolation of the woman within the very relationship that social expectation presents as the foundation of her adult identity.

4.3 Unequal distribution of care and emotional labour

The unequal distribution of care further structures domestic power. Across the novels, the labour of maintaining household continuity—practical, emotional, and managerial—falls disproportionately upon particular women, while other family members remain free to pursue their own trajectories. This labour is continuous, unpaid, and largely unrecognised. It absorbs time, energy, and identity, and it generates the resentment that surfaces when the asymmetry becomes impossible to ignore. The politics of unpaid emotional labour constitute one of the most consistent and carefully examined dimensions of patriarchal power in Desai's fiction. The household is sustained by work that its beneficiaries prefer not to see, and the women who perform that work find their selves both constituted and depleted by the role. Comparative attention reveals that this asymmetry operates whether the woman is a young wife, an unmarried sister who remains, or an elderly figure who has spent decades in continuous service. The extraction of care without adequate recognition is a structural feature of the domestic arrangements the novels depict.

4.4 Domestic space as both confining and constitutive

A distinctive feature of Desai's representation of domestic space is its double character. The household confines. It limits movement, speech, and the range of available futures. It subjects women to surveillance and to the continuous demand for service. It embodies the unequal arrangements that produce suffering and the erosion of self. At the same time, domestic space constitutes. It is the ground of memory, attachment, and the residual forms of identity that persist even under constraint. It provides the concrete settings in which relationships, however asymmetrical, continue to hold meaning. For women who have spent decades within a particular house, that house becomes inseparable from the self that has been formed there. This double character prevents any simple reading of domestic space as pure prison or pure refuge. The house that confines is also the house that holds the past; the routines that exhaust also provide the only available structure of continuity; the relationships that demand also bind. Desai consistently sustains both dimensions, refusing to resolve the ambiguity that defines women's relationship to the domestic worlds they inhabit.

4.5 Continuities in the politics of the private sphere across the novels

When the representations of domestic space and family structure are viewed across the full range of the selected novels, deep continuities become visible. The household remains the primary site of gendered regulation from the early fiction to the later work. The mechanisms of hierarchy, indifference, and unequal care recur in varying configurations but with consistent force. The double character of domestic space as confining and constitutive is sustained across different narrative situations and phases of the writer's career. The private sphere is never treated as a domain of natural harmony or of simple oppression; it is always a field of power, negotiation, and unresolved tension. These continuities affirm that Desai's engagement with the politics of domestic life is not incidental to particular plots but central to her broader fictional project. By returning repeatedly to the household as the ground of her most significant explorations, Desai establishes



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the domestic novel as a form capable of serious critical work. The politics of the private sphere, as articulated across the selected novels, constitute one of the most enduring and consequential dimensions of her contribution to feminist discourse in Indian English fiction.

V. INTERRELATION OF SUBJECTIVITY AND DOMESTIC SPACE

The preceding sections have examined female subjectivity and domestic space as distinct but closely related concerns in Anita Desai's fiction. The present section addresses their interrelation directly, demonstrating that domestic arrangements enter into the structure of consciousness itself, that spatial organisation encodes the politics of gender through recurring metaphors of enclosure and withdrawal, that silence and endurance function as responses shaped by the household, and that the limited forms of agency available to Desai's women are themselves conditioned by the domestic worlds they inhabit.

5.1 How domestic arrangements shape female consciousness

Domestic arrangements in Desai's novels do not merely surround female consciousness from the outside; they participate in its formation. The continuous demand for service, the absence of reciprocal recognition, the hierarchical distribution of authority, and the moral pressure of duty and shame operate as everyday conditions under which the self is produced and sustained. A woman whose time is absorbed by unpaid care develops habits of attention oriented toward the needs of others. A woman whose perceptions are systematically dismissed within the marital home learns to distrust the authority of her own experience. A woman confined within the joint-family household internalises the surveillance that organises its routines. Consciousness formed under these conditions carries the imprint of the domestic structures that shape it. The intensity of interior life that characterises Desai's protagonists is itself a response to the limitation of outward reciprocity within the household. When the domestic world offers little confirmation or opportunity, the inner world expands to fill the available space. Subjectivity and domestic space are therefore not parallel themes but mutually constitutive dimensions of the same representational project.

5.2 Spatial metaphors of enclosure, withdrawal, and residual autonomy

The interrelation of subjectivity and domestic space is further articulated through recurring spatial metaphors that encode the conditions of gendered existence. Images of enclosure—closed rooms, oppressive heat, thresholds that cannot be crossed, houses that hold and confine—link physical environment to psychological and social condition. The house becomes a figure for the closed circuit of a life organised around duty and limited recognition. Withdrawal, whether into silence, solitude, or the cultivated emptiness of deliberate isolation, appears as a spatial as well as a psychological strategy: a claim to residual control over the terms of one's existence within or against the domestic order. Residual autonomy, when it is achieved, is frequently figured in spatial terms—the partial possession of a room, a house, a routine that has been claimed rather than merely endured. These metaphors do not function as simple allegories; they create fields of association that deepen the representation of constraint and limited self-possession. Because so much of what Desai's women experience cannot be fully articulated within available social languages, the spatial dimension of the narrative becomes a crucial medium for the communication of meanings that direct statement might render schematic.

5.3 Silence and endurance within the household

Silence and endurance constitute the predominant modes through which female characters respond to the pressures of domestic life. These modes are produced by the conditions of the household itself. When speech that expresses personal dissatisfaction is interpreted as rebellion or ingratitude, withholding becomes the safer course. When the continuous demand for care leaves no residual space for self-directed activity, endurance becomes the default posture of survival. Silence within the household is therefore not merely an individual psychological symptom; it is a politically charged condition shaped by the absence of effective interlocutors and by the moral regulation that renders the expression of need illegitimate. Endurance similarly carries a double character: it preserves a minimum of continuity and care, yet it absorbs the self so completely into the performance of duty that little remains for personal definition. The interrelation of subjectivity and domestic space is visible in the way these responses are both produced by household arrangements and enacted within them. Silence and endurance are the forms that constrained consciousness takes inside the very structures that constrain it.



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5.4 Limited forms of agency available inside domestic structures

The forms of agency available to Desai's women are themselves conditioned by the domestic worlds they inhabit. Unrestricted autonomy is not among the available options. Economic dependence, the threat of social sanction, the internalisation of normative expectation, and the genuine bonds of attachment that complicate any clean break all operate to limit the scope of freedom. The strategies that remain—withdrawal into deliberate solitude, the gradual release of accumulated bitterness, the achievement of limited clarity within ongoing responsibility—are residual and negotiated rather than transformative. They do not overturn the structures of the household; they enable a measure of self-possession within those structures. Agency in Desai's fiction is therefore not a matter of escaping domestic space but of achieving a limited and hard-won definition of self inside it. The interrelation of subjectivity and domestic space is most fully visible at this point: the household shapes consciousness, consciousness responds through residual strategies of silence and endurance, and those strategies constitute the only forms of agency that the domestic order permits. In sustaining this complex interrelation across the selected novels, Desai produces a feminist fictional practice that remains attentive both to the severity of constraint and to the limited meanings that constrained lives continue to generate.

VI. TEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF SELECTED NOVELS

The theoretical concerns examined in the preceding sections find concrete realisation in the selected novels of Anita Desai. The following analysis addresses each text in turn, demonstrating how female subjectivity and domestic space are interwoven within specific narrative situations, and how the patterns identified comparatively are grounded in the particularities of individual works.

6.1 Cry, the Peacock: marital home and psychological disintegration

In *Cry, the Peacock*, the marital home becomes the primary site of emotional confinement and the formation of a subjectivity under extreme pressure. Maya's hypersensitive consciousness is systematically invalidated by a husband whose rationality and detachment leave no space for reciprocal recognition. The domestic environment—its rooms, garden, and oppressive atmosphere—functions as a spatial correlative for her isolation. The childhood prophecy intensifies her fear until ordinary perception is colonised by apprehension. Narrative immersion in her interiority grants authority to a mode of experience that the marital relationship devalues. When intermediate strategies of endurance collapse, the outcome is violence and madness: a tragic and residual refusal of an uninhabitable domestic reality rather than a simple individual pathology. The novel establishes with unforgettable force the costs of a subjectivity formed within a household organised around emotional asymmetry.

6.2 Voices in the City: joint-family confinement and urban alienation

Voices in the City expands the exploration of domestic constraint into the joint-family household and the alienating pressure of urban Calcutta. Monisha's marriage places her under a network of hierarchical expectations and continuous surveillance that extinguishes vitality and drives her toward silence. The household operates as a total environment in which personal expression finds no legitimate outlet. Calcutta intensifies this confinement, offering no external space of meaningful participation. Contrasting female responses—Monisha's muteness, Amla's partial professional engagement, and the residual authority of maternal figures—map a range of positions without endorsing any as adequate. The novel's resistance to redemptive conclusions registers the incomplete character of social transformation in the domain of gender and the severe limits of individual rebellion within joint-family and urban structures.

6.3 Fire on the Mountain: solitude, aging, and residual withdrawal

In *Fire on the Mountain*, Nanda Kaul's pursuit of isolation at Carignano represents a late claim to residual self-possession after decades of domestic service. Solitude is chosen as the negation of further demand, a spatial and psychological withdrawal from the continuous availability that has defined her life. Yet the past intrudes; memory proves resistant to expulsion; and the arrival of the silent child Raka and the vulnerable Ila Das reintroduce relational claim. The violent disruption that concludes the narrative exposes the fragility of carefully constructed solitude. Aging and the material conditions of the older female body receive sustained attention. The novel examines both the intelligibility of withdrawal as a response to residual exhaustion and the ultimate inadequacy of isolation as a strategy of protection or complete self-definition.



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6.4 Clear Light of Day: custodianship, memory, and unpaid care

Clear Light of Day offers one of Desai's most nuanced examinations of the unmarried woman who remains within the family home. Bim's position as custodian of the house, of the aging aunt, and of the impaired brother organises her identity around continuous unpaid care. Temporal layering demonstrates the persistence of the past within present structures of feeling; resentment toward siblings who left coexists with genuine attachment and the habits of responsibility. Domestic space functions as both inheritance and constraint—the concrete form of memory and the demand for ongoing labour. Reconciliation, when it occurs, remains limited and hard-won, achieving a degree of interior acceptance without abolishing the structural facts of her situation. The novel affirms the possibility of residual self-possession within ongoing responsibility and refuses narratives of simple escape or simple victimhood.

6.5 Fasting, Feasting: household hierarchy and cross-cultural constraint

Fasting, Feasting extends the analysis of domestic power through a comparative structure that places the traditional Indian household in relation to a Western suburban setting. Uma's restricted life within the parental home is organised by preferential treatment of the son, the politics of food and body, and the near-total foreclosure of desire and opportunity. The shift to Arun's experience in America introduces alternative forms of gendered regulation—consumer anxiety, disordered appetite, and incomplete freedoms—without presenting the Western context as a resolution of Indian constraints. Silence, invisibility, and the denial of desire recur across both settings. The novel's dual critique refuses simple hierarchies between cultural arrangements and demonstrates the adaptability of patriarchal regulation under different institutional and cultural conditions. Domestic space, in both its Indian and American configurations, remains a primary site of the management of female existence.

VII. COMPARATIVE OBSERVATIONS

When the selected novels are read in relation to one another, a set of recurring patterns and developmental trajectories becomes visible. These comparative observations consolidate the findings of the individual analyses and clarify the broader configurations of female subjectivity and domestic power that characterise Desai's feminist fictional practice.

7.1 Recurring configurations of constrained subjectivity

Across the novels, female subjectivity is consistently formed under conditions of marital and familial constraint. Consciousness is relational, produced through engagement with asymmetrical relationships that invalidate or subordinate women's perceptions and needs. The intensity of interior life stands in direct relation to the limitation of external reciprocity. Despite variations of age, temperament, and social location, common patterns persist: the turn toward intensified interiority, the tension between residual desire and the claims of duty, and the vulnerability of the gendered self to exhaustion and disintegration under sustained pressure. Constraint does not produce simple emptiness; it produces distinctive, heightened, and often tormented forms of consciousness that the novels render with sustained attention.

7.2 Domestic space as continuous field of power and negotiation

Domestic space functions throughout the selected fiction as a continuous field of power and negotiation. The household regulates mobility, time, labour, and recognition according to gendered principles. Joint-family hierarchy, marital indifference, and the unequal distribution of care recur as mechanisms of constraint. At the same time, domestic space remains constitutive: it holds memory, attachment, and the residual forms of identity that persist even under limitation. The house is never simply a prison or simply a refuge. Comparative reading confirms that Desai's engagement with the politics of the private sphere is not incidental to particular plots but central to her broader project. The domestic novel, in her practice, becomes a form capable of serious critical work precisely because the household is treated as a politically charged domain.

7.3 Evolution from tragic extremity to residual self-possession

A clear developmental pattern emerges across the temporal span of the fiction. The earlier novels tend toward outcomes of tragic extremity, in which intermediate strategies of endurance collapse into violence, muteness, or self-destruction. The middle and later fiction explores residual, partial, and negotiated forms of self-assertion—withdrawal into deliberate solitude, the release of accumulated bitterness, limited clarity within ongoing responsibility—that acknowledge constraint while still affirming a measure of self-possession. This evolution does not imply that later circumstances are less severe. The constraints remain. What changes is the range of responses the fiction is able to imagine and the degree of psychological nuance with which those responses are rendered. The trajectory moves from the intense registration of



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destructive consequence toward a more comprehensive mapping of the limited meanings available within ongoing asymmetry.

7.4 Narrative strategies that grant authority to female consciousness

Formal strategies actively produce the feminist meanings the novels sustain. Interior focalisation grants narrative authority to women's consciousness and challenges the patriarchal devaluation of feeling and perception. Symbolic patterning and temporal layering encode constraint and the weight of memory. Irony and understatement generate residual critique without programmatic declaration. These strategies remain consistent across three decades of writing while achieving greater subtlety and range in the later work. Comparative attention to form confirms that Desai's contribution to feminist discourse is inseparable from her technical achievement: the representation of constrained subjectivity and domestic power is accomplished through narrative means that position the reader inside the textures of women's experience rather than at a safe external distance.

VIII. CONCLUSION

This study has examined the interrelation of female subjectivity and domestic space under patriarchal constraint in the selected novels of Anita Desai. The analysis has established that female consciousness in these texts is consistently formed within marital and familial structures characterised by emotional asymmetry, hierarchical regulation, and the ideology of duty. The intensity of interior life stands in direct relation to the limitation of external reciprocity; when outward avenues of recognition and action are restricted, consciousness becomes the primary domain in which experience is registered and, to a limited extent, resisted. Domestic space functions throughout as a primary site of gendered power, regulating mobility, labour, recognition, and selfhood through the ordinary practices of household life. Joint-family hierarchy, marital indifference, and the unequal distribution of care emerge as recurring mechanisms of constraint. At the same time, domestic space remains constitutive: it holds memory, attachment, and residual identity. The interrelation of subjectivity and domestic space is central to Desai's fictional practice; household arrangements enter into the structure of consciousness, spatial metaphors encode the politics of gender, and the residual strategies of silence, withdrawal, and endurance through which women respond are themselves shaped by the domestic worlds they inhabit. Comparative reading reveals both deep continuities across three decades of writing and a developmental shift from tragic extremity toward more nuanced mappings of partial self-possession within ongoing constraint. Narrative strategies of interior focalisation, symbolic patterning, temporal layering, and tonal understatement actively produce these meanings.

The study contributes to the critical understanding of Anita Desai's fiction by demonstrating the centrality and coherence of her engagement with female subjectivity and domestic power. It clarifies patterns that remain less visible when the novels are considered in isolation and provides an account of development that respects both continuity and change. More broadly, it participates in feminist discourse within Indian English literary studies by affirming the political significance of the private sphere, by expanding the analytical vocabulary available for residual and non-spectacular forms of agency, and by modelling a reading practice that combines postcolonial sensitivity with close textual attention. The interrelation of subjectivity and domestic space is shown to constitute a primary achievement of Desai's contribution to the literary representation of gendered experience under patriarchal arrangements in modern India.

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