

Trapped Between Worlds : Women, Identity and Resistance in the Major Works of Anita Desai and Jhumpa Lahiri

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Abstract: This article examines the representation of women in the fiction of Anita Desai and Jhumpa Lahiri through the perspectives of feminist and postcolonial criticism. Both writers portray women struggling within restrictive social and cultural structures, though their narrative contexts differ significantly. Anita Desai primarily focuses on women confined within traditional Indian domestic spaces, while Jhumpa Lahiri explores the experiences of immigrant and diasporic women negotiating identity in transnational environments. The article argues that both writers depict women as “trapped between worlds” — between tradition and modernity, silence and expression, home and exile, duty and individuality. Through characters such as Bim and Uma in Desai’s *Clear Light of Day* and *Fasting, Feasting*, and Ashima and Gauri in Lahiri’s *The Namesake* and *The Lowland*, the study explores themes of emotional isolation, patriarchal oppression, migration, hybridity, and female resistance. Desai’s women often resist through silence, introspection, and emotional endurance, whereas Lahiri’s women negotiate autonomy through migration, education, and intellectual independence. However, both writers reveal that female agency remains emotionally costly and incomplete within patriarchal systems. The article further demonstrates how silence, displacement, and fragmented identity become central experiences shaping women’s lives in both domestic and diasporic contexts. By presenting women who struggle to preserve individuality despite emotional and social confinement, Desai and Lahiri contribute significantly to feminist and postcolonial literary discourse. Their fiction illuminates the psychological realities of women negotiating identity and belonging in changing social and cultural environments.

Keywords : Patriarchy; identity; diaspora; hybridity; silence; resistance; domesticity.

Introduction

The representation of women in Indian English literature has become one of the most significant areas of feminist and postcolonial studies.

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Writers such as Anita Desai and Jhumpa Lahiri have explored the emotional, psychological, and cultural struggles of women living within patriarchal structures and changing social environments. Their fiction reflects the condition of women who remain trapped between conflicting worlds of duty and desire, silence and expression, tradition and modernity. While Desai primarily focuses on women confined within Indian domestic spaces, Lahiri examines the experiences of diasporic women negotiating identity and belonging in foreign lands. Both writers portray female characters who struggle to preserve individuality despite social restrictions and emotional alienation. Vijay Mishra observes, “diasporic identity often intensifies female alienation because immigrant women must negotiate both patriarchy and displacement” (51). Similarly, Meenakshi Mukherjee remarks, “Indian women in fiction frequently exist within structures that deny them agency while simultaneously burdening them with emotional responsibility” (76). These critical perspectives help in understanding how both Desai and Lahiri portray women as emotionally fragmented individuals searching for selfhood in restrictive social systems.

Women in Anita Desai’s Fiction

Anita Desai’s fiction is deeply psychological and focuses on the emotional suffering of women trapped within traditional Indian society. Her novels portray women who experience loneliness, frustration, repression, and emotional suffocation within patriarchal family structures. Desai’s women are not revolutionary figures who openly rebel against society; rather, they resist silently through introspection, emotional withdrawal, and psychological endurance. In *Clear Light of Day*, the character of Bim represents the sacrifices expected from women within Indian families. Bim dedicates her life to caring for her family members and gradually loses her personal identity within the burden of domestic responsibility :

Now I understand why you do not wish
to marry. You have dedicated your life
to others—to your sick brother and your
aged aunt and your little brother who will
be dependent on you all his life. You
have sacrificed your own life for them.

(Desai 97)

Although she appears independent, she suffers from emotional isolation and suppressed resentment. Tara, her sister, escapes through marriage

but remains emotionally detached and haunted by guilt and nostalgia. Through these characters, Desai reveals that women continue to remain trapped within patriarchal expectations regardless of whether they remain inside or outside domestic spaces. Siddhartha Sharma comments, “Desai’s female protagonists are emotionally imprisoned within structures of domestic obligation” (64). The domestic sphere in Desai’s fiction therefore becomes a symbol of emotional confinement rather than comfort and security. Women are expected to nurture others while suppressing their own ambitions and desires. Mukherjee significantly states, “Desai’s women embody the silences of Indian patriarchy” (87).

Desai’s critique of patriarchy becomes even more explicit in *Fasting, Feasting*, where the protagonist Uma symbolises countless women denied education, freedom, and self-determination within traditional Indian families, “Uma was not allowed to go”. (16) Uma’s life is controlled entirely by her parents, referred to symbolically as “MamaPapa,” emphasising the collective authority imposed upon her existence. While her brother Arun receives educational opportunities and freedom, Uma remains confined to domestic responsibilities and failed marriage arrangements. Her emotional suffering is presented not through dramatic rebellion but through quiet longing and internal frustration. Uma dreams of independence and fulfillment, yet patriarchal structures deny her any meaningful agency. Critics argue that Uma’s silence itself becomes a subtle form of protest against social oppression. Sharma observes, “Desai transforms silence into a language of protest” (72). Desai’s women often remain aware of their oppression, yet they are unable to escape it completely. This awareness creates emotional fragmentation and psychological loneliness, exposing the cruelty of patriarchal expectations. Mukherjee further remarks, “the tragedy of Desai’s women lies in their awareness of oppression combined with their inability to escape it” (94). Through such portrayals, Desai highlights the emotional cost of female existence within rigid social systems.

Women in Jhumpa Lahiri’s Fiction

While Anita Desai examines women within India, Jhumpa Lahiri focuses on immigrant and diasporic women negotiating identity in transnational spaces. Lahiri’s fiction explores migration, cultural hybridity, exile, loneliness, and fragmented identity. Her female characters exist between cultures, unable to fully belong either to their inherited Indian traditions

or to Western society. This sense of displacement shapes their emotional experiences and relationships. In *The Namesake*, Ashima represents the loneliness and alienation experienced by immigrant women living far from their homeland, "Being a foreigner... is a sort of lifelong pregnancy." (49) After moving to America following marriage, Ashima feels disconnected from familiar customs, language, and relationships. Lahiri portrays migration not merely as geographical relocation but as emotional displacement. Ashima attempts to preserve Indian culture through rituals, food, clothing, and language in order to maintain continuity and identity. Unlike male immigrants who engage more actively in professional life, Ashima remains largely confined within the domestic sphere, revealing the gendered dimensions of migration. Vijay Mishra argues, "diasporic women preserve cultural memory while simultaneously negotiating the pressures of assimilation" (89). Ashima gradually develops confidence and independence, but her identity remains divided between India and America. Her life reflects the emotional complexity of immigrant existence and the struggle to negotiate belonging within foreign cultural spaces.

In *The Lowland*, Lahiri presents a more radical female character through Gauri, who openly rejects traditional expectations associated with marriage and motherhood, "She was free. She was free of him. Free of them all." (287) Unlike Ashima, Gauri seeks intellectual freedom and personal independence after immigrating to America. She challenges patriarchal definitions of femininity by refusing to define herself through domestic or maternal roles. However, Lahiri complicates this apparent liberation by portraying the emotional consequences of Gauri's choices. Although she achieves intellectual autonomy, she also experiences emotional detachment and alienation from family relationships. Bidisha Banerjee remarks, "Lahiri's female characters often achieve freedom at the cost of emotional belonging" (132). Gauri's character demonstrates that female autonomy within patriarchal and diasporic contexts remains emotionally costly. Lahiri repeatedly portrays hybridity as emotional fragmentation rather than liberation. Her women negotiate identity through memory, relationships, rituals, and cultural adaptation, yet they continue to experience loneliness and displacement. Mishra explains, "diasporic existence creates fractured identities shaped by nostalgia, alienation, and cultural negotiation" (113). Through these portrayals, Lahiri reveals how immigrant women struggle to preserve identity while simultaneously adapting to unfamiliar social realities.

Comparative Analysis: Identity, Silence, and Resistance

A comparative reading of Anita Desai and Jhumpa Lahiri reveals both similarities and differences in their representation of women. Desai's women are primarily trapped within traditional Indian domestic structures, while Lahiri's women confront the fragmentation associated with migration and diasporic identity. Despite these contextual differences, both writers portray women negotiating conflicting expectations imposed by patriarchal societies. Women are expected to preserve culture, nurture family, and sacrifice personal ambitions for social stability. Marriage and motherhood become central institutions through which patriarchal authority operates. In Desai's fiction, marriage often reinforces emotional confinement and female sacrifice. In Lahiri's works, marriage intersects with migration and displacement, creating additional emotional complexities. Ashima's marriage isolates her within an unfamiliar culture, whereas Gauri rejects conventional maternal and marital expectations altogether. Banerjee argues, "Lahiri destabilises traditional notions of femininity by presenting women who resist maternal idealisation" (140). Both writers therefore, question traditional assumptions regarding female identity and domesticity.

Resistance functions differently in the fiction of both writers. Desai's women resist internally through silence, introspection, and emotional withdrawal, whereas Lahiri's women articulate resistance more openly through education, migration, and intellectual independence. Yet both forms of resistance remain incomplete because patriarchal structures continue to shape women's emotional lives. Silence becomes one of the most important thematic concerns in Desai's fiction. Her female characters are denied opportunities to openly express anger, frustration, or desire. However, silence itself becomes a form of protest against patriarchal authority. Mukherjee observes, "silence in Desai's fiction reflects both oppression and resistance" (99). Lahiri's women possess greater opportunities for self-expression, but their voices remain fragmented by displacement and cultural alienation. Language itself becomes symbolic of identity conflict because immigrant women must negotiate between native and adopted cultures. Thus, both writers portray female identity as fractured and unstable within patriarchal systems. Their works emphasise that female autonomy often remains emotionally costly and incomplete.

Conclusion

Anita Desai and Jhumpa Lahiri present powerful portrayals of women negotiating identity within restrictive cultural and social structures. Though separated by geography and generation, both writers depict women as trapped between conflicting worlds of tradition and modernity, silence and voice, home and exile. Desai's women struggle within domestic confinement and patriarchal family systems, resisting oppression through silence and emotional endurance. Lahiri's women confront migration, hybridity, and cultural displacement while negotiating identity through adaptation and intellectual autonomy. Both writers reveal that female agency remains incomplete within patriarchal societies and that women who resist traditional expectations frequently experience loneliness, alienation, and fragmented belonging. Nevertheless, their female characters continue to negotiate spaces of resilience and individuality despite emotional and social confinement. Through their exploration of gender, identity, migration, and resistance, Desai and Lahiri make significant contributions to feminist and postcolonial literary discourse. Their works illuminate the emotional realities of women "trapped between worlds" and reveal the enduring struggle for female selfhood within changing social and cultural environments.

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