

Unveiling Feminine Identities: An Exploration of Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain*, and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantments*

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Abstract

This research paper aims to examine the nuanced and multifaceted nature of femininity as depicted in Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain* and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantments*. The paper begins by delving into the historical and cultural background of India, particularly the societal norms and gender roles that have traditionally confined women to domestic spaces and suppressed their voices. It then examines how Desai and Divakaruni navigate and challenge these restrictions through their female protagonists, Nanda Kaul and Sita respectively. Through their journeys, Desai and Divakaruni offer a powerful portrayal of women who assert their agency and defy the constraints imposed upon them, ultimately challenging traditional notions of femininity and forging their own paths. Through in-depth analysis of the characters, themes, and narrative strategies in these novels, this paper enriches the understanding of the complexities and nuances of feminine identities within the cultural and societal contexts of India.

Keywords: Feminine Identities, Patriarchy, Relationship, Identity crisis, Self-discovery

Introduction

India's historical and cultural background has been shaped by societal norms and gender roles that have confined women to domestic spaces and suppressed their voices. The tradition of purdah, seclusion of women from public spaces, and the emphasis on patriarchal values have reinforced the idea of women as subordinate to men. This has resulted in limited access to education, employment, and political representation for women. Although, to challenge these norms and empower women, there have been some continuous efforts too. In the Indian literary context, the works of Anita Desai and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni have emerged as pivotal in unravelling the intricacies of feminine identities. The complex and multifaceted nature of womanhood, as depicted in narratives, holds significant value in understanding the social, cultural, and psychological dimensions of female experiences. Particularly, their novels *Fire on the Mountain* and *The Forest of Enchantments* provide rich, nuanced explorations of women's lived experiences, relationships, and struggles within traditional and contemporary Indian societies.

Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain* is a profound portrayal of the protagonist Nanda Kaul's marital struggle and her self-discovery in the serene environs of Kasauli. While discussing about the protagonists of Desai such as Monisha, Maya, and Nanda, Renu Juneja writes in her paper -

These women are trapped in marriages where they feel incompatible with their husbands and in-laws. They have sensitive, introspective natures, while the men in their lives are often closed-off, indifferent, or even coarse. In Indian society, marriage

is often seen as a way for women to secure their identity, but for these characters, it only leads to the suppression of their true selves. (Juneja 2)

Desai often raises concerns about the situation of women in a marriage, this novel is no exception. Another researcher Sonia Chahal observes that

Nanda Kaul is one of those protagonists who have suffered a life-time of unhappiness caused by a loveless marriage. At one time, a University Vice Chancellor's wife, she had been the "hub of a small but intense and busy world." Throughout her life, Nanda has conformed to the wishes of her husband and has fulfilled the requirements of his social status. However, she has never received any affection from her husband. Rather, he has always treated her "as some decorative yet useful mechanical appliance needed for the efficient running of his household." Like all the patriarchal societies the world over, Indian society has also developed a whole series of feminine characteristics like obedience, submissiveness, modesty and piety etc. Nanda has always fitted into this mould of an ideal woman. Instead of appreciating her, her husband has gone ahead and has had a life-long affair with Miss David, a Christian lady. (1956)

Moreover, the novel delves into the intricacies of aging, independence, and nostalgia, as Nanda reflects on her life and its emotional junctures. Her daughters' contrasting lifestyles and the rekindling of an old flame bring to the forefront the complexities of familial and romantic relationships. On the other hand, Divakaruni's novel is a retelling of the Indian epic Ramayana from the perspective of Sita, the central female character. Her narrative beautifully reconceptualizes Sita's agency, resilience, and emotional journey, challenging conventional perceptions of her as a passive, submissive figure.

The comparison of these two literary works provides an opportunity to critically engage with the varied articulations of feminine identities. While Desai's Nanda embodies the challenges and joys of aging and independence, Divakaruni's Sita confronts societal expectations and navigates her own spiritual and emotional truth. Both Desai and Divakaruni intricately weave together themes of tradition, modernity, and individuality, offering readers a compelling insight into the complexities of womanhood. Through the lens of Nanda and Sita, the novels explore the tension between societal expectations and personal desires, the quest for agency and autonomy, and the interplay of tradition and transformation. The novels facilitate a critical examination of the roles and representations of women in Indian literature, challenging stereotypes and conventions, offering alternative narratives that disrupt established gender norms and empower female characters. The narratives also provide a unique vantage point to examine the intersectionality of gender, class, and culture, as the protagonists navigate their identities within the complex fabric of Indian society.

Women Represented in the Two Novels

Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain* and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantments* both delve into the exploration of feminine identities in the context of Indian society. Through the portrayal of their female protagonists, Nanda Kaul and Sita, the authors address the complexities of womanhood, tradition, and empowerment. This analysis examines the representation of feminine identities in both novels, highlighting the challenges, conflicts, and triumphs faced by the female characters. In Desai's novel, Ila, while reflecting

on the gone years tells Nanda Kaul – “Isn't it absurd...how helpless our upbringing made us, Nanda.” (127) Both women were brought up in luxury and were left to fend for themselves after being oppressed by their husbands, brothers, and sons. Nanda Kaul has to seek safety in Kasauli, while Ila Das has to search for work despite having few qualifications. Both women have surpassed their usefulness to society and are pushed to the outskirts;

Furthermore, Nanda's desire for independence and agency is stifled by patriarchal norms, as she feels a sense of obligation to her family, particularly her daughter and grandson.

Nanda's experience as a widow is marked by isolation, loneliness, and a sense of being sidelined by her family. Desai writes, “She watched the white hen drag out a worm inch by resisting inch from the ground till it snapped in two. She felt like the worm herself, she winced at its mutilation.” (21) Nanda Kaul watches the hen destroy the worm, inwardly feeling its pain because she too feels like she is being pulled apart after she learns her serene world is going to be altered by the presence of an unsought-after great-granddaughter. She sees the interruption of her life as a forced return to the world where she had no power, no autonomy, and no wholeness.

Similarly, in *The Forest of Enchantments*, Divakaruni's portrayal of Sita sheds light on the struggles and conflicts faced by women in ancient Indian society. As an embodiment of feminine virtue and purity, Sita is burdened with the expectations of subservience and sacrifice. However, Divakaruni's Sita is a depiction of a modern women in traditional style, as is evident in the very preface of the novel, when Sita seeks reason and logic, a departure from the typical characters in Indian mythology. She does not readily accept beliefs solely on the basis of their divine nature or cultural tradition. Sita tells Valmiki that he doesn't understand a woman's experiences and feelings in her life, whether in the palace or the forest. Valmiki says he was inspired by a divine vision, but Sita argues that it must have been a male God, not a female one, because he doesn't understand the complexities of a woman's life.

It must have been a God that brought it to you, then, and not a goddess...for you haven't understood a woman's life, the heartbreak at the core of her joys, her unexpected alliances, and desires, her negotiations where, in the hope of keeping one treasure safe, she must give up another. (Divakaruni 2)

This shows that Divakaruni's Sita is different from traditional Indian mythology characters as she seeks logic and reason instead of blindly accepting beliefs based on divine or cultural traditions.

This Sita gets encouragement from Divakaruni to displays a newfound resolve, refusing to be place in a position of weakness. Just as in the prologue of the novel, Divakaruni's words resonate with her, offering her encouragement, "Write our narrative too. For as long as we can remember, we've been shoved into corners, trivialised, misunderstood, blamed, forgotten or ridiculed and exploited as cautionary stories."(Divakaruni 4)

Therefore, it would not be incorrect to say that Divakaruni's Sita is not speaking for herself only. She is speaking for all those women who have endured oppression such as Kaikeyi, Ahalya, Surpanakha, Mandodari, and Urmila.

Moreover, Sita's experiences in exile and captivity serve as a metaphor for the oppression and resilience of women in Indian society. However, this Sita does not accept it easily, she questions every injustice done to her. When Lakshmana informs Sita about her banishment due to some rumours questioning her purity, she responded arguably about the accusation and questioned Ram's decision as well.

But why didn't he tell me any of this? "Why didn't he explain what was going on? I would have understood. Don't I know how important is his reputation as king is to him? Together we could have come with a better plan. Even if we could not come up with a solution, I would have been part of the decision, not a victim of it'..." "But he didn't trust me, Lakshman. My husband, whom I trusted from the moment that my father put my hand in his. My husband, whom I forgave even after his words on the battlefield of Lanka gave me no choice but to throw myself into a fire. My husband, to whom gods themselves proclaimed my innocence. That husband has now discarded me like an old sandal. You go back and tell him this, Lakshman: He sentenced me to banishment because people were whispering that I might have betrayed him. But he is the real betrayer. Who is going to sentence him? (Divakaruni 317)

Here, Sita calls Ram a betrayer as he ignores all the sacred vows of marriage and sentences her exile without even doing proper inquiry into the matter, questioning that who will hold Ram accountable for his actions.

Both novels offer a nuanced portrayal of feminine identities, highlighting the complexities and challenges faced by women in Indian society. From the stifling expectations of widowhood to the burden of sacrifice and loyalty, the female protagonists in the two novels navigate the intricate web of societal norms and personal agency. Through their narratives, the two writers shed light on the resilience, strength, and quiet rebellion of women who strive to carve out their own identities in the face of daunting obstacles. Through the portrayal of their female protagonists, Desai and Divakaruni explore the challenges, conflicts, and triumphs faced by women as they navigate traditional norms and societal expectations. The representation of Nanda and Sita in their respective novels encapsulates the complexities of womanhood, tradition, and empowerment, leaving a lasting impact on readers and providing a platform for critical reflection on the depiction of feminine identities in literature

Representation of Patriarchy and Relationships

Representation of patriarchy and relationships in the two novels reveal the complexities and challenges faced by women in traditional Indian society. Both novels explore the impact of patriarchal structures on women's lives and relationships, highlighting the inherent power imbalances and struggles for autonomy. Through the portrayal of various female characters, both authors effectively communicate the enduring effects of patriarchy on women's agency and emotional fulfilment.

In *Fire on the Mountain*, Desai delves into the life of Nanda Kaul, a widow who has spent her life caring for her ungrateful family. The novel vividly depicts the oppressive nature of patriarchy and the limitations it imposes on women. Because of these all these obstacles in her life, Desai's Nanda gets more better understanding about life, Desai writes, "She had

practiced this stillness, this composure, for years, for an hour every afternoon: it was an art, not easily acquired." (23) This quote captures the emotional depth of the character as the by-product of unhappy marriage life.

Nanda's relationship with her grandchildren, particularly her granddaughter Raka, serves as a lens through which the impact of patriarchy on family dynamics becomes apparent. Desai portrays Nanda's sense of duty and sacrifice, shedding light on the expectations placed on women to fulfil traditional roles within the family. Nanda's internal conflict and emotional turmoil serve as a poignant representation of the stifling effects of patriarchy on women's individuality and fulfilment.

Similarly, in *The Forest of Enchantments*, Divakaruni weaves a tale surrounding the protagonist, Sita, and her experiences within a patriarchal society. This novel challenges traditional representations of Sita as a passive and obedient woman, allowing her to reclaim agency and autonomy. Through Sita's relationships with her family and husband, the novel exposes the ways in which patriarchy dictates women's roles and aspirations. Sita's internal struggles and quest for equal treatment are encapsulated in her reflection:

When the time came, I would have ruled the kingdom well. I was confident of that because I'd observed my father in court and learned from his goodness. And more importantly, in our private chambers I'd listened to my mother advising him. But when I confessed these wishes to my mother, she shook her head. 'Even if you were a goddess among women, she said and from her face I could see that she'd heard the whispers, too. It wouldn't be possible. The Kingdom of Mithila can be ruled only by a man. This has been the custom of the country since before the scribes began to write its history.' 'Why can't customs change?' I asked angrily. 'Especially ones that don't make sense?' 'Not this one. Because it's built upon an age old belief the citizens of Mithila hold: no woman is strong enough or wise enough to guide them.' 'I don't believe that!' I cried, outraged. 'Nor do you.' 'It doesn't matter what I believe,' she said. 'A good, caring monarch and your father is certainly that doesn't toy with the deep-rooted beliefs of his people. Not for the sake of personal happiness. Not even to prove a point. (Divakaruni 14)

This reflects how Divakaruni's Sita challenges this notion by questioning why the custom cannot change. In addition to this, this shows how women often get stifled by patriarchal norms and expectations. Even Sita's relationship with her husband, Rama, is emblematic of the complexities wrought by patriarchal expectations. Divakaruni presents Rama as a figure bound by societal pressures and familial obligations, ultimately leading to strained communication and emotional distance within their marriage.

Actually, not just Sita, even Divakaruni's Urmila is a bold figure too. When Ram demands Agni Pariksha of Sita for second time, Urmila gets angry and furious rebukes, "don't do it. Return to the ashram and preserve your dignity. Saudamini will get us a carriage. We'll leave by the back gate. Before anyone knows it, we'll be in the forest. Oh yes, this time I am coming with you and so are my children. Lakshman can do what he wants." (Divakaruni 352) Here, it is evident that Urmila is ready to risk almost everything for the sake of justice for women.

Both the novel offer insightful portrayals of the impact of patriarchy on women's lives and relationships. Through their respective narratives, Anita Desai and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni illustrate the enduring effects of patriarchal structures on women's agency and emotional fulfilment. The representation of Nanda and Ila in *Fire on the Mountain*, as well as Sita and Urmila in *The Forest of Enchantments*, serves as a compelling exploration of the complexities and challenges faced by women within traditional Indian society. Ultimately, both novels underscore the pressing need for women to assert their autonomy and challenge the oppressive constraints of patriarchy in order to achieve emotional fulfilment and agency in their relationships.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has thoroughly explored the themes of feminine identity, patriarchy and relationship in Desai's *Fire on the Mountain* and Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantments*. Through a close analysis of the protagonists' experiences, and the cultural and societal contexts in which they are situated, this paper uncovered the multifaceted nature of oppressions. Both Desai and Divakaruni offer insightful representations of women navigating through complex social and personal landscapes, and their works provide rich material for understanding the diversity and depth of women's experiences. The analysis reveals that the protagonists, Nanda Kaul in *Fire on the Mountain* and Sita in *The Forest of Enchantments*, are confronted with patriarchal expectations and limitations that seek to confine and control their lives. However, they also demonstrate resilience and resourcefulness in asserting their independence and pursuing their own desires. Nanda's decision to live on her own terms in the Himalayan foothills, and Sita's unwavering strength in choosing to leave behind the comforts of palace life to embark on a journey of self-discovery, exemplify the agency and autonomy that women possess, even in restrictive environments. Both Nanda and Sita undergo profound internal transformations as they confront challenges and seek fulfilment. Nanda's experiences in the mountains lead her to a newfound sense of freedom and self-fulfilment, while Sita's trials and tribulations enable her to discover her inner strength and wisdom. The profound insights offered by these novels serve as a poignant reminder of the resilience, strength, and transformative potential of women, and the significance of their voices and stories in shaping our understanding of the human experience as a whole.

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