

Tamed Bodies and Subversive Structures: Understanding Gender and Deciphering Motherhood in Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock* and *Fire on the Mountain*

Kasish

Research Scholar, Department of English
Banaras Hindu University
Assistant Professor
Department of English
Juhari Devi Girls' P.G. College, Kanpur
Uttar Pradesh

ABSTRACT

Gender analyzes the hierarchical social status of men and women and elaborates the oppressive social and cultural constructions of the patriarchal society. Dismantling the thresholds of gender lay bare the fact that gender roles are centered on the conceptions of masculinity and femininity. Masculine and feminine behaviours and practices are the product of the gendered stereotypical society. The institution of motherhood is embedded in the patriarchal constructions of society and acts as a significant exploitative structure in the lives of women that further shapes their subjugated positions. The objective of this paper is to examine and analyze the lives of Indian women that are deeply rooted in the patriarchal set-up of motherhood and predefined roles of gender through the two select novels of Anita Desai namely *Fire on the Mountain* and *Cry, the Peacock*. The patriarchal institution of motherhood restricts the lives of Indian females as it limits their abilities and potentialities and further confines them into the domestic roles of rearing and nursing. Gender critics project motherhood as part of the larger framework of the hierarchical society of unequal gender relations. In a hierarchical society, women are less privileged and are at the disadvantaged position than men. Women are dominated and entrapped in the gender norms and biased associations of the patriarchal institutions. Anita Desai is a well known Indian novelist and she weaves the lives of men and women around the gender issues and the state of motherhood. The narratives of Desai focus on the women characters and she portray the sufferings, desires, rages, agony and trauma of women which arise due to the social constructs of motherhood. This paper intends to study these two novels from the perspective of gender and understand the patriarchal constructs which are associated with institution of motherhood.

KEYWORDS: motherhood, patriarchy, gender, subjugation, hierarchical society, stereotypes, masculine, feminine, cultural constructions.

Anita Desai is an eminent novelist of Indian English fiction. Her contribution in the genre of fiction is highly acclaimed in terms of theme and technique. Keki N. Daruwalla describes her novels as “came on the scene like a breath of fresh air” (53). She is gifted with astute understanding of human lives and her novels delve deep into the vicissitudes of the life of women characters. Desai’s novels deal with the gender issues concerning the lives of women. She weaves the story of Indian joint family system where women are at various subordinate positions. The picture and plight of Indian women are portrayed deftly in the works of Desai. The lives of the female characters revolve around their counterparts as they live in a society that is governed by men. She portrays the women’s psyche and represents their sufferings in the patriarchal society. In her novels, the female characters suffer as mothers and in various roles played by them during their state of motherhood. They are introvert characters initially suffering from all kinds of dominance and later they become frustrated women who negotiate to defy the dominance through different means.

Anita Desai’s novels deal with the multifaceted gender issues of the Indian society. She evokes the institutions that are normalized in the society but are constructed to place women in an inferior condition and disadvantaged position. This paper intends to study the institutionalized construction of motherhood in the novels *Cry, the Peacock (CP)* and *Fire on the Mountain (FM)*. The natural and biological aspects of mothering get into conflict with the institutionalized circumstances under which motherhood is allowed to nurture and develop, creating troubles and problems for women and their state of motherhood. Regarding social constructions associated with motherhood Maithreyi Krishnaraj in her essay “Motherhood” points out:

It is not the mere fact of motherhood of mothering that makes women vulnerable but their social construction, the implications for women flowing from the meaning attached to motherhood and the terms and conditions under which it is allowed to take place. The feminist dilemma is how to retrieve motherhood as a source of liberation, not by eliminating it as an obstacle but redefining appropriate terms and conditions, recreating the social structure that can make motherhood conceivably a creative experience. . . . (35)

In her earlier novels, Desai’s women characters are unable to find the escape from the patriarchal society so they indulge in self- immolation and are not able to deconstruct the stereotypes which are responsible for their sufferings. Her later novels defy the patriarchal perpetuations through different ways. Anita Desai’s *Cry, the Peacock* comes in the category of her early novels while *Fire on the Mountain* is her later novel. In *Fire on the Mountain*, Nanda in order to break away from the burdens of patriarchy in her old age withdraws herself to Carignano which is a solitary place away from the hustle-bustle of the city. In *Cry, the Peacock*, sensitive Maya escapes the rational and patriarchal world of Gautama by pushing him down the terrace culminating in his death. Desai has depicted in both the novels that the roles of mother in the patriarchal society are deeply engrained in the factors which seize the liberty and potentialities of women. In *Fire on the Mountain*, Desai has discussed the entire life of Nanda Kaul whose life has been lapsed in the process of service to others and *Cry, the Peacock* deals with the life of Maya whose life has the void of motherhood. Taking into consideration the analysis of gender roles, this paper will systematically examine the differences in roles and norms prescribed for men and women. It will also analyze the hierarchical relations which exist in the society of men

and women. In this regard to gender, gender roles and sex, Ann Oakley in her book *Sex, Gender and Society* sets out to explore the biological, cultural, social meanings and ideas about what it means to be a man or woman in an ever-changing society. The social and cultural constructs impact men and women and make them perform the gender roles rendering them suitable as masculine and feminine. Oakley disentangles the concepts 'sex' and 'gender' and she provides a clear definition that states:

'Sex' is a word that refers to the biological differences between male and female: the visible difference in genitalia, the related difference in procreative function. 'Gender' however, is a matter of culture: it refers to the social classification into 'masculine' and 'feminine'.

The distinction between 'male' and 'female' on the one hand, and 'masculine' and 'feminine' on the other, makes it possible to clarify much of the argument about sex differences. (16)

Similarly, Simone de Beauvoir initially distinguishes between sex and gender to understand the biological constructions and socially constructed definitions of men and women. She posits:

One is not born, but rather becomes, woman. No biological, psychical or economic destiny defines the figure that the human female takes on in society; it is civilisation as a whole that elaborates this intermediary product between the male and the eunuch that is called feminine. Only the mediation of another can constitute an individual as an *Other*. (293)

In this way, gender creates the distinguished roles for male and female. The role of women as mothers in the patriarchal society is constructed to privilege male members. They perform this role to fit into the gloried and highly eulogized state of motherhood. When raised in a socially constructed society, men and women from their childhood are made to learn certain roles and behave in a particular way that becomes distinctive of their gender. From there men become more aggressive, dominating and less emotional while women become docile, shy and emotional. They perform the gender constantly in their becoming of men and women. From the beginning of their childhood women are indoctrinated as they are destined to become mothers and they would spend their entire life nurturing and upbringing their children. In the novel, *Fire on the Mountain*, Nanda Kaul who is the mother of many children is leading a deceived life of a mother. She nurtures her children but does not get the love and care which she aspires from her children. Moreover, she is also betrayed by her husband whom she gives warmth of love and care. Similarly, Maya in *Cry, the Peacock* wants to have children in her life but her mismatched temperament with her husband provokes her to discard the idea of having child and she transfers her love to her dog. Nanda and Maya both are ceaselessly performing the roles which are constructed by the society for the glories and graces of the patriarchal system of society. In this context, Judith Butler's theory of performativity holds that gender is not an internal essence that gives rise to certain behaviours. Rather, it is performed on the surface of the body over time, through "words, acts, gestures and desires" (173). The stylization of these gestures follows cultural norms.

Desai's novels are fabricated in the patriarchal society and the families are deeply rooted in it from where the female characters draw the conclusions about life that they should be submissive to the norms of the patriarchal society. She weaves the stories where women are marginalized and made to suffer in the stereotypical roles of society. The patriarchal society is where men hold the position of power and are entitled to absolute rule over all women in the family and also over socially younger and economically subordinate males. In such societies women are discriminated, oppressed and marginalized physically, emotionally, financially and all the way round. Kate Millett argues that patriarchy is a political institution which relies on the subordinate roles of women. Millett believes that women are subjected to artificially constructed ideas of the feminine and all aspects of society and culture function according to the specific sexual politics that encourages women to internalize their inferiority until it becomes psychologically rooted in them. She emphasizes that the primary institution of patriarchy is family (33). In the novel *Fire on the Mountain*, Nanda lives in a large family where she performs the duties of both mother and wife. She spends her whole time in serving and arranging meals for the family. Eventually, this becomes the duty of Nanda where she becomes a hostess to everyone in the family. She is entitled to serve and provide hospitality to old person, guests and each and every child of her family. In doing so, she is totally exhausted and wants a complete isolation from the people she is surrounded with. Likewise Maya in *Cry, the Peacock* has lived an unperturbed life with her father and when she enters into the rational world of Gautama, her husband, she becomes shattered and haunted by a childhood prophecy made by an astrologer that within four years of their marriage she or her husband would die. In the due course of events which followed, she could have gradually forgotten this fearful and unfortunate prophecy if her husband would have shown some sensitivity and diligence towards her. But the callousness and apathy of Gautama makes her suffer immensely and she becomes neurotic. She strives for the emotional support from her husband but all her expectations remain unfulfilled and start rotting with her increasing neurosis. She literally struggles and tries to survive against the claustrophobic labyrinth of her unfulfilled desires and deprived emotions, encountering continuously the webs of patriarchy. Ultimately, Maya's fear reaches its culmination and she ponders about the death of her husband and subsequently, she commits the act of resistance against him which brims out on the surface because of the apathetic behaviour of her husband further leading to her continuous fits of neurosis and mental disorder.

The patriarchal system constructs and provides self-definitions and norms for women. These social norms restrict the societal roles of women as mothers. The patriarchal societies amply reward all those women who passively learn their defined roles as motherhood becomes glorified in the patriarchal system. Thus the women themselves contribute and perpetuate the patriarchal social order by abiding to these defined roles. The dismantling of these constructs of gender norms enables us to acknowledge that patriarchy is man-made and constructed to favour men. It is developed historically by the socio-economic and political processes of the society. Gerda Lerner in *The Creation of Patriarchy* has argued against the single cause theories and looks for one historical moment when patriarchy was established and emphasizes that the

value put on sex differences is in itself a cultural product. Sexual attributes are a biological given, but gender is a product of historical process. The fact that women bear

children is due to sex; that women nurture children is due to gender, a cultural construct. It is gender which has been chiefly responsible for fixing women's place in society. (21)

Remarkably, after the emergence of feminist movement, women's rights for liberty and emancipation were put forward and women were the subject of study as a vulnerable being. Later gender studies emerged as a different field which incorporated the study of men, women and transgender and their rights. As gender intersects with other factors of the society like caste, class, race, religion, language and ethnicity so gender studies also enables to evoke those constructions and institutions of society which cause suffering and trauma in the life of men and women and transgender.

Anita Desai's novel *Fire on the Mountain* deals with an elderly woman, Nanda Kaul and her search for own values away from the societal obligations which restrict women's potentialities within the confines of the domestic walls. The three women characters, Nanda Kaul, the widow of a university Vice-Chancellor, her great-granddaughter Raka, and her life-long friend Ila Das are in the orbit of the patriarchal perpetuations. The novel is the critique of such constructs of society which confine women to service, obligation and structured oppressive culture. One such structure is motherhood. In the social hierarchy of men and women, women are at the position of subordination. So women as mothers are solely responsible for raising their children and their roles are confined and restricted to the state of motherhood within patriarchal subjugation. Nanda Kaul takes over the charge of house named Carignano situated in Kasauli on the Himalayan range in order to escape from the patriarchal oppressions of motherhood and give her a place to reside in isolation. Nanda has withdrawn herself at a secluded place where she finds her natural self in the full bloom. Desai says:

It was the place, and the time of life, that she had wanted and prepared for all her life-as she realized on her first day at Carignano, with a great, cool flowering of relief-and at last she had it. She wanted no one and nothing else. Whatever else came, or happened here, would be an unwelcome intrusion and distraction. (FM 3)

In the midst of Nanda's solitariness, a letter from her daughter Asha arrives, in which Asha requests Nanda to keep Asha's granddaughter, Raka with her at Kasauli as Raka's mother has to leave for Geneva with her husband. Nanda feels appalled after reading the letter from Asha. She could no more raise a new and additional child in the perfect and natural setting at Kasauli. She is determined not to keep Raka with her but she fails to ignore Asha's request. She feels annoyed at the thought of meeting Raka and discovering her as an individual. The situation would become worse as Raka is a child and will depend on Nanda for all her needs. Raka would urge Nanda for her meals. Nanda will have to caution Raka against her playing alone in the garden, then, see her at night and lie next to her and wondering for her to sleep. These feelings make Nanda uncomfortable and she realizes that she would never be able to sleep due to Raka's dependency on her and her obligation towards Raka as her guardian and caretaker. She apprehends that this would disturb her peace and solitariness and her quest for isolation will always remain unfulfilled. Nanda's extreme discomfort manifests here when she worries: "Is it wrong? Have I not done enough and had enough? I want no more. I want nothing. Can I not be left with nothing? But there was no answer and of course she expected none" (18).

Additionally, Desai pronounces the trauma which the state of motherhood has put Nanda into and the dire need to escape from it can be felt in the following lines:

She had suffered from the nimiety, the disorder, the fluctuating and unpredictable excess.

She had been so glad when it was over. She had been glad to leave it all behind, in the plains, like a great heavy, difficult book that she had read through and was not required to read again.

Would Raka's coming mean the opening of that old, troublesome ledger again? . . .

Discharge me, she groaned. I've discharged all my duties. Discharge. (*FM* 32-33)

Nanda has awful experiences of motherhood. She has many children and she has served them all but she is unloved, rejected and neglected by all of them. She does not get appreciation for her duties which she has performed in her entire life. Adrienne Rich in her book *Of Woman Born* discusses and fully develops the concept of motherhood and asserts that there is a supposed gap between the idea of mother and the task of mothering. Rich defines patriarchy as "an identifiable sexual hierarchy" claiming that this system has historically arranged and controlled maternal expectations, leaving mothers powerless to live up to or alter impossibly ideal maternal norms (Introduction xxiv). The overly discharged duties by Nanda make her consider these roles as demeaning her own self. The novel portrays the inner condition of her mind that carries the indelible impression of the injuries she has sustained being a mother. Nanda has lived a life of total neglect. She has lived a troublesome life by ignoring her own desires and fulfilling all the demands of her children and husband. Her entire life has lapsed in the process of cooking, sewing, washing, mothering and providing hospitality to her husband's guests. Desai says:

She seemed to hear poignant shrieks from the canna beds in the garden—a child had tumbled off the swing, another had been stung by a wasp, a third slapped by the fourth—and gone out on the veranda to see them come wailing up the steps with cut lips, bruised knees, broken teeth and tears, and bent over them with that still, ironic bow to duty that no one had noticed of defined. (*FM* 20)

When Raka comes to Carignano to stay with Nanda then they evade each other's presence. For Nanda, Raka is an intruder to her privacy and isolation. Raka does not like the ambience of Carignano. Raka is a child who likes the company of apricot trees and animals and she spends her afternoons rambling over the mountain sides and exploring the hills. She is fond of solitude and nature. There is a fascinating and mysterious friendship between Raka and Ram Lal, who is a worker of Nanda. He narrates fictional ghost stories to Raka which certainly arouses the curiosity of the child for mapping the hills. Nanda is not interested and bothered about Raka's absences from Carignano as her presence seems to be an irritating experience for her. She does not want to be drawn into a child's world again as it is bound to deceive her as for her earlier experiences with children are unpleasant and distressing. But Raka is not like any other child she had known, not any of her children or grandchildren. Amongst them, she appears

to be a freak by virtue of never making a demand as if she has no needs. Raka wants only one thing and that is to be left alone and let her pursue her own secret life amongst the rocks and pines of Kasauli. It can be said that if Nanda Kaul is a recluse out of vengeance because of a long lived life of duty and obligation, Raka, her great-granddaughter is a recluse by nature and instinct. Raka is an untamed child as she rejects the very thought of school, hostels, discipline, order and obedience. She is against any culture and hated craftiness. There is growing affinity between Raka and Nanda and subsequently, Nanda starts adoring her great-grandchild. Both Raka and Nanda share the same bond of deprived emotions with the people once they expected to be close with, but now their emotions and hopes being shattered, they are now finding solace and peace in the hills, away from the hollowness of human relations, restlessness and chaos of city life. Nanda says to Raka: “Raka, you really are great-grandchild of mine, aren't you? You are more like me than any of my children of grandchildren. You are exactly like me, Raka” (FM 71). Raka's upbringing is done by a mother who is herself the victim of abuse by the masculine power of her husband. She nurtures her child but cannot avoid the injuries administered to her as mother and wife. Raka is raised in such an ambience where her mental state becomes damaged and she desperately wants to escape this ruthless world of civilization.

In this context, Ruth K. Rosenwasser in his essay “Voices of Dissent” observes about the deprived mental state of Raka as “Raka is the victim of her parents' unhappy marriage”. He says that her mother is the wife of a diplomat and is mistreated by her husband. Raka becomes “reclusive because of her reaction to patriarchal values”. Her mother despite being mistreated by her father insists on staying with him, even she is not allowed to go to her “natal home”. Raka's mother instead of opposing her father perpetuates her own oppression by willingly listening to whatever he asks her to do. Although Raka is dependent on her elders as a child, she finds solace and peace in the “deserted areas of mountainside”. Raka's “damaged emotional landscape of her childhood” symphonizes with “uncivilized landscape of the mountain”. Raka as a child is isolated and considered to be “the crazy one”. She continuously hates and rejects the ‘civilized world’ and prefers the deserted, barren and wild natural locations. She does this in order to escape the hypocrisy of the “civilized world” which continuously “tolerates and perpetuates her mother's mistreatment” (100).

Nanda Kaul is a mother who does not really enjoy being one. Her children were exhausting and unsatisfying to her and she only wished to live her own life on her own terms. Nanda's recluse life in Kasauli doesn't make her apathetic towards the rest of the society which is evident from her developing affinity towards her great granddaughter, Raka, whom she finds as an independent girl who loves freedom and Raka's this wandering desire is very much similar to her own quest for seclusion and isolation. Nanda Kaul's search for her real self is not egotistical and detached from the society but is well grounded in social reality of familial relationships. Desai breaks the stereotypical norms of motherhood and opposes the patriarchal idea of women being the caregivers of the society through her novel *Fire on the Mountain*. She criticizes the male dominated society which propagates the idea that a woman who fulfills the responsibilities of a mother is complete, whole and worthy to live in such a society while a single woman who decides to remain unmarried throughout her life should be shunned socially. The life of single and childless woman has been kept parallel with and compared to the debilitated

lives of weeds and rough, unarranged and wild homes and abodes in this novel. Further, in this context, the character of Ila Das is relevant. She is unmarried and not a mother and thus the patriarchal society perceives her to be a distasteful spinster. When she engages in a nurturing and catering role as a social worker, she is held in a very bad regard by the society and is brutally murdered by an orthodox man named Preet Singh. Preet Singh has a sense of hatred and anger against Ila Das as she hinders his daughter's child marriage with an old man. This vindicates the fact that even unmarried and bachelor women who opt for social work as a kind gesture of motherhood, the violent patriarchal system opposes them and inflicts enormous damage on their state of womanhood. This further questions their existence as independent women who resist the structures of patriarchal society. Desai has depicted the life of a bachelor woman like Ila Das and so she observes in these lines:

When a woman lives alone, her house should be extremely dilapidated, the mud wall should be falling to pieces, and if there is a pond, it should be overgrown with water plants. It is not essential that the garden be covered with sage brush, but weeds should be growing through the sand in patches, for this gives the place a poignantly desolate look. (29)

Keki N. Daruwalla comments on the ending of *Fire on the Mountain* as:

The ending as I said may appear abrupt to me, possibly convincingly logical. Why must Ila Das be so brutally raped and killed, why must the child light the fire in the forest etc? But Anita Desai is not an engineer, constructing a plot laboriously, brick by brick. She is an artist whose strength lies in exploring the inner lives of her characters, in the insights she provides about this business of living, and in the freshness and brilliance of her language. She does not believe in a piling up of detail. (54-55)

As a writer, Anita Desai as Daruwalla observes is more concerned in bringing out the intricate threads of psyche of her female characters and in the process of doing so, she explores and reveals their inner pain and trauma. Anita Desai's novel *Cry, the Peacock* deals with the estranged relationship of Maya and Gautama and their distinct temperaments. Maya suffers from alienation and becomes neurotic due to several reasons. One reason beneath Maya's grief and misery is her being childless. At the times of crisis, she longs for her father with the fiercest desire and not for Gautama. Her father with all his gentleness assures and soothes her, promising that everything in her life will soon be in order. He held her in his arms when she was a small child and when she grew younger, he taught her to readily accept everything without complaining. She always longs for her father and her memories with him. She has been deprived of her mother's love because of her untimely death and she is a motherless child. So she wants to bestow her whole love to her child but in the novel due to her mental conflict with her husband she loses the desire of having her own child. In order to compensate her loneliness, she has shifted her motherly affection towards her pet dog, Toto. She loves this bonding and observes that: "Childless women do develop fanatic attachments to their pets. It is no less a relationship than that of women and her child, no less worthy of reverence, and agonized remembrance" (CP 12).

In *Cry, the Peacock*, Maya gets excessive love from her father and is unable to get the similar affection and love from her husband, Gautama. Gautama fails to give her a sense of fulfillment and emotional cushioning. Maya has never deliberately expressed the need for her mother but the gap exists in her life. In order to fill the gap, she turns to her mother-in-law for motherly love and care. Unfortunately, her mother-in-law fails to give her the affection and love she longs for. Gautama's mother is a social worker and Maya feels offended by that fact that she is only used as a medium of economic support for the social work of her mother in law. She feels as an outsider in the family of Gautama and she thinks that she is only there to fulfill the monetary requirements of the family. She never receives the love and affection from the family of Gautama, which a daughter in law deserves to get. Such moments in her life create an unfillable void and subsequently the pain becomes unbearable for her. Her emotional state is ruled by greater reality beyond life and she is ceaselessly reminded about death as an escape from the existential problems of life. According to the patriarchal norms of society, a general assumption about Maya can be perceived as her mother would have trained her better for the challenges of married life and would have prepared her mentally for marriage and subsequent state of motherhood in an enhanced manner than what her father did. In this regard, Nancy Chodorow in her book *The Reproduction of Mothering* observes that

women's mothering, like other aspects of gender activity, is a product of feminine role training and role identification. Girls are taught to be mothers, trained for nurturance, and told that they ought to mother. They are wrapped in pink blankets, given dolls and have their brothers' trucks taken away, learn that being a girl is not as good as being a boy, are not allowed to get dirty, are discouraged from achieving in school, and therefore become mothers. They are barraged from early childhood well into adult life with books, magazines, ads, school courses, and television programs which put forth pronatalist and pro-maternal sex-stereotypes. They "identify" with their own mothers as they grow up, and this identification produces the girl as a mother. (31)

Maya is the central character of the novel *Cry, the Peacock*, who oscillates between her past and present-her two worlds, where the first covers her childhood and in that phase she has lost her mother and is brought up by her father, and the other is her married life where she faces her insensitive husband Gautama and unaffectionate mother in law. Her sensitivity gets in conflict with the temperament of Gautama who is a rational and realistic man. This imprints an injury upon her persona which drives her neurotic and consequently, she takes a horrible step in her life. Her desire for her husband to become responsive and sensuous remains unfulfilled throughout her life. The marital compatibility is not developed between them and this embarks her journey from her willingness to become a mother and complete woman to restraining herself from becoming a mother and complete woman. Her lack of wholeness, the sense of being incomplete arises from the absence of her child and state of motherhood and she acquires a degree of totality in the company of her pet dog Toto and subsequently develops strong affinity towards him. After the death of her dog, she mourns his death extremely and this emotional void remains thereafter in her life. On the opposite note, Gautama reacts coldly and unemotionally towards this incident which further shocks Maya. From the conversation below, one can point out the degree of alienation between Maya and Gautama as:

‘It is all over,’ he had said, as calmly as the mediator...showing how little he knew of my misery, or of how to comfort me. But then, he knew nothing that concerned me...Telling me to go to sleep while he worked at his papers, he did not give another thought to me, to either the soft, willing body or the lonely, wanting mind that waited near his bed. And now, seeing me bereaved, seeing tears on my face and my pet gone, ‘You need a cup of tea,’ he said. Yes, I cried, yes, it is his hardness...the distance he coldly keeps from me. (CP 10-11)

Geetha Ramanathan in the essay “Sexual Violence/Textual Violence” remarks about both these novels as:

An earlier novel, *Cry, the Peacock*, constitutes the female subject as mad. To western readers the construction is reminiscent of the role with which Cixous invests the hysteric. While Maya's perspective is validated, she remains a victim in her society. *Fire on the Mountain* explores the possibilities of the mother having authority and agency in opposition to the society she lives in. Such an attempt is significant for a feminist modernist because unlike male modernity which, in general, inscribes the destabilization of the subject, feminist modernity is a co-extensive movement, critical of patriarchy without victimizing the female subject and stripping her of agency. (21)

Geetha Ramanathan in the above lines contrasts male modernity with feminist modernity emphasizing how through the character of Nanda Kaul, Desai tries to build a space for her female characters, especially mothers where they can have their own set narratives opposing the forces of patriarchy. This intersectional quality of Desai's novels especially in *Fire on the Mountain*, in which she prepares the ground where Modernity meets feminism, establishes her reputation through which she raises her voice for the cause of Indian females and leading their way towards modern empowerment. As a creative artist, Desai understands very well that feminism has to co-exist with modernity if the conditions of Indian females are to be improved, as this intersection will create an institution of resistance and very aptly, she has portrayed this institution in her novels. Elaborating specifically in both the novels *Cry, the Peacock* and *Fire on the Mountain*, Anita Desai has depicted the troubles and sufferings of upper class Indian women and emphasized the thresholds of the patriarchy which are still active and dominant in the Indian society. The central characters of Nanda and Maya in both the novels are associated with the elite class but remarkably their plight and destitution can easily be related to and identified with the struggles and sufferings of women belonging to middle and lower class of Indian society. Throughout her career as a novelist, Anita Desai has largely focused on the women of elite and middle class of Indian society. Interestingly, in these two novels and her other works she constructs a framework which strengthens and supports the fundamental cause of females of all classes, especially the upper and middle class and projects that structure as an epitome of resistance against forces of patriarchy and factors nurturing those forces. For instance, both Nanda and Maya are victims of alienation and they suffer in the respective houses of their husbands. Both have tried to question the patriarchal system in their own specific ways and have tried to resist the male dominance and subordination. They are to a certain extent deprived

women of the upper class Indian society and their sufferings are camouflaged under the patriarchal snobbery of the society. The common praxis on which both the characters are projected is that both of them long for affection and love from their familial relationships. The suffering which Desai chooses to portray in both these novels reflects the unfathomable depth of the patriarchal quagmire in which these two characters are caught. This captivity is the patriarchal perpetuation of the gender roles performed by them in the presence/absence of their state of motherhood. In both novels, Desai questions the structured institution of motherhood and the roles of mothers as the sole caretakers of their families. She emphasizes that men should also be liable for nursing and rearing of children. This will reduce the sufferings of women and they will get opportunities to excel in the fields of their expertise and enough time to nurture their potentialities and utilize their talents. As far as the patriarchal society is concerned, it normalizes the sufferings of women and Desai is triumphant in raising those muffled voices of women in order to represent the politics and mechanism of repression responsible for the alienation, servitude and destitution of women in Indian society. The literary representations done by Desai in these two novels denote that the institutions of Indian society need to be reconsidered and reframed wherein both men and women need to join hands to eradicate the obstacles in their paths and fight collectively against the subversive forces of the society. Consequently, the institution of motherhood and structures of gender should be brought forward. Afterwards the subtleties and nuances of various positions of women held in the institution of motherhood and frames of gender should be examined and restructured in order to improve the condition of women, resulting in the betterment of Indian society and making it a better place for women to live in.

Works Cited

- Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. Translated by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier, Vintage, 2011.
- Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge, 1999.
- Chodorow, Nancy. *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*. U of California P, 1978.
- Daruwalla, Keki N. "Anita Desai." *Indian Literature*, vol. 52, no. 2 (244), Sahitya Akademi, Mar.-Apr. 2008, pp. 53-56. *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24159368>.
- Desai, Anita. *Cry, the Peacock*. Orient Paperbacks, 2021.
- _____. *Fire on the Mountain*. Random House India, 2014.
- Geetha, Ramanathan. "Sexual Violence/Textual Violence: Desai's 'Fire on the Mountain' and

- Shirazi's 'Javady Alley.'" *Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 39, no. 1, Fiction of the Indian Subcontinent, spring 1993, pp. 17-35. *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26284394>.
- Krishnaraj, Maithreyi. "Motherhood: Power and Powerlessness." *Indian Women: Myth and Reality*, edited by Jasodhara Bagchi, Sangam Books, 1995, pp. 34-43.
- Lerner, Gerda. *The Creation of Patriarchy*. Oxford UP, 1986.
- Millet, Kate. *Sexual Politics*. U of Illinois P, 2000.
- Oakley, Ann. *Sex, Gender and Society*. Gower/Maurice Temple Smith, 1981.
- Rich, Adrienne. Introduction: 1986. *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. W.W. Norton & Company, 1995, pp. ix-xxxv.
- Rosenwasser, Ruth K. "Voices of Dissent: Heroines in the novels of Anita Desai." *Journal of South Asian Literature*, vol. 24, no. 2, Miscellany, summer, fall 1989, pp. 83-116. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40873092>.