

Unhomely Homes: Cultural Dislocation and Feminist Agency in "The Rooftop Dwellers" and "Winterscape"

Dr. Kuldeep Rastogi

Asst. Professor English Indra Priyadarshani Govt. Girls College of Commerce, Haldwani

Anita Desai's fiction for a very long time has been best known for her unshakable focus on psychological landscapes of women keeping track of their personal and cultural transitions. Scholars often appreciate and refer to her narrative style, her interior quality of calmness and control, are a bridge to her themes of gender, displacement, and identity. (Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center, 2015) recognizes the protagonist of Desai's work as, a women experiencing a range of emotions and battling inner conflicts, remains silent not because they feel weak but because they choose silence to maintain the dignity and following the norms formed by the society. In one of her works "The Rooftop Dwellers", this is portrayed through a character named Moyna, her life in a confined rooftop in Delhi, where space has been used as both metaphor as well as material condition for independence and vulnerability of women. In Desai's work, "Narrative Agents", the settings function that shape women's subjective Louvel and Verley(2023) were the result of the use of architectural and environmental symbolism. In a similar manner "Winterscape" has been introspect diasporic alienation and a conflict of generation gap.

The emotionally still environment is a symbol of suburban setting which mirrors larger cultural condition where people are detached from one another and there is a freeze not only of weather but also of inner feelings, is the quality portrayed in an elder women of modern nuclear family. The picture put at the stories' center, as Girardin argues, gets focus on the unresolved complexities of motherhood that differ across culture and memories attached to it. The current studies exhibit that the female character designed by Desai whether located in India or over sea, have to undergo similar kind of oppression or boundations forced by the society. Both the stories depict how a role of women in household, her silence, and the place plays an important role in females' self governance. The review points out the need for a study with comparative framework of Desai's different geographies of urban rooftop and cold diasporic suburbs in order to do a deeper analysis of her critique of gendered power structure. This study contributes to locate Desai's work as a junction of the merge of postcolonial feminism and psycho geographical discourse, it showcases the growth of English literature.

"Rooftop Dwellers": Solitude and Struggle in Urban India

"The Rooftop room gave her the illusion of freedom, but it was also exposed to the heat, dust, and curious stares of others" In the story, Moyna's desire for being alone and fear of invisibility acts as a mirror to the polarity of her living condition. Personified her life as a room which is filled with loneliness and lacks warmth and societal acceptance as a cost she has to pay for being independent in a patriarchal India.

The protagonist of "Roof Top Dwellers", Moyna, is a young independent woman who is trying to build up a life for herself in a patriarchal society of Delhi. She is introduced as a person with mixed feelings contradicting with time, despite the fact of being independent there is a sign of discomfort shown by her reason being that she has distanced herself from her family and past relationship. The room on the rooftop acts as a key symbol for her freedom along with the power to see things above the world, but on the contrary the room is isolated, exposed and perilous. The height is used metaphorically to depict Moyna's detachment from the traditional roles, while the exposure of the position she is in signals the social risk of such form of detachment. Not long ago two research scholars Mathew and Samuel, 2020, interpreted this space as a place of conflict between competing ideas and belief system as a public affair rather than a private one, applying a sense of independence and vulnerability. The exposure of the rooftop to extreme weather and male gaze of the neighbors showcases her inner solitude and psychological turbulence.

Desai's psychological depth becomes a voice to the women's suffering and unfulfilled desires which eventually lead to one or the other feminist act. Moyna's inner monologue revolves around the uncertainty and introspection putting forward women who does not show her rebellious behavior rather remains silent and shows resistance in her choices she makes, for example, the rejection to marriage, managing to stay alone, and trying to stay happy and satisfied. Critics such as Sarah Curtis(2000) disagree with the fact that Desai framed her character Moyna as an unenthusiastic feminine character, who did not rebel instead choose to make bold choices of not marrying and following the traditional routes. Her tolerance and ability to adjust is evident through the other symbolisms such as the pipal tree which was growing inside her house, the irregular

water supply, and the inappropriate songs being played by the neighbors in their rooftop. The pipal tree eventually becomes the strength to her existence, she says in solitary, bears all the negatives, still is beautiful and defending herself from the harsh surroundings. The story is imbued with genre hybridity, as noted by Louvel and Verley (2023), it serves as a blend of fairy tales with brutal reality. The rooftop acts as a tower that tells the story of a princess who does not wait for any prince to come to her rescue, rather claims to stay. The other character Tara, illustrates the foul strategies women apply and play in order to get their unfulfilled desires of getting married, or getting a financially stable husband, or sometimes even emotional comfort fulfilled by the men around them. Towards the end we see an unresolved matter of Moyna's arranged marriage proposal sent by her mother, further showing the commitment of Desai in shaping the life of the character of a woman as an open ended journey rather than one with neatly tied patriarchal norms. Scholars like Mathew and Samuel (2020) argue that the refusal of the marriage proposal is a pure feminine gesture and a self analysis that selfhood resists both family pressure and a romantic relation.

The story till date holds relevance as the women living in urban areas, working day and night earning their own bread still faces basic issues like safety, exclusion from the society, judgments for not living up to the traditional norms made by the patriarchal society. Moreover, Desai's narrative finds its way with ecological and relatable feminist concerns such as space for living, water, and peace in a concrete jungle talks to the creators of the environment regarding the inequality being faced by the women in the society. The contrasting effect of her independent struggle against the patriarchal and modernized society reflects that even the urban areas are all designed according to the male centric society therefore discrimination is faced by women even in urban areas, and their freedom is always conditional and incomplete. Through this psychological portrait Desai reframes feminist resistance as something women endure throughout their life without denial and not as a dramatic revolt. Her room even at this condition is an identity of her presence, an unstable position from which Moyna keeps a view of the world and reframes her right to live at her own terms. Thus, in "The Roof Top Dwellers", Desai a softer part of feminism where women's strong choices acts as her inner strength and her quit endurance and survival challenge the traditionally formed patriarchal norms.

"Winterscape": Dislocation and Dispossession in the Diaspora

In contrast, "Winterscape", is a powerful visual that tells a complete resonant story in just one frame with the theme of cultural dislocation, motherhood, family duty, and silent bonds across seas. The story begins with the entry of a pregnant Canadian lady names Beth, who is telling about the existence of two women around her. First, her mother-in-law, Asha and another the aunt, Anu, who raised him, both wore colourful sari and were standing near a snowy window creating a scene that showed beauty and contrast in a single landscape. The scene brings forward two contrasting cultures and histories. We learn about the childhood of Asha and Anu, how Anu was ignored and after raising Beth's husband Rakesh, Anu suddenly gained attention of others and gave her some importance. On visiting Toronto, the two sisters faced a lot of difficulty managing their sari and also taking care of the baby, all of it highlights how there was a blend of two families belonging from different cultures still trying to put efforts to stay close. Beth with time understands how these women had their own way to tackle things. Her observation leads her to empathize with them, the story starts and ends with a similar picture of the mothers at the window, later the place is changed to the fridge, through this the author conveys the message of how strong memories can be.

Critics notice how this work of Desai has portrayed cultural dislocation through the contrast between Indian emotional traditions and calm western culture as its central theme. One of the critics calls the frozen image "quietly peaceful", showing both connection and difference. Further, Rakesh is seen to adore the picture again and again which made it evident how fragile relations are especially when you are away from your homeland. The story also reflects how older immigrant women feel ignored and left out. But Desai flips the card and does not make it sound like a sad stereotype, instead, she portrays them with dignity, uncasing the depth of their emotions and sacrifices. The story clearly asks "What does it mean to share motherhood?". Combining all these essence Desai created a breath taking story about survival, memories, and a sense of belonging.

Comparative Insights: Two Women, Two Landscapes

The short stories written by Anita Desai, "The Roof Top Dwellers" and "Winterscape", both portray two different personalities of women but eventually both are seemed to be facing identity crisis, a sense of belonging, and a control over their lives. The first character, Moyna, young independent women lives in a room on the rooftop, faces number of problems but does not give up as she wants to lead her life freely. The second character is an old lady who moves abroad to visit her son but finds it difficult to adjust to a western home. Despite the fact that these two women are in two different worlds and belong to different generations, still end up facing similar hurdles of being treated different because of their gender but we see these two standing strong and holding on to their dignity till the end.

Moyna feels her freedom and becomes vulnerable living in the small room on the rooftop. She spurns to follow traditional culture and follows her passion to write to gain control over her life. But life on the rooftop does not turn out to be easy because of the heat, noise, and the pestering attention along with a feeling of alienation. Her space acts as a symbol to show both a success of a woman as well as the cost she has to pay to achieve it in this modern society. Her struggle does not limit to be just physical rather turns out to be more of an emotional challenge, as she deals with the pressure of her family, neighbor, and certain doubts of love and marriage too arises. This story gives a message of how difficult it is for women to find her identity in this male dominant society and the social censor she needs to face along with the payment of the cost of her freedom.

On the other hand the mother in “Winterscape” is placed in a peaceful environment of Canadian suburb. But the move from her homeland to an unknown place overseas was not her own choice but just a gesture out of love for her son. Unlike the city Moyna lives in, this place is calm and peaceful but the mother still goes through the feeling of ignorance and loneliness. She could not communicate because of the language barrier and the cultural difference especially with her daughter-in-law. Despite the respect she receives her presence does not seem to be countable. Here the cold snowy winter acts as a symbol of how emotionally distant and isolating her experience is at this foreign land. She fades away in silence as now she was no longer seen to be standing at the window but was now only on a frame on the fridge.

Desai used both the rooftop and the snowy landscape as a means to depict their inner lives. Moyna’s rooftop shows her freedom along with emotions fluctuations and the frozen stillness showed the mother’s deep down grief of the distance from her family and quite disappearance of her role and voice. Both the characters reflected strength not by rebelling but by living through the pain. Moyna’s refusal to marry and the mother’s patience with her family showed that silence too can be the answer to all the problems. Both the women are limited by gender expectations and are seen to be living a life full of sacrifices.

At the end, Desai does not promote any culture or portray women as stronger rather she highlights how both the setting Indian as well as Western can be unwelcoming to women who tend to question the norms and the duties of their expected roles. Desai criticizes the way both the societies make the women feel to lower down her self-worth and lead a life expected by the society following all the traditional norms made by the patriarchal society. “The Roof Top Dwellers”, and “Winterscape” are two moving stories talking about the gender, space, and identity facing the same question “How can a woman hold on to who she is in a world that often sees her as unimportant?”. Desai shows that resistance does not always look rebellious; it can sometimes be simply an act of living one’s own life with pride and dignity whether it is a small rented room or just a faded photograph on a fridge.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- [1]. Curtis, Sarah. Reading Anita Desai: Gender, Silence and Resistance. Oxford University Press, 2000.
- [2]. Desai, Anita. The Rooftop Dwellers. In Games at Twilight and Other Stories, Vintage, 1998, pp. 95–118.
- [3]. Desai, Anita. Winterscape. In The Penguin Book of Modern Indian Short Stories, edited by Stephen Alter and Wimal Dissanayake, Penguin Books, 1993, pp. 245–254.
- [4]. Girardin, Renée. "Maternal Memory and Cultural Displacement in Diasporic Literature." Journal of Postcolonial Studies, vol. 27, no. 3, 2019, pp. 45–61.
- [5]. Louvel, Liliane, and Verley, Clara. Narrative Agents: Architecture and Gender in Modern Indian Fiction. Routledge, 2023.
- [6]. Mathew, Joseph, and Samuel, Reena. “Spaces of Resistance: Gendered Architecture in Desai’s Rooftop Dwellers.” South Asian Literature Review, vol. 8, no. 2, 2020, pp. 112–126.
- [7]. Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center. “Anita Desai: Storytelling Through Silence.” Smithsonian Institution, 2015. www.apa.si.edu/desai-silence