

Dynamics of Victimhood and Rebellion: A Comparative Study of Socio-Cultural Constructs in the Works of Anita Desai and Mulk Raj Anand

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Abstract

The portrayal of victimhood and rebellion in literature offers profound insights into the socio-cultural constructs of different periods and societies. This paper examines the dynamics of victimhood and rebellion in the works of Anita Desai and Mulk Raj Anand, two prominent Indian writers whose narratives reflect deep socio-cultural concerns. By comparing their representations of marginalized individuals, their responses to oppression, and the broader implications of their struggles, this study highlights the evolution of socio-political consciousness in Indian English literature. The paper argues that while both writers emphasize the conditions of subjugation, their characters navigate victimhood and rebellion through distinct pathways shaped by gender, class, and historical contexts.

Keywords: Victimhood, Rebellion, Socio-Cultural Constructs, Anita Desai, Mulk Raj Anand, Indian English Literature, Postcolonialism, Subaltern Studies.

Introduction

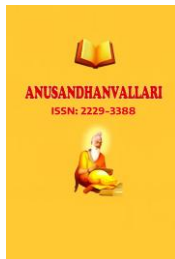
Indian English literature has long served as a medium for articulating the complexities of oppression and resistance. The works of Anita Desai and Mulk Raj Anand provide rich narratives that explore these themes through distinct yet complementary perspectives. While Desai's focus often centers on psychological victimhood and internal rebellion, Anand's narratives foreground systemic oppression and external resistance. This paper seeks to compare and contrast the manifestations of victimhood and rebellion in their works, emphasizing the socio-cultural underpinnings that shape their storytelling. The study also incorporates insights from other postcolonial and feminist theorists to broaden the analytical framework.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws from postcolonial literary theory and socio-political criticism to analyze how Desai and Anand frame their characters' struggles. Frantz Fanon's notion of the colonized psyche and Gayatri Spivak's concept of the subaltern inform the discussion on victimhood, while James C. Scott's theory of everyday resistance provides insight into the mechanisms of rebellion. Additionally, insights from Homi K. Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* and Edward Said's *Orientalism* contribute to the understanding of identity formation and cultural hegemony in their works.

Victimhood

Desai and Anand have portrayed victimhood of women in many of their plays. They were sensitive in bringing the atrocities the women faced into their writings that would be recorded forever and read by generations to come. Anita Desai brought into light the psychological oppression and gendered subjugation. Anita Desai's works,



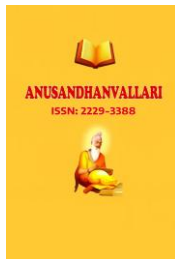
particularly Cry, The Peacock and Clear Light of Day, illustrate the internalization of victimhood. Internalization of victimhood springs from a sensitive source which the woman especially knows, mostly her near and dear ones. Anita Desai's protagonists, often women, experience a similar psychological entrapment exacerbated by patriarchal and societal expectations. One of her fond characters, Maya in her famous novel, Cry, The Peacock epitomizes this feminine hardship, where her victimhood is not overtly external but deeply internalized, manifesting in psychological turmoil and isolation. Maya before marriage and she after marriage are two different identities. Before marriage her every wish was fulfilled and her every demand was met. In fact, she depended on her father so much that she could not handle her own issues after marriage by herself and had to bank on her father for support. Maya was devastated by male ego, male mindset and male behaviour. She lost her self-esteem. She didn't give up. She fought all her best to restore her dignity and get normalcy. This has a long and lonely impact on her mental health. This is more brutal than a physical wound. She suffered from deep trauma that only worsened with the passing of time. The trauma built up to such lethal level that she thought it wise to murder her husband, Gautama. It did not stop there; she committed suicide later. This suggests her knowledge of the consequence of her action which would be more regressive. She physically ended herself, however, she was mentally dead since a long time. This is not evident but has manifestations in her work and very life itself. Critics such as Jasbir Jain and Meenakshi Mukherjee have highlighted how Desai's narratives align with feminist psychoanalytical perspectives, further enriching the discussion of victimhood.

Mulk Raj Anand has also brought in the plight of women through his depiction of systemic oppression and class struggles. Conversely, Mulk Raj Anand's Untouchable and Coolie depict victimhood as an outcome of caste-based and economic exploitation. In Untouchable, Sohini, a lower caste girl is subjected to sexual abuses by a priest of higher caste. When she objected to this bond and fearing the matter could get to light, the priest, Pandit Kali Nath falsely accused her for defiling him. These incidents underscore the double victimhood of lower caste women. And adding to her woes is her incapacity to correct her image and help herself with due justice. She is not educated enough and she does not have contacts who could help her. Moreover, her lower caste limits her access to such justice. In another famous work of Anand, Coolie, he has depicted many women victims. Rukmani, a mistress of an influential person, Munoo is subjected to patriarchal dominance. She does not find her in herself. This subjects her to grow inward and become hopeless. Anand has also artfully, portrayed Parbati. He is a factory workers wife who is trapped in poverty and domestic violence. This fight is even more profound as her primary struggle is to ensure two ends meet. This leaves her with nothing except accepting her fate. In fact, poverty just adds to her woes, but that is not a very defining factor. As in Anand's characters, Sheila, a wealthy woman, and Lakshmi, a sex worker, who reveal different shades of women's victimhood—showing how both the rich and poor struggle under patriarchy, whether through emotional neglect or outright exploitation. So, it is understood that both the rich and the poor are equally affected by the oddities of the society. The flimsy difference could be a woman with wealth does not have primary struggle to feed and health.

Anand's characters suggest their victimhood is a collective rather than an individual experience. Scholars like Sudhir Kakar and Priyamvada Gopal have explored how Anand's work aligns with social realism and Marxist literary criticism, further contextualizing his representation of victimhood.

Rebellion

It is noted that rebellion is the ultimatum as a response to oppression. Desai through passive and psychological resistance has brought up women rebelling against the unjust done to them. Desai's characters often rebel in subtle, passive ways. Bimla famously known as Bim is a brilliant but stubborn woman who loves poetry, excels in academics. She has an independent mind and chooses her own friends. She had to suffer patriarchal ideologies. However, she fought all the way to be herself and finally doing what she loves the most and being with people who she likes to be with. She does these in Clear Light of Day disregarding challenges societal expectations by refusing to marry, asserting her independence in a non-confrontational manner. This rebellion is introspective and



silent but equally powerful. As Chandra Mohanty and Simone de Beauvoir have argued, such forms of resistance are integral to feminist discourses that focus on redefining agency beyond overt activism.

In contrast to Desai, Rebellion as depicted by Anand was active and systemic resistance. Anand's narratives are replete with overt acts of defiance. Bakha's moment of awareness in *Untouchable* and Munoo's constant struggle for dignity in *Coolie* highlight a more explicit form of rebellion, one that calls for social reform and justice. Anand's characters align with the theories of Karl Marx and Antonio Gramsci, whose writings emphasize the role of the proletariat in social upheaval and transformation.

Comparative Analysis

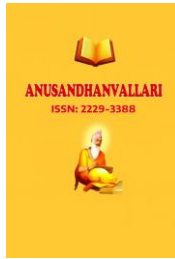
Gender, class, and Historical context have been pivotal in writers' ideas. These sublime features in society are very evident. Society is shaped through these features and vice versa. Gender has been a talking point by writers since ages. Writers write what they see in society. And gender provides fodder to our thoughts and gives insight to the then society as a whole. Class also has an impact in the writings of many. Class is of many types. Broadly, class is divided into the haves and the have nots as propounded by Karl Marx. The haves enjoy superior status in society with the means of production in their hands. The have nots are mere labours and sell their work for money. They are inferior in the society. With class comes thought, action and behaviour. These class goes onto shape their respective realms in the society. Marx also believed that this gap in the different classes will call for a revolution. The have nots will revolt and set the order right. Historical contexts also add to writers dimensions. Different stages in history have different narratives of the society, particularly, women who have seen passing through different tones of the society. A critical examination reveals that while both writers engage with victimhood and rebellion, their approaches are influenced by gender and class constructs. Desai's focus on female protagonists underscores the limitations imposed by patriarchal norms, whereas Anand's male protagonists grapple with the rigidity of caste and economic structures. Furthermore, historical context plays a vital role—Desai's post-independence India allows for introspective narratives, while Anand's colonial-era setting necessitates a more direct confrontation with oppression. The scholarship of Gauri Viswanathan and Ania Loomba is instrumental in situating these narratives within the broader discourse of colonial and postcolonial literature.

Conclusion

The comparative study of Anita Desai and Mulk Raj Anand's works highlights the varied dimensions of victimhood and rebellion in Indian society. While Desai's narratives illuminate the internal struggles of individuals ensnared by psychological and societal constraints, Anand's works provide a stark portrayal of systemic oppression and active resistance. Together, their literary contributions offer a nuanced understanding of the socio-cultural constructs that shape victimhood and rebellion in Indian literature. Future research may further explore the intersectionality of caste, gender, and economic status in Indian English literature.

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