



## RESEARCH ARTICLE

**SENSE OF ALIENATION AND EMOTIONAL ESTRANGEMENT –A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF ANITA DESAI AND MARGARET ATWOOD'S HEROINES**Ragamayee K<sup>1\*</sup>, Dr.K.Lalitha Bai<sup>2</sup><sup>1\*</sup>(Assistant professor, CVRCE, Hydearbad.)<sup>2</sup>(Professor, VIIT, Hyderabad.)Doi: <https://doi.org/10.54513/JOELL.2023.10303>**ABSTRACT****Article history:**

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The quest for identity and the struggle to identify oneself with the surroundings resulting in a sense of alienation and estrangement is experienced by the protagonists of the women's writing. This paper attempts to focus on the common features of the characters in the novels of the two women authors Anita Desai and Margaret Atwood. Most of the protagonists of Desai can be classified under two categories, one with disturbed, obsessed, oversensitive, aesthetic sensibility while the others are a little tough, stubborn, sarcastic, and cynical about the situations and the people around. Whether it is Maya, Monisha, Sita and Tara who belong to the first category or Nirode, Amla, Nanda and Sophie who belong to the second category, it all begins with the feeling of that estrangement which leads to the zenith though they chose different endings. Margaret Atwood opines that the central reality of Canada or Canadian literature depends wholly on the concept of survival and existence. Similar to those of Desai, Atwood's heroines attempt to discover their inner self as they feel that they are like emotional refugees seeking shelter in a terrain that they cannot identify themselves with. Most of her characters, especially women feel emotionally maimed and undergo a constant turmoil to connect with the now and present.

**Keywords:** *Culture, Estrangement, Alienation, Identity, Turmoil, Oppression.*



A constant psychological turmoil is experienced by the woman in a quest for self-asserted, independent identity of her own contrary to the one assigned by the society. The society has always tried to portray the image of woman as someone who is an embodiment of sacrifice and the true follower of moral values. This resulted in a kind of suppression and oppression of woman in the name of honour, modesty and respect. Right from the very childhood, girls are brought up with a false notion that they are dependent on man and never think of leading an independent life of their own. They are made to believe that they are not and can never be equal to their male counterpart. They grow up seeing the prominence given to father and brother and are injected with the concept that they have to respect and obey their husbands.

Betty Friedan comments on the dominant patriarchal society in her '*Feminine Mystique*' thus, "*The identity issue for the boy is primarily an occupational-vocational question; he will be a husband and a father (his sex-role identity) but he will also centrally be a worker, while the girl's identity centers more exclusively on her sex-role whose wife I will be, what kind of family will we have;*" (Friedan, 245)

Though women contribute to half of the population, society often tends to conveniently forget the fact that the active participation of women is equally and sometimes more important for the successful progress of the society. Irrespective of the culture and region, the position of woman and the treatment towards her is surprisingly similar. Hence an attempt

is made to compare a few female characters and protagonists of Anita Desai and Margaret Atwood.

Anita Desai, through her novels, throws light on the inner psyche of the woman who is in a constant struggle attempting to define herself. A tussle within herself, whether to follow her instincts and assure her position or follow the path that she is expected to so that she can be the ideal woman according to the social norms, is constantly seen. In her first novel, '*Cry the Peacock*', the protagonist, Maya narrates the major part of the story in the first-person narrative. Desai employs the stream of consciousness to expound the details of the past and to narrate the gradual deterioration of Maya's marriage, her distorted relationship with her husband, Gautama, and the torn inner self losing her mental poise and sanity.

Mary Wollstonecraft in her, '*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*' discusses how a woman undergoes transformation by being constantly restricted and confined to domestic life. She talks about how lack of exposure and presiding in a confined dominion often makes many women despotic, cunning, tyrannical and petty. (80). Hence the victim becomes the perpetrator of patriarchal oppression. Maya loses her mental balance, becomes weak and vulnerable, gets carried away by the prophecy and ends in a tragedy.

Maya is a sensitive, emotional, and simple lady with an aesthetic sense. On the contrary, her husband Gautama, a practical man doesn't give importance to these minute details. She considers him to be insensitive as he fails to understand her or respect her interests. The names of the characters



are also indicative of their nature, Maya means illusion, an imagination, far from reality and Gautama is the name of Buddha who has renounced everything to win over the "Maya" (illusion) of the materialistic world. Following the prophecy, Maya takes a bold decision to kill her husband because she considers him to be dead already as he is not there for her.

Margaret Atwood's heroines experience a sense of estrangement even in a known terrain and feel like emotional refugees. They feel alienated not only from the environment but also from the very culture, language and communication process. The dominant patriarchal society treats woman as a product, an object or commodity for sale and service. Offred, the protagonist of 'The Handmaid's Tale' is a perfect example of this. The very title is indicative of that, a woman doesn't have an identity of her own; she is not supposed to refer her original name anywhere. She is identified as belonging to someone; here it is of Fred-meaning belonging to Fred. She is like a possession and not an individual. Handmaids are forbidden from using their birth name.

The story is divided into two parts, one told in the first-person narration by Offred and the rest is about the lives of handmaids from Offred's perspective. Handmaids are women with healthy reproductive systems and are assigned to upper class men to help them reproduce for 'them'. Unfortunately, the women who are the wives of these men also do not have a voice against this practice. The possibility of men being sterile is conveniently denied. Serena Joy, wife of the commander to whom Offred is assigned, suspects this but doesn't say a word, instead she encourages

Offred to get impregnated by Nick, their Chauffer. The handmaids are never addressed with their original names except during their training to be handmaids. This depicts how deprived women are to even be identified with their birth name. Another fact to be observed here is whether it is the assigned handmaid treated as a tool/commodity or the legal, official wife; woman has no voice of her own. (Serena denies accepting the fact that she is a former television figure).

The controversial painter Elaine Risley, the protagonist of Atwood's 'Cat's Eye' who vividly reflects on her childhood and teenage experiences is similar to Sita of Desai's 'Where Shall We Go This Summer?' who also dwells in the past. Elaine recalls Cordelia from her teenage friends as being both kind and cruel. From her memories of childhood, Elaine remembers the prized possession, a cat's eye marble she used to play with along with her brother. The marble becomes the prominent motif of her paintings later in the future. She regains those memories when she discovers the red plastic purse in which she finds the marble. The narration is in first person interspersed with flashbacks about the glory of her childhood.

The protagonist Sita of Desai's 'Where Shall We Go This Summer?' is constantly remembered of her father and childhood memories associated with the island she stayed in. Sita is a middle aged woman with her fifth pregnancy, totally exhausted physically and disturbed mentally. She doesn't know what exactly she wants, she doesn't want to deliver the child nor does she want to abort. She undergoes a mental agony where she is not at rest with her own self. She wants to run away, away from the present



and the now. She resents her fifth pregnancy and feels alienated from her husband and family. The novel is divided in to three parts, the first showing the present state of Sita and her reminiscences of her childhood island Manori, her image of her ideal father as a perfect and successful man. The second section discusses the events of her past life and the concluding section evinces the fake resolution and acceptance of her future life.

Sita bearing her fifth child is indicative of how she is being treated as a tool to produce (reproduce) children as the society defines her (woman) role as fit to be child-bearing, rearing, and taking care of the family. This, though not exactly the same, is similar to that of Atwood's handmaid, Offred who is officially assigned to married, high ranked men (Commander) to bear children for them and not expect any further benefits or relation with them. Sita transforms experiencing three stages-thesis, antithesis and synthesis or doubt, rejection and acceptance. She initially doubts and questions her identity, rejects her present state, realizes that she got carried away when she finds out the truth about her father. She glamorizes the past only to realize that she was deceived by her own memories. She undergoes a lot of turmoil before concluding that her future is with her husband and that she will confide in him by sharing everything with him. But the euphoria ends very soon as she realizes that she cannot connect with her husband psychologically. Sita accepts to compromise but considers that her defeat because she continues living, her conflict still unresolved.

Offred narrates the story in first person starting with her third assignment as a handmaid to

the commander. The narratives of her present day experiences are intertwined with her past memories of life before and during the revolution. The series of events like, her loss of control over her marriage, their failed attempt to escape to Canada, her indoctrination to become a handmaid, ill treatment by the commander's wife, Serena Joy, loss of her friend Moria-all these incidents leave her in a state of estrangement. She feels alienated and a sense of non-belongingness creeps in. Later she becomes pregnant and even contemplates suicide in a state of despair. Towards the end when she is taken away by the people calling themselves the agents of the secret police, she is not sure whether to trust them or not. She is unsure of her trust towards Nick. Finally, she enters the van with the same uncertainty that is similar to that of Sita who decides to compromise with her future as she is left with no option.

An analogous relationship can be drawn between the characters of Atwood's novel 'Surfacing' where the protagonist is not given a name intentionally to indicate the universality of the sense of alienation from society and Desai's ninth novel, 'Journey to Ithaca'. Atwood attempts to explore new facets of Bildungsroman through this novel in a conventional manner of self-discovery to self-recovery. The characters' search for spiritual meaning of life prompts the action of Desai's novel. The quest for identity, moving away from the present in search of inner self, realization and making peace with the truth in pursuit of spiritual enhancement are the elements that form the crux of both the novels.

In 'Surfacing,' the unnamed heroine along with her lover Joe, accompanied by a married couple



David and Anna, revisits Quebec in search of her missing father in a hope to find him. The busy city life marked by her personal and professional failures makes her emotionally weak and sensitive. Though the search seems to be external, there is actually a deep and interior search going on trying to associate with the prized possessions gifted by her parents. She attempts to bring out the lost sensitivity within her through this.

The readers are made aware of her complex psyche when she informs about her having led a double life to the extent that people even ask her if she had a twin sister. The series of events that she has created in her fiction like a spurious marriage, divorce followed by the abandonment of her child is psychologically so intense that she has distanced herself from her own parents as she refers to them as 'they', as if belonging to someone else. This intentional detachment from people around is indicative of the sense of estrangement being felt within.

The reason for feeling alienated is not just one, but regional, religious and emotional as well. Her French was so bad because of her English descent that she was sometimes even mistaken for American; she was non-Roman Catholic, indeed non-religious among the fervent; she felt alienated as a woman in a male dominated society. Above all these is the emotional self-alienation where she felt like a stranger to herself. The various events of her life leave her confused. The incidents also teach her that there is no innocence in wilderness. When she finds her father's body trapped under water, she understands and acknowledges life on a broader perspective and accepts death as a part of life. The

reason for her strong aversion to society and intense feeling of alienation resulting in madness is not clear. She realizes her innocence in seeking refuge in childhood memories and reclaims to be a part of the life-making process by conceiving the child of Joe. The result of the transformation is due to understanding of the fact that complete withdrawal is nothing but death.

'Journey to Ithaca' by Anita Desai is the journey of a young couple Sophie and Matteo from Italy to India in search of enlightenment and ultimate bliss. The couple, similar to those of Desai's other couples; do not agree with each other. Sophie is more practical and cynical whereas Matteo is sensitive and emotional who believes that the end of their journey is at the feet of the Mother. Sophie feels alienated by Matteo because he is in search of the Eternal Truth, the Supreme Bliss. He doesn't care for her or their two children in the pursuit of this ultimate bliss. She feels that only she is being responsible about the children and her family as she leaves him in India and goes to Italy along with the children. But the fact is that she too leaves them under the care of their grandparents as she is busy, learning the truth and journey of the Mother. She fails to understand what has really attracted Matteo towards Mother.

The self-imposed isolation (from the city life) of the unnamed heroine of Atwood's 'Surfacing' resulting in her madness can be compared to Sophie of Desai's 'Journey to Ithaca', where she also runs away from her husband unable to accept and appreciate his decision. But she is equally restless and decides to come back to India when he falls sick. Nanda Kaul of Desai's, 'Fire on the Mountain'



attempts an escape from her family, children, grandchildren, and all to live in isolation in a mountain top cottage in Kasauli. Her craving for contact is revived with the arrival of her great granddaughter Raka. Her longing to go back to life is reflected through her actions to win over the child's heart. This feeling of running away from the present and the now, trying to make life more meaningful, taking refuge in an isolated land, whether a mountain top or the woods of an island, the realization of the self and the longing to get back, to be connected can be seen commonly in these characters.

## CONCLUSION

Most of the novels of Desai contain a deep-rooted sense of philosophical concern about the true meaning of life. Her protagonists are dissatisfied with the mundane routine of the present and the now. The quest for identity and the search for a meaningful life provoke them to take some serious steps risking their relations and even lives. Atwood's heroines experience a sense of emotional estrangement similar to those of Desai's. Contemplative of their time and place, Atwood's characters are apparently indecisive. They are torn between the inner voice seeking freedom and meaning and the superficial society and social norms. They are emotionally maimed, trying to fathom the deep rooted conscious and unconscious impressions, gaining strength to return and finally find a means of identification with the present. Thus they want to establish a sense of belongingness.

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