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The Theme of Alienation in Anitha Desai's *Fire On The Mountain* and Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance Of Loss*

G. Priyadharshini, M.A., M.Phil.

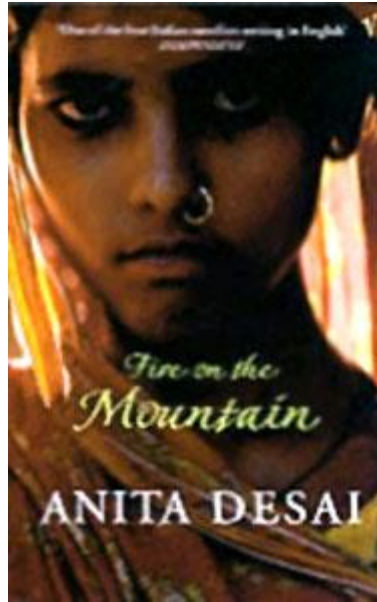
Excellent in Writing Psychological Novels

As a novelist of considerable merit, Anita Desai has enriched the tradition of Indian writing in English. The novels of Anita Desai have captured many a reader and scholar. Her novels include *Cry the Peacock* (1963), *Voices in the City* (1965), *Bye-Bye The Black Bird* (1971), *Where shall We Go This Summer?* (1975), *Fire on The Mountain* (1977), *Clear Light of Day* (1980), *The village by the sea* (1982), *In Custody* (1984), *Baumgartner's Bombay* (1988) and *Fasting Feasting* (1999), Her short stories were published under the title *Games at Twilight* (1982).

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Desai excels in writing psychological novels. In her women-centered novels, she has depicted the intensity of psychological conflicts experienced by women. The psyche is inextricably bound to social situations. The psychic defense mechanisms that women follow to escape the pain are realistically portrayed by Anita Desai. In the exploration of the inner consciousness or the psychological state of mind, Anita Desai has been compared to the British fiction writer Virginia Wolf.

Kiran Desai

Anita Desai is a guiding star for many bright young writers. Starting right at home, she influenced her own daughter, Kiran Desai. She was born on 3rd September, 1971 in New Delhi and lived there until she was 14. She spent a year in England, before her family finally moved to the United States. Her mother Anita Desai has direct influence on Kiran Desai's writing. The young Kiran Desai grew up listening to her mother talking about literature and writing.

Kiran Desai's favorite works included all master pieces of Truman Capote, Tennessee Williams, O'Connor, Juan Rulfo and Narayan. She completed her schooling in Massachusetts before attending Bennington College and Hollins University. At this stage Kiran Desai started to take her writing seriously and jointed Columbia University, where she studied creative writing.

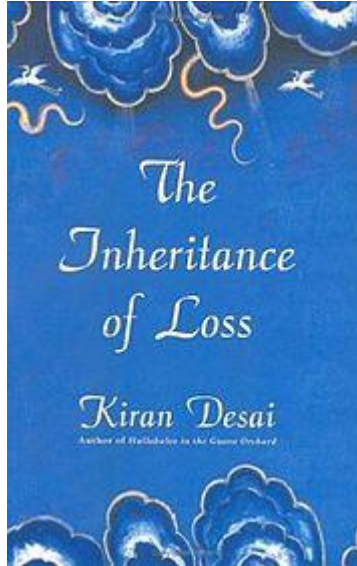
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Gaining Literary Recognition

Kiran Desai first gained literary attention in 1977 when she published in the *New Yorker* and in *Mirror Work*, a controversial anthology of fifty years of Indian writing edited by Salman Rushdie. Kiran Desai has written only two novels. *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* and *The Inheritance of Loss*.



Focus of This Article – The Theme of Alienation

This article explores the theme of alienation in Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain* and Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*.

The theme of alienation is a pivotal concept in post-modern Literature. It has been in use in theological, philosophical, sociological and psychological writings. Alienation is a state of man's incompatibility with his milieu. It refers to the polarization between man and nature and the disintegration of man's dream of bliss. It also reflects a state of man's detachment from himself, with a prevailing sense of loneliness or a feeling of exclusion, that accompanies any behavior in which the person is compelled to self-destructively. The individuals are forced to manipulate people and situations in accordance with the social demands, while feeling incapable of controlling their actions.

Alarming Proportions

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Alienation is an old phenomenon but it has assumed alarming proportions in the present age. Several factors have brought about this state of awareness. The feeling of alienation is inherent in man as he is prone to almost all the physical and psychological attacks of society and its controllers. The negative effects of alienation lead man either to commit suicide or to consider himself not more than an automation deprived of any personal ranking or individuality.

In the present day, writers like Anita Desai, Bharthi Mukherjee, Kiran Desai, Arundhati Roy etc. write about the theme of alienation in their novels. Anita Desai in her novels is constantly concerned with alienation of the protagonists from themselves, from society and from others. She depicts the dilemma of modern man. She is not a social realist in the conventional sense of the term. She is more interested in portraying the responses of a sensitive mind to the world around her/him.

Anita Desai and the Theme of Alienation

The theme of alienation is treated by Anita Desai with much innovation, that she explores the minute details and analyses thoroughly the motives of her characters. She shows her male and female protagonists at strife. She portrays her characters as they are and not as they should be. In her novels, she has ably dwelt upon such existential themes such as male/female accommodation, alienation, absurdity of human existence, quest for ultimate meaning in life, decision making, lack of communication, detachment and isolation, focusing on how women in the contemporary urban set up, bravely struggle against or helplessly submit to the relentless forces of an absurd life. The alienation among her protagonists is the result of the individualistic temperaments, influence of the past on the heroines and the conflict between fantasy and reality.

Fire on The Mountain

In *Fire on The Mountain*, Anita Desai portrays the alienation of her protagonist, Nanda Kaul in a unique manner. Nanda Kaul sacrifices a lot for her family and lives only for her family. She never thinks of a life on her own. She often feels alienated among her family members and even with her husband. Nanda Kaul's great grand-daughter Raka also feels alienated. She dislikes her parents because they always fight with each other. This childhood

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experience makes her isolated and depressed. So, she is sent to seek refuge under the care of her grandmother Nanda Kaul. But, both are alienated from each other in the Hills of Kasauli. Nanda Kaul is a recluse out of vengeance for a long-life of duty and obligation, but her great granddaughter is a recluse by nature. Like Nanda and Raka all the other characters also suffer isolation in this novel.

Psychological Depth

The novel unfolds with great psychological depth the growing tense bond between the two equally troubled relatives. The achievement of this remarkable novel lies in its chilling climax when Ila Das, Nanda Kaul's garrulous friend and social worker, is raped and murdered by a villager whom she stopped from marrying off his daughter at a very young age. The disturbing climax inter-twines the three feminine threads of the novel when the willful Raka sets fire to the mountain, symbolic of the flames that engulf all three in the end. The novel holds a mirror to the crisis in human values and the lot of the isolated woman as she struggles to assert her identity.

Kiran Desai – Personal Experience of Alienation

Kiran Desai has been greatly influenced by her mother Anita Desai. As an immigrant, she experience alienation, isolation, depression, cultural shock, oppression, etc. and these traits are reflected in all her novels.

The Inheritance of Loss

In *The Inheritance of Loss* through the character of Biju, she expresses her own feelings and emotions. Biju acts as the mouth piece of Kiran Desai. Biju feels alienated in New York, where he switches from one job to another and from one hotel to another. As an immigrant in New York, he has no one there to help him. So he feels isolated in the glamorous city of New York. He longs to come back to his motherland. The novel has autobiographical overtones and the novel can be viewed as having themes of belonging, estrangement, exile and home coming.

In Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*, a retired judge Jemubhai Patel feels alienated, depressed and isolated in England. Sai is a westernized Indian brought up by English nuns and

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feels estranged in India. Her mastery of the English language and little knowledge of Hindi makes her a stranger in her own country. She develops a feeling of rootlessness in Kalimpong as she is caught between two extremely different cultures, the Indian and the western. Finally, she leaves the Judge's house in search of a home that would really make her happy. Biju belongs to the shadow class of illegal immigrants in New York. He tries to eke out an existence without being caught in an alien culture which is not kind to him. Thus, the judge Sai and Biju suffer from rootlessness, alienation and quest for identity.

Diaspora and Alienation – A Comparison of Two Novels

Anita Desai and Kiran Desai are diasporic writers. Anita Desai's characters feel alienated within themselves and Kiran Desai's characters are immigrant aliens. They feel alienated in the foreign countries. So their characters share some common features. In *Fire on The Mountain* Nanda Kaul, the protagonist leads an isolated life in the Hill of Kausali. Similarly, in *The Inheritance of Loss*, the judge Jemubhai Patel who is the protagonist of the novel also leads a lonely life in the hill of Kalimpong in the company of his cook. Like the Judge, Nanda Kaul also lives alone with a cook. Anita Desai does not just state this, she shows it through dialogue. "No visitors yet?..... we have none"(FOTM 12)

In *Fire on The Mountain*, Raka is a helpless child and she has to live under the patronage of her great grandmother. Similarly in *The Inheritance of Loss*, Sai is an orphan and she lives in the house of her grandfather. Both Nanda Kaul and Judge Jemubhai Patel feel that their lonely lives are affected by the arrival of Raka and Sai respectively. Then they identify the same characteristic traits in the new comers too. Nanda Kaul realizes that Raka is the finished perfected model of what Nanda Kaul herself was - merely a "brave, flawed experiment" (FOTM 47). In the novel of Kiran Desai, the judge Jemubhai Patel realizes that

Sai... was more his kin than he had thought imaginable.

There was something familiar about her. She had the same accent and manners...(TIOL 210)

Not only are the characters and themes similar but also the technique of flashback is used by the novelists to serve their individual purposes. In *Fire on The Mountain*, Anita Desai efficiently handles the flashback technique through the character of Nanda Kaul and brings out the impact of the past on the present secluded life. In Kiran Desai's novel, Jemubhai Patel and Biju also recall their past lives through constant flashbacks.

Anita and Kiran

Anita Desai was a keen observer of the life around her. She deals with the psychological problems confronting Indian women, particularly after marriage. She has the capacity to convey the inner feelings of women in her works. As a result she has emerged as a great psychological novelist. Moreover, she attains a special position in the psychological world. As the daughter of a great literary figure, Kiran Desai is influenced by her mother Anita Desai, but she has also emerged as an artist of unique style. Nationalism, multiculturalism, globalization, and despair are the themes of Kiran Desai's writing.

Anita Desai and Kiran Desai have dealt with the theme of alienation related to characters from different origins and situations. The present study has future scope for an in-depth analysis of characters in both the novels.

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