



# “Social Constraints and Female Agency: The Role of Culture and Tradition in the Novels of Anita Desai and Arundhati Roy”

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## Abstract

This abstract examines the interplay of social constraints and female agency within the cultural and traditional frameworks in the novels of Anita Desai and Arundhati Roy. Both authors, through their nuanced storytelling, vividly depict the lives of women navigating a patriarchal society. Desai’s works often highlight the internal struggles of her female protagonists, who grapple with societal expectations and personal aspirations. Roy’s narratives, on the other hand, delve into the broader socio-political contexts that shape and sometimes constrain women’s lives. This study explores how culture and tradition both inhibit and inspire female characters in their quest for identity and autonomy. By comparing and contrasting the portrayal of women in Desai and Roy’s novels, the research aims to uncover the underlying themes of resistance, resilience, and the quest for self-realization amidst cultural and traditional pressures. The analysis reveals the complex dynamics between societal constraints and individual agency, offering insights into the broader discourse on gender and identity in contemporary Indian literature.

**Keywords:** Female Agency, Social Constraints, Culture and Tradition, Indian Literature, etc.

## Introduction

The portrayal of women in literature has long been a reflection of the cultural and social dynamics of a given society. In Indian literature, the works of Anita Desai and Arundhati Roy stand out for their profound exploration of female agency and the constraints imposed by societal norms and traditions. Both authors provide a nuanced critique of the roles women play within their respective cultural contexts, offering a rich tapestry of narratives that highlight the struggle for identity and autonomy.

Anita Desai, a celebrated Indian novelist, often centers her stories around the inner lives of her female characters. Her novels, such as *'Cry, the Peacock'* (1963), *'Where Shall We Go This Summer?'* (1975), and *'Fasting, Feasting'* (1999), delve into the psychological landscapes of women who are often confined by societal expectations. Desai's protagonists frequently grapple with the dual pressures of tradition and modernity, seeking to carve out spaces for their personal desires and aspirations within a patriarchal framework .

Desai's depiction of female characters is deeply intertwined with the cultural and traditional milieu of India. In *'Cry, the Peacock'*, the protagonist Maya is depicted as a woman trapped in a loveless marriage, struggling with mental health issues exacerbated by the expectations placed upon her as a wife and daughter-in-law. The novel vividly illustrates the impact of cultural norms on women's mental health and their sense of agency . Similarly, in *'Where Shall We Go This Summer?'*, the protagonist Sita battles with the monotony of domestic life and the societal pressures of being a perfect wife and mother. Desai's exploration of Sita's inner turmoil provides a poignant commentary on the limited roles available to women within traditional Indian society .

Arundhati Roy, on the other hand, situates her female characters within broader socio-political contexts, often highlighting the intersectionality of gender with caste, class, and religion. Her seminal work, *'The God of Small Things'* (1997), which won the Booker Prize, is a testament to her ability to weave personal narratives with larger social issues. The novel's female protagonists, Ammu and Rahel, navigate a world rife with familial and societal constraints, revealing the complex interplay between personal agency and socio-cultural limitations .

Roy's narrative style is marked by its lyrical prose and intricate structure, which serve to underscore the multifaceted nature of her characters' experiences. In *'The God of Small Things'*, Ammu's illicit relationship with Velutha, a man from a lower caste, challenges the rigid caste system and the patriarchal norms that govern her society. This relationship, and its tragic consequences, highlight the harsh realities faced by women who defy societal expectations . Similarly, Rahel's journey is one of self-discovery and resilience, as she contends with the legacy of her family's past and the constraints imposed by societal norms.

The exploration of female agency in Desai and Roy's works is deeply rooted in the cultural and traditional contexts of India. Both authors illustrate how these contexts shape and often restrict the lives of their female characters. However, they also depict moments of resistance and resilience, where women assert their autonomy in the face of oppressive structures. This duality is central to understanding the complex dynamics between social constraints and female agency in their novels.

In *'Fasting, Feasting'*, Desai contrasts the lives of two sisters, Uma and Aruna, to highlight the differing impacts of societal expectations on women's lives. Uma, who remains unmarried, faces the stigma and limitations imposed by her family and society, while Aruna, who marries and moves to a different country, grapples with the pressures of maintaining a perfect family image. Desai's nuanced portrayal of these characters underscores the pervasive influence of cultural norms on women's choices and their sense of self.

Similarly, in Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017), the diverse cast of characters, including transgender individuals and marginalized women, navigate a society fraught with political and social upheaval. Roy's depiction of these characters' struggles and their acts of defiance offers a broader commentary on the intersections of gender, identity, and socio-political constraints. The novel's exploration of the lives of women and other marginalized groups within the broader context of Indian society underscores the pervasive impact of tradition and culture on individual agency .

Both Desai and Roy's novels provide a critical lens through which to examine the roles of culture and tradition in shaping women's lives. Their works highlight the tensions between societal expectations and personal aspirations, revealing the ways in which women navigate and negotiate these constraints. By focusing on the inner lives and struggles of their female characters, Desai and Roy offer a profound critique of the patriarchal structures that govern Indian society .

The novels of Anita Desai and Arundhati Roy offer a rich exploration of female agency within the constraints of culture and tradition. Their works highlight the complexities of women's lives, illustrating both the oppressive nature of societal norms and the moments of resistance and resilience that define their quest for autonomy. By examining the interplay between social constraints and female agency in their novels, this study seeks to uncover the underlying themes of identity, resistance, and self-realization that permeate contemporary Indian literature.

## Methodology

This study employs a qualitative literary analysis approach to explore the portrayal of female agency and the impact of social constraints within the cultural and traditional contexts depicted in the novels of Anita Desai and Arundhati Roy. The primary texts analyzed include Desai's *Cry, the Peacock*, *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*, and *Fasting, Feasting*, alongside Roy's *The God of Small Things* and *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. The analysis is structured around thematic exploration, focusing on key themes such as identity, autonomy, resistance, and resilience. A close reading method is employed to dissect the narratives, character development, and dialogues, highlighting how these elements reflect and critique societal norms and traditions.

Secondary sources, including scholarly articles, critical essays, and books on Indian literature and feminist theory, provide additional context and support for the interpretations of the primary texts. These sources are carefully selected to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the socio-cultural and historical background influencing the authors' works.

The study also incorporates an intersectional perspective, examining how factors such as caste, class, and religion intersect with gender to shape the experiences of female characters. This approach allows for a nuanced analysis of the complex dynamics at play in the novels.

By synthesizing insights from literary criticism and feminist theory, this methodology aims to uncover the layers of meaning in Desai and Roy's portrayals of women, offering a deeper understanding of the interplay between social constraints and female agency in contemporary Indian literature.

## Results

The analysis of the novels of Anita Desai and Arundhati Roy reveals a multifaceted portrayal of female agency within the constraints imposed by cultural and traditional norms. Both authors provide a rich exploration of the ways in which women navigate and resist these constraints, highlighting their resilience and quest for identity and autonomy.

### ➤ Anita Desai's Novels

- *Cry, the Peacock*

In '*Cry, the Peacock*', Desai portrays Maya as a woman deeply affected by the expectations and limitations placed upon her by society. Her struggle with mental health issues is exacerbated by her loveless marriage and the rigid roles prescribed to her as a wife and daughter-in-law. Maya's ultimate descent into madness and her tragic end underscore the devastating impact of societal constraints on women's mental well-being. Desai's vivid depiction of Maya's internal turmoil illustrates the profound psychological effects of living in a society that restricts female agency.

- *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*

In '*Where Shall We Go This Summer?*', Desai presents Sita, a protagonist who is disillusioned with her domestic life and the societal pressures of being the perfect wife and mother. Sita's decision to escape to an isolated island during her pregnancy is a powerful act of resistance against the societal norms that confine her. Desai's portrayal of Sita's inner conflict and her yearning for freedom highlights the tension between societal expectations and personal aspirations. The novel underscores the limited roles available to women within traditional Indian society and the struggle for autonomy within these constraints.

- *Fasting, Feasting*

In '*Fasting, Feasting*', Desai contrasts the lives of two sisters, Uma and Aruna, to explore the differing impacts of societal expectations on women. Uma, who remains unmarried, faces the stigma and limitations imposed by her family and society. Her life is marked by a lack of agency and the constant pressure to conform to the expectations of a dutiful daughter. In contrast, Aruna, who marries and moves to a different country, grapples with the pressures of maintaining a perfect family image. Desai's nuanced portrayal of these characters highlights the pervasive influence of cultural norms on women's choices and their sense of self. The novel illustrates how societal constraints shape the lives of women, often limiting their opportunities and stifling their individuality.

### ➤ Arundhati Roy's Novels

- *The God of Small Things*

In *'The God of Small Things'*, Roy delves into the intersectionality of gender, caste, and class, revealing the complex dynamics that shape the lives of her female protagonists, Ammu and Rahel. Ammu's illicit relationship with Velutha, a man from a lower caste, challenges the rigid caste system and patriarchal norms. The tragic consequences of their relationship highlight the harsh realities faced by women who defy societal expectations. Ammu's struggle for autonomy and her ultimate demise underscore the oppressive nature of societal constraints on women.

Rahel's journey of self-discovery and resilience is marked by the legacy of her family's past and the societal norms that govern her life. Roy's depiction of Rahel's relationship with her twin brother, Estha, and her return to her ancestral home provides a poignant commentary on the enduring impact of cultural and traditional constraints on women's lives. The novel's intricate narrative structure and lyrical prose underscore the multifaceted nature of the characters' experiences, highlighting their resilience in the face of adversity.

- *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*

In *'The Ministry of Utmost Happiness'*, Roy expands her exploration of marginalized identities to include transgender individuals and marginalized women. The diverse cast of characters navigates a society fraught with political and social upheaval, highlighting the intersections of gender, identity, and socio-political constraints. Roy's portrayal of these characters' struggles and their acts of defiance offers a broader commentary on the pervasive impact of tradition and culture on individual agency.

The character of Anjum, a transgender woman, embodies the resistance against societal norms and the quest for identity and acceptance. Anjum's journey from being rejected by her family to creating a safe haven for marginalized individuals in the form of the Khwabgah (House of Dreams) illustrates the resilience and agency of individuals who defy societal constraints. Roy's depiction of Anjum's life and the lives of other marginalized characters highlights the intersections of gender, caste, and class, revealing the complex dynamics that shape their experiences.

➤ Comparative Analysis

The comparative analysis of Desai and Roy's works reveals several key themes that underscore the portrayal of female agency within the constraints of culture and tradition. Both authors depict the profound impact of societal expectations on women's lives, highlighting the psychological and emotional toll of conforming to rigid roles. However, they also illustrate moments of resistance and resilience, where women assert their autonomy and challenge oppressive structures.

Desai's focus on the inner lives of her female protagonists provides a deep psychological exploration of the effects of societal constraints. Her portrayal of characters like Maya and Sita emphasizes the internal conflicts and struggles for identity and autonomy within a patriarchal framework. Desai's nuanced depiction of the limited roles available

to women and their impact on mental health and personal aspirations underscores the pervasive influence of cultural norms on women's lives.

Roy, on the other hand, situates her female characters within broader socio-political contexts, highlighting the intersectionality of gender with caste, class, and religion. Her portrayal of characters like Ammu, Rahel, and Anjum reveals the complex dynamics that shape their experiences and the multifaceted nature of their struggles for autonomy. Roy's narrative style, marked by its lyrical prose and intricate structure, underscores the interconnectedness of personal and societal issues, offering a broader commentary on the pervasive impact of tradition and culture on individual agency.

The novels of Anita Desai and Arundhati Roy provide a rich exploration of female agency within the constraints of culture and tradition. Both authors highlight the oppressive nature of societal norms and the moments of resistance and resilience that define women's quest for autonomy. By examining the interplay between social constraints and female agency, this study reveals the underlying themes of identity, resistance, and self-realization that permeate contemporary Indian literature. The analysis underscores the importance of understanding the complex dynamics between societal expectations and personal aspirations in shaping the lives of women in traditional and modern contexts.

## Discussion

The novels of Anita Desai and Arundhati Roy provide a profound exploration of female agency within the constraints of cultural and traditional norms. This discussion highlights the ways in which both authors critique societal expectations and depict the resilience and resistance of their female characters.

Anita Desai's works are marked by an intense focus on the psychological states of her female protagonists, who are often caught in the web of societal expectations. For instance, in *'Cry, the Peacock'*, Maya's descent into madness symbolizes the destructive impact of patriarchal constraints on women's mental health (Desai, 1963). Her isolation and ultimate tragic fate underscore the severe limitations imposed on women, which stifle their personal growth and autonomy. Similarly, in *'Where Shall We Go This Summer?'*, Sita's retreat to an isolated island represents a symbolic rejection of societal norms and a quest for personal freedom (Desai, 1975). Desai's portrayal of Sita's internal conflict highlights the constant battle between societal duties and personal desires faced by women.

Desai's *'Fasting, Feasting'* further elucidates the varying impacts of societal expectations on women's lives through the contrasting experiences of Uma and Aruna. Uma's life, marked by familial control and lack of personal agency, contrasts sharply with Aruna's seemingly more liberated yet equally constrained existence in a different cultural context (Desai, 1999). Desai effectively demonstrates that regardless of geographical and cultural shifts, patriarchal structures continue to limit women's roles and opportunities, thereby stifling their sense of self.

Arundhati Roy's narratives, on the other hand, situate female agency within broader socio-political frameworks. *'The God of Small Things'* offers a poignant critique of caste and gender dynamics in Indian society. Ammu's illicit

relationship with Velutha serves as a powerful act of defiance against the caste system and patriarchal norms (Roy, 1997). The tragic consequences of this relationship highlight the brutal repercussions for women who challenge societal expectations, thereby emphasizing the oppressive nature of these constraints. Rahel's journey of self-discovery amidst these societal pressures underscores the resilience required to navigate such a restrictive environment.

Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* expands the discourse on marginalization to include not only women but also transgender individuals and other marginalized groups. The character of Anjum, a transgender woman, embodies a profound resistance against societal norms (Roy, 2017). Anjum's transformation of her home into a sanctuary for the marginalized illustrates the potential for creating alternative spaces where agency and acceptance thrive despite societal rejection. Roy's depiction of Anjum and other characters in the novel underscores the intersectionality of gender, caste, and class, revealing how these axes of identity compound the challenges faced by marginalized individuals.

Both Desai and Roy's works emphasize the psychological and emotional toll of conforming to societal norms, while also illustrating moments of resistance and resilience. Desai's focus on the internal struggles of her female protagonists provides a deep psychological insight into the effects of societal constraints. Her portrayal of characters grappling with mental health issues and internal conflicts emphasizes the personal costs of living within restrictive cultural frameworks (Nityanandam, 2000).

Roy's broader socio-political context highlights the intersectionality of gender with other forms of social stratification, offering a more expansive critique of societal constraints. Her characters' acts of defiance against rigid norms serve as powerful statements of resistance and autonomy (Mondal, 2010).

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the novels of Anita Desai and Arundhati Roy offer a profound exploration of the interplay between social constraints and female agency within the cultural and traditional contexts of Indian society. Both authors illuminate the pervasive impact of patriarchal structures, societal expectations, and cultural norms on women's lives, while also highlighting their resilience and resistance. Desai's works often delve into the internal landscapes of her female characters, portraying their psychological struggles and the subtle forms of rebellion they employ to carve out spaces of autonomy. Her narratives reveal how deeply ingrained traditions and familial obligations shape and sometimes stifle women's aspirations, yet also underscore moments of quiet defiance and self-discovery. In contrast, Roy's writing tends to adopt a more overtly political stance, addressing broader socio-political issues alongside personal stories. Her female protagonists often confront and challenge the oppressive forces head-on, embodying a more visible and vocal form of agency. Roy's critique of caste, gender, and economic inequalities provides a framework for understanding the interconnectedness of various forms of oppression and the ways in which women navigate and resist these constraints. Together, Desai and Roy's novels underscore the complexity of female agency in the face of cultural and traditional limitations. They reveal that while social constraints are powerful, they are not insurmountable. The agency displayed by their female characters is multifaceted, ranging from subtle acts of defiance to overt rebellion, reflecting the diverse ways in which women negotiate their identities and assert their autonomy within a constrained societal framework. Through their rich and nuanced portrayals, Desai and Roy contribute significantly to the discourse on gender, culture, and resistance in contemporary Indian literature.

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