

## Women In and Women Out: An Analysis of Spaces and Relationships in Anita Desai's Select Short Stories

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### Abstract

The theme of representation of women in the domestic and public arena is the quintessence of Anita Desai's writings. This paper endeavours to focus on her two short stories, *'The Domestic Maid'* and *'The Rooftop Dwellers'*, and analyses how the author presents the agonies and sufferings of women in both domestic and public space. Though the stories revolve around the lives of two women, it also shed light on the lives of other women, whose lives become hues of protagonists' lives. *'The Domestic Maid'* is the story of village woman Geeta, who takes up a job of a domestic worker in the city to meet both ends of her family's needs. Her conversation with her co-worker Chaaya, reveals her agonies and sufferings in

life. *'The Rooftop Dwellers'* presents the life of Moyna, who works in a literary journal and her desire for freedom and a space for her own. Moyna does not want herself to be chained in the norms and mores of the society, and the story portrays how difficult it is for a woman to find 'her own room' in a patriarchal society. The study sheds lights on the play of power and women's constant desire for a free space of their own. The stories also delineate the theme of domestic and public violence. The former presents the issue of domestic violence, and the latter offers the idea of public violence against women.

Keywords: Domestic, Public, Self, Patriarchy, Violence.

Anita Desai, a postmillennial Indian novelist in English, has written a large number of works dealing with the plight of women in Indian society. Most of her works mark out the psychological issues and hostile predicament of female characters. The theme of representation of women in the domestic and public arena is another quintessence of Anita Desai's writings. This paper endeavours to focus on her two short stories, *'The Domestic Maid'* and *'The Rooftop Dwellers'*, and analyses how the author presents the agonies and sufferings of women in both domestic and public space. Though the stories revolve around the lives of two women, it also shed light to the lives of other women, whose lives become hues of protagonists' lives. The paper endeavours to glance on the aspects of domestic and public violence against women, power hierarchy and constrains of patriarchal social norms, and female relationships, in tone with feminist theoretical discourses.

*'The Domestic Maid'* is the story of a village woman Geeta, who takes up the job of a domestic worker in the city to meet both ends of her family's needs. Her conversation with her co-worker Chaaya, reveals her agonies and sufferings in life. The narration opens with the portrayal of the life of these city-dwellers who come to the city expecting and dreaming of a better and peaceful life, eventually ending up in the four walls of the kitchen where they have

to sacrifice all their dreams and hopes. The author also draws a parallel between rural and urban life in her description. Married women have to take up the responsibilities of two families- their own family and the family they work in. They live in an eerie world of miseries and sufferings, and the narrator generally describes the plight of these maids follows like this:

In the changing urban environment, these maids are in huge demand for various household chores like cleaning; washing; cooking; baby-sitting etc. The married women prefer part-time jobs to balance work and their own families, whereas the unmarried young girls prefer to work full-time as a housekeeper. Cities have always been a big draw for skilled and unskilled migrant labourers from neighbouring states, even neighbouring countries. Men and women migrate to the cities with dreams of better earnings and a better living conditions. The men take up work in the industrial sector or join the much-in-demand security services. Women mostly end up as domestic maids. The children join the work force early as seven or eight of age. (Desai, 2014)

The protagonist of this story is a married woman who has to face turmoils both in her own family and the family where she works. Anita Desai presents her protagonist's life in a detailed manner, and this stands as a microcosm of the life of other domestic workers shown in the story. Geeta, along with her husband Prakash and two children have migrated to the city from their native village- "an impoverished little hamlet" where they lived under penury and terrible poverty. Like other villagers, the narrator says Prakash was "lured by the life in the big city" (Desai, 2014). In the new city Prakash works in a local factory, and Geeta works in at least four houses as a domestic maid "in the high residential complex". The plot of the particular story takes place in the house of Asha, where Geeta works part-time.

'*The Rooftop Dwellers*' presents the life of Moyna, who works in a literary journal and her desire for freedom and a space of her own. Moyna does not want herself to be

chained in the norms and mores of the society, and the story portrays how difficult it is for a woman to find ‘her own room’ in a patriarchal society. According to Chris Weedon (qtd. in Jenainati and Judy, 2007) patriarchal refers to the “power relations in which women’s interests are subordinated to the interest of men”. These power relations in Indian society dichotomize the public and domestic space for men and women and try to confine women in the domestic sphere and enable men to control the public area. Moyna tries to break this notion, but the narrator does not overtly tell whether she succeeds in her attempt or not.

Indian tradition and culture expect women to have a dependent nature. In *Manusmriti* (*Laws of Manu*), an ancient legal text among the many Dharmaśāstras of Hinduism, it is written that “day and night woman must be kept in dependence by the male (of) [...] they must kept under one’s control. Her father protects (her) in childhood, her husband protects (her) in youth and sons protect (her) in old age: a woman is never fit for independence” (Buhler). She comes from such a traditional Indian family where the members of the family are conditioned with the patriarchal norms and mores, and wants Moyna to be dependent on her father and brothers. When Ritwick talks about the booster pump, water tank, and its working Moyna stands still with an ignorant look and he “looked at her with the kind of exasperation her brothers turned on her when she failed to understand what they were doing under the bonnet of the car or with electric gadgets at home. She came from a family so competent that she had never needed to be competent herself” (Desai, 2011). Her family does not want her to stay alone and work the only reason she is allowed “by her family to come to Delhi and take the job was that it was of a literary nature, and her father had known Bose Sahib at the university” (Desai, 2011). The patriarchal society frames even the decision over career of a woman.

Women in society play an essential role in this conditioning. It is mostly the mother in a family who conditions her girl child according to societal expectations. Moyna’s mother is

such a kind of woman. She wants her daughter to have all the feminine virtues that society expects from a woman. The story ends with her mother's letter which contains- "advice on how to run her household, how to cook a specially strengthening stew, an offer of monetary help, pleas to return home, her father's message that she should consider studying for a higher degree before embarking on a career" (Desai, 2011). Mrs Bhallas approach towards Moyna also reflects the traditional Indian women's attitude towards working women.

Another critical aspect of Indian patriarchal society is brought into the light by the author is being a 'single woman'. Moyna finds it hard to get a *barsati* (a small room at the top of a house) in Delhi, because most of the landlords have considered her as an "instrument of danger", and do not allow her to live in their rented houses. The narrator explains, "She had been scrutinised with such suspicion, questioned with such hostility, that she [Moyna] realised that no matter what they stated in their advertisements, they had nothing but fear and loathing for the single working woman, and the greatest dread of allowing one into their safe, decent homes" (Desai, 2011). In her home, Moyna has never experienced a social gathering with her colleagues, but when she sits on the rooftop and has wine with them for the first time, she has "felt her spirit break free and lift". She is incredulous about the moment and thinks, "here she was, entertaining friends on 'her terrace' on a starry evening, just as she had imagined an adult working woman in the metropolis might do, just as she had imagined she would do and now it was happening". Not only Moyna but also Tara is enjoying the night, where she is liberated from all the fetters of her domestic life, especially away from her mother-in-law's house where she lives. The image of "the parrots streaking in to settle in the branches of the pipal tree for the night" (Desai, 2011) symbolises the mind of the two women who want to settle down for a while away from all the repressions they confront both in their private and public sphere.

Again the inquisitiveness of the society into the lives of others is portrayed through the neighbourliness of the other roof dwellers. Some of them have lined up along their windowsills “to watch (discreetly or not so discreetly) Moyna's first social gathering.” When the wine bottle is emptied, they have begun to talk and laugh much louder. That time “the neighbours spied on them, scandalised, hidden now by night's darkness, but they were unaware how their voices carried downstairs as well, and what a degree of grim disapproval was mounting there” (Desai, 2011). Throughout the story, this idea is recurrent. Bhallas' interloping into the personal affairs of Moyna presents the society's curiosity for looking into the life of a single woman. The individuality of a woman is questioned here. In Tara's words, what they need is a place of their own.

The stories also delineate the theme of domestic and public violence. The former presents the theme of domestic violence, and the latter gives the subject of public violence against women. In *'The Domestic Maid'*, violence against women in the domestic sphere becomes a major topic for discussion. Geeta's husband Prakash's cruelty and violence show the suffering of a lower class working woman. He persuades her to borrow money from her mistress Asha, but she refuses to do that. She says, “when I refused to borrow anymore, he punished me” (Desai, 2014). The author lambastes the attitude of a patriarchal society where man exercises power to punish his wife brutally. In the workplace, Geeta is abused by her mistress, and in home, she is physically and emotionally man-handled by her husband. For a lower working-class woman in Indian society, this torture—“black and blue” in Chaaya's words “is the eternal truth, day in and out” (Desai, 2014). The attitude of the security guard towards this group of working women presents the miserable plight of the women and their helplessness towards the suffering they undergo. The narrator says, “a passing guard leers at them and makes a vulgar guttural sound. The girls glare at him, other than that have no choice but to ignore him” (Desai, 2014).

In ‘The Rooftop Dwellers’ the narrator presents the plight of the women who become the victims of eve-teasing in their journey-“without the menace of crazed young men groping at them or pressing into them as if magnetised, or even delivering vicious pinches before leaping off the bus and running for their lives” (Desai, 2011). So most women in the hostel have “preferred to pay the extra rupee or two to travel on the Ladies' Special instead of the regular DTS” (Desai, 2011). Bhallas’ servant boy’s indecent behaviour through his gaze and song is another problem Moyna faces. In India, violence against women is increasing day by day, and these stories are mouthpieces of such violence.

In both the stories, the author presents a sisterhood between the female characters as an act of political solidarity between women. bell hooks in her work, *Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics* (2000) states that “Feminist sisterhood is rooted in shared commitment to struggle against patriarchal injustice, no matter the form that injustice takes”. It recognises the experiences of women and shares sympathy for their common sufferings. Likewise, the female characters in the two select stories create a sisterhood of mutual understanding. The friendship between Geeta and Chaaya are presented along with their identification with other women. When Geeta sheds tears and complaints to Chaaya about Asha, Chaaya’s words to console Geeta reflect her identification of womanhood with other women. She says: “See, they are also women and have to live under their husband, in-laws. If they are working there is the frustration at office as well. Because they cannot take out this anger and frustration on anyone else, they take it out on us. That’s all”(Desai, 2014). Though portrayed as a dominating and privileged mistress, the narrator unravels the compassionate side of Asha’s nature. Asha leads a more sophisticated life according to the social benchmarks, even then, she is being restricted to a domestic space. She always readily extends a helping hand when Geetha is in a financial crisis. The author intends to illustrate the characters’ shared experiences as women through this episode. Geetha also strives to

understand Asha's situation. She says, "But you are right, Ashadidi uses a harsh tone but never hesitates to help me out in my hour of need", and she admits that Asha "too must have her frustrations as she has to manage office and home both as her husband is mostly travelling" (Desai, 2014).

There is always a presence of power, which gearshifts the lives of women in the spaces in which Desai's women characters are entangled in. In '*The Domestic Maid*', the power is exercised over Geetha by her husband in domestic space, and Asha in the working space. In '*The Rooftop Dwellers*', Moyna's life is entangled with the decisions of her father in the domestic space, matron in the hostel, and the Bhallas in *barsatis*. Linda McDowel, Professor at University of London observes in her essay "*Place and Space*" (2003) as follows, "for most women, the home is a sight of social relations that are structured by power an inequality. ... for too many women, too the home is a place dominated by fears of domestic violence and abuse". Amidst all of these enforcing power structures, Desai's women characters are in the pursuit to find out their own spaces of freedom. Chaaya and Geetha figure out space under a tree, after their tiresome work-hours, to share their troubles and anxieties with each other. They share some time to reflect, to comfort, and to laugh. Chaaya takes Geetha to such a created space or a space of escape under the tree when she figures out that Geetha is so careworn. "Come, let's sit under that tree for some time and you tell me what happened", (Desai, 2011) says Chayya. The two women share a bond of womanhood under the shades of a tree.

The two women go quite for some time, each lost deep in her own thoughts. Perhaps looking for a way out of their misery, or thinking there is no way out. The rustling leaves of the tree giving music to their cogitation. It is usually in these moments of rumination that the two close friends solace in each other's company, supporting and comforting. (Desai, 2014)

Moyna creates such spaces her own in her rooftop house and in her workplace. She enjoys being alone in the city and in her room. A single room accommodation on a rooftop in a city like Delhi, with water scarcity and minimal security is never an extravaganza yet, Moyna feels belongingness to that space. The narrator says,

The rooftop, which covered the entire area of the villa, seemed to her immense, larger than any space she had occupied since her arrival in Delhi, and it was clear, empty space under an empty sky, with a view of all the other rooftops stretching out on every side, giving Moyna, as she stood there, a sense of being the empress of all she surveyed” (Desai, 2011).

Whenever she feels a violation in her personal spaces, she relocates herself to a new space. She left behind her home and later her hostel-room for the same reason. In her working space, a two-room building over a bakery, Moyna feels the same belongingness as she feels in her rooftop room, mainly because of her acquaintance and companionship of another female spirit like her own-Tara. The male presence in the office does not bother her at all because Raj Kumar and Mohan never interfere with Moyna’s individual space. The story narrates, “... she had grown used to the two-roomed office with its bamboo shutters, Raj Kumar sitting in a corner and tying up book parcels, Mohan enjoying his bun omelette and samosas at his desk.” (Desai, 2014).

The friendship between Geeta and Chaaya, draws parallels with the relationship between Moyna and Tara. For Tara, workplace is solace and escape from all mundane domestic works and responsibilities, and for Moyna, it is an escape from her family and home. Tara has both “maternal and proprietorial feelings” towards Moyna. At the same time, Moyna has an immense admiration towards Tara’s style, and one day in the future, Moyna hopes to be a person like Tara or somebody better than her. Moyna thinks: — “the way she

smoked cigarettes and drank her coffee black and spoke to both Raj Kumar and Bose Sahibas equals, and she hoped ardently to emulate her, one day” (Desai, 2011).

Anita Desai, is manifestly subjecting the male-dominated society to a penetrating critique. Both the stories portray the relegation of women in the domestic sphere, the problems they undergo within this domestic sphere as well as public space and how the patriarchal society views relationships. The stories shed lights on the play of power and women’s constant desire for a free space of their own. The select stories are polemic against the social and cultural values set by the patriarchal society at the same time it gives an expression of female sisterhood and liberation. It shows how women are silenced in both domestic and public spheres, and questions the notion of the individuality of a woman as a human being.

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