

# Breaking Moulds: The Social and Emotional Terrain of Single Womanhood in Anita Desai's Novels

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## Abstract

This paper explores the nuanced and layered portrayal of single women in the novels of Anita Desai. It focuses on three distinct categories: women who remain unmarried by choice, those who are widowed, and those forced out of marriage due to neglect or abuse by their husbands. Through close textual analysis, the study examines how these women navigate emotional isolation, societal expectations, and personal hardship while asserting their autonomy and resilience. Voluntary spinsters in Desai's works are depicted as women who consciously reject traditional roles, embracing solitude as a space for freedom and intellectual fulfilment. Widows grapple with the pain of loss and the stigma attached to their status, often struggling to reclaim their identity in a world that marginalizes them. Women abandoned by their spouses confront adversity and social judgment yet find ways to survive with dignity and inner strength. In an era where marriage is no longer seen as the sole path to a woman's identity, Desai's representation of singlehood offers valuable insights into changing social norms. This study highlights how her female protagonists break conventional moulds of femininity, challenging patriarchal boundaries and redefining the contours of womanhood through solitude, self-awareness, and resistance.

**Keywords:** Spinsters, Widows, Forced singlehood, Societal Challenges, Resilience

Anita Desai is a highly esteemed writer whose insights into the lives of women are exceptional. Her novels provide a valuable foundation for examining the experiences of women who either choose or are compelled to lead solitary lives, either before or after marriage. The theme chosen is very relevant in today's context as statistical records state that, "There are more single women in India today than at any time in recorded history, with widows, divorcees, the never-married and the abandoned accounting for an estimated 21 per cent of the country's female population" (Sunder).

This paper embarks on an exploration of the complex lives of single women in Anita Desai's novels, examining married women who are separated, divorced, or widowed, as well as unmarried women, whether by choice or circumstance. These women, shaped by their individual experiences, provide insights into the broader societal challenges and internal struggles they face. Desai's nuanced portrayal of such characters offers a fertile ground for understanding their personal quests for autonomy and survival in a society that often marginalizes single women.

In *Cry, the Peacock*, the protagonist Maya exemplifies a woman who becomes a widow by choice. Trapped in a marriage devoid of affection and intimacy, she finds herself psychologically isolated. Her husband's emotional indifference drives her to an extreme act—she murders him, thereby claiming widowhood as a means of escape from her loveless marriage. Maya's story sets the tone for a recurring theme in Desai's novels—the psychological toll of marital dissatisfaction on women. Similarly, Maya's sister-in-law chooses to leave her marriage due to her husband's abusive behaviour, highlighting another aspect of separation. Her defiance of societal norms, especially in seeking a divorce, represents the growing consciousness and empowerment of women in Desai's works.

In *Voices in the City*, Otima, a widowed mother of four, is depicted as a pillar of strength. She defies the stereotype of the helpless widow by becoming the financial backbone of her family. Additionally, Aunt Lila, another widowed character, pursues a career to support herself and her daughter, empowering her child to escape an abusive marriage and realize her professional aspirations. These characters exemplify how widows, often marginalized in society, can find strength through self-reliance and the pursuit of economic independence.

In *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*, Sita, the protagonist, attempts to flee her emotionally detached husband, seeking refuge for herself and her children. Her decision to escape the toxic environment of her marriage, coupled with the emotional void left by her absent mother, reveals deep psychological scars that drive her need for isolation and protection of her children.

*Fire on the Mountain* features Nanda Kaul, a widow who escapes a loveless marriage to seek peace in solitude. She retreats to the hills of Kasauli, where she embraces her single life. Her close friends, Ila Das and Rima, remain single due to the destructive actions of their brothers, who squander the family wealth. Ila Das's tragic fate—she is brutally raped due to her work as a social worker in defending a young girl from child marriage—highlights the dangerous realities faced by single women who step outside traditional roles.

In *Clear Light of Day*, Bimla (Bim) sacrifices her personal aspirations to care for her disabled brother, Baba. Her choice to remain single reflects a deep sense of duty, contrasting with the Mishra sisters, who leave their marriages due to their husbands' alcoholism. These sisters assume the role of caregivers to their drunken father and brothers while earning a living by tutoring. Mira Masi, a young widow sent to care for the household, becomes a surrogate mother to Bim and Baba, illustrating how widows are often entrusted with familial responsibilities despite their own struggles.

In *Custody* introduces a widow devoted to serving spiritual gurus and the poor, exemplifying how some women find meaning in religious devotion and selfless service. Her life of prayer and austerity contrasts with the more rebellious characters in Desai's other works, yet she remains an independent and strong figure.

In *Fasting, Feasting*, Uma, the protagonist, is coerced into remaining single by her overbearing parents. They force her into an invalid marriage, and later prevent her from pursuing independence when Dr. Dutt, a spinster doctor, tries to secure a job for her. Dr. Dutt, herself an unmarried woman, represents the strength of women who choose to lead professional and independent lives despite societal pressures. Additionally, the novel features Mira Masi, an independent widow who dedicates her life to piety and pilgrimage, embodying the strength that many single women derive from spiritual devotion.

Beginning with Anita Desai's debut novel, *Cry, the Peacock*, the protagonist, Maya, leads a life marked by emotional isolation even within her marriage to Gauthama. Despite her deep yearning for his companionship and physical closeness, Maya's emotional and physical needs remain unmet. Her marriage is

devoid of emotional warmth and intimacy, leaving her in a state of profound detachment. Gauthama's indifference renders Maya a virtual stranger in her own relationship, leaving her untouched by the emotional or physical bonds of marriage. Maya, in a rare moment of clarity, offers a poignant reflection on a possible resolution to her emotional turmoil: , "...longing for her arms, hating her detachment. I insisted on drawing her into the conversation, away from her letters, and Gauthama too, thinking that if I could but tie them all into one burning knot of contact and relationship with me, nothing, not even the fiercest fingers, would be able to extricate and banish me - or Gautama" (Desai, Cry 137). Despite this realization, Maya remains powerless against the persistent indifference of her family. This profound sense of emotional detachment and psychological alienation gradually pushes her toward a breaking point, leading her to seek a tragic and violent escape from her unbearable isolation. In a moment of psychological turmoil, Maya succumbs to madness and impulsively kills her husband by pushing him off the terrace. In this act, she transforms herself into a widow, not by circumstance, but by a deliberate and tragic choice. Maya's sister-in-law, Nila, chooses to distance herself from her husband, despite having a child. She returns to her parental home, seeking her brother Gauthama's assistance in initiating divorce proceedings. However, both her mother and brother attempt to dissuade her, urging her to adapt to her circumstances. Nila, resolute in her decision, rejects their advice and insists on pursuing a divorce. Meanwhile, Maya's mother-in-law, who manages an orphanage, is deeply absorbed in her work. Although she has a husband, he is largely absent from family life. Through conversations and narrative insights, it is revealed that he has long been estranged from the family, dedicating himself to India's freedom movement, engaging in protests, fasts, and enduring multiple imprisonments. His prolonged absence has rendered him almost invisible in the family sphere. Maya's mother-in-law, fully immersed in her career, appears emotionally distant from her children, leaving them to navigate their marital struggles without her active involvement. The failures of her children's marriages may, in part, be attributed to the emotional detachment exhibited by both parents, whose personal commitments overshadowed their roles within the family structure.

In *Voices in the City*, Otima, a well-educated widow, demonstrates her independence and modernity by choosing to write letters to her children in English rather than in their mother tongue. This decision reflects her desire to maintain a connection with her children on more progressive and intellectual terms. Otima also seeks to support her son Nirode financially, but he refuses her help, showcasing his personal struggle with his own identity and pride. Despite her widowhood, Otima lives an independent life, embodying a form of self-reliance that contrasts with traditional portrayals of widows in Indian society.

Aunt Lila, another widow in the novel, stages a subtle rebellion by cutting her hair short, symbolizing her defiance against societal norms and expectations. As a widow, her decision to break away from the typical image of mourning and submission demonstrates her strength of character. Lila not only protests in this quiet way but also encourages the younger women in her family to pursue their dreams and establish careers. Although she herself aspired to become a doctor, she ended up working as a social worker, a profession that still allows her to maintain a sense of purpose and independence. Her daughter, Rita, follows this path of empowerment, escaping an abusive marriage and establishing a career in the physics laboratories of Paris. Rita's success, despite the challenges she faces, serves as a testament to the resilience and determination instilled in her by her mother, Lila. Together, these women illustrate a shift in the portrayal of widows and single women, as they challenge societal expectations and forge independent lives for themselves.

In *Fasting, Feasting*, Dr. Dutt, a single and independent female doctor, faces thinly veiled criticism from Uma's father, Papa. Outwardly, he pretends to respect her, but internally, he is determined to keep her influence away from his daughter, fearing that subservient Uma might be inspired to emulate Dr. Dutt's independence. As Patricia Uberoi, a Delhi-based sociologist, observes, "Indian society is still largely rooted in patriarchy and gender inequality, with single women often stereotyped as choosy, morally loose, or headstrong" (Sunder). This societal mindset is mirrored in Papa's fear of Dr. Dutt. His apprehension leads him and Mama to lie and reject one of the jobs offered to Uma by the doctor, further confining her to a life of dependence.

Uma, meanwhile, bears the social stigma of being a single, separated woman. Twice betrayed by potential bridegrooms, she briefly lives with her in-laws before discovering that her new husband is already married. Her parents, driven by the allure of a reduced dowry, thrust her into these failed marriages, only to later blame her for the outcomes. Uma endures constant belittlement, her failed marriage used as a tool to oppress her further, even though her misfortunes are largely the result of her parents' decisions.

In contrast, Mira Masi, the widow, offers a rare source of comfort and joy for Uma. Visiting the family periodically, Mira Masi brings a spiritual serenity with her piety, and her presence marks some of the few moments of peace for Uma. Their shared visits to temples and simple meals together provide respite from the overwhelming pressures of Uma's stifling family life, illustrating how single women like Mira Masi can still find purpose and strength outside of societal expectations.

In *Fire on the Mountain*, Nanda Kaul, the central character, finds freedom only after the death of her disloyal husband. Freed from the constraints of her well-maintained household, she retreats to the isolation of the hills, where she seeks peace and solitude. Her life reflects the social reality described in *The News Minute*: "The female identity is built around marital status in our society. It is extremely difficult for women to leave abusive relationships and live on their own, or choose to lead a single, unpartnered life" (Shaji). Nanda's bitterness stems from years of suppressing her desires and being bound to societal expectations of a dutiful wife. Only in widowhood does she manage to sever the ties that bound her to a life of emotional emptiness and societal pressures. Her friend, Ila Das, presents another dimension of singlehood. Although well-educated, Ila remains single due to her physical deformity, which society deems unattractive. Her sister, Rima, though beautiful and talented, also ends up unmarried because their brothers, sent to England for education, squander the family's wealth, leaving the sisters destitute. In a moment of regret, Ila Das laments that her Westernised education did not equip her with practical skills, such as farming, which might have provided her with a sustainable livelihood. Despite her intellectual achievements, she feels defeated by the harsh realities of her circumstances. Ila Das meets a tragic fate in the end, as she is brutally raped and murdered by a man whose daughter she had saved from a child marriage. Her gruesome death underscores the dangers faced by women who, like Ila, challenge the oppressive norms of society and act as agents of change. Both Nanda Kaul and Ila Das embody the struggles of women seeking independence in a society that continually tries to bind their identity to marriage, familial duty, and submission.

In *In Custody*, the life of a widow is portrayed through the character of the old woman in whose home Deven, the protagonist, stays while recording the poet Nur. Her life reflects a common path for widows in Indian society, where, after the loss of a husband, many women are expected to devote themselves to spirituality as a way of coping with their isolation and societal disregard. As described in the novel, "The old lady's piety consisted not only in feeding of whoever came to be fed... but also in performing long and elaborate pujas at dawn and dusk" (Desai, *In Custody*, 185-186). This devotion to religious rituals

provides her with a sense of purpose and respect in a world that otherwise offers her little. Widows like her are often forced into a life of spiritual penance, as it becomes one of the few honourable paths available to them after enduring the hardships of widowhood. These women turn to divine providence in the face of a society that has been cold and unkind, finding solace in rituals and religious duties. Their spiritual practices are not just acts of faith, but also a means of survival and a way to reclaim some dignity after a life that has left them socially and emotionally marginalized. It emphasizes the plight of such women, who are left with few options and must navigate a life of piety as a form of escape from the bitterness of human relationships.

In *Clear Light of Day*, Bimla's life is marked by sacrifice and a deep sense of duty, as she devotes herself entirely to caring for her autistic brother, Baba. Her commitment stems not only from responsibility but also from love, which leads her to forgo personal desires, including marriage and a family of her own. Mira Masi, another poignant figure in the novel, embodies the tragic fate of a virgin widow. Married at the tender age of twelve, she is later discarded by her in-laws and sent to live with the Bhimla household, where she is treated as little more than a burden. Desai poignantly describes her as being "handed to them like a discarded household appliance" (Desai, *Clear Light of Day*, 161). Despite her unfortunate circumstances, Mira Masi pours her love and energy into the care of the children, particularly the autistic Baba, whose life she transforms through patience and teaching. Her role in their lives becomes deeply meaningful, as she provides the solace and affection the children so desperately crave. In this way, both Bimla and Mira Masi exemplify how women in such constrained situations seek solace and purpose in caregiving and companionship, often at the cost of their personal fulfilment.

The significance of this research lies in its examination of how singlehood is portrayed in Indian literature, particularly how Desai crafts a complex narrative of women who navigate life beyond the traditional roles expected of them. In a society that often marginalizes single women, this study underscores their resilience and challenges the oppressive norms that limit their autonomy.

Singled-out women in Desai's novels are often depicted as establishing careers for themselves, drawing strength from self-sufficiency. It is this financial and emotional independence that empowers them to step away from hopeless marriages and societal constraints. Anita Desai masterfully portrays both resilient single women who triumph over societal pressures and those who suffer under them. Regardless of their circumstances, these women exemplify the necessity of courage, the importance of having a career, and the ability to make decisive choices for a peaceful and fulfilling life. As societal norms continue to evolve, there is a growing need for legal frameworks to support and protect the rights of single women. As highlighted in an article from *The Times of India*, "In Indian society, a woman's identity is often tied to her marital status. Single women are often viewed as being in a transitional phase, expected to eventually get married or partner with someone. This societal mindset can lead to a lack of recognition and support for the specific needs and challenges faced by single women" (George). This underscores the urgent need for legislation that recognizes and safeguards the rights of single women, ensuring that their unique challenges are addressed and their autonomy is respected.

This research calls for a revaluation of how single women are perceived, both in literature and society. Their narratives should be celebrated, not as stories of lack or failure, but as testimonies of strength, survival, and self-determination. In closing, Desai's works leave us with a deeper understanding of the plight and perseverance of single women, urging readers to recognize and challenge the societal constraints that continue to restrict women's lives.



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