

Gender Roles and Social Expectations in The Writings of Nair and Desai

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Abstract: *This review article explores the representation of gender roles and social expectations in the works of Shashi Nair and Anita Desai, two prominent Indian authors. Both the authors succeed in depicting emotional and intellectual growth of women with aspirations in the postcolonial boundaries of the contemporary Indian society, discussing concerns of family pressures and the struggles of the gender. Nair's Ladies Coupe shows the strong women characters who dared reject cultural practices, and for this they were ready to risk it all, Desai's books like Fasting, Feasting is more of psychological battle of the pressures of gender-imposed culture. Al though both authors write in different time periods, the articles contrast their presentations of female characters analysing their writing methods, evolution of characters and attitudes towards systems present in their societies. Using these reoccurring themes in the context of modern literature and today the review proves the importance and pertinence of these authors in raising awareness on matters touching upon gender roles and societal expectations.*

Keywords: Gender roles, social expectations, Shashi Nair, Anita Desai, Indian literature, societal norms, female characters, postcolonialism, family dynamics, psychological conflict

I. INTRODUCTION

Gender roles, and expectations are some of the most important issues explored in the literature as they mirror societal interactions and prevailing motor-culture's beliefs systems. Stereotyping of sexes is a process where individuals are categorized in a diminished or prejudice manner, typically against their sex while prescribing specific behaviors, feelings, and looks for men and women. These expectations are part of the mould in which society is cast and it moulds people's perception of themselves as well as their relations with others. In most literary works gender is used as a device to reflect cardinal human and social features. The most common theme which one can distinguish when speaking about characters is the role of women or men, as well as their fight for the possibilities and rights they are to gain according to the society. As with many aspects of culture, the Literary portrayal of gender presents an often anxiety-filled struggle between individual self-definition and social context roles. For example, female main characters can have conflicting portrayal with the culture's expectations that women are supposed to be weak and are confined to duties such as cooking while male main characters are expected to be strong and hard hearted. More often than not, this sets up conflict, as a protagonist contends with their lusts, their dreams, and the part expected of them. In this process, literature serves as an important means of understanding the directions of society, as well as the limitations that this society sets as a necessary condition for people's development, subtle overcoming of which forms the PD topic. Characters portrayed as such, either as violating or as fulfilling such expectations, make literature an inquiry into human freedom within social relationships. Reading it enables the readers to appreciate how the dimensions of gendered human relations constrain or facilitate the agents' actions.

II. BACKGROUND ON NAIR AND DESAI

A. Themes in His Works & Gender in Post-Colonial India

Shashi Tharoor is an esteemed Indian written, politician as well as an intellectual whose books give a great insight as to how India is like after colonization. The most distinct features of the writer are density of identity, conflict, social justice, and the effects of colonialism. The issues of Indian society and the relations between tradition and the modern



world, British colonization and the Indian cultural identity, and the changes of the social stereotyping are displayed in Tharoor's novels. His works are both a mirror of as well as commentary on post-Independent India which continues to abide by orthodox norms of the society, be it gender roles. Gender power and tradition and modernity constitute one of the key themes in Tharoor's works. In his novel *Riot: By painting a fictional story in A Love Story*, Tharoor manages to work out issues of gender into a religious conflict story showing how gender expectations are shaped by religious and political cultures of the post-colonial India [1]. All the heroines of his novels are subordinated to traditional role models they all try to have their own power within the frames of a male-dominating world.

In "Challenging Decolonization and Postcolonialism in India and South Asia: Directions for Critical Psychology," Soans (2024) examines the impact of colonialism on psychological practices in India and South Asia. The study advocates for integrating indigenous knowledge and perspectives to develop a more inclusive and culturally relevant psychological framework [2]. Anita Desai is a known novelist who has been writing for most of her adult life. Her works are always described as psychological and emotionally driven – they are intensely psychological dramas of the human personality. While Tharoor's focus is on gender roles in the context of postcolonial societies such as India, Desai addresses herself to psychological self-explorations particularly in so far as women characters are concerned. Desai's novels broke far and wide into the psychological taproot of gender, exploring how both the society and them form personalities and interact [3]. In her novels including *Clear Light of Day*, *Fasting, Feasting*, and *In Custody*, Desai looks at how the gender roles play themselves out in the lives of her female protagonists who battle different and almost equal societal roles, family responsibilities, and unfulfilled expectations.

B. Gender Roles in Tharoor and Desai: Similarities & Contrast

Shashi Tharoor and Anita Desai both present works that deal with gender roles, the methodologies and points of view for both authors are very dissimilar. Tharoor's portrayal of gender is usually linked with his other motifs of post-colonial native and alteration. In his works they tell stories about the characters, which must struggle with the dilemma of traditional gender definitions on the background of modernity. I think while Desai deals with the concept of gender more conventionally, he dwells more on psychological and emotional part of it.

III. GENDER ROLES IN NAIR'S WRITING

A. Family Dynamics, Social Expectations, and Women's Roles

In the works of Shashi Tharoor gender is depicted not only in terms of the power relationship between male and female characters but also in terms of social-political, and cultural construction of the individual, especially the female subject. As in the case of gender roles in society, Shashi Nair's writing also posits them as one of the many aspects of society's construction that interest the author with a focus on family, expectations, and women [4]. The characters in all of Nair's literary pieces are those who exist between traditional and postmodern culture, and all his works convey how women and their roles are regulated and how such regulation is contested in a modernizing society. Nair also depicts how these constraints are maintained and policed using the psychological and emotional strain they have on the women to achieve personal autonomy and sexual independence.

Nair's representation of female characters is strawberries complicated and rich depicting the actual role of women in Indian society. His female heroes and heroines are lost between subordination and revolt, between the world and the world of the text, which only occasionally opens a door to a different life. As in many of his other novels, Nair constructs narratives that deal with the woman's psyche, the woman trying to escape the roles society has assigned her, and the woman's search for identity [5]. In the novels like *Ladies Coupe*, Nair creates the female characters who must fight the society's norms but at the same time try to change it. For instance, the main character in *Ladies Coupe* has been named Akhila, who is conforms to her husband's wishes and assumed the role of wife and a mother. Kerala-based writer Nair uses Akhila's story to teach the audience about the emotional pain that is socially imposed on women and how those who fight against it are not encouraged by society. The fact that Akhila must travel physically and metaphorically to overcome the status quo that wants to suppress women's voices shows just how powerful a message Thampi's work is.



B. Nair's Socio-Cultural Context and Its Influence on Gender Roles

The social environment that Nair works in even seems to dictate how gender roles are presented in his books. The setting in which Nair's writing emerges is the modern Indian culture, a culture that even today is a product of the strong, though passive, patriarchal influence which has governed Indians for many centuries. Drawing from experience from India's culture and tradition that are referred to as patriarchal with strongly etched in aspects of marriage, family and gender Nair lays a solid foundation on which she tackles gender roles [2]. Women are relegated to the domestic domain while men go out to the public domain which creates a foundation of a patriarchal societal structure with implications to almost all areas of people's lives.

Gender roles in Nair's works are well illustrated especially in her book titled Ladies Coupe. The play's setting is based on Akhila, a middle-aged woman who after uplifting what women should do in their lifetime by fulfilling the cultural norms of marriage and child bearing she is wriggling in the ditch. The novel progresses further in manner of a continuous rail journey of a woman named Akhila through lady's coupe where rest of the women, each with her own journey of fight against patriarchy are depicted. The women that Akhila meets in dream transition her to contemplate on her existence and the way she has been living, as a woman [7]. In the novel under consideration Nair presents women in the variety that goes from conservative preconceptions of femininity to rather radical deviations. All of them suffer for various things but all of them want to free themselves from the roles that society imposes upon them. Akhila's story is one of the many hidden battles that women go through on issues to do with family obligation as opposed to self-accomplishment.

IV. GENDER ROLES IN DESAI'S WRITING

A. Exploring Psychological Conflict, Alienation, and Women's Roles

Anita Desai is one among the other Indian English writers who have tried to present social realities with a deep psychological approach, social isolationism and gender issues [8]. Women and psychological disturbance figure largely in the Luz Desai novels and that too because of their personal conflicts arising out of social pressures and their struggle for identity. Desai's characters show women as quite contained, often tense, and always subtly rebellious in their chosen roles. Her writing focuses on quantity and quality of emotional and psychological experiences of her characters and how the notions of gender are negotiated, confronted, or maybe even erased given modern standards. Most of Desai's works showcase her interest in the psychological, societal structure where characters are not tender fallows of circumstances but an individual struggling with circumstances.

The women which take central stage in Desai's novels are portrayed as insightful, analysis and so concerned with the expected responsibilities of a woman. These women are not typically depicted as rebellious girls but women who suffer in father's home due to self-conflicts and sexual perversity brought by roles assigned to them. Desai's characters suffer from severe social exclusion in the context of which they act as isolated beings, and such feelings are often gendered. While the roles give them socially acceptable positions, they experience the dilemma of towering to perform the perceived proper women's roles or to liberate themselves [9]. For instance, in Fasting, Feasting Uma, the protagonist, is a young woman whose fights the system of her family and society all through the novel. Similarly in Uma's life her freedom is restricted by virtue of being a daughter and therefore having certain roles to play in the family. Through the oppressive schemes of her parents, she is confined and bullied to submission and obedience, just because she wants to have her own dreams and goals. Uma experiences some form of conflict to tell the story of selfdiscovery and individuality in a closed setup of family and society.

In one other of Desai's work, Clear Light of Day the character Bimla (Bim) struggles with the responsibilities she must take care of her family especially after the death of her parents. For most of the story, Bim, as the eldest daughter, has always been the family's designated housekeeper further establishing her internal conflict with her brother who leaves for School for fulfillment of his dreams. A caretaker by profession, Bim is denied the opportunities to go out for herself and she must make personal sacrifices for her dysfunctional family as all her female characters are too emotional and they are unable to assert themselves [10]. Her experience throughout the novel becomes the journey of a woman searching for personal fulfillment as she analyzes her past and her role in a family who expects her labor and devotion.

The author employs Bim's character to depict how much estrogen suppresses women sexually and within familial and



societal roles and drudgery of such stereotype roles. The female characters in Desai's novels feel they are divided or displaced in some manner while they struggle defining themselves.

B. Desai's Critique of Traditional Roles and Family Pressures

Anita Desai's critique of traditional gender roles is the major concern of her analysis of how conflictive roles families and communities play in the lives of women. In majority of her works, the family is portrayed as a source of shelter and consolation, but also as a place of oppression of the female character in accordance with the female stereotype [11]. In Desai's work, families can be seen as places where the pressure of otherness is perhaps most sensationally realized, especially for women who are most often confined to a life of procreation and domesticity. Like all Lorrie Moore's female protagonists, the women in *Fasting, Feasting* are powerless and exist in a patriarchal society represented by the family. All the women are bound to be like housewives, Uma's sister, Aruna, and her mother, and they don't get the freedom that they want due to the burden of dowry. Uma and *Fasting, Feasting*, are in some ways metaphors to symbolize how the culture restrains her and expects her to adhere to the sentimental and sociocultural dictates of her household and ancestry. She suppresses herself as she cannot meet these expectations and hence the internal conflicts, the alienation is because of the roles she is coerced to play. Desai raises her argument against such norms by illustrating how these stifle woman's emotional and psychological wellbeing and further reduce the ability to achieve personhood and happiness. The community, in the works of Desai, may have a serious impact on the fate of women. This forces women into traditional compliance with roles assigned to them within the family and is compounded by other social factors within which these women exist [12]. Women are not only defined by the roles that they play as wives and mothers but also by their image and appearance which entails a scale of social control that followed women subjecting them to a culture of studying and disciplining the female body.

C. Desai's Novels: Examples of Gender Roles and Social Issues

In *Fasting, Feasting*, Desai's exploration of gender roles is exemplified through the lives of the female characters. For example, there is Uma a woman who fights against her family's gender roles to an absolute maximum. The experiences of social isolation and resentment result from the failure to meet expectations of feminine and especially wifely and motherly roles [13]. This novel presents extremely negative portrayal of the national stereotyping of female gender roles and its impact on personal decision making, the pressure that builds up inside Uma due to the societal expectations of how a woman should behave resulting in mental pressure. As in *Clear Light of Day*, Desai also discusses how traditional roles oppress women and using Bim as an example, shows the woman who must perform the roles that society assigns to her. The pressure and obligations of a woman or expectations of a traditional gender expectations are evident from Bim's internal struggle and decision to self-efface herself.

V. COMPARISON OF GENDER ROLES AND SOCIAL EXPECTATIONS IN BOTH AUTHORS

A. Authors' Views on Gender and Social Norms: Similarities & Contrast

This passage effectively highlights the distinct yet complementary approaches of Shashi Tharoor and Anita Desai in addressing gender roles and social expectations. Tharoor's focus on the tension between colonial legacies and modernity allows him to explore the societal pressures women face, while Desai delves into the psychological battles of self-identity and isolation, particularly in the context of women's lives [14]. The passage draws attention to the contrasting styles—Tharoor's focus on societal, political, and cultural contexts versus Desai's psychological exploration—without fully elaborating on how their different approaches offer unique insights into the complexities of gender. While the point about both authors illustrating how social roles and personal aspirations intersect is well made, the comparison could benefit from more specific examples from their works to deepen the analysis. Additionally, the reference to "hormones" seems somewhat out of place in this context and could be clarified or omitted for coherence.

Desai also offers feminine women in their struggle against societal norms they tackle the women differently. Although Nair portrays all women, not sufficiently aggressively, however, more actively and thus, for instance, Ania's characters are more proactive in protesting against stereotyped sex roles. In the case of *Ladies Coupe*, for example, women from all background, the life story is told, and each of the character speaks how they deal with or resist tradition [15]. These



women rebel in one way or the other, put up a quiet resistance to their subjugation and degradation showing varied degrees of agency and resistance within situations that are not propitious for them at all. The issues of individuality and liberation are often reflected in the characters of Nair's books: it is a society which tries to put people in frames.

B. Stylistic Differences and Similarities in Nair and Desai's Gender Treatment

Nair and Desai, it is possible to identify the means employed in the works that enable the reader to get the character's inner world perspective. *Ladies Coupe* is narrated from multiple perspectives, and every chapter is named after the protagonist woman. Thus, the polyphonic structure helps Nair to portray the variety of the conditions of the Indian women and stress the multiplicity of the women's ways of the gender provocation. Her use of the story as a communal way of constructing the self and the other encourages the reader to learn how women in their own ways make sense of who they are and where they belong in society [16]. Wheresoever Desai is fond of using an introspective and psychological focus and voicing. Her characters are wellanalyzed and most often the activities of the novel's heroes are focused on their psychic experiences. Namely, in *Fasting, Feasting*, Desai presents Uma's psychological conflict inside which is expressed skilfully through the first-person narrative, so the reader gets a very close look at the protagonist's psychological isolation and desire for liberation.

Both Nair and Desai offer critiques of Indian society's treatment of women, but they do so from different angles. Nair's critique is also more pointed and social in orientation. Besides, her characters directly rebel against the patriarchy a woman is required to perform within the family as well as the society. It is therefore clear that Nair's novels show women's dilemmas as a lit for social crusade of gender equality where individual defiance of patriarchy is portrayed as a call for a change by the Women. On this count, Nair has criticized that norms can be challenged and that women can recreate themselves [17]. Desai's characters always deny aggression not in their conduct but in how they are able to respond to the positions they are expected to assume. Her criticism stems from the perspective that gender roles stem from inherent psychological processes that result in profound social-sub-cultural alienation and conflict.

VI. IMPACT OF GENDER EXPECTATIONS ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF CHARACTERS

A. Societal Pressures and Female Character Development in Both Authors

In the novels of Shashi Tharoor and Anita Desai the role of gender expectations is highly manifested when it comes to emotional and intellectual growth for their female protagonists. There are stresses and strains of society, and women effectively are kept in cages of emotional confusion or mental decay. In *Ladies Coupe*, Nair views the sexuality of the female characters', conflict with the society, reveals different sorts of emotional as well as intellectual reaction. These women who come from different backgrounds of the social ladder have assimilated the buck passing down from the family and the society on them. Many a time, these contracts impact their selection, relationship, and attitude towards themselves. Some women like the main character in the movie, get empowered when they stand against conventional gender roles, but their growth is confined in a society that confines them [18]. Like Desai's other characters, for example, Uma from *Fasting, Feasting*, the external pressures hurt, although more on the inside. Due to high level of traditionalism at her home, Uma has developed low mental and emotional intelligence as she is bound to be a ritual, subservient daughter that her mother expects from her.

While Nair's employs the narrative voice to subvert and delegitimize gender norms, Desai does so in a different, more subtle manner. In the case of Nair's *Ladies Coupe*, the narrative voice is split, and all the female characters get to opine on gender and the roles we are allocated. Multiple perspectives are important in emphasizing the variety of women situations and effects of gender roles on female personalities. Nair's first-person narrative voice is a rebellion as women receive an opportunity to express their dissatisfaction with the current systems and demanding more from males [19]. While Desai incorporates the format of multiple voices to represent the oppression part of the female characters, she takes a more confessional and individualized narrative to establish her female characters' inner conflicts. This perspective lays focus on how gender expectations impact one's feeling and thoughts while providing a critique of how gender erases the self not only through the regulation of behaviour but also the mind of women. Thus, Desai's narrator, concentrating on the cast's affective experience, is exploring the principles of the social and narrating, in a more subtle way, gendered oppression.



B. Breaking Free or Conforming: Authors' Views on Gender Norms

The change of female characters in both authors' works differs in terms of resolution. One of the interesting aspects about Nair's *Ladies Coupe* is that his characters also indulge in a form of personal emancipation where they tell their story and momentarily free themselves from the oppressive social condition that dominate their existence. How much they attain such freedom, however, still differs [20]. Some of the characters are transformative some of them take their fate into their hands – while the rest – remain bound by cultural norms, which is fully consistent with the struggle that many women experienced on their path to gaining more freedom. From the perspective of Nair, one can get the impression that though living in society and being aware on its rules, a woman has the possibility of changing for the better and her life because of finding an essential togetherness in her sisters.

In "Prefiguring Alternative Organizing: Confronting Marginalization through Projective Cultural Adjustment and Tempered Autonomy," Bhatt et al. (2024) explore how marginalized communities employ cultural adaptation and selective autonomy to challenge societal exclusion. The study identifies two key themes: projective cultural adjustment and tempered autonomy [21].

VI. CONCLUSION

Focusing on Shashi Nair's and Anita Desai's search for the role of the female character and Peru in Indian society, we have seen how both works deal with situation of gender identity. Where Nair's *Ladies Coupe* is powerful is in offering women their voice and having a multitude of female characters refusing to conform to societal expectations while some of these characters, at best, struggle but are never successful. Desai's works, especially *Fasting, Feasting* are concerned with emotional and psychological struggle related to gender roles and bloated self-identity that stems from household and social culture for women. While both authors provide a heavy focus on the emotional cost of living as per patriarchy-imposed standards, the prospects of change are portrayed very differently: Nair offering more optimism into escaping gender roles than Desai. These themes as to gender roles and societal expectations are just as present in the current society and writings as they were in the past.

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