



**Epitome : International Journal
of Multidisciplinary Research**

ISSN : 2395-6968

Gender representation in Children literature: Anita Desai's The Village by the Sea

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Abstract

This paper aims to analyze the status of women's empowerment in India through the works of women authors for children; focusing on key aspects such as freedom of movement, political participation, gender inequality, sexual harassment, autonomy, and decision-making. Women's empowerment refers to granting women authority and control over decision-making, whether at a personal or global level. The independence of women since childhood is essential for advancing the political, social, and economic development of a country.

For centuries, women have been deprived of their rights, but now is the time to bring about change. After India's independence, the framers of the Constitution and prominent leaders recognized women's equal social standing with men. Literature and society are deeply interconnected, influencing and shaping each other. Indian female authors have made significant efforts to establish their presence in a traditionally male-dominated literary landscape.

Women novelists from India have introduced a new dimension to Indian English literature. The journey began with

Krupabai Sathianadhan, the first Indian woman to write an English novel. Her work Saguna, an autobiographical novel, explores the struggles of women through themes of religion, cultural identity, and feminism during the colonial era.

Modern Indian women writers such as Anita Desai, Manorama Jaffa, Suniti Namjoshi, Sigrun Shrivastava and Sandhya Rao have played a crucial role in highlighting the challenges faced by women in contemporary male-dominated society. Their works address issues of gender discrimination, societal expectations, and female empowerment. This paper provides a brief discussion on the contributions of Indian women writers in promoting and advocating for women's empowerment through children literature.

Key words: *freedom of movement, political participation, gender inequality, sexual harassment, autonomy, and decision-making*



1. Introduction

A comprehensive critical analysis of contemporary English-language Indian children's novels is long overdue. Although this genre has only recently emerged and remains relatively small, postcolonial critic argues that modern children's fiction reflects significant Indian social trends. These trends are noteworthy as they indicate societal shifts or aspirations for change regarding children's roles and proficiencies. As one of the world's most populous nations, a major source of emigration to the English-speaking West, and a potential global superpower, India warrants close examination. Indian children's literature, both within the country and among the diaspora, serves as a valuable lens into evolving cultural values and contemporary social issues.

The uniqueness of Indian children today, as part of an "*Internet generation*" in a developing nation, where high aspirations clash with limited opportunities an unprecedented situation. Despite these challenges, fictional Indian children are often depicted as actively shaping their own lives, communities, and even their nation. Using postcolonial and feminist theoretical frameworks, The study compares children's novels from the Indian diaspora with those published in India to analyze how Indian childhood is portrayed across a broad range of texts. Given the need for a focused and manageable study, certain limitations were necessary. This analysis does not include Indian children's literature written in languages other than English. Modern women writers focus on issues related to women, such as broader societal concerns like gender representation, corruption and injustice. Many novels explore the unknown psyche of women and depict the sorrows of unfortunate homemakers. These works are widely appreciated by readers, which has contributed to a gradual shift in modern women's awareness of their social, emotional, cultural, religious and economic needs. Women writers and their literary styles have become powerful tools for social change in India. Today, Indian women are more empowered and aware of their rights, and society has come to recognize



their crucial role. Women's writing is now considered a strong medium for modernism and feminist expression. Their works address both pressing contemporary issues affecting women and longstanding societal problems.

2. Background of the study

Everything we read shapes us, influencing how we see ourselves as girls and women or as boys and men. Children's literature, simply put, refers to literature written for children. One of the most widely referenced definitions comes from *Miles MacDowell* in her book *Fiction for Children and Adults: Some Essential Differences* (1973), where she illustrates children's literature as typically shorter, favoring action over passivity, using dialogue and events rather than lengthy descriptions or introspection. The book usually feature child protagonists, follow conventional storytelling patterns, and incorporate clear moral lessons, which are often absent in adult literature. Additionally, they tend to be more optimistic and use child-friendly language, with distinct and structured plots.

The study endeavors to analyze how gender is represented in children's literature and examine whether the unequal portrayal of women has changed over the past two decades. Children's books play a crucial role in transmitting cultural values to young readers, shaping their self-image and understanding of societal roles. India, often referred to as "*the cradle of children's literature*," has a rich tradition of storytelling, rooted in oral narratives such as the *Panchatantra*. Scholar *A.K. Ramanujan* describes this legacy as being "*just a grandmother away*."

Gender representation in children's literature is significant because gender plays a fundamental role in shaping society. According to *Hamilton et al.* (2006),

"Stereotyped portrayals and the underrepresentation of female characters in children's books can negatively impact children's development. These depictions can limit career aspirations, shape perceptions of parental roles, and even influence



personality traits. The lack of equal representation for female characters also affects how young girls relate to their gender and perceive their place in society. These disparities in literature contribute to the early socialization of children, reinforcing traditional gender roles."

(Hamilton et al. 2006)

Gender stereotypes in children's stories are widespread, with characters often assigned traits based on their gender. These stereotypes define characteristics such as physical appearance, abilities, attitudes, interests, and career aspirations. Children encounter these messages not just in school but also at home from a very young age, which can restrict their sense of identity and potential.

3. Rationale of the study

India has a vast and diverse collection of children's literature, drawing from ancient myths, folktales, fables, and legends. These narratives have continued to influence modern children's books through retellings and adaptations in print and visual media. *Navin Menon*, a leading scholar in Indian children's literature, notes in his article *Historical Survey of Children's Literature* that

"Publishers frequently rely on traditional stories such as the Panchatantra, Indian epics, and classical folklore, which still dominate children's literature today. Despite linguistic diversity, Indian children are culturally united through widely recognized stories like the Panchatantra, Mahabharata, and Ramayana, which have been translated into multiple languages."

(Menon, 2019)

For centuries, male authors have written about women from their own perspectives. Classic Indian texts such as *Kathasaritsagara* by *Somadeva*, *Hitopadesha* by *Narayan Pandit*, and *Panchatantra* by *Vishnu Sharma* reflect these biases. Despite the progress in gender equality



and expanded career opportunities, gender role stereotypes persist, continuing to have negative consequences, especially for women. One would assume that in the 21st century, gender would no longer limit opportunities or force individuals into traditional roles due to a lack of representation.

Gender is embedded in children's books through language, narrative structure, and character roles. A 1995 study revealed that male names appear twice as often as female names in children's literature. Even books with gender-neutral titles tend to revolve around male characters. Female characters are typically portrayed as sweet, naive, conforming, and dependent, while male characters are depicted as strong, adventurous, independent, and capable.

Children's books play a crucial role in shaping societal norms, as they often serve as a child's first exposure to social structures. These books traditionally present women in roles such as cooking, sewing, caring for children, teaching, and nursing, while men are depicted as engaging in physical activities like racing, wrestling, and rescuing, or working in high-status jobs such as doctors or engineers. In a lecture at St. Joseph's Evening College on November 17, 2018, titled *"Children's Literature in India: Contesting Sites of Tradition and Dissent,"* Dr. Padma Baliga emphasized the lasting impact of childhood reading. She noted that children's literature has been used to preserve traditions, but both tradition and dissent are necessary in shaping young minds. Over the last two decades, the representation of women in Indian children's literature has significantly evolved. A growing number of female writers are offering fresh perspectives on female characters, shifting away from the traditional male-dominated narratives.

The existing study is an effervescent approach to determine whether these historical patterns of gender representation have changed in contemporary Indian children's literature and to assess the progress made in achieving a more balanced portrayal of both genders.



4. Review of related literature

Meera Parashar (2020) contemplated based on her review studies that historically, children's literature has been predominantly male-oriented. *Carole M. Kortenhuis and Jack Demarest (1993)* analyzed picture books from the 1940s to the 1980s and found an increase in the representation of female characters, with gender parity achieved by the 1980s. *Angela M. Gooden and Mark A. Gooden (2001)* similarly noted that female protagonists became equally prevalent as male protagonists in modern children's books. However, disparities persist when analyzing parental roles *David A. Anderson and Mykol Hamilton (2005)* discovered that fathers appeared in only 47% of scenes compared to mothers, suggesting that female representation varies based on role portrayal.

Despite the increased visibility of female characters, their representation remains entrenched in traditional stereotypes. *Amanda B. Diekman and Sarah K. Murnen (2004)* found that even so-called “nonsexist” children's literature continued to depict female characters engaging in stereotypically feminine activities. *Carol Adams and Rae Laurikietis (1976)* highlighted that adult female characters in children's books were primarily mothers, aunts, or grandmothers, whereas men occupied a diverse array of professions, such as postmen, farmers, business owners, and law enforcement officers. This discrepancy limits the perceived opportunities available to female readers.

Stereotypes in children's literature extend beyond occupational roles to personality traits. *Susan D. Witt (1997)* found that male characters were predominantly portrayed with traditionally masculine traits, while female characters were depicted as either androgynous or traditionally feminine, with no male characters exhibiting androgynous traits. Fairy tales, in particular, emphasize female beauty, reinforcing the notion that physical attractiveness is a woman's most valuable asset. *Lori Baker-Sperry and Liz Grauerholtz (2003)* argued that



tales emphasizing feminine beauty were more likely to endure over time, reinforcing societal expectations of female appearance.

KinhukSaha (2023) postulated based on the findings of her study that over the past fifteen to twenty years, the study of literature has undergone significant changes. The rise of structuralism and post-structuralism theories has transformed the way literature is analyzed and understood. As a result, the field has experienced a period of dynamic and productive change, integrating these theoretical perspectives into the study of all forms of literature. Theoretical discussions are now central not only for graduate students, who may specialize in literary theory just as they do in Shakespeare, but also in many introductory literature courses. For scholars of children's literature, this shift has been particularly beneficial. Reader-response theory, feminist criticism, semiotics, and deconstruction have challenged the rigid, traditional standards that once defined literary value, making room for children's literature in academic study. In the past, literature departments dismissed children's literature as unworthy of serious analysis, just as they did with science fiction, women's literature, and media studies. When I was an undergraduate, children's literature courses did not exist such a concept would have been laughable to most literary scholars. However, regardless of how traditionalists may feel about these new perspectives, they have undeniably helped establish children's literature as a legitimate and respected field of study.

Sohan Raizada (2024) postulated based on the findings of his study that, these modern approaches provide the necessary tools to analyze children's literature in a meaningful way. The older method of literary analysis is New Criticism focused primarily on uncovering hidden meanings within texts. This approach made the study of children's books seem unnecessary, even absurd. After all, if books written for ten-year-olds or even toddlers require highly trained scholars to interpret their meaning, what are those young readers supposed to make of them? In addition, if adult scholars dedicate years of study to uncovering the deeper



meaning of a book meant to entertain and educate children. Ultimately, the evolution of literary theory has not only reshaped literary studies as a whole but has also created space for children's literature to be taken seriously. By applying modern theoretical approaches, scholars can explore children's books with the same depth and rigor as any other literary work, recognizing their cultural and intellectual significance.

5. Objectives of the study

This research paper has under-mentioned objectives-

1. To appraise gender representation in Indian children's literature.
2. To analyze the depiction of gender in Anita Desai's *The Village by the Sea*.

6. Thematic Discussion

The Village by the Sea is a young adult novel by Indian author *Anita Desai*. First published in London in 1982, the book was later released in the United States in 1984. It tells the story of two siblings, *Lila* and *Hari*, who struggle to support their impoverished family. The novel won the *Guardian Children's Fiction Prize* in 1983.

Lila and *Hari* are the eldest children in a poor family living in *Thul*, a small fishing village by the sea in rural India. Their family was not always poor, but their situation worsened when their father was tricked into paying a large sum of money to a man who promised him a job in Mumbai. The man disappeared with the money, leaving the family in financial ruin. Devastated, their father turned to alcohol, neglecting his responsibilities and borrowing money from neighbors to fuel his drinking habit.

With their mother bedridden due to illness, thirteen-year-old *Lila* and twelve-year-old *Hari* take on the responsibility of caring for their younger siblings, *Bela* and *Kamal*. *Lila* manages the household and looks after their mother, while *Hari* works in the fields to earn whatever little money he can. Always searching for ways to improve their situation, *Hari* considers applying for a job at a factory rumored to be opening in the village.



Their fortune changes slightly when a wealthy family, the *DeSilvas*, arrives from Mumbai to spend their vacation in *Thul*. They hire *Lila* and *Hari* to help around their house, providing the siblings with some much-needed income. *Mr. DeSilva*, after learning about their hardships, promises to help *Hari* find a job at a car wash in Mumbai. Although this opportunity does not materialize, it sparks *Hari's* determination to go to Mumbai and seek work, especially after their family dog, *Pinto*, is poisoned by angry neighbors seeking revenge for their father's unpaid debts.

Around the same time, a fisherman named *Biju* is building a motorized boat, signaling the changes in the village as industrialization begins to take root. Many villagers, unhappy with the construction of factories on their land, decide to travel to Mumbai to voice their concerns to the government. *Hari* seizes this chance to go with them. However, upon arriving in the city, he discovers that the *DeSilvas* are away on vacation. Fortunately, *Hira Lal*, a servant at the *DeSilvas'* home, introduces *Hari* to *Jagu*, a kind man who offers him a job at his restaurant, the *Sri Krishna Eating House*. *Hari* earns a rupee a day and sends money back to his family, along with a postcard to reassure *Lila*.

Meanwhile, in *Thul*, *Lila* struggles to take care of their sick mother, who requires hospitalization. Desperate for help, she turns to the *DeSilvas*. *Mr. DeSilva* takes their mother to the hospital and covers her medical expenses until she recovers.

In Mumbai, *Hari* finds an unexpected mentor in *Mr. Panwallah*, a watchmaker who owns a shop near the restaurant. *Mr. Panwallah* teaches *Hari* the art of watch repair and convinces *Jagu* to let him split his time between the shop and the restaurant. Under his guidance, *Hari* becomes skilled at fixing watches. However, as time passes, he begins to miss his family and decides to return home.

Upon arriving in *Thul*, *Hari* is relieved to find that his mother's health has improved and that his father is beginning to overcome his alcoholism. Inspired by what he learned in Mumbai,



he starts a small business raising animals and considers opening his own watch repair shop in the village. The novel ends on a hopeful note, with the family's situation finally taking a turn for the better.

The central themes of the novel include family, responsibility, poverty, trust, perseverance, and adapting to change. *Lila* and *Hari* work tirelessly to improve their lives, but their journey is also shaped by the kindness of others. The story conveys an important message: hardships can be overcome through resilience and determination, and opportunities should be seized to build a better future. Additionally, the novel highlights the shift from traditional agricultural work to industrialization, reflecting the changing economic landscape of India.

7. Anita Desai and Gender delineation

Anita Desai is a distinguished figure in contemporary Indian literature, renowned for her insightful exploration of the human condition within the context of Indian society. Through her extensive body of work, *Desai* meticulously examines gender dynamics, roles, and relationships, offering profound insights into the complexities of life shaped by Indian cultural traditions. This introduction lays the foundation for an in-depth analysis of *Desai's* portrayal of gender in her novels, highlighting the significance of her contribution to the broader discourse on gender, culture, and society.

Spanning several decades, *Desai's* literary career reflects the evolving landscape of Indian society. From the colonial period to the present day, her narratives capture the essence of human experience, delving into individual consciousness while simultaneously shedding light on the societal forces that shape it. A recurring theme in *Desai's* works is gender, which holds particular significance within the Indian societal framework, where traditional norms often clash with the forces of modernity.

Gender is intricately woven into the fabric of *Desai's* storytelling, emerging as a central motif that influences identity, relationships, and societal expectations. Whether set in bustling urban



centers or quiet rural villages, her novels offer a mirror to the complex interplay of power, privilege, and patriarchy in Indian society. Through her characters, *Desai* provides a nuanced portrayal of individuals navigating these societal structures, often challenging conventional gender roles and seeking personal agency within a system that seeks to confine them.

At the heart of *Desai's* exploration of gender is a deep examination of traditional roles and expectations. Within India's patriarchal framework, women are often relegated to domestic spheres, while men are imbued with authority and control. Yet, *Desai's* characters frequently resist these norms, carving out spaces for autonomy and self-expression. Her novels trace the shifting roles of men and women in Indian society, illustrating the tensions that arise as individuals attempt to reconcile personal aspirations with societal expectations. Whether in the pursuit of independence and self-discovery or the struggle for recognition and acceptance, *Desai's* protagonists grapple with the many dimensions of gender identity.

Moreover, *Desai's* portrayal of relationships serves as a lens to examine gender dynamics within both familial and societal spheres. From sibling rivalries to marital discord, her narratives reveal the intricate power struggles, conflicts, and moments of intimacy that define human relationships. Through her exploration of love, loss, and longing, *Desai* transcends gender and cultural boundaries, speaking to the universal emotions and experiences that connect us all.

Anita Desai's novels stand as powerful testaments to the ability of literature to illuminate the complexities of the human experience. Through her insightful depiction of gender roles and relationships, she encourages readers to reflect on the ways gender shapes our lives and to challenge the societal norms that confine us. As we journey through her works, *Desai* invites us to question, to explore, and ultimately, to envision a world where gender is not a limitation but a celebration of our shared humanity.



8. Gender Paradigms in Indian Society: A Study through Anita Desai's Narratives

Indian society has long been shaped by deeply entrenched gender roles, defining expectations and behaviors for individuals. Traditionally, women have been assigned the roles of caregivers and homemakers, while men have held positions of authority and privilege. These gender constructs are woven into the social fabric, influencing family dynamics, societal structures, and personal identities.

8.1. Patriarchal Structures and Their Impact

At the heart of gender construction in Indian society lies the dominance of patriarchal structures, which uphold male authority and control. Within this system, women are often marginalized, their voices suppressed, and their agency restricted. *Anita Desai's* narratives offer a powerful critique of these patriarchal norms, exposing how they not only oppress women but also shape the identities and experiences of men. Her narratives highlight the struggles of women seeking autonomy and the ways in which societal expectations mold male behavior and privilege.

8.2. Influence of Cultural Norms and Traditions

Desai's portrayal of gender is deeply influenced by the cultural norms and traditions that govern Indian society. Through themes such as arranged marriages and strict codes of conduct, her characters wrestle with the weight of tradition as they navigate their gender identities. Cultural expectations serve as both a source of stability and a form of restriction, influencing decisions and shaping interpersonal relationships.

8.3. The Interplay between Tradition and Modernity

Desai's exploration of gender is further enriched by the tension between tradition and modernity in Indian society. With globalization and urbanization challenging long-held norms, traditional gender roles are increasingly being questioned, leading to new forms of identity and self-expression. Her novels capture this evolving landscape, depicting the ways



in which individuals negotiate and redefine gender in response to societal change. Through her nuanced portrayal of gender roles, patriarchal structures, and cultural expectations, *Anita Desai* provides readers with a profound understanding of power, privilege, and identity in Indian society. Her work not only challenges the rigid constructs of gender but also highlights the resilience and agency of those who dare to defy societal expectations.

9. Budding Roles of Men and Women in **Anita Desai's Stories**

Anita Desai's novels intricately depict characters who challenge traditional gender roles, reflecting the shifting dynamics of Indian society. Women in her narratives frequently defy societal expectations by asserting their agency and pursuing ambitions beyond the confines of domestic life. *Desai's* portrayal of evolving female roles goes beyond mere resistance to traditional norms; it delves into themes of empowerment and liberation.

Her female protagonists embark on journeys of self-discovery and self-realization, challenging patriarchal structures that seek to confine them. These characters navigate the complexities of gender identity, carving out paths of independence and autonomy in a society that often seeks to diminish their worth. Alongside her exploration of female empowerment, *Desai* also examines masculinity within the Indian context. The male characters in her novels grapple with societal expectations of manhood, struggling with notions of power, success, and identity.

9.1. Gender Discrepancy in *The Village by the Sea*

The Village by the Sea (1982) has been described as "*a brilliant and resonant children story of change in older India.*" However, as the story unfolds through conflicting perspectives and societal discourses, it seems that change is reserved only for men, while women remain in the same position.

The novel opens and closes with a spiritual theme, depicting the women of the fishing village, *Thul*, performing morning prayers by the sea rather than in the local temple. In doing



so, they appear to have a sense of autonomy, as they are not reliant on temple priests who, according to Hindu customs, expect payment for conducting religious rituals. These women willingly perform these prayers for the well-being of their husbands and fathers or simply for a good start to the day, suggesting that they do not see themselves as oppressed within this spiritual framework.

However, *Anita Desai* presents an alternative perspective through *Lila*, a young woman who silently resists conforming to traditional religious roles. She comes to understand that, in reality, money holds more power than spirituality. By having *Lila* reject this spiritual role, *Desai* challenges the nationalist narrative that confines women to the inner sanctum of culture and tradition.

The novel is shaped by various conflicting societal discourses. These include the village women's religious practice at the sea, the Maharashtra Government's plans for industrialization in villages near Bombay, political and environmental opposition to these industrial projects, urban women's protests against rising prices of essential goods, and the expressions of masculinity in the community, such as the coconut-seller's views and *Mr. Panwalla's* authoritative advice. These competing ideologies influence Hari's identity and choices. Meanwhile, *Lila*, unaffected by these external influences, represents a form of femininity that opposes the traditional, male-dominated perception of womanhood, which ties women to spiritual roles.

The story initially focuses on *Lila*, a key female character, as she carries a small basket filled with flowers to offer on a sacred rock in the sea, which serves as an informal temple. Other village women, who pray for the safety of their husbands and fathers at sea, soon join her. However, *Lila's* prayers are different she does not pray for her father, who has become a drunkard and sold his boat to pay off debts. Nevertheless, like the other women, she prefers to perform this act of worship herself rather than rely on a priest. This choice gives them a



sense of independence within their spiritual practice. In contrast, in the material world, women assert their independence only when men failsuch as when they are absent or unable to fulfill their responsibilities.

As scholar *Sudhakar Ratnakar Jamkhandi* transcripts,

"Only when the men are a failure, as is Lila's father, and only when the men are absent, do women assert their independence and their will. In the presence of their husbands, the only roles they play are those of wife and mother."

(Jamkhandi, 2008)

This is evident in *Thul's* fishing community. Where debt and alcoholism exist, women suffer the most. However, in families without these problems, relationships between men and women seem affectionate. The women even refer to their husbands as "*our men*" (*The Village by the Sea*, P. 20), showing their care and attachment. Nonetheless, when women face oppression, they leave their husbands.

The wives of the three Khanekar brothers serve as an example after enduring their husbands' alcoholism; they left and returned to their parents' homes in other villages. Only their elderly mother, Hira-bai, remained to take care of them.

(*The Village by the Sea*, P. 49)

On the other hand, despite their father's drinking and debts, *Lila* and *Hari* cannot abandon him. Their mother, too, is powerless to challenge him:

"No one dared tell him, least of all her mother."

(*The Village by the Sea*, P. 11)

This reinforces the idea that debt and alcoholism are the primary causes of hardship for women in this community. *Lila* and *Hari*, the novel's two main characters, have both been forced to leave school due to their father's financial troubles. As the older sibling, *Lila* urges *Hari* to take responsibility and find a way to support the family since, in their society;



women's roles are limited to household duties. However, she remains hopeful that *Hari* will soon be old enough to work and provide for them. *Hari* is encouraged by the government's industrialization project, which promises,

"The government is going to build a great factory here. Many factories hundreds of them." (*The Village by the Sea*, P. 13)

Yet deep down, he knows that he must eventually leave *Thul*. If the village transforms into an industrial hub, he might stay and build a new life. Nevertheless, if not, he and his family will continue to struggle, just like his sick mother, and could ultimately starve. He also recognizes that, due to societal norms, his sisters cannot work on a fishing boat or in a factory. Their future is predetermined they must marry, and as the eldest male, it is his duty to arrange their weddings, provide their dowries, and ensure they marry well. He worries about how he will afford these responsibilities. Without a stable job, he cannot rescue his sisters from the miserable life they currently endure, surrounded by poverty, sickness, and hopelessness. *Hari* realizes that he cannot earn enough in *Thul* by selling coconuts. The only solution is to leave for Bombay, whether with *Mr. de Silva's* help or on his own. Before we consider what *Lila* wants to do, let us first examine how she has developed in *Hari's* absence. With *Hari's* departure to Bombay, *Lila* finds space to shape her own identity through her interactions with different people in *Thul*. Unlike *Hari*, she is not driven by ambition. However, her strong survival instinct makes her active, adaptable, and resourceful. She takes on the responsibility of keeping her family together by willingly working in the homes of the *de Silvas* and *Sayyid Ali*. Like *Hira-bai*, she assumes the role of the family head, but unlike *Hira-bai*, she does not indulge in drinking toddy or follow superstitions. Due to the lack of a doctor in the village, *Lila* has no choice but to rely on the local quack for her mother's treatment, though she does not fully trust him. She openly expresses her doubts, saying:



"What shall we do? We can't do anything we have to listen to him. There is no hospital in the village; we could take her to, and no doctor who would come. We have no one but the magic man to help us." (The Village by the Sea, P. 53)

With *Hari* gone and the *de Silvas* arriving in *Thul*, *Lila* takes on the role of the family's breadwinner. She not only provides for the household but also becomes a mother figure to her younger sisters and even takes care of her irresponsible father, ensuring he has food and money for cigarettes while looking after their ailing mother. Unlike women in the city who join protests against government policies, *Lila* demonstrates her own form of resilience and leadership. When the *de Silvas* leave, *Sayyid Ali* arrives, and her mother is admitted to *Alibag* hospital, *Lila* highlights her ability to manage difficult situations. Unlike *Jagu's* wife, who openly protests against her husband's alcoholism, *Lila* does not confront her father about his drinking. However, by assuming the role of the family's provider, she indirectly shames him and initiates a quiet transformation in him. She even defies his authority by taking her mother to *Alibag* hospital with the help of the *de Silvas* without consulting him.

Lila's strength and growth remain rooted in *Thul*, whereas *Hari* must leave for the city to assert his masculinity. She may not have a clear vision for the future as *Hari* does, but she is fully equipped to handle present challenges. Perhaps she believes that solving immediate problems is more important than having long-term ambitions. A significant moment occurs when *Hari* watches their mother and other village women performing a religious ritual by the sea after the beach races. He is deeply moved by the sight of them scattering flower petals and colored powder on the rocks as a form of prayer. Wanting *Lila* to share in his joy, he calls out:

"Lila, Look! ... Look, Lila ..." (*The Village by the Sea*, P. 157)



Nevertheless, *Lila* does not respond. She remains silent. This silence is meaningful. It suggests that she does not find the religious ritual inspiring, even though it offers the women a small sense of autonomy. Through her experiences inside and outside the home, *Lila* has realized that it is not spirituality, but money, that truly enables change and survival. This is evident in her thoughts:

"The money made everything possible, and Lila hoped the gentleman would stay on and on so that she could continue to earn money." (The Village by the Sea, P. 111).

Lila's refusal to engage in religious traditions highlights her belief in financial independence. Her journey represents a challenge to traditional narratives that confine Indian women to the spiritual domain. If *Lila's* perspective reflects the author's, then *Anita Desai* is suggesting that the nationalist discourse on women was male-centered. Through *Lila*, *Desai* conveys that industrialization and progress in rural areas should benefit not only men but also women. Furthermore, *Desai* highlights the reality that in times of poverty, economic power holds more influence than spirituality. Like a Marxist perspective, her novel gives precedence to money as the force that shapes all aspects of material life.

Through *The Village by the Sea*, *Desai* explores the pressures placed on men to conform to rigid gender norms. She highlights how these expectations often limit their emotional expression and personal fulfillment. Her examination of gender roles is further enriched by her focus on intersectionality, illustrating how gender identity interacts with factors such as class, caste, and religion. By portraying the experiences of marginalized individuals, *Desai* challenges readers to reflect on how intersecting identities influence opportunities and social status.

Anita Desai's portrayal of evolving gender roles in Indian society provides readers with a nuanced understanding of gender dynamics and identity. Through themes of female empowerment, the complexities of masculinity, and the intersectionality of gender, she



invites readers to examine how societal expectations shape individual experiences. Ultimately, her novels serve as powerful testaments to the resilience and agency of those who dare to challenge traditional norms and forge their own paths in a world shaped by gendered expectations.

10. Conclusion

The most significant shift in children's literature is that women are now writing about women, rather than male authors portraying women through their own perspectives. This has led to more realistic and diverse female characters no longer limited to being passive, submissive, or uninspired. Instead, modern female protagonists are depicted as creative, strong, and independent. While female representation has increased over time, traditional themes persist, depicting women as passive, nurturing, and primarily valued for their beauty. These portrayals can influence young readers' self-esteem, aspirations, and perceptions of gender roles.

Despite these challenges, recent efforts to introduce diverse female characters in children's literature are promising. It is crucial to continue challenging outdated gender norms and expanding the representation of women in literature to reflect the evolving realities of modern society. By doing so, we can ensure that future generations grow up with a more inclusive and empowering understanding of gender roles. Children and adults alike struggle to distinguish stereotypes from reality. As society progresses, it is essential for children's literature to evolve alongside it, providing young readers with a more accurate and equitable portrayal of gender roles. Although the number of female-led stories has increased, it has not yet reached parity with male-centered narratives. However, with the continued efforts of contemporary authors, the representation of women in children's literature is steadily improving. If this trend continues, we can expect a more balanced portrayal of male and female characters in the near future.



Anita Desai's exploration of gender roles and relationships within Indian society offers a profound insight into human experience and social norms. Through her compelling narratives and well-developed characters, she analyzes traditional gender constructs and patriarchal structures, providing a deeper understanding of how these roles evolve over time. From her depiction of female empowerment to her examination of masculinity, *Desai's* works delve into the complexities of gender identity and expression. By incorporating the lens of intersectionality, she highlights how factors like class, caste, and tradition influence an individual's experience of gender. Her novels serve as critical commentaries on societal expectations, encouraging readers to question and challenge the constraints that limit personal freedom and agency. By amplifying the voices and experiences of marginalized individuals, *Desai* envisions a more inclusive and equitable society one where gender is not a restriction but a celebration of diversity and resilience. Her portrayal of gender dynamics leaves a lasting impact on contemporary literature, offering readers a compelling glimpse into both the intricacies of Indian society and the depth of the human spirit.

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