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Research Article

Rebellion as Resistance: Exploring the Intersection of Individual Identity and Social Hierarchy in Anita Desai's and Mulk Raj Anand's Narratives

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Abstract :

This paper examines the theme of rebellion as resistance in the works of Anita Desai and Mulk Raj Anand, focusing on the intersection of individual identity and social hierarchy. By exploring their narratives, this study highlights how both writers depict rebellion as a response to systemic oppression and cultural constraints. Desai's characters often engage in psychological resistance against gendered expectations, while Anand's protagonists actively challenge caste and class structures. Through a comparative analysis, this paper argues that rebellion in these texts is not merely an act of defiance but a negotiation of selfhood within socio-political constraints. Drawing from postcolonial theory, feminist critique, and subaltern studies, this research situates their works within broader literary and socio-cultural discourses on resistance. Desai's protagonists often experience rebellion as an internal struggle against societal expectations. In Cry, The Peacock, Maya's descent into psychological turmoil represents an unarticulated resistance to patriarchal oppression. Anita Desai brought into light the psychological oppression and gendered subjugation. Anita Desai's works, particularly Cry, The Peacock and Clear Light of Day, illustrate the internalization of victimhood. Internalization of victimhood springs from a sensitive source which the woman especially knows, mostly her near and dear ones.

Keywords: Rebellion, Resistance, Identity, Social Hierarchy, Postcolonialism, Subaltern Studies.

Introduction :

Rebellion in literature serves as a crucial site for examining the relationship between individual identity and systemic oppression. Anita Desai and Mulk Raj Anand, two prominent Indian English writers, explore rebellion as a form of resistance within distinct socio-cultural contexts. While Desai's characters struggle against patriarchal conditioning and internalized oppression, Anand's protagonists resist caste-based discrimination and economic subjugation. This paper compares their approaches to rebellion, emphasizing the intersection of identity and social hierarchy in shaping acts of resistance. By engaging with postcolonial, feminist, and Marxist theoretical frameworks, the study elucidates how their works contribute to discourses on self-determination and social justice. Alienation emerges as natural consequences of existential predicament. It is necessary to understand the meaning of existentialism. Existentialism is not a well organized and systematic philosophy of life nor can its beginning be pinpointed according to Saleem (2014).

Review of Literature :

This section surveys existing scholarship on Anita Desai and Mulk Raj Anand, establishing the context for the study and identifying the specific gap for research.

Social Realism and the Subaltern in Mulk Raj Anand

Mulk Raj Anand is widely recognized as a pioneer of the Indo-Anglian novel, celebrated for his commitment to social realism. Caste and Class Oppression: Critics like M.K. Naik and C.D. Narasimhaiah have extensively analyzed Anand's *Untouchable* (1935) and *Coolie* (1936). Research here focuses on his critique of the caste system and colonial exploitation. The Nature of Rebellion, Scholars argue that rebellion in Anand's work is typically external and collective. Desai's novels are not populated by heroic characters, whether male or female, at least in the traditional sense. In *Fire on the Mountain*, (1977) Desai explores the effectiveness of escapism as a coping mechanism as stated by Krishnaveni (2016). It is a reaction against tangible social evils (poverty, caste). Current Gap, While the *social* aspect of rebellion is well-documented, the psychological reconstruction of the protagonist's identity how the act of resisting reshapes their self-conception beyond their caste marker remains a fertile ground for deeper exploration. Anand's first three novels deal with the misery and wretchedness of the crushed and the poor and their struggle for a better life. His subsequent novels are almost a variation on the same theme and are intended to bring home to the reader the plight of the ever-burdened peasant who is powerless to fight superstition and social convention and who is baulked at every step in his aspiration for a better living Sudha (2022). Mulk Raj Anand is the most celebrated social realist. His novels are the depiction of harsh reality of Indian society based on caste Yashoda (2018).

Psychological Realism and Female Interiority in Anita Desai

Anita Desai's fiction primarily focuses on the inner turmoil of the psyche. Her characters, though often surrounded by others, experience a profound sense of alienation and discomfort, yet they remain aware of the cultural context they inhabit Kumari (2021). Anita Desai is noted for shifting the focus of the Indian English novel from the outer social world to the inner landscape of the mind. The Inner World of Women, Critics have explored the existential angst of Desai's protagonists in *Cry, the Peacock* (1963) and *Voices in the City* (1965). Rebellion as Withdrawal: Scholarship often characterizes rebellion in Desai's work as "neurotic" or "escapist." Maya's descent into madness or Monisha's suicide are frequently read as failures of adaptation. There is a need to re-frame these "neurotic" behaviors as active strategies of resistance. By viewing withdrawal not as weakness but as a refusal to participate in a patriarchal hierarchy, we can draw parallels to the overt resistance found in Anand.

The Comparative Intersection

Few studies directly compare Anand and Desai because they are often seen as opposites (Social vs. Psychological Realism). This research argues that both authors deal with the “crushing of the individual.” Whether it is the caste hierarchy in Anand or the patriarchal hierarchy in Desai, the pressure on the individual is remarkably similar. This paper will uncover how both authors depict rebellion as the *only* means of preserving individual identity. The Indo Anglian fiction shows an awareness of Indian life its social awakening and protest the independence struggle and its traumas social and political transitions and above all, the portrayal of suffering men and women Bai (2019).

Research Methodology :

This section outlines the theoretical framework and analytical approach used to conduct the study.

Research Design

This paper employs a Qualitative Textual Analysis method. It involves a close reading of selected primary texts to identify, interpret, and compare patterns of rebellion and identity formation.

Primary Sources

The analysis will anchor on specific representative texts: Mulk Raj Anand: *Untouchable* and *Coolie* (Focusing on the subaltern protagonist). Anita Desai: *Cry, the Peacock* and *Voices in the City* (Focusing on the alienated female protagonist).

Theoretical Framework:

The analysis will be viewed through a Postcolonial and Psychoanalytic lens. Subaltern Studies, To analyze the silencing of the marginalized subject in Anand’s social hierarchies. Feminist Literary Theory, To examine the “Othering” of women in Desai’s domestic hierarchies. Existentialism, To interpret “rebellion” not just as political resistance, but as an existential assertion of the self (referencing Camus’ *The Rebel*).

This analysis is informed by postcolonial theory, subaltern studies, and feminist criticism. Frantz Fanon’s exploration of colonial subjectivity, Gayatri Spivak’s argument on the subaltern’s voice, and Homi K. Bhabha’s concept of hybridity frame the discussion on identity and rebellion. Additionally, James C. Scott’s notion of “hidden transcripts” and Antonio Gramsci’s theory of cultural hegemony inform the analysis of resistance strategies in these texts. By incorporating insights from Simone de Beauvoir’s feminist existentialism and Karl Marx’s critique of class struggle, this study examines the ideological forces that shape rebellion in Desai’s and Anand’s narratives.

Individual Identity and Psychological Rebellion in Anita Desai’s Works :

Anita Desai’s protagonists, often women, experience a similar psychological entrapment exacerbated by patriarchal and societal expectations. One of her fond characters, Maya in her famous novel, *Cry, The Peacock* epitomizes this feminine hardship, where her victimhood is not overtly external but deeply internalized, manifesting in psychological turmoil and isolation. Maya before marriage and she after marriage are two different identities. Before marriage her every wish was fulfilled and her every demand was met. In fact, she depended on her father so much that she could not handle her own issues after marriage by herself and had to bank on her father for

support. Maya was devastated by male ego, male mindset and male behaviour. She lost her self-esteem. She didn't give up. She fought all her best to restore her dignity and get normalcy. This has a long and lonely impact on her mental health. This is more brutal than a physical wound. She suffered from deep trauma that only worsened with the passing of time. The trauma built up to such lethal level that she thought it wise to murder her husband, Gautama. It did not stop there; she committed suicide later. This suggests her knowledge of the consequence of her action which would be more regressive. She physically ended herself, however, she was mentally dead since a long time. Similarly, in *Clear Light of Day*, Bim's refusal to conform to traditional gender roles reflects a quiet yet resolute defiance. Desai through passive and psychological resistance has brought up women rebelling against the unjust done to them. Desai's characters often rebel in subtle, passive ways. Bimla famously known as Bim is a brilliant but stubborn woman who loves poetry, excels in academics. She has an independent mind and chooses her own friends. She had to suffer patriarchal ideologies. However, she fought all the way to be herself and finally doing what she loves the most and being with people who she likes to be with. She does these in *Clear Light of Day* disregarding challenges societal expectations by refusing to marry, asserting her independence in a non-confrontational manner. This rebellion is introspective and silent but equally powerful. Critics such as Jasbir Jain and Meenakshi Mukherjee argue that Desai's characters exemplify existential rebellion, where resistance manifests in solitude and introspection rather than overt activism.

Rebellion has always been the tool against oppression. Not all characters rebel. But, the fact that these writers especially Desai chose certain characters who went to fight against the then norms of the society speaks loud and clear about the fighting back attitude of women. Desai through Bimla and Maya has meaningfully brought the happening of the society. In fact this resonates with Marx ideology of revolution. He pointed out that the protagonist and the bourgeois will revolt to set a utopian society. This could be at all levels and not necessarily over financial gaps or controlling over means of production. So, the women in Desai's novel took to rebellion to correct the wrongs done to them. Desai's women protagonists resist not through direct confrontation but by subverting expectations in subtle ways. As Chandra Mohanty suggests, this form of rebellion is central to feminist struggles in postcolonial societies, where agency must be understood beyond Western paradigms of activism. Bim's decision to remain unmarried and financially independent challenges gender norms in a society that equates female fulfillment with marriage and domesticity.

Subaltern Studies (For Anand) Concept: Gayatri Spivak's "*Can the Subaltern Speak?*"
Application: Analyze if Bakha actually "speaks" or if Anand (an upper-caste intellectual) is speaking *for* him. Does Bakha have true agency, or is he just a vehicle for Anand's Marxism ?
Existentialism & Feminism (For Desai) Concept: Simone de Beauvoir's "*The Other*" or Albert Camus' "*The Outsider*.
Application: Desai's characters experience "alienation." They are strangers in their own families. You can argue that their rebellion is an Existentialist assertion of existence precedes essence-they refuse the "essence" (wife/mother) assigned to them.

Analytical Procedure

Thematic Coding: Identify instances of "imposed hierarchy" (caste rules, gender roles) and "acts of rebellion" (breaking rules, silence, madness, flight).
Comparative Matrix: Create a framework to compare:
Trigger: What provokes the rebellion? (External humiliation vs. Internal suffocation).
Form: How is rebellion enacted? (Physical defiance vs. Mental withdrawal).
Outcome: Does the rebellion succeed in establishing an identity?

Reframing the Thesis: The Nature of the Cage

A strong thesis should argue that while both authors depict the crushing weight of hierarchy, the “cage” is constructed of different materials. For Anand: The cage is external and material (Caste, Poverty, Colonialism). Rebellion is a struggle for *dignity* and *physical survival*. For Desai: The cage is internal and relational (Marriage, Gender Roles, Domesticity). Rebellion is a struggle for *sanity* and *autonomy*.

Core Argument: “*While Mulk Raj Anand’s characters rebel to enter society on equal terms, Anita Desai’s characters often rebel to escape society’s expectations entirely.*” Mulk Raj Anand: Rebellion as Social Outcry In Anand’s works (e.g., *Untouchable*, *Coolie*), individual identity is often obliterated by a collective label (e.g., “The Sweeper,” “The Coolie”). The Body as the Site of Resistance, In *Untouchable*, Bakha’s rebellion is physical. He is obsessed with his clothing (the “fashun” of the Tommies) and his hygiene. By trying to look like a Sahib, he is physically resisting the dirty identity society imposes on him. Analysis Point: Rebellion here is mimicry. Bakha tries to subvert hierarchy by adopting the *the Subaltern* of the highest hierarchy (the British). The Failure of Direct Confrontation, Anand often shows that violent or direct rebellion is impossible for the subaltern. When Bakha is slapped, he wants to retaliate but is frozen by centuries of conditioning. Deeper Insight: His rebellion shifts from *action* to *introspection*. The “touch” moment sparks an existential crisis—this consciousness is the resistance.

Anita Desai: Rebellion as Psychological Withdrawal

In Desai’s works (e.g., *Cry, the Peacock*, *Voices in the City*, *Fire on the Mountain*), the hierarchy is the patriarchal family structure. Silence and Madness as Weapons, Unlike Anand’s characters who might shout or beg, Desai’s protagonists (like Maya or Nanda Kaul) often use silence. Analysis Point: Withdrawal is an active rebellion. In *Fire on the Mountain*, Nanda Kaul’s desire to have “no one and nothing” is a radical rejection of the Indian woman’s duty to be a nurturer. The “Room of One’s Own” vs. The Household. The “house” in Desai’s novels is not a sanctuary but a prison of hierarchy. Deeper Insight: Madness (as seen in *Cry, the Peacock*) is the ultimate refusal to compromise. If the “sane” world requires the death of her individual identity, Maya chooses “insanity” to preserve her selfhood.” Golden Nugget” Insight

Consider the role of Language as a hierarchy. Anand attempts to “Indianize” English (e.g., translating Punjabi abuses directly) to rebel against the Queen’s English, making the language itself a tool of resistance for the lower class. Desai uses hyper-refined, poetic, and interior English. Her characters rebel by retreating into a high-intellect world that their pragmatic families (like Gautama in *Cry, the Peacock*) cannot understand. Social Hierarchy and Active Rebellion in Mulk Raj Anand’s Works Anand’s narratives foreground active resistance against caste and economic oppression. Bakha in *Untouchable* and Munoo in *Coolie* embody the struggles of marginalized communities striving for dignity within a rigid social hierarchy. Their rebellion, though often thwarted, signals a collective awakening against institutionalized discrimination. Scholars such as Priyamvada Gopal and Sudhir Kakar have examined how Anand’s work aligns with Marxist literary criticism, portraying social structures as mechanisms of control that must be actively resisted. Unlike Desai’s individualistic portrayals of rebellion, Anand emphasizes collective resistance. His characters’ acts of defiance—whether in Bakha’s confrontation with caste indignities or Munoo’s refusal to accept his fate—resonate with Gramscian notions of counter-hegemony. James C. Scott’s theory of “everyday resistance” further elucidates how Anand’s protagonists engage in acts of defiance that, while seemingly minor, contribute to broader social change.

Comparative Analysis: Individual vs. Collective Rebellion :

While both Desai and Anand depict rebellion as a response to oppression, their approaches differ in scope and execution. Desai's rebellion is introspective, emphasizing psychological and emotional defiance against patriarchal structures. Anand, in contrast, portrays rebellion as an active confrontation with systemic injustice, emphasizing class and caste struggle. These differing representations reflect the intersections of gender, class, and historical context in shaping resistance strategies. The scholarship of Gauri Viswanathan and Ania Loomba provides a postcolonial framework for situating these narratives within broader resistance movements in Indian literature.

The Architecture of Hierarchy (The Street vs. The Veranda)

Thesis Idea: The physical spaces in the novels enforce the hierarchy. Rebellion is the act of trespassing these spaces. Anand's "Street" (Public Hierarchy) *The Well*: In *Untouchable*, the well is a vertical hierarchy. Bakha must wait at the bottom for someone from the top to pour water. His rebellion is the *desire* to draw his own water—a spatial transgression. *The Road*: The road is where identities collide. Anand's rebellion is often about mobility. Munoo in *Coolie* travels from village to city to mountains. His movement is his resistance against being fixed in one social station. Desai's "Veranda" (Domestic Hierarchy) *The Drawing Room*: In *Voices in the City*, the house is a suffocating container of "middle-class morality." Monisha commits suicide not to kill herself, but to escape the *walls* of her husband's house. *The Garden*: Often a place of wild, unkempt rebellion. Maya in *Cry, the Peacock* identifies with the wild garden, resisting the ordered, logical, "manicured" world of her husband Gautama.

The Phenomenology of Rebellion (Body vs. Mind)

Rebellion is not just an action; it is a location. In Anand, the site of rebellion is the Body. In Desai, the site of rebellion is the Psyche. **Language as a Tool of Resistance**: How the characters speak (or refuse to speak) is their primary weapon against hierarchy. **Anand**: The "Vulgarisation" of English Technique: Anand intentionally infuses English with Punjabi/Hindustani abuses ("Rape-mother," "Cock-eyed ghazal"). Why it is Rebellion: He refuses to write "Standard English." By forcing the Queen's language to carry the "dirty" rhythm of the street, he breaks the literary hierarchy. He forces the Western reader to hear the Indian subaltern. **Desai**: The Weaponization of Silence Technique: Her characters often stop speaking entirely or speak in internal monologues that the reader hears but other characters do not. Why it is Rebellion: In a patriarchal hierarchy, a woman is expected to respond/serve. By remaining silent (like Sita in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*), she denies the oppressor the satisfaction of obedience. Silence is a "non-violent non-cooperation." **The Theoretical "Lens"**: Spivak's "Strategic Essentialism" Concept: Sometimes groups must temporarily "essentialize" themselves (e.g., "We are all Workers") to fight back. Application: Anand's characters try to do this (Unite as workers in *Coolie*), but fail because Caste divides them. Desai's women fail to unite because their suffering is too individual/isolated. The "Double Colonization" of Women Concept: Women in India are colonized twice: once by the British/Western modernity, and again by Indian Patriarchy. **Anand's Women** (e.g., Sohini): Suffer physical abuse/sexual threat (Physical Colonization). **Desai's Women** (e.g., Monisha): Suffer intellectual dismissal. Her husband treats her as a child/object (Intellectual Colonization).

The Locus of Rebellion :

"While both Mulk Raj Anand and Anita Desai depict the erasure of individual identity as a prerequisite for social stability, they locate the site of resistance in fundamentally different realms: the corporeal and the psychological. In Anand's *Untouchable*, the hierarchy is external and tangible;

Bakha's rebellion is triggered by the visceral shock of the 'polluting touch' and the subsequent public slap. Here, the resistance is **somatic**-Bakha's body becomes the battlefield where the rigid structures of Caste clash with his desire for physical dignity. His rebellion is an attempt to reclaim ownership of his own skin from a society that views it as a source of contagion. Conversely, Desai's *Cry, the Peacock* situates the conflict within the claustrophobic interiority of the domestic sphere. Maya's rebellion is not against a visible oppressor like a priest, but against the invisible, crushing rationality of her husband, Gautama. When Gautama dismisses her grief over the death of her pet as irrational, Maya's subsequent descent into 'madness' functions as a subversive act of resistance. By refusing to be 'sane' in a world that equates sanity with emotional sterility, she rejects the patriarchal hierarchy that demands the erasure of her female instinct. Thus, whereas Anand's protagonist rebels to *enter* the social order as an equal, Desai's protagonist rebels to *exit* a social order that she perceives as a spiritual vacuum."The Semiotics of Resistance (Noise vs. Silence)"The mechanism of rebellion in the narratives of Anand and Desai diverges sharply in the deployment of voice. In Mulk Raj Anand's *Coolie* and *Untouchable*, resistance is linguistic and acoustic; it is the intrusion of the 'vulgar' into the polite space of the novel. Anand weaponizes language by infusing English with the rhythm and abuses of the Punjabi underdog, forcing the colonial language to accommodate the subaltern reality. Munoo and Bakha may be socially silenced, but the narrative voice surrounding them is cacophonous, demanding that the reader *hear* the injustice. Conversely, Anita Desai operates within a framework where language has failed. In *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*, Sita's rebellion is characterized not by what she says, but by her refusal to communicate. Confronted with a husband who deals only in pragmatism and facts, Sita realizes that language is a tool of the patriarchy, incapable of expressing her existential anguish. Therefore, she retreats into silence and isolation. While Anand uses 'noise' and linguistic hybridity to break down the walls of social hierarchy, Desai uses silence as a defensive fortification to preserve the sanctity of the individual identity against a world that refuses to understand it."The Gendered Cage (Vertical vs. Circular Oppression)"The geometry of oppression functions differently for the protagonists of the two authors, dictating the trajectory of their rebellion. For Anand's male protagonists, such as Bakha, the hierarchy is vertical-a rigid ladder of Caste where the individual is crushed from above by the priest, the merchant, and the landlord. His rebellion is an upward struggle for mobility and dignity within the public sphere. However, for Desai's female protagonists, such as Monisha in *Voices in the City*, the hierarchy is **circular** and concentric. She is not oppressed by a distant social system, but by the immediate, intimate circle of the joint family. Monisha is trapped in a 'gilded cage' where oppression is disguised as protection and duty. While Bakha fights against his exclusion from society, Monisha fights against her forced inclusion into a domestic role that obliterates her selfhood. Consequently, the intersection of identity differs: Anand's hero battles the dehumanization of *Labor*, while Desai's heroine battles the dehumanization of *Gender*. The former seeks to be recognized as a man; the latter seeks to be recognized as a human being separate from her role as a woman."

Conclusion :

Anita Desai and Mulk Raj Anand's works offer contrasting yet complementary perspectives on rebellion as resistance. Desai's characters engage in subtle, psychological defiance, challenging gender norms through introspection and non-conformity. Anand's protagonists, on the other hand, actively resist socio-economic hierarchies, highlighting the role of collective struggle in dismantling oppression. By examining rebellion through the lenses of individual identity and social hierarchy, this paper underscores the complexity of resistance in Indian English literature. Future research may explore how these themes evolve in contemporary Indian fiction, further interrogating the relationship between selfhood and systemic power structures.

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