

**BALANCING HERITAGE AND PROGRESS: INSIGHTS FROM ANITA DESAI'S 'THE VILLAGE BY THE SEA' AND 'FASTING, FEASTING'****JUHI BIRLA****Assistant Professor****KMGPGC College, Badalpur****Abstract**

*This essay critically examines the interplay between tradition and modernity in Anita Desai's novels "The Village by the Sea" (1982) and "Fasting, Feasting" (1999). Set against disparate backdrops, these works illuminate the conflicts and tensions that emerge as traditional values encounter modern influences. "The Village by the Sea" chronicles the lives of siblings Hari and Lila, who grapple with the impact of industrialization on their traditional village existence. Conversely, "Fasting, Feasting" juxtaposes the cultural dynamics of an Indian family with those of an American family, emphasizing the characters' personal struggles and societal transformations. Through intricate character development, evocative settings, and engaging narratives, Desai deftly portrays the complexities of preserving cultural identity amidst the forces of modernization. This analysis underscores Desai's nuanced depiction of the advantages and challenges of modernization, advocating for a balanced integration of tradition and modernity.*

**Keywords:** Anita Desai, tradition, modernity, *The Village by the Sea*, *Fasting Feasting*, industrialization, cultural identity, gender roles, economic mobility, modernization

**Introduction:**

Anita Desai is a prominent character in modern writing, renowned for her detailed depiction of human emotions and the complexities of society. Her works frequently explore the intricacies of life in India, offering a subtle viewpoint that connects the traditional with the modern. Of her many significant contributions, two novels, *\*The Village by the Sea\** (1982) and *\*Fasting, Feasting\** (1999), stand out for their in-depth examination of these issues.

"*The Village by the Sea*" is a moving story that takes place in a small seaside village in India, centering around the challenges faced by a family living on the brink of destitution. Desai skillfully portrays the difficulties and determination of rural life by presenting them from the perspective of the young protagonist, Lila. Conversely, *\*Fasting, Feasting\** depicts a distinctly contrasting backdrop, juxtaposing the experiences of two siblings—Uma, who stays in India, immersed in conventional familial obligations, and Arun, who relocates to the United States, struggling with the conflict between his cultural heritage and the unfamiliar environment he occupies.

This article seeks to examine the point at which tradition and modernity cross in these two works. Through an analysis of the characters' encounters and the socio-cultural environments

portrayed, we can acquire a more profound comprehension of how Desai explores the conflict and balance between tradition and modernity. This examination will not only showcase Desai's literary artistry but also contemplate the wider ramifications of these subjects in modern society.

The juxtaposition between tradition and modernity is a prominent theme in "The Village by the Sea".

"The Village by the Sea" by Anita Desai transports readers to a quaint seaside village in India, where the intertwined lives of two siblings, Hari and Lila, unfold amidst the clash of traditional and modern influences. Desai adeptly depicts the peasants' profound and inherent bond with their natural environment, emphasising their dependence on agriculture and fishing for survival (Desai, 1982, pp. 35-45). The tale adeptly portrays the cadences of rural existence, imbued with time-honored traditions and ceremonies that have persisted over successive generations.

Yet, within the peaceful and uncomplicated nature of village life, a significant danger arises in the shape of industrialization and modernization. The intrusion of urbanisation and economic pursuits is a significant obstacle to the villagers' customary way of life, disturbing the tranquilly they have deeply valued (Desai, 1982, pp. 78-82). The conflict between tradition and modernity becomes evident as the villagers struggle with the influences of change, endeavouring to safeguard their cultural legacy while also embracing the possibilities of advancement.

Desai skillfully delves into the intricacies of this transition by portraying the experiences of Hari and Lila, prompting readers to reflect on the subtle equilibrium between tradition and modernity. The narrative serves as a powerful reminder of the unwavering strength of rural communities in the midst of changing times. "The Village by the Sea" showcases Desai's exceptional literary skills, providing deep understanding of the human experience and the enduring challenge of harmonising tradition with progress.

### **Characterization and Conflict**

Hari and Lila symbolise the younger generation in Anita Desai's "The Village by the Sea," as they navigate the challenging balance between traditional values and modern influences. Their father, who is addicted to alcohol and frequently absent, represents the deteriorating traditional patriarchal systems that have difficulties in adjusting to the evolving era. On the other hand, their mother, who is confined to bed due to illness, represents the unfortunate outcomes of holding onto old traditions in a society that requires adjustment and advancement.

Hari's voyage to Mumbai, a vibrant city teeming with contemporary activity, provides a dramatic juxtaposition to the serene yet unchanging existence in the hamlet. His encounters in the city introduce him to a flurry of fresh prospects and difficulties, compelling him to face the truths of urban life. Hari is faced with the clear differences between the simple rural lifestyle and the sophisticated metropolitan lifestyle when he interacts with city dwellers who are embracing modernity, like the De Silva family (Desai, 1982, p. 74). The De Silvas, who symbolise modernity,

act as catalysts for Hari's realisation of the potential that lies beyond the limitations of his conventional upbringing.

Hari's story arc vividly portrays the clash between tradition and modernity, as he struggles with the appeal of development while simultaneously confronting his strong emotional connection to his family and cultural heritage. His voyage serves as a representation of the larger societal conflicts portrayed in the novel, illustrating the universal challenge of reconciling the past with the future in a fast changing society.

### **Analysis of Setting and Symbolism**

The settlement in "The Village by the Sea" serves as a powerful representation of tradition, immersing its residents in a rich fabric of customs, celebrations, and a closely united society. The place is a haven of comfort and security, where the patterns of existence are determined by long-standing traditions handed down from one generation to another. Yet, this peaceful and perfect way of life is in danger due to the approaching threat of progress symbolised by the upcoming establishment of a factory. This imminent danger serves as a powerful warning of the unavoidable encroachment of advancement, shattering the fragile equilibrium between tradition and transformation.

The sea, an omnipresent force in the life of the people, represents both nourishment and disruption. The river not only sustains the local community by providing a means of living through fishing and abundant resources, but it also acts as an entry point for other individuals who introduce transformative influences. The fluctuation of the tides reflects the recurring pattern of life in the village, whose stability is frequently tested by the capricious influences of external factors.

Desai's expressive writing style intensifies the contrast between the village and the city. The vibrant city is depicted as a discordant symphony of sound and disorder, overflowing with prospects and allurements. On the other hand, the community is portrayed as a peaceful sanctuary, rich in customs but hindered by lack of progress. The stark contrast highlights the attractiveness and risks of modernism, as well as the security and limitations of tradition. Desai's skillful use of vivid imagery and rich symbolism prompts readers to contemplate the intricate nature of societal advancement and the unwavering strength of tradition when confronted with transformation.

Narrative technique refers to the specific methods and strategies employed by an author to convey a story or narrative. It encompasses the various literary devices, structures, and styles used to shape and present the plot

Anita Desai utilises a third-person omniscient narrative style in "The Village by the Sea" to offer readers a comprehensive perspective on the characters' internal struggles and the socio-economic changes that are influencing their lives (Desai, 1982, p. 102). This narrative method provides readers with the ability to perceive the thoughts and emotions of many characters, so gaining a deeper understanding of their motivations and challenges. Desai provides a

comprehensive view that sheds light on the intricate nature of the villagers' experiences as they navigate the conflicts between upholding their traditional beliefs and embracing societal transformation (Desai, 1982, p. 145).

Desai adeptly explores the intricacies of the characters' thoughts and emotions, effectively portraying their challenges and ambitions. The omniscient narrator in Desai's work, as seen by the reference to page 189, offers a thorough comprehension of Hari's aspiration for a more fulfilling existence beyond the village and Lila's resolve to protect her family in the face of hardship. Furthermore, Desai utilises this narrative approach to skillfully intertwine many narrative strands, effortlessly linking the individual conflicts of the characters with the wider socio-economic influences that mould their society.

The omniscient narrator provides readers with a clear view of the clash between tradition and modernity, surpassing the limitations of individual viewpoints. The all-knowing narrator serves as a mentor, directing readers through the complexities of village existence while illuminating the broader influences in motion (Desai, 1982, p. 215). Desai's skillful implementation of the third-person omniscient narrative enhances the work, encouraging readers to fully engage with the town and its residents as they confront the enduring conflicts between advancement and conservation.

**The juxtaposition between tradition and modernity in the novel "Fasting, Feasting" is explored.**

Anita Desai's novel "Fasting, Feasting" examines the cultural differences and similarities between an Indian family and an American family, as they grapple with the challenges of upholding tradition while embracing modernity. The work is divided into two distinct sections, immersing readers initially in the vivid tapestry of Indian society and subsequently in the busy landscape of America.

The initial portion of the work takes place in India, where readers are acquainted with the limitations imposed by conventional familial obligations and societal standards. Desai explores the complexities of arranged marriages, gender roles, and the societal pressures to conform by examining the Indian family (Desai, 1999, p. 45). Amidst this context, the protagonists struggle with the conflict between safeguarding their cultural legacy and being enticed by the appeal of modernization.

Subsequently, the story shifts to the United States, where the cultural disparities become even more evident. In the realm of possibility and individualism, the Indian protagonist encounters the overwhelming assortment of options and liberties that characterise American existence (Desai, 1999, p. 78). Desai illuminates the intricacies of integration and identity in a foreign country through the immigrant family's experiences, where the battle between tradition and the inexorable advancement of society is evident.

Desai employs a dual narrative framework to push readers to contemplate the common themes of cultural identity, familial responsibility, and the pursuit of fulfilment. Desai highlights the interdependence of humanity by contrasting the Indian and American experiences, despite the geographical and cultural disparities that divide us. "Fasting, Feasting" is a profound examination of the human experience, skillfully navigating the intersections of tradition and modernity with deep understanding and sensitivity.

### **Character development and the influence of culture**

Uma, the main character in the Indian context, is a lady of middle age who finds herself confined by her customary familial responsibilities. Her parents, especially her father, embody the strict conformity to traditional patriarchal ideals. The unsuccessful marriages of Uma and her ongoing submission to her family emphasise the oppressive character of these customs (Desai, 1999, p. 45).

Arun, who is Uma's brother, serves as a connection between the conventional and the contemporary. His experience of studying in the United States introduces him to a distinct culture, but he feels emotionally disconnected and faces difficulties in finding his identity. This highlights the conflict that arises when a person with a conventional upbringing encounters contemporary Western values (Desai, 1999, p. 120).

### **Analysis of Setting and Cultural Contrast**

Indian households are deeply rooted in traditional customs, where rituals, family hierarchy, and society expectations significantly influence the lives of individuals. Conversely, the American backdrop in the latter portion of the story presents a distinct form of grappling with modernity. The Patton family, in whose company Arun resides, seems to epitomise the contemporary, progressive way of life, however they also suffer from their own problems, including excessive materialism, absence of strong family connections, and personal discontent (Desai, 1999, p. 156).

Desai use divergent settings to examine the disparate impact of tradition and modernity on individuals within various cultures. Uma, like many women in India, faces the oppressive burden of tradition. In the United States, the contemporary way of life presents distinct difficulties, including the feelings of isolation and shallowness encountered by the Patton family.

### **Sex and cultural customs**

Anita Desai's body of work frequently delves into the significant influence of tradition on women's lives, a theme that strongly reverberates in both "The Village by the Sea" and "Fasting, Feasting." In these novels, Desai depicts female characters who are limited by the inflexible demands of traditional gender roles, their lives confined by the rules of a male-dominated society.

Lila in "The Village by the Sea" serves as a heartbreaking symbol of the conventional role of women as caretakers in Indian society. Since she was a child, she has taken on the burden of

looking after her mother, who is unable to leave her bed, as well as her younger siblings. In doing so, she has given up her own dreams and chances for personal development (Desai, 1982, p. 56). Lila's narrative trajectory exemplifies the all-encompassing impact of patriarchal systems, which restrict her independence and perpetuate the pattern of female oppression.

Similarly, in "Fasting, Feasting," Desai illuminates the life of Uma, whose existence is restricted by the oppressive limitations of traditional gender conventions. Uma is confined by her family's expectations, which suffocate her. Her value is determined only by her capacity to satisfy the specific duties assigned to her as a daughter, sister, and future wife (Desai, 1999, p. 89). The desires and dreams of the woman are controlled by the arbitrary wishes of her family and community, emphasising the widespread influence of patriarchal domination.

Desai's portrayal of Lila and Uma's experiences serves as a powerful critique of patriarchal systems that marginalise women and hinder their ability to reach their full potential. Desai highlights the importance of addressing women's empowerment by emphasising their problems in the wider social context. Desai's writing style is sharp and perceptive, and she skillfully presents female characters in a way that encourages readers to confront and question the deeply ingrained societal standards that contribute to gender inequity. Her work also urges readers to actively support the creation of a fair and inclusive society. The novels are significantly influenced by economic factors. The novel "The Village by the Sea" explores the ambivalent emotions of optimism and anxiety that arise with the possibility of industrialization. Hari's relocation to the urban area symbolises a possible means of breaking free from destitution, but simultaneously highlighting the susceptibility of conventional means of making a living to contemporary economic influences. The novel "Fasting, Feasting" depicts education as a means to achieve modernity and access to enhanced chances. Arun's voyage to America represents the pursuit of contemporary values, while also exposing the personal and cultural displacement that can arise from such a change.

Cultural identity refers to the sense of belonging and identification with a certain culture or group, which is shaped by shared values, beliefs, traditions, and customs.

Anita Desai's examination of the conflict between cultural identity and modernity is evident throughout her works, particularly in "The Village by the Sea" and "Fasting, Feasting." In these novels, Desai skillfully explores the intricacies of identity in response to external pressures and changing cultural environments. The residents in "The Village by the Sea" have a strong connection between their sense of identity and their traditional way of life, which is based on long-standing conventions and rituals (Desai, 1982, p. 67). Nevertheless, the esteemed sense of self is endangered by the intrusion of modernization, exemplified by the imminent establishment of a factory. The villagers are currently dealing with the impact of change, which has made them realise the vulnerability of their cultural legacy. They are also facing the difficulty of maintaining their identity in the midst of external influences.

Desai explores the intricacies of cross-cultural identity via Arun's experiences in "Fasting, Feasting." Arun, while being physically far from India, has a strong emotional and cultural connection to his heritage. He faces challenges in reconciling his traditional upbringing with the values of the Western culture (Desai, 1999, p. 112). The individual's cross-cultural encounters provoke significant inquiries regarding one's sense of self and affiliation, emphasising the lasting impact of one's cultural legacy even amidst transforming circumstances. Desai urges readers to reflect on the complex interplay between cultural identity and adaptation by juxtaposing traditional ideals with modern influences. Regardless matter whether they take place in the rural settings of India or the busy cities of America, her novels act as powerful reminders of the lasting strength of cultural identity in the midst of globalisation and rapid change.

Desai does not idealise modernity; instead, she gives an impartial perspective on its advantages and disadvantages. Although modernization presents economic and educational prospects, it also poses obstacles such as cultural dilution, ecological deterioration, and social estrangement. Desai's portrayal implies that a careful blending of tradition and modernity, rather than completely embracing or rejecting either, is crucial for the well-being of both individuals and society.

## Conclusion

Anita Desai's novels, "The Village by the Sea" and "Fasting, Feasting," provide significant observations on the convergence of tradition and modernity. Desai effectively portrays the intricate interplay of various influences on individuals' lives through her well-developed characters, detailed settings, and engaging storylines. Her novels provide as a poignant reminder of the lasting significance of tradition and the opportunity for transformation that comes with modernity. They encourage readers to contemplate the delicate equilibrium required to reconcile these two aspects of human existence.

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