

Gendered Geographies: Female Subjectivity and Space in the Works of Anita Desai and Kiran Desai

Sandhya Nandan¹; Dr. Shabina Khan²

¹PhD Scholar, Department of English Literature, Rabindranath Tagore University (RNTU), Bhopal (M.P)

²Associate Professor, Department of English Literature, Rabindranath Tagore University (RNTU), Bhopal (M.P)

Publication Date: 2025/10/18

Abstract: This research examines the combination of gender, spatial measures, and identity as embodied in the works of Anita Desai and Kiran Desai, who are eminent writers of the Indian English domain. Adopting a feminist-space theoretical perspective, it examines the manner in which contexts, that is, domestic, psychic, as well as world contexts, affect perceptions of oneself and consciousness among females. Anita Desai's "Clear Light of Day" (1980) and "Fasting, Feasting" (1999) demonstrate the confines placed on women within family and cultural limits, while Kiran Desai's "The Inheritance of Loss" (2006) and "Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard" (1998) consider the dynamic and discontinuous settings typical of diaspora and globalisation. Adopting Gaston Bachelard, Henri Lefebvre, Sara Ahmed, and Rajeswari Sunder Rajan's theoretical ideas, it argues that the two writers adopt "space" as a metaphorical form of consciousness, reflective of the history of Indian womanhood from domestic limitations to cosmopolitan opportunities. It finishes by refuting that the transition from Anita's reflective domestic realism to Kiran's cosmopolitan perspective reflects India's vast cultural shift, moving from post-independence reflection to world engagement, and thereby redefining female identity as a dynamic process of moving between belonging and estrangement.

Keywords: *Feminist Spatial Theory, Indian English Women's Writing, Anita Desai and Kiran Desai, Gender and Space in Literature, Postcolonial Feminist Criticism, Female Subjectivity and Identity.*

How to Cite: Sandhya Nandan; Dr. Shabina Khan (2025) Gendered Geographies: Female Subjectivity and Space in the Works of Anita Desai and Kiran Desai. *International Journal of Innovative Science and Research Technology*, 10(10), 970-975.

<https://doi.org/10.38124/ijisrt/25oct518>

I. INTRODUCTION

The evolution of Indian English fiction has presented a significant advancement in its representation of women's identities, shifting from a marginalised domestic role to that of a cosmopolitan and reflective individual. Prominent contributors to this noteworthy transformation are Anita Desai and Kiran Desai, an extraordinary mother-daughter literary partnership that together articulates the emotional and spatial development of Indian women as they transition from the private domain to the international arena.

Anita Desai's writing began in the 1960s and 1970s, when Indian women's writing turned from the outside world of society to inward reflection. The stories feature the author as creating key protagonists who reside in oppressive home environments, middle-class urban life, family residences that abound with memories, and lone sanctums that signify mental imprisonment and desire for spiritual escape. As critic Meenakshi Mukherjee wrote, "Anita Desai turned the Indian English novel inward, toward the psyche, giving voice to the unspeakable anxieties of the Indian woman" [13].

Kiran Desai, in fictions of the post-millennium, reimagines such conflict in the new transnational settings of migration and globalisation. The characters she represents suffer not only emotional dislocation but also geographical distance, being in broken realities that span India and the Western world. "The Inheritance of Loss," winner of the Man Booker Prize in 2006, captures the present anxieties of identity formation in terms of colonial pasts, socio-economic inequities, and dislocation of culture.

The question of space, physical, social, or psychic, becomes a central figure in an understanding of the ways in which both writers create female subjectivity. While in Anita Desai's domestic interiors and cities often present scenes of repression as well as remembrance, in Kiran's stories, mountains, unknown lands, and towns of borders bespeak motifs of world disunity and homelessness. This is a feminist-space reading of both authors that considers the ways in which women inhabit, question, and reimagine space.

A. Research Gap and Purpose

Though both authors have been widely studied, their works are rarely compared through the lens of gendered spatiality. This study attempts to reduce that gap by exploring the continuum of spatial consciousness, from Anita's domestic interiors to Kiran's transnational geographies, revealing how each represents distinct stages in the evolution of Indian womanhood.

B. Research Questions

- How do Anita and Kiran Desai deploy space as a figure of speech for the subjectivity of women?
- How do local and world environments reflect ideas of restriction or liberty?
- How is the intergenerational connection among these writers representative of evolving feminist perspectives in Indian English literature?

II. AIMS OF THE RESEARCH

- To analyse the interaction of space, gender, and identity in the chosen works of Anita and Kiran Desai.
- To analyse spatio-emotional and corporeal locations as they reflect the negotiations of females with patriarchal, cultural, and transnational boundaries.
- To examine the recurrent tendencies and interruptions in feminist consciousness as revealed by the two writers.
- To contribute to postcolonial feminist writings by applying space theory to the fiction of Indian females.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Indian Women's Writing and Feminist Consciousness

The post-independence period is a great watershed in English fiction in the representation of the internal world of the woman. Earlier works, often determined by nationalist or reform-oriented impulses, moved steadily on to more introspective forays into consciousness, affectivity, and gendered perceptions. Writers such as Kamala Markandaya, Nayantara Sahgal, and Ruth Praver Jhabvala began placing the woman in the midst of the opposing spheres of tradition and modernity, explaining the interaction of patriarchy, class, and normative expectations.

Scholars like Susheila Nasta in *Motherlands* argue that such an introspective turn marks "a move from the nation's geography to the geography of the self," in which personal and psychic arenas become arenas of resistance [14]. Likewise, Meenakshi Mukherjee, in "The Twice Born Fiction," argues that Indian female novelists replaced extra-psychic dynamics with affectual sincerity, thus redefining narrative realism in terms of feminine consciousness. Within this evolving milieu, Anita Desai occupies a seminal position. Her novels illuminate the complexity of women's emotions within middle-class domestic frameworks, depicting how silence, memory, and routine conceal rebellion. Desai's delicate handling of language and interiority anticipates later global feminist discourses, making her work foundational to any study of gendered subjectivity in Indian English fiction.

B. Theoretical Framework: Feminism and Space

The conceptual triad of space, gender, and identity forms the backbone of feminist-spatial criticism. Gaston Bachelard's "The Poetics of Space" (1958) considers individual spaces such as corners, homes, and attics as important sites for creativity and memory, in that "space shelters the dreaming consciousness" [3]. Compare Henri Lefebvre, in "The Production of Space" (1974), who extends such thought by advocating that space is produced through social relations, ideologically inscribed, and metaphysically bound to power relations. Together, these conceptual works offer a prism through which to understand both domestic and international settings as cultural productions rather than as neutral settings.

Feminist thinkers, such as Simone de Beauvoir and Luce Irigaray, shed light on the manner in which patriarchal systems limit women's access to the domestic realm while simultaneously supporting men's liberty of motion in the public sphere [10]. In "Queer Phenomenology" (2006), Sara Ahmed rethinks this spatio-temporal dynamic by introducing the term "orientation," thus aligning directional corporeality with affective attachment and gendered identity [1]. In the Indian context, Rajeswari Sunder Rajan in "Real and Imagined Women" (1993) and Jasbir Jain in "Writing Women Across Cultures" (2002) demonstrate how postcolonial women's narratives reclaim these constrained spaces as zones of negotiation and agency. Integrating these frameworks allows for an interpretive lens that views Desai's and Kiran Desai's settings, from the family home to diasporic landscapes, as evolving architectures of selfhood.

C. Anita Desai and the Domestic Psyche

Anita Desai's fiction pioneers the psychological novel in Indian English literature, focusing on the female interior as a site of tension between submission and self-assertion. In "Clear Light of Day" (1980), the decaying house in Old Delhi symbolises the protagonist Bim's entrapment within memory, duty, and solitude. The spatial imagery, stagnant gardens, echoing corridors, dusty windows, externalises her inner paralysis. Similarly, in "Fasting, Feasting" (1999), Uma's confined existence epitomises the inertia of patriarchal domesticity. As R. S. Pathak observes, Desai "transforms domestic space into a psychic laboratory where the drama of repression unfolds" [15].

Critics such as Malti Agarwal identify Desai's stylistic precision, her use of sensory details, silence, and rhythm, as central to portraying women's unspeakable emotions. Desai's emphasis on confinement does not simply evoke pity; it invites a philosophical reading of endurance as a mode of resistance. Sujala Singh points out that Desai's houses are "repositories of lived time, carrying the sediment of female consciousness" [18]. Through this lens, the domestic setting becomes not only the woman's prison but also her diary, where memory writes itself upon walls and silence becomes speech.

D. Kiran Desai and the Transnational Landscape

Kiran Desai's writing shows how space can be seen from both local and global views. Her 2006 book, "The Inheritance of Loss," looks at how migration and the legacy of empire affect people's lives. The story is set in Kalimpong, a hill town that is both isolated and connected because of globalisation. The book follows different characters from different backgrounds and countries, exposing how globalisation changes people's sense of belonging. According to Elleke Boehmer, Desai's landscapes "render visible the cosmopolitan melancholia of global capitalism" [4]. In "Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard" (1998), spatial satire operates through elevation; the protagonist's perch in the tree parodies both detachment and surveillance. Priyamvada Gopal interprets this as "a postcolonial allegory of the absurdity of escape" [9]. Kiran Desai's women, though more mobile than Anita's, remain haunted by displacement; their mobility is offset by cultural rootlessness.

Her texts match Homi Bhabha's notions of hybridity, in that identity is created in "the in-between." The sites that feature in Kiran's texts, including mountains, cities, and foreign kitchens, match Lefebvre's produced space, relating the power of economic as well as racial hierarchies in constructions of belonging. As a consequence, remapping the personal as geopolitical, her world mapping performs an association of femininity and transnationalism.

E. Identified Research Gap

So far, studies have looked at Anita Desai's focus on psychological realism and Kiran Desai's focus on postcolonial cosmopolitanism. But, not many have compared their works within a feminist and spatial perspective. The majority of analyses fixate on themes of gender or diaspora without tracing the development of space as a narrative and ideological entity from one generation to the next. A comparative reading grounded in spatial theory offers fresh insights into how the Indian female subject moves from confinement to mobility, yet continues to negotiate belonging within patriarchal and global hierarchies [3,12].

Furthermore, the intergenerational connection between the two authors, a mother and daughter writing across different centuries, remains undertheorised. As Ritu Tyagi suggests, their works reflect "a continuum of feminist consciousness adapting to shifting material realities" [20]. Analysing this continuity through the lens of space reveals how narrative architecture transforms: from the introspective interiors of Anita's Delhi homes to the expansive yet alienating terrains of Kiran's global world. By addressing this gap, the present research situates both writers within the broader genealogy of Indian feminist modernism, showing how their narratives trace India's transition from the postcolonial domestic sphere to the global cultural marketplace while preserving the emotional intensity of female experience.

IV. METHODOLOGY

This research employs a qualitative, interpretive, and comparative textual analysis approach.

A. Primary Texts:

- Anita Desai: *Clear Light of Day* (1980), *Fasting, Feasting* (1999)
- Kiran Desai: *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006), *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* (1998)

B. Analytical Framework:

- Spatial theory (Bachelard, Lefebvre)
- Feminist criticism (Beauvoir, Irigaray, Ahmed)
- Postcolonial theory (Bhabha's concept of hybridity and displacement)

The process entails close reading of the images, settings, and symbols of the stories to observe how various locations, including home, nature and global locations, influence the power and actions of women. Through the juxtaposition of Anita Desai's interiorised realism with global irony in Kiran Desai, the research illustrates the development of spatio-subjectivity in Indian English literature.

V. DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

A. Domestic Space and Female Confinement in Anita Desai

Anita Desai's novels permanently re-conceptualise the domestic sphere as an ethical and psychic landscape in which women struggle against ingrained presumptions and imperceptible hierarchies. In "Clear Light of Day" (1980), the dilapidated family house in Old Delhi is a palimpsest of forgetting and immobility. Its broken walls, untamed garden, and suspended temporal existence connote psychic immobility felt by inhabitants, particularly Bim, whose isolation is mirrored in India's own broken modernity. Its confines become simultaneously shelter and damnation, described as a "living tomb" by critics R.S. Pathak, where silence bears the burden of history [15].

In "Fasting, Feasting" (1999), Desai moves the same motif into a smaller, more repressive domestic microcosm. Uma's family home represents a patriarchal world in which women are fixed in space and emotion. The repeated imagery of closed windows and broken motion signifies the refusal of independence. Uma's immobile life is contrasted with that of her brother Arun, who is highly mobile in a transnational world, highlighting the way in which gender determines access to space and liberty. Desai's subtle but cutting narration eschews obvious rebellion; rather, she enacts resistance in stillness and survival, making silence into a kind of eloquence. Domestic space in Desai, then, is more than mere physical incarceration but rather is a figure for patriarchal conditioning, tracing the psychic boundaries within which feminine identity is negotiated.

B. *Nature, Escape, and the Psychological Landscape*

In the 1975 work “Where Shall We Go This Summer,” author Anita Desai examines liminal geography by using the island as a metaphoric borderline that bridges the binary of mortality and rebirth. As the main character, Sita retreats from the tumultuous atmosphere of the city world into the isolated island of Manori, symbolising a yearning to escape a world full of emotional distress and isolation. The sea, as a figure for boundless possibility and dissolution, identifies with her need to escape established limitations and experience a reformation of the self. Desai, however, purposefully eschews the idealisation of the refuge; the stillness of the island becomes oppressive, corresponding with Sita’s mental agitation. As pointed out by Malti Agarwal, “Desai’s landscapes are psychological mirrors; what appears external is the projection of inner conflict” [2].

The dynamic of insular and urban landscapes offers an example of the duality of feminine desire as both yearning for isolation and a need for intersubjective connection. The environment is an extension of the psyche in that the dynamics of locomotion in space indicate psychic change. The withdrawal of Sita, however, marks not emancipation but emphasises the basic truth that geographical space is incapable of liberating a consciousness bound by memories. Through sensory imagery, like the saline wind, the whispering waves, and the stillness, Desai smoothes out distinctions between outside and inside realms, thus delineating nature as a metaphysical landscape rather than a rural refuge. Through Sita, Desai inscribes that the perception of feminist emancipation goes far beyond geographical shift of location; it calls for a rethinking of emotional and social affiliation.

C. *Transnational Spaces and Fragmented Identities in Kiran Desai*

Kiran Desai’s book, ‘The Inheritance of Loss,’ talks about how places and identities change because of globalisation, memories of colonial times, and people living far from their homes. The story takes place in Kalimpong, a town in the mountains, near the border, where local worries mix with big world events. The mountains are beautiful but also unpredictable, kind of showing how people’s sense of who they are can be broken or confusing. The story switches between Sai, a young girl whose grandfather used to be a colonial judge, and Biju, who lives in New York without official papers. Both embody spatial dislocation: Sai’s colonial education distances her from local culture, while Biju’s migration exposes the harsh inequalities of the West. Priyamvada Gopal describes these characters as “products of a world where movement no longer guarantees freedom but reveals new hierarchies of exclusion” [9].

Desai’s writing jumps between continents, such that home becomes a fleeting status. The geography of the novel smoothes out edges between past and present, mountain and city, privilege and destitution. Kalimpong’s crumbling colonial buildings recall her mother’s settings in Delhi, where the stakes are global more than domestic. Migration sites like kitchens, basement apartments, and border cities make people feel sad and lost. This sadness matches Sara Ahmed’s idea of

‘disorientation,’ which means feeling confused or unsteady [1]. Wanting Western modernity often leads to feeling estranged or distant, rather than feeling more powerful. This shows how capitalist systems keep old colonial hierarchies alive across large regions. Transnational space in Kiran Desai’s writing thus represents the fragmentation of belonging, where the prospect of mobility hides more profound alienation.

D. *The Feminine Geography: From Silence to Movement*

The transition from Anita Desai’s reflective domesticity to Kiran Desai’s cosmopolitan mobility is a larger shift in feminist consciousness of space, from silence to speech, from survival to migration. Anita’s protagonists internalise revolt, exercising agency in reflection and perseverance. Kiran’s characters externalise displacement, navigating between cultures and continents. Yet, both portray the persistence of emotional exile despite physical mobility. As Elleke Boehmer observes, “the feminist imagination in postcolonial fiction travels, but it carries the traces of domestic memory wherever it goes” [4].

Anita Desai’s stress on immobility and contemplation foresees some kind of spiritual rebellion, in which the celebration of inner life defies outside limits. At the same time, Kiran Desai’s global scenarios demonstrate the postcolonial paradox: with enhanced mobility, fragmentation increases. Cosmopolitan protagonists created by her imagination do not inherit liberty but meet ambiguity, as is the case with global citizenship. Both writers redefine the female journey not as arrival but as perpetual negotiation, a process of re-rooting within dislocation.

The “feminine geography” in their fiction thus becomes a continuum: Anita inscribes the domestic interior with emotion and memory, while Kiran expands that interior into the world. Their protagonists inhabit spaces that are both inherited and self-created, bound yet transformative. Through them, Indian English fiction reimagines womanhood as an ongoing spatial dialogue between home and horizon, bridging silence and speech, enclosure and exploration.

E. *Intergenerational Continuity and Transformation*

The intergenerational dialogue between Anita Desai and Kiran Desai reflects the continuity of feminist evolution in Indian English fiction, a literary inheritance that transforms confinement into cosmopolitan inquiry. The mother’s psychological realism and the daughter’s global irony converge to create a two-tiered cartography of female experience. As Ritu Tyagi notes, “Anita Desai’s women dream of flight; Kiran Desai’s women fly but remain haunted by the memory of home” [20]. This intertextual kinship situates the two Desais within a larger feminist tradition where both lineage and rupture shape the self.

Anita’s narrative restraint, marked by silence, introspection, and linguistic minimalism, finds an echo in Kiran’s ironic detachment and global disillusionment. Yet both articulate what Jasbir Jain calls the “feminist re-visioning of space” [11]. Their shared sensibility transforms the female experience from an enclosed private condition into

a universal human metaphor of displacement and longing. The two authors collectively chart India's literary transition from post-independence anxiety to global pluralism. Their works expose how emotional geography evolves with history: from the stillness of Delhi homes to the vertigo of international migration. The world of the mother is one of moral strength, but that of the daughter is characterised by existential uncertainty. Both, though, agree that identity is not disclosed through belonging as such, but through the process of traversing space. This intergenerational dialogue acknowledges that literature by women writers from India, although it has evolved in style and focus, still reflects themes of moral integrity and emotional independence.

VI. FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

The comparative reading of Anita Desai and Kiran Desai reveals that "space" in the form of domestic, natural, or transnational space is a key metaphor for feminine subjectivity, emotional maturation, and cultural mediation. Though separated by a generation, the two writers present a common vision and employ geography not just as background but as a constitutive element in the existential and moral quest of females. Their narratives, based in an Indian sense of culture as much as in a sense of universality, range through shifting landscapes of femininity from postcolonial reflection to cosmopolitan dislocation.

The Anita Desai novels transform the domestic space into a psychic universe where female protagonists navigate the complexity of duty, remembering, and personalised identity. The main protagonists, Bim, Uma, and Sita, reside in environments that repress and cultivate their existence. The stillness of her homes and the isolation of her islands evoke Bachelard's ideal of intimate space as "the geography of the soul." Within these limits, Desai devises resistance as tenacity and a subtle consciousness of self. By deploying silence in a structurally precise manner, she conveys complex observations about the weight of family obligation, the ghosts of remembrance, and the feminine socialisation typical of middle-class life for women.

Kiran Desai rewrites the idea of motherhood by showing female characters in a global and international context. In her book "The Inheritance of Loss," she describes how characters move from the Himalayan town of Kalimpong to immigrant life in New York, reflecting feelings of disconnection common in modern postcolonial societies. In her writing, feeling like you belong is no longer automatic but involves living through migration and exile. Irony and multiple settings, in turn, make her question the very premises of freedom, modernity, and cosmopolitanism. The notion of a home, no longer perceived as a constriction in Anita's world, becomes elusive in Kiran's world, an arena of desire but ultimately unconcerned.

Together, their works illustrate the evolution of feminist spatial consciousness in Indian English fiction. Anita's accounts capture the static potency related to incarceration, while Kiran's stories capture the kinetic dynamism of migration. Both, however, express a unified reality: genuine

liberty is achieved not by the crossing of physical borders, but through the reorganisation of ideological and affective boundaries. Their texts present Lefebvre's produced space, illustrating the ways in which hierarchical structures, aftereffects of colonialism, and misogyny shape the foundational framework of belonging.

This paragraph talks about how the two writers' discussions across generations show the growth of India's culture and literature. It covers how ideas of identity changed after India gained independence and how they now think about themselves in a global context. The female characters in their stories, whether following tradition or questioning it, show different ways women resist, stay strong, and imagine new possibilities. In grounding the notion of womanhood in the site of lived experience, Anita and Kiran Desai successfully redefine being in the world, moving from being occupants of space to cartographers of consciousness, delineating edges of liberty in the confines of history, memory, and migration.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The Research Scholar sincerely thanks the Research Supervisor, Dr Shabina Khan, for the invaluable motivation, constant encouragement, and generous guidance throughout the course of this research. Her contribution to this research study, along with her insightful feedback and unwavering support made this study possible and deeply enriching.

REFERENCES

- [1]. Ahmed S. Queer phenomenology: Orientations, objects, others. Durham: Duke University Press; 2006.
- [2]. Agarwal M. Indian writing in English: Critical ruminations. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers; 2002.
- [3]. Bachelard G. The poetics of space. Boston: Beacon Press; 1994.
- [4]. Boehmer E. Colonial and postcolonial literature: Migrant metaphors. Oxford: Oxford University Press; 2005.
- [5]. Desai A. Clear light of day. New Delhi: HarperCollins; 1980.
- [6]. Desai A. Fasting, feasting. Boston: Houghton Mifflin; 1999.
- [7]. Desai K. Hullabaloo in the guava orchard. New York: Atlantic Monthly Press; 1998.
- [8]. Desai K. The inheritance of loss. New York: Atlantic Monthly Press; 2006.
- [9]. Gopal P. The Indian English novel: Nation, history, and narration. Oxford: Oxford University Press; 2009.
- [10]. Irigaray L. This sex which is not one. Ithaca (NY): Cornell University Press; 1977.
- [11]. Jain J. Writing women across cultures. Jaipur: Rawat Publications; 2002.
- [12]. Lefebvre H. The production of space. Oxford: Blackwell; 1991.
- [13]. Mukherjee M. The twice born fiction: Themes and techniques of the Indian novel in English. New Delhi: Pencraft International; 2009.

- [14]. Nasta S. *Motherlands: Black women's writing from Africa, the Caribbean and South Asia*. New Brunswick (NJ): Rutgers University Press; 1992.
- [15]. Pathak RS. Anita Desai: The novelist of inner turmoil. *Indian Rev World Lit Engl*. 2005;1(1):1–18.
- [16]. Rajan RS. *Real and imagined women: Gender, culture and postcolonialism*. London: Routledge; 1993.
- [17]. Showalter E. *A literature of their own: British women novelists from Brontë to Lessing*. Princeton (NJ): Princeton University Press; 1977.
- [18]. Singh S. The spatial politics of memory in Anita Desai's fiction. *J South Asian Lit*. 2004;39(2):101–20.
- [19]. Spivak GC. Can the subaltern speak? In: Nelson C, Grossberg L, editors. *Marxism and the interpretation of culture*. Urbana (IL): University of Illinois Press; 1988. p. 271–313.
- [20]. Tyagi R. *Indian women novelists in English: Feminist vision and the creative imagination*. New Delhi: Sarup Book Publishers; 2014.