



THE THEME OF ALIENATION IN THE SELECT NOVELS OF ANITA DESAI AND KIRAN DESAI

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the theme of Alienation in Anita Desai's *Cry, The Peacock* (1963) and Kiran Desai's *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* (1997). The theme of alienation is a pivotal idea in post-modern Literature. It has been being used in theological, philosophical, sociological and Psychological writings. Alienation is a state of man's contradiction with his milieu. It alludes to the polarization among man and nature and the breaking down of man's dreams of joy. It also reflects a mirrors a condition of man's separation from himself, with a common feeling of depression or a sentiment of avoidance that goes with any conduct where the individual is constrained to pointlessly. The people are compelled to control individuals and circumstances as per the social requests, while feeling unequipped for controlling their activities. Alienation is an old phenomenon but it has accepted alarming extents in the present age. Several factors have achieved this condition of awareness. The feeling of alienation is characteristic in man as he is inclined to practically all the physical and mental assaults of society and its controllers. The contrary impacts of alienation lead man either to end it all or to see himself as not in excess of automation deprived of any close to home positioning or individuality.

Alienation is one of the major problems confronting the post modern man. The present era can be rightly called as "the era of alienation". In the present era, the impact of alienation is due to many things as the generation gap, loss of identity, fear, loss of credibility, isolation. The tremendous progress of science, the rapid growth of industrialisation and urbanisation and the changing value systems in the society are the reasons for loneliness of

man. One of the cardinal characteristics of alienation is the anxiety, about which John Macquarie writes thus: "it confronts the individual with his responsibility and the call to grasp his authentic being".

In the present day, writers like Anita Desai, Bharathi Mukherjee, Kiran Desai and Arundhati Roy write about the theme of alienation in their novels. Anita Desai and Kiran Desai in their novels are constantly concerned with alienation of the protagonists from themselves, from society and from others. They depict the dilemma of modern man. They are not a social realist in the conventional sense of the term. They are more interested in portraying the responses of a sensitive mind to the world around her/him.

Alienation is a condition in the rich social relationships reflected by a low degree of integration or common values and a high degree of distance or isolation between individuals or between an individual and a group of people in a community or work environment. The term alienation itself comes from the Latin *alienus* which meant 'of another place or person', which in turn came from *alius*, meaning 'other' or 'another'. The term alienation has been used in varied meanings over ages. In the ancient times it was used in the metaphysical sense of achieving a higher sense of contemplation. Alienation is estrangement from other people, society or work... a blocking or dissociation of a person's feelings, causing the individual to become less effective. The focus here is on the person's problems in adjusting to society. However, some philosophers believe that alienation is inevitably produced by a shallow and depersonalised society.

It results in people feeling meaninglessness and purposelessness in their lives. The contemporary man fails to perceive his purpose of life and constantly searches for his place in the world. Globalisations have improved the quality of life in India but of course only to a minority of people. Besides this, the gulf between the rich and the poor has also deepened. This created an atmosphere where all relations including the familial relations have become commercial. It has created a society where ethics and human values are sacrificed for the sake of success. Kiran Desai has been greatly influenced by her mother Anita Desai.

Alienated persons are always haunted by anxiety, doubt and distrust. A sense of isolation and loneliness keeps them rather unhappy in all respects. Writers all over the world are affiliated with an agony caused by the sociological, psychological, cultural and economic situations prevailing our times, is a symptoms of an alienation that they are subjected to philosophy, art, literature and morality are the products of man, which become independent and powerful and tend to enslave man, the producer himself and make him powerless and dependent. Thus, man alienated from the activity through which these products are created.

Anita Desai (Mother) and Kiran Desai (Daughter) are the most prominent Indian novelists in English. There are more than dozens of their novels to their credit. Beside this, collection of short stories and articles too. They are status of women in the male dominated society. There are number of scholars who have studied and published many valuable accounts and comments on their works. They have an independent approach to women's problems in Indian society as well as life in general. Anita Desai and Kiran Desai are especially prominent for the insightful depiction of the inner life of the female characters in their writings. Many novels of them, explores the tension between family members and the alienation of middle class women. Anita Desai once remarked that, "writing is a process of discovering the truth- the truth that nine-tenths of the iceberg that lies submerged beneath one-tenths of visible portion we call reality".

A close study of Anita Desai's novels reveals that she has comprehensively delineated the cause of modern men's alienation and its disastrous consequences. In her novels, Anita Desai tries to reveal the psychological problems faced by human beings. In fact, she tries to discover the real meaning of life by speaking through her characters. Her characters try to deal with the question, "What does it mean to exist?" She probes deep into the psychology of her characters and depicts their real nature by the forces of self, society, and family. She moves between two extremes that is 'attraction for life' and 'her fascination for death'. Anita Desai is interested in eccentric characters. All the female characters in her novels are always seen growing and changing. They are confronted with the present, look back to the past and visualize their future also. In her novels, sorrow and death, the quest for life and love get projected rather richly in almost all her novels. What differentiates her from other novelists is her individuality and sensibility and her central theme is the existential predicament of an individual. Anita Desai spotlights an extremely complex nature of life. The real life has an infinite variety, but she prefers inner reality and plunges into the innermost depths of the human psyche, the inner disturbance and the turmoil inside the mind. In her writings, conflicts arise from self's desire for fulfilment.

Those characters who do not realize the true meaning of life lead a loveless and egocentric life making for agony of alienation or loneliness. They do not remember that happiness is not related to any material thing. Their own soul is a treasure house, real happiness. The person, who forgets this and thinks that material things and people around will give him peace and happiness, is lost.

Anita Desai 's novels become particularly interesting in view of the fact that in all her novels that shift of emphasis is from the outer realities or social realism to the inner mind and the psychic tensions, with a marked

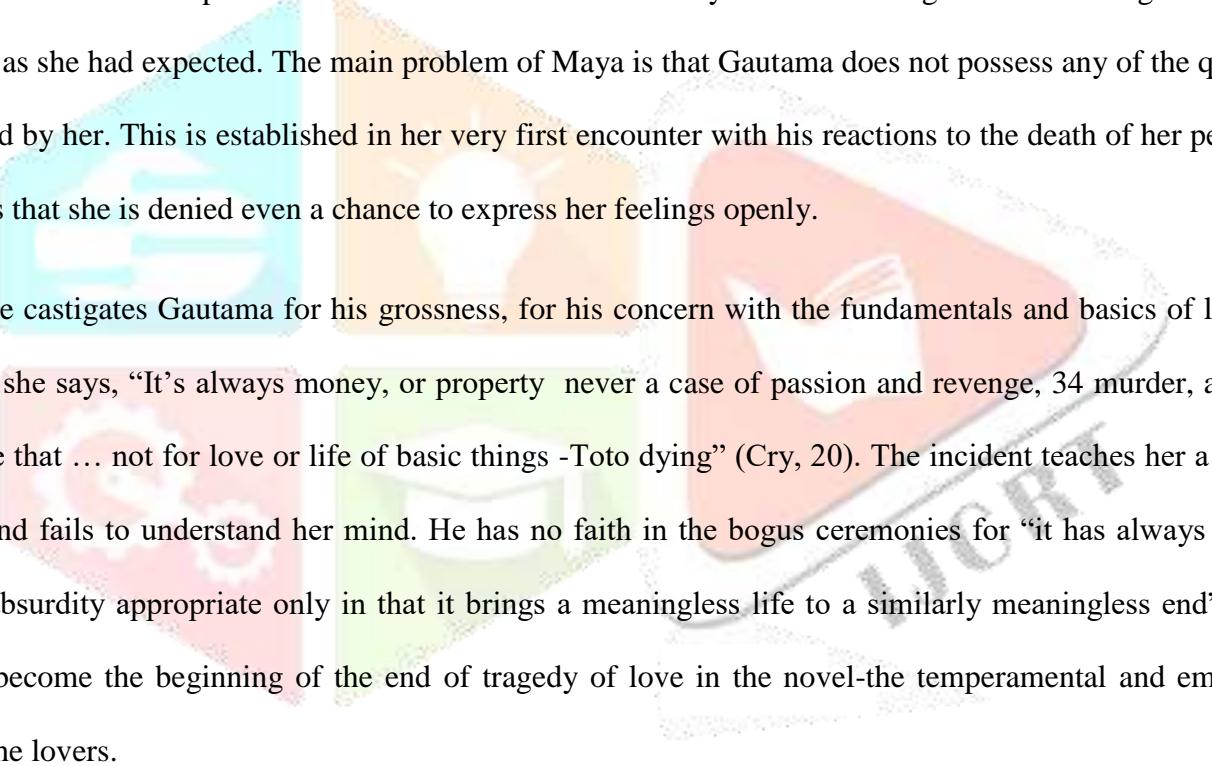
predilection to experiment with the novel as an art form and with the point of view or perspectives. Anita Desai has added a new dimension to the achievement of Indian women writers in English fiction through her novels *Cry, The Peacock* and *Fire on the Mountain*. In her first novel *Cry, The Peacock*, Anita Desai's style is tinted with a curious compatibility with her theme, because the narrator happens to be a hypersensitive young become, tense and over wrought. Anita Desai's protagonist in *Cry, the Peacock* experiences herself as alienated. In her married life she is not at the centre because, all the members of the family and preoccupied with politics and social, intellectual problems, while she is a bundle of emotions. As a result of her alienation she develops fear-psychosis. She is disillusioned in her married life. A Peacock's cry symbolizes her own cry for love. She wants to live life passionately, but Gautama with his philosophy of detachment does not realize her emotional and physical needs. He is sexually cold, which drives Maya to frustration and alienation. For Gautama, Maya is childish, ignorant and even silly.

The cry of the peacock is really Maya's cry for Gautama's love, her need of physical union and emotional fulfilment. In her loneliness and emotional starvation, she is haunted by the albino astrologer's prophecy, which predicts her or Gautama's death in the fourth year of their marriage. She broods over question, which should die. The prophecy drives to schizophrenia. There is gradual disintegration of her mind. She shows symptoms of gradual depersonalization. But she does not grow completely neurotic. There are moments of clear thought when she can examine her past and present life. In these clear moments, she realizes that Gautama would never meet her physical demand. She craves for attachment while Gautama values his detachment.

After receiving the letter from Arjuna, her brother, about the horoscope, Maya shows too much interest in Gautama's talk on death and life after it. Maya increasingly becomes aware of the problem of existence. *Cry, the Peacock* underlines the idea of death. Maya, in her self-alienation, cannot talk to Gautama about it, nor can she share her obsession of death with anyone. She broods over Gautama, lying undisturbed by her side, a man who has no contact with the world. His death would not matter to him. But, she is the one who has heard and felt the cry of the peacocks. Maya is alienated from him, from his family and the world around her. In this state of mind she is obsessed with the idea of death predicted by the astrologer.

She chooses death for Gautama because he is not involved in life. Maya has an obsession. But, there is great difference in the nature and cause of their obsession. Maya suffers alienation as she can connect neither with her husband nor with his family. Besides, she is obsessed with the idea of death and on the other hand, would like to

live, and pushes Gautama off the parapet. But Maya, who is utterly alone in her father's house, screaming jumps from the balcony, thus ending her life. Anita Desai's style is tinted with a curious compatibility with her theme, because the narrator happens to be a hypersensitive young become, tense and over wrought. **Theme Of The Novel** The main character of the novel *Cry, The Peacock*, Maya, a highly sensitive, imaginative, love-lorn woman, is married to a rich, pragmatic, executive Gautama, who although interested in Urdu poetry is far from being sentimental. He is sharp and quite accommodating level - headed and worldly-wise but on the contrary Maya has an aberrant mind, too sensitive to ignore the slightest injury to her feelings. In *Cry, The Peacock*, Maya is depicted as a passionate lover longing for her husband's absolute love. It is revealed in the novel that Maya has a possessive mentality. As an unmarried girl she respects her father and is showers love on him. After marriage, she wants to transfer her love and respect to her husband. But unfortunately she does not get the same degree of love and sympathy as she had expected. The main problem of Maya is that Gautama does not possess any of the qualities that is expected by her. This is established in her very first encounter with his reactions to the death of her pet dog Toto. She thinks that she is denied even a chance to express her feelings openly.



She castigates Gautama for his grossness, for his concern with the fundamentals and basics of life in terms of money she says, "It's always money, or property never a case of passion and revenge, 34 murder, and exciting things like that ... not for love or life of basic things -Toto dying" (Cry, 20). The incident teaches her a lesson that, her husband fails to understand her mind. He has no faith in the bogus ceremonies for "it has always seemed the ultimate absurdity appropriate only in that it brings a meaningless life to a similarly meaningless end" (Cry, 14). This has become the beginning of the end of tragedy of love in the novel-the temperamental and emotional self between the lovers.

The death of a pet is thus symbolically for her the death of a wedded life with a man who is obsessed with the fact of life. This is the starting point of her alienation. Anyone could feel Maya's loneliness when she says "his coldness, and incessant talks of cups of tea and philosophy in order not to hear me talk and talking reveal myself. It is that my loneliness in the house" (Cry, 9). Maya's expectation that Gautama should console her is shattered when she finds that he absolutely lacks the elixir on consolation. As an average man of sense, he has a belief in the surrounding world and he is invariably guided by logic and reasoning. He aims at a philosophical detachment in life visualized by the lines of the "Bhagwat Gita". She says "he is fit to attain immortality who is serene and not affected by these sensations but is the same in pleasure and pain" (Cry, 108). There is an inadequacy of response between

Maya and Gautama which becomes the central point of the novel later. He enjoys his reading Urdu poetry in the lawns of their house. Gautama quotes softly an Urdu couplet and yet remains impervious and does not respond to the feeling and emotions imbibed in those lines. Maya can enter into “the rare comparison” and “tender understanding” of the lines, which bring her a moment of hope when she achieves her epiphany, her transcendence.

Gautama accuses the Urdu musicians as sentimentalism available only to the decadent. When Maya is in too agitated a state of mind a gentle voice drifts towards her from the musicians singing in the lawn, Gautama lacks aesthetic sense, and power of understanding the feeling of Maya, Anita Desai trumpets the idea in an incident in the novel. On night Maya feels for the starts and pleads, Gautama nonchalantly retorts well I hope bright enough for me to spot a fly ruptured at the recitation of the Urdu couplet whereas Gautama has no romance. All Maya likes is the company of Gautama like the incomparable pair Antony and Cleopatra who spend their time in mirth and revelry. But to her deception, once Gautama offers a party to his friends without informing Maya. Maya enters the party as an “uninvited guest” she tells her husband. Maya wishes that her love should be reciprocated at all levels. She expects her husband’s emotional caressing and wishes his to quench her thirst for love mind, the pores of her body and womanhood. But she received only chidings to which she responds. These are the words of Maya to her insensitive husband. It is a great shock to her that Gautama reduces the true feelings of love to mere attachment. The claim for love, intimacy, and sympathy which turned out to be unfulfilled desires leads Maya to antagonism and positive hostility. Gautama’s temper is matter of fact, based on truth and balance, whereas that of Maya is a romantic concern with the ideal so that the inadequacy of their partnership in love leads indispensably to tragedy, Maya is egotistical, self-indulgent, pursuing, fancies and fanciful feelings. She lives as a ‘toy-princes’ in an imaginary world. Gautama accuses her. She leads her life with mental agony.

When she solves one problem, she is confronted with a new problem. She is not rid of the problem but tortured by a series of problem. The theme of husband wife estrangement is not developed in a slow, incremental manner. It does not acquire sociological or even philosophical connotations. The final disaster hinges on a prophecy uttered by an astrologer many years ago. As a girl she has approached an astrologer with albino eyes who predicts an unnatural death either to her or to her husband after four years of their marriage.

This long forgotten, but now remembered prophecy acts upon Maya with the same force, of the inevitability as the prophecy of the witches upon Macbeth. The second factor determining the cause of Maya’s tragedy is the myth pining round the peacock’s cry. The central image of the peacock reveals the mystery of life and death and

knows them to be one. The author says "peacocks are wise. The eyes upon their tails have seen the truth of life and death and know them to be one. Living, they are aware of death. Dying, they are in love with life" (95-96). There is a remarkable use of the bird-image in almost all the novels of Desai signifying the fettered condition of the human beings. Some titles of the novels such as *Cry, The Peacock, Bye-Bye Black Bird*, and *In Custody* are indicative of the enclosed, entrapped life of the humans as against the bird's lives. The title of the novel *Cry, The Peacock* is highly symbolic. The repeated use of the word 'peacock' becomes a symbol of the neurotic protagonist Maya herself. When the peacock crises, it is Maya's own obsession with wish for death.

Desai explores varied sensibilities and inscrutable relationship to plumb the depths of troubled consciousness, to depict states of mind and nuances of feeling, finally evoke mood and atmosphere so integral to her subject of feminism and the images of women. Maya's ability to "relate", to "connect" differentiates her from all other protagonists of the novels of Anita Desai, because it is precisely this ability that helps her to survive the threat to her sanity when pushed to the extremity of her strength, helps her to overcome the death wish that tempts her when driven to the 'extremity of despair. There is no necessity for her to take recourse to suicide as Maya does, no need to succumb to madness, no need to cling on to illusion and then make an unwilling, unconvincing confused, compromise is there the need to simply collapse, under the strain of existential anguish and nullity. In fact, all these attitudes of Maya reflect on the feminist practice of Desai.

Every word, every phrase, every image is functional in this novel, which only proves the novelist's superb control over her medium and matter. Despite its thin story line, gloomy ending and sickening image of the world. Anita Desai is certainly claiming for women, as a feminist, the freedom for choice and fulfilment of life, time and place, to be themselves, discarding the traditional obligations and duties thrust upon them, by suggestion and indirections, but not directly and openly as in the images of her women character

Alienation and Immigration are the main themes of Kiran Desai's novels. The theme of alienation has been Recurrent in the Indian English fiction. *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* (1997) depicts the sense of alienation and unhappiness in life. Each of the major characters the protagonist Sampath Chawla, his father Mr.R.K.Chawla his mother Kulfi, and his sister Pinky suffer from alienation, isolation and loneliness. All are alienated and isolated not only because of their distress in life but also of their inability to understand and respond to one another. The treatment of these character's show Desai's interest in complex, disturbed and alienated personalities.

The protagonist of the novel, Sampath Chawla is an alienated and self-estranged person who has little sense of a meaning in life. He feels disconnected and fragmented. He is often scolded by his father, Mr.R.K.Chawla (a clerk in local Reserve Bank). Chawla is a opportunistic Indian and wants a change in the nonchalant attitude of his son. Sampath has a large brown birthmark on his face. Sampath's sense of alienation is more aggravated when all his classmates got job. "even the ones with report cards that were just like his" (Desai, HGO 23). This was only Sampath that left idle. "in the tea stalls and singing to himself in the public gardens" (Desai HGO 23). Mr. Chawla manages a government job as a clerk in the local post office for his son. But Sampath performs miserably at his job as a mailsorter. He is a nonchalant, mad person as an employee and feels claustrophobic in human company. He spends his days in the post office by opening private letters and involving the lives of the villages. He feels suffocated in the environment and longs for freedom. His disassociation from his family members and society forms a state of alienation and he feels lonely and rootless. Frustration overpowers him when Sampath loses his job in the post office after performing cross dressing at the wedding of his boss's daughter. Through Sampath hated his job anyway that loss is a big blow to him. He loses his job. His sense of alienation developed into "a never ending flow of misery.

It was a prison he had born into" (Desai, HGO 43). On being fired from his post on account of rukus he create at the wedding, Sampath decides to settle down in abandoned orchard far from the village with an urge to alienate himself from society. He runs away from his home too. His resolution to isolate himself from the life is a bold step to cope up with the feeling of alienation.

Sampath's existential dilemma is that he thinks differently from everyone else. Desai's Sampath is the best example of alienated people who are suffering from mental illness or can be read symbolically as the imprisoned citizen in a harsh, capitalist society. This is evident from the self-reliant mannerism of both the characters. At first his family and townsfolk thought that Sampath had gone mad when his family came to know about his presence through the headlines of local news papers "Post-office clerk climbs tree" (Desai, HGO 67) reached the place to take him back to town. Sampath was not convinced and declared that he is happy in the present place, "I am adopting a simple way of life. From now on I have no relatives" (Desai HGO 54), and Mr. Chawla was compelled to fix a cot onto the tree. His habit of stealthily reading others' mails in the post office provided him with an opportunity to behave like a saint who could reveal the personal details of others like a fortune teller.

At one point Sampath asks Mr. Singh Ji, the brothers-in-law of a neighbor in Shahkot, "Is your jewellery still safely buried beneath the tulsi pant?" (Desai, HGO 65). Eventually, Sampath's flight from society due to his

alienation is thrust back into the sea of humanity, but this time creating a hullabaloo like never before. Sampath answers the questions of devotees as if he had been a great scholar with excellent reading and knowledge. Sampath had an aura around him. Each word of his speech reflected deep meaning and was taken as a wise suggestion. His answers were interpreted symbolically concerning the secret life of devotees as if he had been their master, friend, philosopher and guide. At one occasion, a lady, worried about the bad company of her son sought his advices. Sampath replied in an exceptionally sociable manner “Add lemons to milk and it will grow sour” (Deasi, HGO 74). His mythicdal sentences were inspiring and they drew people “moth will go to the lantern” (DesaiHGO 76). Sampath’s exile provides him a prestigious identity both in society and family.

Mr.Chawla’s sense of alienation became quite acute when he feared that all his wishes will be shattered soon. The fact that he cannot control the forces of nature confused him completely. His temporary happiness shattered, as the monkeys disrupted his plans. He tries to

get rid of monkeys, a solution that even the District collector finally agrees to implement. He never brothers to ask his son what he would like to do; He decides what is best for his family’s name, disregarding everything else. Mr.Chawla is both smart and stupid and he knows how to overcome alienation, but at the same time, alienation is his destiny and he cannot avoid it. It is evident that Mr.Chawla, throughout the course of novel, pursues this dreams, trying to fulfil his own desires through the momentary success of his son.

Sampath’s sister, Pinky, also experience the same sense of alienation, as she tries hard to achieve social ties.but feels as an outsider in the community, She is unable to find a shared interest and finally lead an insignificant life of meaninglessness. She lacks moral strength. The primary cause of her alienation is a feeling of estrangement from the social norms. She goes through a transformation and then returns to her original state of thought. She is transformed by love, but when that love of hers goes awry, the thoughts ingrained in her head by her father and grandmother about class and society immediately return.

One day in the bazaar, she fell in love with the ice cream seller. However, she falls in love with him while wearing a drab uniform that her father had forced her to wear, and

upon returning home, she bursts into tears: *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* is too serene to touch on riots. The characters in the novel seem suffocated, alienated, indifferent, divided and unfriendly. When Sampath feels cornered at the novel's end, he pukes on his cot, and then, like the fabled Indian performing his rope trick, he vanishes into thin air. His mother Kulf

keeps on cooking and is bent upon completing her quest to find a monkey to put in her pot.

Thus, *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* reflects the problem of alienation, search for identity, turmoil in relations, and isolation from society. Desai seems mature enough to explore her characters' sense of alienation within and beyond the sordid world all around them. Everyone finds himself or she eventually alienated and separated even barred in the hostile and confining environment.

Desai has secured a distinctive place among the great contemporary Indian authors exploring life and society in India and elsewhere. Her novel *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* is a charming, lyrical, fable about destiny-a work of comic eccentricity, charisma, and joy in language and life. Kiran's language is original; she brings something totally fresh and new to the writing scene in an era of diasporic fiction.

Kiran Desai's approach to the traditions and conventions of diasporic fiction in the last quarter of the twentieth-century acquires a rich dimension in the twenty-first century. The depth-dimension of both the novels *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* and *The Inheritance of Loss* widely extend the scope and flexibility of global compulsions of the twenty-first century-its aspirations, challenges and artistic possibilities in a global society embroiled in ethnic strife. Indeed, the problems of commitment and artistic resolution of social and cultural issues constitute the central matrix of Kiran Desai's vision.

In all these novels the protagonist are Indian Women immigrants, who immigrate to America to realize the American dream. In their novels, they reflect immigrant experiences through different female characters and situations. They effectively depict immigrant themes like pangs of alienation, identity crisis and the sense of belonging to nowhere. Their character's psyche is disturbed by the thoughts of illusion and reality. Anita Desai and Kiran immigrant protagonist experience rootlessness, lack of "acculturation" alienation, violence in the alien society nostalgia, displacement and unfulfillment of diasporal dreams that drive them to an extreme state of depression.

Alienation brings happiness to Maya (*Cry, The Peacock*) Sampath in *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*. They find solace there in the Mountain and Guava orchard. Maya and Sampath want to escape from the regular life and responsibilities. They want a tension free life. Diaspora and Alienation -A Comparison of Two Novels Anita Desai and Kiran Desai are diasporic writers. Anita Desai's characters feel alienated within themselves and Kiran Desai's characters are immigrant aliens.

Anita and Kiran Anita Desai was a keen observer of the life around her. She deals with the psychological problems confronting Indian women, particularly after marriage. She has the capacity to convey the inner feelings of women in her works. As a result she has emerged as a great psychological novelist. Moreover, she attains a special position in the psychological world. As the daughter of a great literary figure, Kiran Desai is influenced by

her mother Anita Desai, but she has also emerged as an artist of unique style. Nationalism, multiculturalism, globalization, and despair are the themes of Kiran Desai's writing. Anita Desai and Kiran Desai have dealt with the theme of alienation related to characters from different origins and situations. The present study has future scope for an in-depth analysis of characters in both the novels.

