

QUIET AGENCY AND DISAPPEARING SELVES IN ANITA DESAI'S THE ARTIST OF DISAPPEARANCE

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ABSTRACT

Anita Desai's *The Artist of Disappearance* presents a sensitive exploration of individuality, memory, translation, solitude, creativity, and disappearance in contemporary India. The collection consists of three novellas: "The Museum of Final Journeys," "Translator Translated," and "The Artist of Disappearance." Each novella examines a different form of withdrawal from the visible world. The first novella studies memory, heritage, decay, and the failure of institutions to preserve cultural legacies. The second novella focuses on Prema Joshi, a woman translator whose search for literary purpose leads her into questions of authorship, identity, desire, and ethical responsibility. The final novella presents Ravi, a solitary artist who creates a secret garden in the mountains and resists the noise of modernity, publicity, and environmental destruction. This study examines how Desai presents agency in quiet and indirect forms. Her characters do not always resist society through open rebellion. They seek meaning through preservation, translation, silence, solitude, and artistic creation. The paper also studies how Desai critiques patriarchal values, cultural neglect, the dominance of English, the commodification of art, and the environmental damage caused by modern development. Through these novellas, Desai presents disappearance not as emptiness, but as a complex mode of survival, self-protection, and inner freedom.

KEYWORDS: Anita Desai, disappearance, agency, identity, translation, memory, solitude, environmental consciousness.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Anita Desai has long been recognized for her inward and delicate treatment of human life. Her fiction often moves into the hidden regions of the mind, where fear, memory, silence, longing, and selfhood take form. She is interested in people who live away from public noise. Her characters often feel out of place in society. They may remain silent, withdrawn, hesitant, or emotionally isolated. Yet their silence is rarely empty. It often contains resistance, pain, memory, and a desire for another way of living.

The Artist of Disappearance continues this major concern in Desai's fiction. The collection brings together three novellas that deal with different forms of disappearance. In "The Museum of Final Journeys," a fading museum becomes a symbol of forgotten history and cultural neglect. In "Translator Translated," Prema Joshi enters the world of translation and gradually discovers the unstable relation between language, identity, and authorship. In "The Artist of Disappearance," Ravi retreats into the mountains and creates a hidden garden that becomes both an artwork and a refuge from modern life.

The title of the collection itself is important. Disappearance, in these novellas, does not mean simple absence. It suggests withdrawal, concealment, loss, protection, and resistance. People disappear from society because society fails to understand them. Art disappears because the modern world wants to display and consume it. Languages disappear when dominant cultures ignore them. Memories disappear when institutions refuse to preserve them. Nature disappears when development destroys it.

This paper examines how Desai presents quiet agency and disappearing selves in the three novellas. Agency in Desai's work does not always take the form of loud protest. It may appear in a caretaker's loyalty to a dying museum, in a woman translator's desire to enter the literary world, or in an artist's refusal to make his work public. Such actions may look small, but they carry deep emotional and ethical force.

The study also pays attention to the feminist concern in the collection, especially in "Translator Translated." Prema Joshi's struggle reveals the position of women within literary culture, language politics, and social expectation. Her attempt to translate Suvarna Devi's work becomes a search for her own identity. Yet this search also creates conflict because she begins to cross the boundary between translator and author. Desai uses Prema's story to examine the desire for recognition and the ethical complications of creative freedom.

Through the three novellas, Desai studies memory, language, art, and nature in a changing India. She reveals how people and things that appear marginal may carry great value. Her fiction asks the reader to listen to what is quiet, neglected, and almost lost.

2. THE MUSEUM OF FINAL JOURNEYS": MEMORY, HERITAGE, AND NEGLECT

"The Museum of Final Journeys," the first novella in the collection, explores memory, legacy, decay, and the passage of time. The story is narrated by a young civil servant who recalls his visit to a remote museum in India. An elderly caretaker guides him through the museum and pleads for government support to preserve the collection. The museum was once the life's work of a local ruler who collected strange and varied objects from different parts of the world. By the time the narrator visits it, the place has fallen into neglect.

The museum is central to the meaning of the novella. It is not merely a building filled with old objects. It is a space where memory has been abandoned. Its decaying exhibits, stale air, and forgotten rooms reveal the failure of society to preserve its past. The museum contains objects that once carried wonder, value, and cultural meaning. Yet they now stand in silence, removed from their original contexts and from public attention.

The title "The Museum of Final Journeys" suggests an ending. It points to the final destination of objects, memories, and human ambitions. The museum preserves journeys that have already ended. It also

reveals the human desire to resist time. The ruler who created the museum tried to gather the world into one place. He wanted to preserve experience, beauty, rarity, and power. Yet the museum itself shows that preservation is never complete. Time continues to erode what human beings try to protect.

Desai uses the museum to examine the relation between the old and the new. The caretaker represents loyalty to the past. He has given his life to the museum even though the world around him no longer cares for it. His dedication has dignity, but it also has sadness. He becomes the last guardian of a fading world. The young civil servant, on the other hand, represents modern bureaucracy. He is educated, official, and rational, but he is also helpless before the emotional appeal of the caretaker and the silent burden of the museum.

The narrator's response to the museum is complex. At first, he feels surprise and disbelief. The collection appears strange and useless to him. Slowly, however, he begins to sense the sorrow of the place. He understands that the museum is not merely a collection of dead objects. It contains the remains of human longing. The caretaker's plea touches him, but he cannot save the museum. His failure reveals the limits of official power and modern indifference.

The novella also contains a postcolonial concern. The museum holds objects uprooted from different cultures and geographies. This raises questions about collection, ownership, and preservation. Many such objects lose their original meaning when they are moved from their natural and cultural settings. Desai quietly asks what happens when cultures become exhibits and histories become possessions.

The elephant in the story is one of the most moving symbols. Unlike the other exhibits, the elephant is a living being. It carries memory, age, dignity, and sorrow. It stands between nature and history. It is a living relic of a world that is almost gone. The elephant reminds the reader that memory is not always stored in objects alone. It also lives in bodies, habits, landscapes, and relationships.

"The Museum of Final Journeys" is therefore a meditation on cultural neglect. It shows that disappearance can happen slowly. A museum disappears when no one visits it. A tradition disappears when no one values it. A memory disappears when institutions fail to protect it. Desai presents this disappearance with melancholy and restraint. She does not turn the museum into a grand symbol of glory. She shows it as fragile, dusty, and nearly forgotten. That is where its emotional power lies.

3. "TRANSLATOR TRANSLATED": LANGUAGE, FEMALE AGENCY, AND LITERARY DESIRE

"Translator Translated," the second novella, offers the strongest treatment of female agency in the collection. It tells the story of Prema Joshi, a college professor and aspiring translator. Prema teaches English, but her life has become dull and unfulfilled. She feels the weight of missed possibilities. Literature remains her passion, yet she has never found a way to become a writer herself.

Her life changes when she discovers the work of Suvarna Devi, an obscure writer in Oriya. Prema feels a deep connection with Suvarna Devi's novel. She sees in it a world that speaks to her own hidden desires and frustrations. When she receives the chance to translate the novel into English, she believes she has found a new purpose. Translation becomes her way of entering literature, recognition, and selfhood.

At first, Prema sees herself as a bridge between Suvarna Devi and a wider readership. She wants to bring a regional text into English and make it visible. Yet the act of translation soon becomes more complicated. The translator is expected to be faithful to the original. But Prema begins to feel that the original text does not fully satisfy her. She wants to improve it, adjust it, and make it more powerful. Gradually, her own voice enters the translation.

Desai uses Prema's story to examine the tension between fidelity and creativity. Translation is often seen as secondary work, but the novella shows that it is also an act of interpretation and creation. The translator must choose words, tone, rhythm, and meaning. These choices can change the life of a text.

Prema's problem is that she does not remain within the boundary of translation. Her desire for authorship begins to overtake her responsibility to the original writer.

The novella raises important questions about ownership. Who owns a translated text? Does it belong only to the original author? Does the translator also have a creative claim? When does interpretation become appropriation? Desai does not offer easy answers. Instead, she presents Prema as a complex woman driven by longing, intelligence, insecurity, and ambition.

Prema's agency is quiet but intense. She does not rebel against society in a visible way. Her rebellion takes place in language. She wants to move from the position of a teacher and reader to that of a creator. She wants to be more than a woman who admires literature from a distance. Translation gives her a space where she can act, choose, and intervene. Yet this agency becomes morally uncertain when she begins to reshape another woman's work.

The novella also explores the politics of language. Suvarna Devi writes in Oriya, a regional Indian language. Prema translates her into English, a language associated with power, prestige, and global circulation. This movement from Oriya to English is not neutral. It reflects the hierarchy of languages in India and in the global literary market. A text may remain invisible in a regional language but gain value once it enters English. Desai quietly critiques this system.

Prema's situation also shows the position of women in literary culture. She admires Suvarna Devi, but she also competes with her. She wants to serve the author, but she also wants to replace her. This conflict reveals the hunger for recognition that has long been denied to women. Prema's failure is not simply personal. It arises from a world where women's creative desires are often delayed, suppressed, or dismissed.

"Translator Translated" is therefore a study of identity in language. Prema discovers herself through translation, but she also loses ethical clarity in the process. Her story shows that self-expression can become dangerous when it ignores responsibility. Desai presents female agency here with great subtlety. She does not idealize Prema. She allows her to be vulnerable, ambitious, gifted, and flawed.

4. THE ARTIST OF DISAPPEARANCE": SOLITUDE, ART, AND ECOLOGICAL RESISTANCE

"The Artist of Disappearance," the final novella, turns to art, solitude, and environmental consciousness. It centres on Ravi, a reclusive man who withdraws from society and returns to the decaying mountain estate of his dead parents. Unlike people who seek success, fame, or public approval, Ravi desires silence. He wants to live away from the noise of urban India and the demands of ordinary social life.

In the mountains, Ravi discovers his artistic gift. He creates a secret garden using the landscape itself. His garden is not made for exhibition. It is a private work of art, hidden from the world. It grows out of his intimacy with nature. He arranges plants, stones, water, and space with patience and care. The garden becomes his sanctuary. It also becomes his way of speaking without words.

Ravi's withdrawal is a form of resistance. He refuses the modern world's obsession with visibility, speed, publicity, and consumption. He does not want his art to be seen, praised, sold, or documented. For him, art is not a public performance. It is an inner necessity. It belongs to the place that produced it and to the solitude that made it possible.

Desai uses Ravi's garden to question the purpose of art. Modern society often values art only when it can be displayed, reviewed, photographed, or owned. Ravi's garden resists these measures. It is beautiful, but it is not permanent. It is created from nature and will eventually return to nature. Its value lies in its presence, not in its market value.

The arrival of environmental filmmakers disturbs Ravi's hidden world. Their discovery of the garden brings outside attention into a space that was meant to remain private. The filmmakers claim to care for the environment, yet their presence creates a new form of intrusion. They want to record, expose, and display. Their desire to preserve the garden through film becomes another way of possessing it.

This conflict reveals a tension at the heart of the novella. The desire to preserve can become a form of exploitation. The desire to celebrate can become a form of violation. Ravi's garden is meaningful because it is hidden and intimate. Once it becomes an object of public attention, its purity is threatened.

The novella also critiques modernization and environmental destruction. The mountains, like many natural spaces in contemporary India, are vulnerable to development, tourism, and careless human use. Ravi's garden represents a different relation with nature. He does not dominate the landscape. He works with it. His art grows from attention, patience, and respect.

Desai's ecological vision is quiet but strong. Nature in the novella is not a decorative setting. It is a living presence. Ravi's relationship with the natural world suggests a mode of life based on care rather than control. His art shows that human creativity need not destroy nature. It can exist in harmony with it.

Ravi is called an artist of disappearance because he does not want to stand before his work. He wants to disappear into it. This desire challenges the modern idea of the artist as a public figure. Ravi's anonymity is not failure. It is his chosen condition. He refuses the ego of authorship and the noise of recognition. His disappearance becomes his art.

5. QUIET AGENCY IN THE COLLECTION

The three novellas in *The Artist of Disappearance* are different in setting and character, yet they are connected by a shared concern with quiet forms of agency. Desai's characters rarely act in dramatic or heroic ways. They do not deliver speeches or lead revolutions. Their actions are small, private, and often misunderstood. Yet these actions carry meaning.

The caretaker in "The Museum of Final Journeys" preserves memory even when society ignores it. His agency lies in loyalty. Prema in "Translator Translated" seeks identity through language and translation. Her agency lies in the desire to create, though it becomes ethically troubled. Ravi in "The Artist of Disappearance" makes a hidden garden and refuses public recognition. His agency lies in withdrawal.

These forms of agency are fragile. They can fail, become distorted, or disappear. Yet Desai values them because they resist a world that measures worth through power, visibility, success, and public approval. Her fiction shows that human dignity often survives in hidden places.

The feminist dimension of the collection is clearest in Prema's story. Prema's struggle reveals how women seek authorship and recognition in a literary culture that often leaves them dependent on male-dominated institutions and language hierarchies. Yet the broader collection also questions systems of authority that restrict the self. These systems include patriarchy, bureaucracy, linguistic dominance, modern development, and market culture.

Desai's treatment of disappearance is therefore complex. Disappearance may mean loss, neglect, or erasure. But it may also mean protection, refusal, and self-possession. A person may disappear because society has failed them. A person may also choose disappearance to preserve an inner truth from violation.

7. CONCLUSION

The study indicates that occupational stress among college educators in Kanchipuram is predominantly influenced by workload, administrative pressure, role ambiguity, and job insecurity. Anita Desai's *The Artist of Disappearance* is a deeply reflective collection that examines memory, translation, art, solitude, and identity. "The Museum of Final Journeys" presents a decaying museum as a powerful symbol of cultural neglect and the human desire to preserve memory against time. The novella shows how heritage can fade when society loses the patience to care for it.

"Translator Translated" studies the difficult relation between language, identity, and creative desire. Through Prema Joshi, Desai examines the position of a woman who tries to find selfhood through translation. Prema's journey reveals the power of language, but also the ethical dangers of turning another writer's work into a space for one's own ambition. The novella becomes an important reflection on female agency, authorship, and the politics of literary value.

"The Artist of Disappearance" explores the relation between art, solitude, and nature. Ravi's secret garden becomes a form of ecological and artistic resistance. It rejects publicity, ownership, and the destructive logic of modernity. Through Ravi, Desai asks whether art can remain pure in a world that wants to expose and consume everything.

Together, the three novellas reveal Desai's subtle understanding of human agency. Her characters do not always resist through open confrontation. They resist by preserving, translating, withdrawing, creating, and caring. Their lives show that silence can hold meaning and disappearance can become a form of self-protection.

Desai's collection also critiques the structures that limit human freedom. It questions cultural neglect, patriarchal expectations, linguistic hierarchy, the commodification of art, and environmental destruction. By bringing together memory, language, gender, art, and nature, *The Artist of Disappearance* offers a quiet but powerful meditation on the fragile ways in which human beings search for identity and dignity in a changing world.

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