

Quest for Harmony in Anita Desai's 'Diamond Dust, A Tragedy,' 'The Rooftop Dwellers,' and 'Winterscape'

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<p>Received: 26 May 2025; Received in revised form: 21 Jun 2025; Accepted: 25 Jun 2025; Available online: 30 Jun 2025</p> <p>©2025 The Author(s). Published by International Journal of English Language, Education and Literature Studies (IJEEL). This is an open access article under the CC BY license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).</p> <p>Keywords— protagonist, psychoanalyst, existentialist, confrontation, self-actualisation.</p>	<p><i>This paper explores the portrayal of the protagonists' quest for harmony in Anita Desai's short stories 'Diamond Dust, A Tragedy', 'The Rooftop Dwellers', and 'Winterscape'. In Diamond Dust and Other Stories, Desai presents a panoramic range of characters from different walks of life, reflecting their existential journeys and emotional responses to life's challenges. These characters are seen as sensitive individuals, often cherishing a utopian vision of life. However, confrontation with stark realities often induces neurosis. Characters with regressive tendencies succumb to social isolation and lose their authentic selves. In contrast, strong-willed and mature individuals face adversity with confidence, engaging with life rather than retreating. Through such portrayals, Desai emphasizes self-realization, self-assertion, and the importance of forging meaningful human connections in the journey toward harmony.</i></p>

I. INTRODUCTION

In the realm of Indian English literature, Anita Desai occupies a unique place as a master of psychological realism. Her narratives often delve into the interior lives of her protagonists, unearthing suppressed emotions, identity crises, and the tensions between individuality and society. While her novels like *Clear Light of Day* and *Fasting, Feasting* are celebrated for their layered characters and emotional depth, her short stories are equally compelling in their exploration of human psychology. This paper seeks to analyze the protagonists' search for harmony in three of Desai's most powerful short stories – 'Diamond Dust, A Tragedy', 'The Rooftop Dwellers', and 'Winterscape'. As in her novels, Desai's short fiction reveals her sensitive grasp of both inner and outer worlds. However, unlike the limited thematic focus of her novels, her short stories introduce a broader cross-section of society, capturing a panoramic spectrum of

characters from different social and cultural backgrounds. In these narratives, Desai brings her characters into sharp relief against the backdrop of urban alienation, cultural dislocation and personal estrangement. This paper applies psychoanalytic theories by Karen Horney and Abraham Maslow to examine how Desai distinguishes between neurotic and mature characters, showing that only those capable of self-realization and meaningful engagement with life are able to attain inner harmony.

II. DISCUSSION

Anita Desai's psychological insights into her characters are neither superficial nor schematic. Rather, she reveals their inner lives through carefully crafted details—gestures, silences, obsessions, and resistances. In doing so, she often portrays a dichotomy between characters who are neurotic and trapped by inner compulsions and those who exhibit

resilience, creativity and the will to adapt. Karen Horney, in *Neurosis and Human Growth*, defines neurosis as a “desperate struggle for survival in a world perceived as hostile” (Horney 38). These struggles are marked by compulsive behaviors, unrealistic expectations, and a distortion of self-image. Abraham Maslow, in contrast, speaks of 'self-actualizing' individuals as those who can face novelty and uncertainty with openness and creativity (Maslow 16). In Desai's stories, we encounter both categories—those who retreat and disintegrate, and those who evolve through confrontation and transformation.

In 'The Rooftop Dwellers', Moyna is the most vivid example of a self-actualizing individual. She arrives in Delhi with aspirations of becoming a journalist. Unmarried, intelligent, and independent, she struggles to adjust to a minimal existence on a rented rooftop apartment. The story captures the anxiety of a young woman asserting her identity in a metropolis marked by gendered limitations and social scrutiny. Moyna's emotional endurance becomes clear when Desai writes: “She was free, she was determined, she had made her decision, and she sat up, laughing” (Desai, 'The Rooftop Dwellers' 89). Through her determination, Moyna converts hardship into habit, and eventually into liberation. She refuses marriage proposals not because she lacks emotion, but because she values her autonomy. Her concern for her driver Gurmail and her dedication to her magazine show that she does not live in emotional isolation. Rather, she constructs a life of purpose, creativity, and interpersonal empathy.

In contrast, Mr. Das in 'Diamond Dust, A Tragedy' represents a case of arrested emotional development. A civil servant, Mr. Das appears decent and upright, yet his inner world is consumed by an obsession with his dog, Diamond. His wife, who has long struggled with his emotional absence, remarks bitterly that while he is meticulous about the dog's diet, he has never shown similar concern for their children. This pet obsession isolates him from both familial and social spheres. When Diamond runs away, Mr. Das's psychological world collapses. The frantic search that follows does not restore his equilibrium but accelerates his disintegration. Desai captures the surreal depth of his collapse in a hallucinatory image: “behind the bars of the window receding into the

distance, Diamond glittered like a dead coal, or a black star, in daylight's blaze” (Desai, 'Diamond Dust' 112). Mr. Das's fall into neurosis and eventual psychosis is emblematic of a man who has substituted emotional withdrawal for meaningful human connection.

While Moyna finds meaning in solitude, Mr. Das finds only silence and rupture. The contrast between these characters emphasizes Desai's recurring theme: solitude is not inherently pathological, but it becomes so when it is not rooted in self-awareness and emotional reciprocity. Mr. Das lacks the creative will to reconstruct his world in the face of loss. Unlike Moyna, who moves from isolation to interconnection, Mr. Das moves from illusion to collapse.

In 'Winterscape', Desai explores the East-West cultural divide through the characters of Asha and Anu, two elderly Indian women visiting their son Rakesh in Canada. The cultural polarity in this story is not merely geographic but psychological. Asha and Anu have devoted their lives to traditional values of sacrifice and familial devotion. However, in Canada, they find themselves emotionally adrift. Beth, Rakesh's westernized wife, does not comprehend the depth of Indian familial expectations. She becomes annoyed when Rakesh insists on bringing the women to Canada. Desai writes: “The first euphoria and excitement soon led to little nervous discussion and explosions, then to dejection” (Desai, 'Winterscape' 42). The old women grow passive and sickly, preferring to stay indoors rather than explore the alien city. Their alienation is poignantly captured in a photograph where they are seen watching snow: “calls for silence, creates silence, like snow... they seemed nearly to have merged into this white snowscape” (Desai, 'Winterscape' 42).

Unlike Moyna, who adapts to her environment through a redefinition of self, Asha and Anu are unable to process the cultural dissonance they face. Their identity is so deeply intertwined with their traditional roles that any rupture in cultural familiarity results in psychological withdrawal. Their passivity and silence are not signs of acceptance but symptoms of internal collapse. Like Mr. Das, they represent Desai's neurotic characters—emotionally stagnant, locked in memory, and unable to forge new meanings in unfamiliar terrain.

Usha Bande's observation that Desai's artist protagonists "manage to see beauty and harmony through the sordidness of life" (Bande 170) finds its resonance in Moyna. Moyna does not romanticize her struggles, nor does she flee from them. Her efforts to establish a career, form meaningful relationships, and remain emotionally grounded despite minimal material support affirm Desai's faith in the creative and resilient spirit. In contrast, Mr. Das's and the sisters' inability to transcend their inner limitations showcases the tragic consequences of emotional rigidity.

Desai's characters may be victims of time, place, or culture, but they are never devoid of agency. The difference lies in how they confront adversity. Karen Horney's theory is instructive here: the difference between neurotic and healthy striving lies "between seeming and being, fantasy and truth" (Horney 39). Moyna embraces truth; Mr. Das clings to fantasy. Maslow emphasizes that 'only a creative person can manage the future' (Maslow 16). Moyna's creativity is not artistic but existential—she creates a future by living deliberately. She becomes an emblem of Desai's mature character who breaks the cocoon of isolation and emerges into authentic selfhood.

III. CONCLUSION

Through her intricate portrayal of characters like Moyna, Mr. Das, Asha, and Anu, Anita Desai constructs a psychological map of human resilience and vulnerability. Her short stories are not just narratives of action but of consciousness—delicate, detailed explorations of how people live, suffer, adapt, and sometimes disintegrate. Desai's message is clear: harmony cannot be passively inherited. It is something one must earn through struggle, insight, and emotional courage. In contrasting the fates of her characters, Desai upholds the value of self-realization, the power of emotional connectivity, and the redemptive quality of creative adaptation. In an increasingly fragmented world, her fiction remains a testament to the inner strength required to carve meaning from chaos.

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