

Aesthetic Transformation and Matrilineal Postmemory in Anita Desai's *Rosarita*

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Abstract

Rosarita (2024), Anita Desai's recent novella is an extraordinary late-career renaissance that comprises six decades of thematic inquiry into female interiority, domestic confinement, and postcolonial displacement into an evocative, hallucinatory reflection upon matrilineal memory. The story, set in the scorching, historical landscapes of Mexico, traces Bonita, a young Indian language student living in San Miguel de Allends, who is approached by an eccentric strange woman named Victoria. Victoria feels that Bonita is the mirror image of deceased mother Sarita, whom she remembers as "*Rosarita*", a passionate painter who studies were guided by Mexican artists. Bonita confronts this radical alternative to her memories of a silenced and submissive 'company wife'. She embarks on an uncertain journey of self-discovery through ruined communes, colonial estates in Colima, and the Pacific shores of La Manzanilla.

The objective of this article is to explore how Desai simultaneously maintains and adapts her typical aesthetic concerns. It attempts to investigate how Desai presents feminine agency through the prism of domestic imprisonment, artistic repression, and patriarchal annihilation through the exploration of the tripartite relationship of grandmother, mother, and daughter. Further, the paper interrogates the second-person narrative technique, the epistemological nature of the Trickster figure, and the historical resonance linking India's 1947 Partition with the 1910 Mexican Revolution. Finally, the article, analysing the text and the recent critical reviews, demonstrates how Desai transforms filial bereavement into a investigation of postmemory, where material identity remains an unresolved, spectral canvas.

Keywords: Anita Desai, *Rosarita*, Matrilineal Memory, Second-Person Narration, Partition Trauma, Transnational Feminism.

Women novelists in Indian Writing in English have been playing a significant role in the empowerment of women highlighting women's experiences, struggles, desires, and aspirations in their literary representations. Writers such as Ruth Praver Jhabvala, Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Deshpande, Bharati Mukherjee, Nayantara Sahgal, Githa Hariharan, Manju Kapur, Arundhati Roy, Chitra Banerjee Divakarauni, Kiran Desai, and a few more have questioned patriarchal values and exposed the social, cultural, and economic inequalities faced by women. Their novels often portray women negotiating restrictive traditions, marriage, motherhood, domestic responsibilities, sexuality, education, and personal identity.

In the recent past, the contribution of women novelists extends beyond portraying women as victims of oppression. They change their narrative and "expose the silence imposed by patriarchy, explored the inner lives of women, and challenge the social structures that restricted female identity" (*Instagram*, 2026). They present multifaceted 'New Women' who actively redefine agency, think, question, resist, and self-determine to build their own identity. As such, their fiction is slowly becoming a form of cultural and intellectual empowerment, enabling women's voices to enter public discourse and creating greater awareness of gender equality.

Anita Desai is one among those few magnificent Indian English women novelists who made a sincere attempt to understand the predicament of women and present their inner world. She, in an Interview with Yashodhara Dalmia (1979) said that she is interested in the characters "who are not average but have retreated, or have been driven into some extremity of despair and turn against or make a stand against the general current" (p. 13). She delineates the turmoil with the psyche of women characters. She explores the complex psychic depths of her female characters, who are trapped within the close confines of an incompatible marriage. Her women characters live in isolated worlds of existential problems.

Anita Desai, from the first breakthrough novel *Cry, the Peacock* (1963) to the recent novella *Rosarita* (2024), initiated a decisive departure from the prevailing social-realist orthodoxies of mid-century Indian English fiction, redirecting narrative focus from public socio-political events to the hidden, turbulent landscape of female interiority. Her canonical works such as *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* (1975), *Fire on the Mountain* (1977), and *Clear Light of Day* (1980) meticulously exposed the psychological costs exacted by rigid patriarchal institutions. In *Fasting, Feasting* (1999), this critique expanded into a comparative transatlantic examination of domestic entrapment, while *Baumgartner's Bombay* (1988) and *The Zigzag Way* (2004) traced the cultural displacements of exiles navigating the violent currents of

twentieth-century global history. Her protagonists—predominantly sensitive, alienated women—struggle against the claustrophobic routines of familial duty, often retreating into psychic isolation, neurosis, or profound silence.

Before an analysis of the novella is made, it would be better to narrate the summary in brief. Anita Desai's *Rosarita* centres around the character Bonita, a young Indian woman who travels to San Miguel de Allende, Mexico, to study Spanish. While sitting in a public garden, she is approached by an elderly Mexican woman who claims to have known Bonita's mother, whom she remembers as "Rosarita," an aspiring artist who had once travelled from India to Mexico. Bonita is initially certain that the woman is mistaken because her mother, Sarita, had never mentioned Mexico or a life as an artist. However, the encounter unsettles Bonita's understanding of her mother and makes her reconsider the apparently ordinary life she had known. The mysterious woman, whom Bonita gradually regards as a "Trickster," leads her through places associated with the supposed past of her mother. In this process, Bonita begins to reconstruct fragments of Sarita's life, imagining the possibilities that may have existed beyond her mother's role within the family.

The narrative gradually becomes less a search for factual evidence and more an exploration of memory, identity, motherhood, female self-expression, and the silences within families. Bonita's journey forces her to recognise that a parent may possess an inner life that remains unknown to the children and other family members. Sarita's possible transformation into Rosarita therefore represents the suppressed aspirations of a woman whose individual identity may have been overshadowed by domestic responsibilities and social expectations. Desai deliberately leaves several questions unresolved, creating an ambiguity between remembered experience, imagination, and possible truth. Thus, the novel suggests that understanding another person, particularly a parent, is not always a matter of recovering complete historical facts but it may also involve acknowledging the fragments, silences, and possibilities that constitute personal memory. Through Bonita's psychological journey, *Rosarita* presents a sensitive reflection on the distance between the person we believe we know and the complex individual that person may actually have been.

In *Rosarita*, Desai maintains an unbroken continuum with these established thematic imperatives while enacting radical formal mutations. The domestic world remembered by Bonita reproduces the chilling emotional austerity that is one of the characteristics of Desai's earlier fiction. The authoritarian corporate executive husband, the suppressed wife condemned to monotonous domestic management, and the silent, observant child navigating domestic tensions are archetypes deeply rooted

in Desai's oeuvre. However, where earlier works documented domestic confinement through sustained psychological realism, *Rosarita* operates through condensation, poetic compression, and ontological ambiguity.

This stylistic shift is highlighted by Desai's deliberate adoption of the second-person point of view ("you") which is unusual. In an interview with Nandini Nair for *Open Magazine*, Desai noted that she models her prose upon the structural economy of poetry – drawing on Rainer Maria Rilke, C.P. Cavafy, and Joseph Brodsky – to achieve maximum resonance using the fewest possible images. She explained that employing the second person allowed her to collapse the distance between character and reader: "I found that using the second-person voice was easier. It makes it more direct and instant".

Critical reception has illuminated how this grammatical stance functions as both an intimate interior address and a disorienting interrogation. Reviewing the novella in *The Guardian*, Stephanie Merritt emphasizes that the second person "creates a distancing effect, but at the same time, inevitably, gives the impression of the author addressing an iteration of herself". The grammatical "you" estranges Bonita from her own perceptions, externalizing her internal fragmentation and mirroring the reader's confrontation with filial postmemory.

Further, *Rosarita* orchestrates an unapologetic return to an exclusively female matrix. The narrative consists of three women – Bonita, Victoria, and the spectral Sarita/*Rosarita* – circling one another around an absent maternal center.

The representation of women in *Rosarita* is structured through an intergenerational matrilineal continuum comprising three figures: the paternal grandmother, the mother (Sarita/*Rosarita*), and the daughter (Bonita). Through this genealogical triad, Desai charts the historical transformations of female agency across twentieth-century India, diagnosing the mechanisms by which patriarchal dominance enforces feminine erasure.

The paternal grandmother represents the traditional, pre-independence matriarch who secures domestic authority by accepting patriarchal enclosure. Married as a young village girl from the grandfather's native district, she functions as the "designated appurtenance" (*Rosarita*, p. 14) brought along to support his legal career. Rather than resisting this subordinate status, she claims mastery over her designated territory. When guests praise the smooth execution of her banquets, she proudly boasts of having "set her household on wheels and letting it run by itself" (p. 14).

Her authority is enacted through domestic craft: sitting on a cane stool on the kitchen patio supervising the preparation of mango pickles, measuring spices, and daily inspecting the brown-and-white ceramic jars lined up against the stone wall. Yet Desai highlights the patriarchal ceiling bounding this domestic sovereignty. While the grandmother tends a private whitewashed altar under the temple tree, offering hibiscus and jasmine to her deity, the grandfather refuses to acknowledge its presence on his grounds. In this patriarchal economy, the text observes with biting irony: “If there was a god, it could only be The Husband” (p. 15). The grandmother’s domestic authority depends entirely on her obedience to patriarchal law.

In contrast to the grandmother’s contented domesticity, Sarita embodies the suppressed mid-century Indian woman crushed by the transitional demands of modern corporate capitalism. Relocated to an executive flat in New Delhi that upholds the postcolonial “boxwallah” mercantile traditions of her husband’s firm, Sarita also places the household “on wheels,” but does so without the matriarch’s pride. Instead, her domestic labour is defined by an “unwilling martyrdom to his daily routine”—an inflexible regimen of organizing shopping lists in red notebooks, managing domestic servants, and hosting identical corporate cocktail parties designed to signal executive status.

Desai renders Sarita’s alienation palpable through precise domestic details. Her authoritarian husband treats the home with bored contempt, enforcing strict social conformity. Sarita’s rebellion is registered through subtle refusals: rising from the dinner table to reject the mandatory executive fare of meat and potatoes, choosing instead to eat the plain vegetables cooked by the servant in the kitchen under her husband’s threatening glare.

Her family origins remain an enduring mystery; she is dismissed by her husband’s family as coming from transient, rootless “railway people”. Within the class- and caste-conscious hierarchy of her in-laws, her darker complexion and lack of pedigree mark her as an intruder, casting her marriage as an unfortunate misstep.

The domestic degradation of Sarita culminates in her spatial banishment within the home:

Mother lying on a straw mat on the floor of a space off the bedroom called ‘the boxroom’. If she is still there when Father emerges from the bedroom, fresh and ready for his morning cup of tea, he steps over her as if she is a rag left there carelessly, his face clenched tight as a fist. (p. 24)

The “boxroom” – a domestic liminal zone reserved for broken furniture and battered luggage – serves as the spatial manifestation of Sarita’s psychic marginalization. She, confined to a straw mat amidst old boxes, suffers debilitating headaches and retreats into silence.

Desai portrays the tragic material destruction of the mother’s interior life: the family cook periodically summons the street ragman (kabariwallah) to weigh bundles of her scrap paper on suspect scales, selling her sketches, pastels, and notebooks for a negligible “four rupees a kilo”.

Crucially, Desai does not exempt the daughter from complicity in this domestic violence. Recalling her father’s exasperated shouts through the door, Bonita remembers her own youthful cruelty: “admit it, admit it! You heard, you saw through your half-open door, and you cried, ‘Yes, yes. Hit her on the head with it! Beat her! Make her get up!’” (p. 25). The daughter aligns herself with the father’s violence, punishing the mother for displaying the unbearable shame of her own subjugation.

Bonita’s trajectory reflects the modern Indian woman’s attempt to escape the cycle of domestic confinement through intellectual detachment. She constructs an identity founded upon academic rigour and geographic displacement believing that her mother’s fate will settle upon her “like ashes, like sand,”. When standardized academic paths prove to be another extension of institutional conformity, she turns to foreign languages as a vehicle of self-liberation:

...seizing as if inspired on the study of languages that would wrench you out, lead you as far away as you could get—French that took you to Pondicherry, Portuguese that took you to Goa, and the Portuguese that led you to Spanish and Spanish had brought you here—here and now. Aquí y ahora. (p. 23)

Linguistic transit functions for Bonita as a deliberate defense mechanism. By speaking languages devoid of familial resonance, she attempts to construct an autonomous identity detached from ancestral memory. Yet, as Nandini Bhatia argues in *Usawa Literary Review*, this intellectual flight is inherently paradoxical: Bonita’s linguistic trajectory leads her directly to the physical site of her mother’s suppressed past. Her detachment is shattered the moment Victoria approaches her in the Jardín, proving that geographic distance cannot dismantle matrilineal trauma.

At the core of *Rosarita* is the tension between domestic silencing and artistic self-realization. In Desai’s thematic universe, art offers an alternative realm of female subjectivity, allowing women to exist beyond the prescribed familial roles of

daughter, wife, and mother. Yet within bourgeois domesticity, female artistic expression is treated as an aberration that must be suppressed.

The only material artifact of Sarita's artistic sensibility in the New Delhi household is an overlooked pastel drawing hanging above Bonita's childhood bed:

...a sketch in wishy-washy pale pastels that had hung on the wall above your bed at home, of a woman seated on a park bench—and yes, it could have been one here in San Miguel—with a child playing in the sand at her feet. She is not looking at the child and the child is not looking at her, as if they had no relation to each other, each absorbed in a separate world, and silent". (p. 11)

This pastel sketch serves as an objective correlative for the psychological estrangement between mother and daughter. The woman and child within the frame inhabit separate, non-communicating spheres; the mother's averted gaze refuses the all-consuming maternal posture demanded by patriarchal ideology.

Rendered in pale, fragile pastels, the artwork was treated as worthless within a household decorated with heavy teak furniture, Kashmiri carpets, and colonial sporting lithographs intended to showcase executive prestige. Like Sarita herself, the painting was permanent yet invisible—functional, domestic, but ignored. It never occurs to Bonita to investigate the sketch until Victoria's revelations in San Miguel force her to reconsider the image as an autobiographical record of Sarita's hidden Mexican journey.

Desai structures Bonita's quest around the dynamics of postmemory, a concept developed by Marianne Hirsch to describe the relation of children to the traumatic experiences of their parents—experiences that the children remember only through stories, images, and creative projections. Because Sarita maintained a resolute silence regarding her youth and her temporary absence from the family home, Bonita must reconstruct her mother's identity through imaginative projection.

As Sayari Debnath (2024) observes in *Scroll.in*, filial perceptions are inherently limited by structural assumptions of parental transparency:

We often make the mistake of assuming that we know everything about our mothers. Fathers do not invite such scrutiny—they are understood to be unyielding of secrets and a double life is often expected. Desai takes her heroine – absent in the first person! – all

the way to Mexico to assert her existence. The mother 'sheds' the daughter to become a self while the daughter probes her propensity to 'want' without knowing what or why".

When Victoria describes *Rosarita* painting in the Jardín under Maestro Francisco—watching her talent “flowering,” witnessing her shed her timidity, and observing her dancing the tango in the plaza with young suitors—Bonita experiences profound epistemic panic. The vision of her mother dancing the tango on a lamplit Mexican plaza, “a man’s leg thrust between hers,” strikes Bonita as utterly alien and scandalous.

Nandini Bhatia observes that independence is “such a strange colour for a mother”. Bonita’s reflexive impulse to hide behind dark glasses when confronted by Victoria reveals a desire to shield herself from the realization that her mother existed as an autonomous, desiring, creative subject entirely separate from her maternal function.

The flamboyant figure of Victoria – designated throughout the novella as “The Stranger” and “The Trickster” – drives the ontological instability of the narrative. Dressed in theatrical costumes of layered cotton skirts in lime and indigo, fringed rebozos, heavy coral and turquoise rings, and smelling of catechu, Victoria operates simultaneously as a living link to Mexico’s artistic past, a confidence trickster exploiting a foreign tourist, and an apparition conjured by Bonita’s unresolved grief.

The philosophical parameters of this ambiguity are signalled by the novella’s two epigraphs:

- **Fernando Pessoa (Songbook, 1930):** “I’M SORRY I DON’T RESPOND. / Each of us is many persons. / To me I’m who I think I am, / But others see me differently / And are equally mistaken. / Don’t dream me into someone else / But leave me alone, in peace! / If I don’t want to find myself / Should I want others to find me?”.
- **Antonio Tabucchi (It’s Getting Later All the Time):** “...an impossible greeting, like one who waves vainly from one bank of the river to the other knowing there are no banks, really, believe me, there are no banks, there is only the river... what idiots, we worried so much about the banks and instead there was only the river”.

Pessoa's poetry of fragmented subjectivity establishes that identity is non-unitary, validating Sarita's split existence as corporate martyr and Mexican painter. Meanwhile, Tabucchi's river metaphor reflects Desai's dissolution of stable epistemic boundaries: the boundary between historical truth and fabulation collapses into an indivisible current.

Every physical location that Victoria presents as tangible evidence of *Rosarita's* artistic life dissolves upon inspection:

- **The Casa Garcia:** When Victoria leads Bonita to the grand colonial mansion where *Rosarita* allegedly boarded, they encounter only a locked iron gate opening onto a vacant lot—a desolate plot containing a single tiled wall fragment, cracked paving stones choked with weeds, and two starving, motherless kittens.
- **The Commune at Los Encuentros:** When Bonita demands to see the independent art school outside San Miguel, they take a bus through an arid landscape to a ruined chapel covered in graffiti and dilapidated adobe huts. Victoria spins an erratic tale of American G.I. veterans who painted grotesque murals of war and persuaded *Rosarita* to join their collective, reducing her to an emaciated, weeping figure living in squalor.
- **The Ubiquitous Apparition:** Following the excursion to Los Encuentros, Victoria begins appearing across San Miguel in multiple contradictory personas: a beggar sitting on the stone steps of a bank, an itinerant vendor circling the Jardín with armfuls of beads, an herbalist hawking magic potions in the market, and a ghost feeding stray cats in the deserted corridors of a decaying hotel.

The ambiguity reaches its narrative zenith in Section IV, when Victoria entices Bonita to fly to her ancestral estate in Colima. The estate is authentic: a grand colonial palazzo managed by Victoria's nephew, Arturo. Yet the visit disintegrates into familial recrimination. Bonita discovers that Victoria has instrumentalized her presence as leverage in an inheritance dispute with Arturo over turning the ancestral home into a hotel.

During the night, Victoria suffers a hysterical breakdown on the terrace, screaming that her bedroom is overrun with fantasmas and espectros sent by the devil to bite and scratch her. Forced to switch rooms and sleep amidst Victoria's torn mosquito nets and overturned water carafes, Bonita is confronted with the chaotic reality of ancestral trauma.

Fleeing Colima, the following morning in a taxi bound for the coast, Bonita experiences an epistemological breakthrough:

...if the ghosts and spectres that the Trickster claimed had attacked her had proven to have their roots in the realities of her ancestry, then Rosarita the Artist might also have been conjured out of a fragment of truth—a chance encounter with a stranger in the Jardín, a charmed moment embroidered by recollection. For the Trickster the two waters met and melded, the resulting murk was her natural element; she floated in it, swam.

It was you who would not allow them to combine, struggled to keep them separate in order not to drown. What if you too allowed them to merge and become one? (pp. 74-75)

Desai suggests that historical trauma cannot be interpreted through Western, positivist binaries of empirical fact versus total falsehood. For the Trickster, truth is an interpretive medium where memory and fabulation cross-pollinate. Bonita's obsession with empirical verification is dismantled, clearing the path for an acceptance of mythic multiplicity.

Behind the personal, matrilineal drama of *Rosarita* lies an exploration of transnational historical trauma. In her Author's Note, Desai makes explicit the historical framework connecting twentieth-century India and Mexico:

When the Partition of India took place in 1947, trains carried untold numbers of refugees across the new borders of India and Pakistan, which bears some resemblances to the historical role played by trains in the Mexican Revolution of the 1910s, carrying both the militia and the revolutionaries. Violence and bloodshed accompanied both these events on a horrific scale. (p. 95)

Desai highlights the real-world historical figure Satish Gujral, the Indian painter and Partition refugee who studied mural painting in Mexico under Diego Rivera and David Alfaro Siqueiros. Gujral recognized a profound aesthetic resonance between the tragic, monumental art of the Mexican Revolution and the communal bloodshed he experienced during Partition, infusing his post-Partition canvases with revolutionary Mexican iconography.

In Section II of the novella, Desai integrates this historical parallel directly into Bonita's imagined reconstruction of her mother's awakening. Bonita envisions

Sarita intercepting an invitation to an art lecture at the Mexican Embassy in New Delhi. Escaping the confines of her home while her husband is away on business, Sarita attends the lecture, where a garden reception is transformed by projected slides of revolutionary art:

The decorous tableau before it vanishes into a pit and what emerges is the artists' engagement with their history, in scene after scene of carnage: a knife-thrust here, a skull smashed open there, guts ripped from living bodies, drawing blood and more blood. Women's bodies are pierced and eviscerated, infants torn out of their wombs and arms, flung into flames, bones twisted and charred into ashes... Out of these barbaric landscapes trains arriving, marvels of steel and technology, all smoke and fiery iron, some carrying troops and their arms, others packed with passengers slaughtered along the way, blood oozing out of carriages when they are opened, then more blood and still more... Mouths opening to roar: Azadi! Libertad! At their feet corpses left for vultures to gorge on. Wounds, mutilations thrust in the faces of those who survive to declare: this is Man, intrinsically, this is his history: look! (p. 31)

This graphic passage – highlighted by Stephanie Merritt in *The Guardian* – constitutes the traumatic core of the book. The descriptions of butchery, particularly the mutilation of female bodies and children, reflect the specific nature of communal violence during the 1947 Partition, where over 75,000 women were abducted, raped, or mutilated across the newly carved borders.

For Sarita, this confrontation with Mexican art is not an encounter with a foreign history, but a shocking encounter with her own disavowed past. Her family's identity as transient "railway people" who never spoke of their origins is deciphered as refugee trauma: they were survivors of the Partition trains that crossed Punjab and Bengal laden with dead.

The silence Sarita maintained throughout her marriage was the paralyzing muteness of a refugee forced to erase her past to assimilate into the bourgeois respectability of her husband's family. The encounter with Mexican muralism provides an aesthetic rupture: "Fearlessness. That was what she now has to learn". Her flight to Mexico becomes an attempt to find an artistic visual language equal to the horrific scale of her historical wound.

The novella's final movement, set in the coastal village of La Manzanilla on the Pacific coast, brings Bonita's pilgrimage to an unresolved, quiet conclusion. Arriving alone at a beachside bungalow inhabited by aging North American and European expatriates, Bonita enters a landscape stripped of the historical ghosts of San Miguel and the ancestral melodrama of Colima. The foreign expatriates—lounging on the veranda, drinking beer, trading superficial observations about Indian weddings and yoga—represent an aimless cosmopolitanism entirely disconnected from Sarita's tragedy. Bonita recognizes immediately that her mother could never have belonged to this group.

Catching sight of a solitary, elderly artist raking sand outside a palm-thatched studio, Bonita experiences a final vision:

In a brief, hallucinatory moment you see her turning onto that path, walking up it, entering that painting and vanishing into it. For that one moment, it is so real that you are paralysed, and wait there for her to come out, then break away in a panic for fear she might. (p. 87)

This encounter marks the threshold of Bonita's psychological journey. She realizes that she does not truly desire her mother to materialize as an empirical certainty. To possess absolute, documented proof of Sarita's actions would reduce her once more to a fixed, domestic object. By vanishing into the canvas, the mother preserves her autonomous artistic existence, permanently beyond filial possession.

Bonita's search terminates in the beachside cemetery of La Manzanilla, where whitewashed wooden crosses sink into shifting coastal dunes. Contemplating a detached letter from her sister Indu describing their parents' cremation and the final distribution of assets, Bonita receives her ultimate inheritance: "Just as you had shed her, she implied, she now shed you. Go free".

Bonita, sitting on the sand and observing the rising tide that will inevitably submerge the graves and sweep the coffins out to sea, collects a handful of shells, shakes them free of sand, and casts them into the water. The novella concludes with an acceptance of epistemic boundaries: "You have come as far as you can, you tell yourself: you can go no further". Desai offers no sentimental filial reunion, but a hard-won liberation rooted in recognizing that the maternal self remains an unrecoverable, autonomous enigma.

Desai does not clearly reveal whether Rosarita was a real historical painter or an imaginary figure created by an eccentric man. This uncertainty makes Rosarita more than a character in a family story. She becomes a symbol of a woman creating

her own identity. In a patriarchal society, women are often limited to household duties, and their creative work is ignored or treated as worthless. The daughter imagines a secret, passionate, and artistic life for her mother. In doing so, she restores the identity and creativity that her mother was denied. Desai shows that when patriarchal history silences women, fiction and memories passed through generations can preserve their voices. Through imagination and memory, women can create a space where their identity and freedom continue to exist.

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