



Review Article

The Artist and the Marketplace: Representation of Artistic Labour in Anita Desai's Fiction

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Abstract

This paper explores the intricate representation of artistic labour and the dynamics of the marketplace in Anita Desai's fiction. Desai's narratives foreground the complex relationship between the artist's creative impulses and the economic realities that shape their artistic production and reception. Through detailed character studies and thematic analysis, the paper investigates how Desai portrays the struggles of artists negotiating their identity, autonomy, and survival within a capitalist framework. The artist is often depicted as caught between the purity of artistic expression and the commoditisation of art, revealing tensions inherent in the commoditisation of culture in postcolonial India. Desai's fiction critically examines the marketplace not merely as an economic space but as a cultural arena where power, class, and social status influence the valuation of art and artists. By focusing on the psychological and social dimensions of artistic labour, the study highlights how Desai's work critiques the limitations imposed on creativity by market demands, social expectations, and gender norms. The paper also discusses the broader implications of these themes for understanding the role of art in contemporary society. Ultimately, this research underscores the significance of Desai's literary contribution to discourses on art, labour, and capitalism, demonstrating her nuanced engagement with the challenges faced by artists in a rapidly transforming socio-economic landscape.

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INTRODUCTION

Anita Desai, one of the most distinguished voices in Indian English fiction, is renowned for her intense psychological realism and sensitive portrayal of inner lives shaped by social, cultural, and historical forces. Unlike many of her contemporaries who foreground overt political or social movements, Desai turns inward, exploring alienation, silence, emotional conflict, and the fragile negotiations between self and society. Among the many thematic concerns running through her oeuvre, the representation of artistic labour and the position of the artist within the marketplace remains a critical yet relatively underexplored dimension.

This research paper examines how Anita Desai conceptualizes artistic labour as both a deeply personal vocation and a socially conditioned form of work shaped by economic pressures, cultural hierarchies, and market forces. In Desai's fiction, the artist is rarely a celebrated figure; instead, artistic practice is shown as precarious, undervalued, and often marginalised. The tension between artistic authenticity and commercial viability forms a recurring pattern, revealing Desai's critique of capitalist commoditisation of creativity.

Through a close reading of selected novels such as *Clear Light of Day*, *Fire on the Mountain*, and *In Custody*, this study analyses the ways in which Desai portrays the marketplace not merely as an economic institution but as a cultural arena where power, class, gender, and postcolonial anxieties intersect. Artistic labour is examined in relation to psychological strain, gendered constraints, and postcolonial identity, highlighting how Desai situates creativity within broader structures of labour and capitalism.

Methodologically, the paper employs textual analysis supported by theoretical perspectives from Marxist cultural criticism, feminist theory, and postcolonial studies. By situating Desai's fictional artists within discourses of labour and market relations, the study aims to demonstrate how her fiction offers a subtle yet powerful critique of the commoditisation of art and its implications for artistic identity and social value.

Conceptual Framework: Art, Labour, and the Marketplace

Artistic labour occupies an ambiguous position within capitalist societies. Unlike industrial or service labour, artistic work often resists quantification, standardisation, and immediate economic valuation. Marxist theorists such as Raymond Williams and Walter Benjamin have argued that under capitalism, art increasingly becomes a commodity, shaped by market demand rather than intrinsic creative or ethical value (Williams, 1980; Benjamin, 1968). This transformation fundamentally alters the social function of the artist, who must negotiate between creative autonomy and economic survival.

In the Indian postcolonial context, this negotiation is further complicated by colonial legacies that privileged certain cultural forms while marginalising indigenous or non-commercial artistic practices. Anita Desai's fiction reflects this complexity by portraying artists who struggle not only against market pressures but also against cultural hierarchies inherited from colonial and patriarchal structures.

The marketplace in Desai's novels functions as both a literal and metaphorical space. It represents economic necessity, social recognition, and cultural legitimacy, while simultaneously threatening to erode artistic integrity. Artistic labour, therefore, becomes a site of tension where creativity intersects with class position, gender identity, and psychological vulnerability.

Artistic Labour in Desai's Fiction

Desai's fiction consistently foregrounds characters engaged in or connected to creative pursuits-writing, music, poetry, or intellectual labour. Artistic work is depicted as emotionally consuming and socially isolating, demanding intense personal investment without offering assured material reward.

In *Clear Light of Day*, artistic sensibility manifests through Raja's literary aspirations and his engagement with Urdu poetry. Raja's artistic inclination is deeply intertwined with questions of cultural identity and historical change. His creative labour is not commoditised in a conventional sense, yet it is shaped by social privilege and cultural capital. Desai subtly shows how access to artistic pursuits is mediated by class and education, reinforcing the idea that artistic labour is never detached from material conditions.

Similarly, in *Fire on the Mountain*, creative and intellectual labour is presented as a private, almost withdrawn activity. Characters retreat from public life, suggesting a rejection of the marketplace altogether. However, this withdrawal is itself a response to social exhaustion and emotional labour, indicating that the artist's isolation is not a romantic ideal but a coping mechanism in a society that fails to nurture creativity.

Across Desai's works, artistic labour is portrayed as precarious-marked by uncertainty, lack of recognition, and emotional vulnerability. The artist's struggle is not simply internal but structurally produced by economic and cultural systems that undervalue non-commercial creativity.

The Marketplace as a Cultural Arena

In Desai's fiction, the marketplace extends beyond economic exchange to become a cultural arena where artistic value is constructed, negotiated, and contested. Recognition and success are shown to depend not solely on talent but on social networks, institutional support, and conformity to dominant cultural tastes. In *Custody* offers the most explicit engagement with the marketplace of art and literature. The novel portrays the declining status of Urdu poetry in post-independence India, revealing how linguistic politics and market forces determine artistic survival. NurShahJehanabadi, the ageing poet, embodies the tragic consequences of a cultural marketplace that no longer values his art. His creative labour is rendered obsolete by changing political and economic priorities, highlighting how market-driven cultural shifts marginalise certain artistic forms.

The commoditisation of art in Desai's fiction produces ambivalent outcomes. While market recognition promises financial stability and visibility, it often demands compromise. Artists are pressured to tailor their work to audience expectations, risking the dilution of aesthetic and ethical values. Desai presents this tension without romanticising resistance,

instead showing the quiet erosion of artistic integrity under economic compulsion.

Artist vs Market Place

The relationship between an artist and the marketplace is complex and often seen as a dynamic tension. On one side, the artist is primarily driven by creativity, self-expression, and the pursuit of originality. Their role is to innovate, challenge norms, and convey emotions or ideas through their work. Artists seek to communicate their unique vision, often prioritizing artistic integrity over commercial considerations. On the other hand, the marketplace operates based on demand, trends, and financial viability. It serves as the platform where art is bought, sold, and valued. The marketplace influences what kind of art gains visibility and commercial success, often favoring works that appeal to broader audiences or fit current market trends. This economic aspect can sometimes pressure artists to tailor their creativity to meet market expectations.

The interplay between these roles shapes the art world. While artists bring innovation and authenticity, the marketplace provides exposure, financial support, and sustainability for their careers. However, the challenge lies in balancing artistic freedom with commercial success. Some artists navigate this by maintaining a core of authentic work while producing market-friendly pieces. Others reject market demands to preserve their creative purity, sometimes at the cost of financial stability. Ultimately, the artist and the marketplace roles are interdependent. The marketplace needs artists to create valuable content, while artists rely on the marketplace to reach audiences and sustain their practice. Understanding this dynamic helps appreciate both the creative and economic forces shaping the art world today.

Gender and Artistic Labour

A significant contribution of Desai's fiction lies in its nuanced portrayal of gendered artistic labour. Female artists and creative figures face layered constraints stemming from patriarchal norms that restrict mobility, expression, and access to cultural capital. Women in Desai's novels are often confined to domestic spaces, where their creative impulses are subordinated to familial responsibilities. Even when women engage in artistic or intellectual labour, their work is frequently dismissed as secondary or trivial. This marginalisation reflects feminist critiques of unpaid and undervalued labour traditionally performed by women (Federici, 2012). In *In Custody*, although the primary artistic focus rests on male poets, female characters occupy supportive or sacrificial roles, revealing the gendered division of cultural labour. Desai thus exposes how the marketplace privileges male creativity while rendering female artistic labour invisible or peripheral.

By highlighting these disparities, Desai critiques not only economic commoditisation but also patriarchal structures that shape artistic recognition. The marketplace becomes a site where gendered power relations determine whose labour is valued and whose is silenced.

Psychological Dimensions of Artistic Labour

One of Desai's most distinctive contributions is her exploration of the psychological consequences of artistic labour under market pressure. Her artists are introspective, emotionally fragile, and often haunted by feelings of inadequacy and failure. Economic insecurity intensifies psychological distress, as artists struggle to reconcile creative aspiration with material necessity. Desai portrays artistic labour as a source of both meaning and suffering. The act of creation offers moments of transcendence, yet prolonged lack of recognition leads to alienation and self-doubt. This psychological toll underscores the human cost of commoditisation. When artistic value is measured primarily in economic terms, creative labour becomes a site of anxiety rather than fulfilment. Desai's fiction thus reveals how market forces penetrate the inner lives of artists, shaping identity and self-worth.

Postcolonial Context and Artistic Labour

The postcolonial context of Anita Desai's novels adds significant complexity to the depiction of artistic labour, highlighting the intricate interplay between history, culture, and economics. Colonial rule not only disrupted indigenous cultural economies but also imposed Western standards and values upon artistic expressions, creating a legacy of cultural dislocation. In the aftermath of independence, Indian artists find themselves negotiating a fractured cultural marketplace shaped by multiple forces-nationalism, global capitalism, and linguistic hierarchies. This environment complicates their creative work, as they must balance the demands of preserving cultural heritage with the pressures of contemporary economic realities.

In Desai's *In Custody*, the decline of Urdu poetry serves as a potent symbol of the broader marginalisation experienced by certain cultural traditions within this postcolonial marketplace. Once flourishing, Urdu poetry now struggles for survival, reflecting the erosion of a rich linguistic and cultural legacy. Through this portrayal, Desai underscores how artistic labour becomes a site of cultural resistance, a vital space where artists assert the value of their traditions against forces of neglect and erasure. At the same time, artistic labour is fraught with challenges, as artists grapple with limited opportunities and shifting audience expectations.

Desai's narrative reveals that artists must continuously negotiate between maintaining cultural authenticity and adapting to new socio-economic conditions. This delicate balancing act mirrors postcolonial anxieties surrounding questions of identity, belonging, and cultural continuity in a rapidly changing world. The artist's struggle is thus not only about creative expression but also about safeguarding cultural memory and heritage in an unequal global system that privileges certain languages, cultures, and forms of art over others. In this light, artistic labour in Desai's fiction transcends the realm of individual creativity; it becomes a form of cultural assertion and survival. By foregrounding the experiences of artists within this complex postcolonial framework, Desai invites readers to reflect on how artistic work is intertwined with larger historical and political processes. The artist's role

emerges as both vulnerable and vital-caught between the pressures of economic survival and the imperative to keep cultural traditions alive. Ultimately, Desai's treatment of artistic labour offers a nuanced exploration of how culture and creativity persist and transform amid ongoing postcolonial challenges.

CONCLUSION

Anita Desai's fiction offers a profound and understated critique of artistic labour within the marketplace. By portraying artists as psychologically complex individuals embedded in economic, social, and cultural structures, Desai dismantles romantic notions of creativity detached from material conditions. Her novels reveal the precariousness of artistic labour under capitalism, the gendered inequalities shaping creative recognition, and the postcolonial tensions influencing cultural value. The marketplace emerges as a powerful force that both enables and constrains artistic expression, shaping identities and determining social worth. Through her nuanced portrayal of artistic struggle, Desai invites readers to reconsider the relationship between art.

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