CHAPTER - 4
A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF ANITA DESAI
AND NAYANTARA SAHGAL WITH
REFERENCE TO THE DEPICTION OF THE
CHANGING FAMILY STRUCTURE

When Jane Austen came with Pride and Prejudice in 1797, depicting a complete picture of a family comprising of parents with their four daughters, not only it attracted the readers but it also introduced the depiction of the family structure in the West. As the blurb of the text says:

1. Marrying off marriageable daughters
   has been the unsettling past time of mothers
   since the beginning of time, but no writer
   has extracted more of the stuff of human
   wit and kindness ever before, depicting
   the same theme than Jane Austen in
   marrying off the Bennets.

In our country, the rise of this theme began along with the rise of feminism. When it reached to its peak, in this continent, a very crucial question came into existence that how much could the male writers depict the family structure and how much is it going to be right, since, male psyche has always been considered less sensitive than female. However, this question was answered by the male novelists here by their flawless
depiction of the family structure such as R. K. Narayan, Ved Mehta, Bhabhani Bhattacharya, Vikram Seth, Arun Joshi and many other prominent novelists. Though, male novelists did succeed in the depiction of the family structure it is needless to say, that the women writers of this country proved more successful in depicting the family structure because of their natural urge. In this relation, N. R. Gopal comments:

2. **Women writers of all ages have a natural preference for writing about women characters and depicting familial relationships** (p.18).

Due to this natural talent, as already discussed in the first chapter, Indian English fiction was written by a number of women writers who have taken the theme of family structure in their novels, extensively such as Jhabvala, Markendaya, Attiah Hussain, Shakuntala Srinagesh, Shashi Deshpande and Arundhati Roy. All these women novelists have dealt with the theme of family in various manners, thus leaving almost no aspect unexplored. In this relation, Dr. S. V. Balkrishna comments:

3. **The main speciality of the women novelists of this country is the depiction of a typical Indian family which has been studied from every angle by these novelists** (p.323).

However, it could be said that in this cluster of writers, both, Anita Desai and Nayantara Sahgal have taken deep interest in depicting family structure. These two writers have their thematic nexus on the
familial relationships. It is the depiction of the familial relationships which binds the two novelists with each other in a strong bond. Though, it could be said that while Ms. Desai has concentrated much on the depiction of various relationships, covering almost all such as husband—wife relationship, siblings’ relationship, parents—children relationship and relationship with in—laws, friends and society, Ms. Sahgal concentrates entirely on marital and extra marital relationships and the concept of marriage, specially in India and its futility. Marriage is the most auspicious occasion in a person’s life, in a girl’s life. Right from the beginning, they belong to the person they marry to. Love, respect, trust are the emotions which are directly related with the marital relationships in this country. Perhaps, that’s the reason, why marriages give rise to most sensitive and intimate relationships. However, it has limitations in the Indian context as well as it does not go with the nature of human beings. Marriage is an appetitite when the couple is full of husband—wife attraction. As the time passes, the taste for each other goes down. As a result of this, extra marital relationship creeps in and this becomes the basis of the broken marriages. Nayantara Sahgal has interestingly dealt with the problem of marriage as a feature of the appetitie and its attendant consequences.

This is a country where women are worshipped as idols, even the rivers are named after the Goddesses such as Ganga, Jamuna, Kaveri and Sarasvati. But the same country also witnesses the largest problem of dowry and women being suppressed and harassed in the most beautiful relationship of marriage. This happens because in spite of being the most
important event, marriage is a matter of destiny and appetite. Today, a lot of importance is given to the external factors such as the economical independence of an individual. Thus, according to Indian parents, the most eligible bachelor for marriage is one who is smart and economically well – to do. What they basically forget is to match the emotional compatibility and the intellectual level and the integrity of the character and religiosity in the person. As stated earlier, here the question arises, that whether a marriage could work merely on the external factors? Do feelings have no place in a bond in which the two individuals share themselves completely with each other?

In India, in the case of mismatched marriage, the girl is forced to stay with her husband, killing all her emotions and feelings. She never leaves the home but often burnt alive due to factors like dowry and other woman. While, most women adjust with their destiny and learn to live with it, by trying to find a way out. It is a pathetic situation for the sensitive females who because of their sensitivity fail to adjust with the hostile atmosphere around but at the same time are not allowed to leave their husbands. Such women are the primary concern of both the novelists, Ms. Anita Desai and Ms. Nayantara Sahgal and in most of their works, we find such women, who are essentially different from others. But here, it is noteworthy that Desai’s characters are neurotic who end their lives like Maya in Cry, the Peacock or Monisha in Voices in the City. But, Sahgal’s characters believe in fighting and opting for a way out like Rashmi in This Time of Morning or Simrit in The Day in a Shadow. They are basically true to human nature. They show that they
too, like men, have their individual likes and dislikes, tastes and preferences. Therefore, the development of her characters and the problems arising out of marital problems are true to human physical conditions whereas Desai’s depiction borders on psychic neurotic dimension.

The marital disharmony is the most common factor in the works of both the novelists. However, there is a difference in the treatment of theme by them. While the husband–wife relationships depicted in the novels of Ms. Desai are the worst ones in the form of the relationship of Maya and Gautama in *Cry, the Peacock* or Monisha and Jiban in *Voices in the City*, the same relationship is equally hostile but is subdued in the novels of Ms. Sahgal, which is clearly visible in the relationship of Saroj and Inder in *Storm in Chandigarh*. However, one does witness an entirely failed relationship in the form of the relationship of Som and Simrit in *The Day in a Shadow*. While, the wives depicted by Ms. Desai are hypersensitive to the point of neurosis like Maya in *Cry, the Peacock*, the wives of Ms. Sahgal are hypersensitive, but able to remain in their senses. That’s the reason that while, Desai’s protagonists react in an entirely irrational manner for instance, Maya killing her husband Gautama in *Cry, the Peacock* or Monisha committing suicide in *Voices in the City* or Sita eloping to an alien island in *Where Shall We go this Summer?*; Sahgal’s protagonists are sensible enough to come out of their relationships without breaking the essential cord of their own sanity for instance, Saroj in *Storm in Chandigarh*, finds that her marriage with Inder is not at all going to stay and she goes with Vishal to
start a new life, similar is the case of Simrit in *The Day in a Shadow* who opts for an extra marital relationship after discovering the failure of her marriage or Rashmi in *This Time of Morning* who opts for Neil after having parted with her husband Dalip. There is only a couple of good marriages depicted by Ms. Desai such as the marriage of Tara with Bakul in *Clear Light of Day* or the marriage of Sita in *Where Shall we go this Summer?* which is saved because of her husband, Raman.

While, Ms. Desai has evoked dominating and manipulative females who are responsible for the disharmony in their marriages such as Nirode’s mother in *Voices in the City*, Ms. Sahgal has brought out similar characters like Uma in *This Time of Morning* and Mara in *Storm in Chandigarh*. These females are beautiful and they know how to manipulate their beauty in a proper way.

Apart from these similarities, there are certain differences between these two novelists which cannot be ignored. Ms. Desai has tried to bring even the external factors as the cause of marital disharmony in the form of intrusion of in-laws such as the case of Monisha in *Voices in the City*, but, Ms. Sahgal has depicted westernized female who has kicked her heels, broken the orthodox religious and superficial emotional bonds. Her characters go beyond these limits and they live for their personal preferences, like and dislikes. They are bold enough to get engaged one and satisfy their physical urge with a man of their liking. Such dimension and variety is depicted by Sahgal. And Desai’s world and the women
depicted by Desai are psychic and neurotic with a suicidal tendency. Therefore, Sahgal’s vision is immoral and individualistic whereas Desai’s vision is moral and traditional and circumscribed by the taboos and restrictions of Indian ethos. Both, Ms. Desai and Ms. Sahgal have successfully explored the marital relationships.

Ms. Desai has given equal importance to all other relationships by depicting them in detail, but, Ms. Sahgal has concentrated entirely on extra marital relationships. In Desai’s novels we hardly find any extra marital relationship, except the extra marital relationship of Amla with Dharma and Nirode’s mother with her neighbour in Voices in the City. In the works of Ms. Sahgal, there are many extra marital relationships found such as the relationship of Mara and Inder and Saroj and Vishal in Storm in Chandigarh, Simrit and her boyfriend in The Day in a Shadow, Rashmi and Neil in This Time of Morning, and several indications of the same relationship with other characters.

While, the relationship of parents and children is given importance by Ms. Desai in the form of Maya’s relationship with Rao Saheb in Cry, the Peacock, Nirode’s complex relationship with his mother in Voices in the City, Sita and Raman’s relationship with their two kids in Where Shall We go this Summer, the relationship of Bim, Raja and Tara with their parents in Clear Light of Day, and Arun and Uma’s relationship with their parents in Fasting, Feasting; in the novels of Ms. Sahgal, we find the same relationship in the form of Sanad’s
relationship with his parents in *A Time to be Happy*, Kailas’s relationship with his parents in *This Time of Morning* and Saroj and Inder’s relationship with their kids in *Storm in Chandigarh*. Unlike Desai, Sahgal considers this relationship rather stereotyped and in almost all her novels, she has depicted a very typical relationship of parents with their children which involve love, respect along with some shades of differences which is found in the relationship of Kailas with his parents in *This Time of Morning* and the relationship of Sanad with his parents in *A Time to be Happy*.

In this context, Desai has given a lot of importance to childlessness in the form of her female protagonists who suffers because of the same reason such as Maya getting neurotic in *Cry, the Peacock*, and Monisha committing suicide in *Voices in the City*. The same problem is presented in a different manner in *Where Shall We go this Summer?* where the female protagonist doesn’t want to give birth to her child since, she is afraid of the hostility around her. But unlike Desai, Ms. Sahgal has kept her entirely away from this aspect of life except the character of childless Mara in *Storm in Chandigarh*.

The siblings’ relationship is vital in the novels of Ms. Desai in the form of the love hate relationship of Maya and Arjuna in *Cry, the Peacock*, the undying bond of love between Nirode, Amla and Monisha in *Voices in the City*, the love hate relationship of Bim, Raja, Baba and Tara in *Clear Light of Day* and the genuine sisterly affection between
Aruna and Uma along with a neutral yet loving relationship of Arun, Aruna and Uma in *Fasting, Feasting*, but the novels of Ms. Sahgal don’t have much in this aspect except a few relationships in the form of Sanad’s father Govind Narayan and Harish’s relationship and the relationship of Sahdev with his brothers in *A Time to be Happy*. Apart from this relationship, there is hardly any other siblings’ relationship found in the novels of Nayantara Sahgal.

Similarly, both the novelists differ in portraying the relationship of an individual with the society. The characters of Anita Desai are essentially rebels, fighting against the society and thus, are refusing to be a part of it such as Nirode in *Voices in the City*, Maya in *Cry, the Peacock*, Raka in *Fire on the Mountain*, Sita in *Where Shall We Go this Summer?*, Bim in *Clear Light of Day* and Arun in *Fasting, Feasting*, while the characters of Ms. Sahgal are essentially social, going with the society and following its norms righteously such as Vishal in *Storm in Chandigarh*, Rakesh in *This Time of Morning*, Sanad in *A Time to be Happy* and many more. Although, both the novelists have given importance to society, their depictions are entirely in contrast with each other. Ms. Desai emphasises on the importance of society by depicting it in a negative manner, but Ms. Sahgal has done the same by depicting it positively.

The familial relationships dominate the novels of Anita Desai, but in the novels of Nayantara Sahgal, they are only a part of the
story. With the freedom struggle forming the background of almost all the works of Sahgal such as *A Time to be Happy*, *This Time of Morning*, *Storm in Chandigarh*, *Rich Like Us* and *Mistaken Identity*, she depicts all the problematic relationships in a limited cocoon. Relationships are entirely restricted in their sphere in the works of Ms. Sahgal. for instance, the deteriorating relationship of Saroj and Inder has no impact on the political or the general scenario of Chandigarh in *Storm in Chandigarh*. While, in the novels of Ms. Desai, various relationships are in direct relation with the society. Ms. Desai, always makes it a point to make her relationships universal by the usage of various images which not only make her text rich but also create the desired atmosphere which forms the background of the novel such as her depiction of cities in *Voices in the City* which has Calcutta being used as the city of violence and muffled voices and *Where Shall We go this Summer?* where Bombay (now Mumbai) stands essentially for the hustle and bustle and moreover, violence. In the fiction of Desai, the cities provide irresponsible anonymity to the young – they do what they please to satisfy their selfish desires, but the same cities prepare a background for destruction for the sensitive lot. Desai’s cities stand for betrayal with her old and young, sensitive and insensitive, innocent and inexperienced characters who are entirely ignorant of the new metropolitan culture. Calcutta destroys and kills Monisha in *Voices in the City* and Bombay becomes the major cause of the fear and resentment of Sita in *Where Shall We go this Summer?* Apart from cities, there are various other images used by Ms. Desai in order to give a more subtle picture of her characters’ frame of minds like the imagery of Natraja and mating peacocks in *Cry, the Peacock*, the nature imagery in *Voices in the City* and *Fire on the
Mountain, bird imagery in *Where Shall We go this Summer?* and the time imagery in *Clear Light of Day*.

With reference to theme, the novels of Ms. Desai are essentially feminist and deal with problematic relationships, but the novels of Ms. Sahgal are called feminist or political novels and they contain the unabashed tint of human sensitivity with reference to various relationships.

Both, the novelists go together in changing the themes of their novels. The thematic shift in Anita Desai comes from *Clear Light of Day*. The shift is from the family structure to the crisis of identity and disillusionment as illustrated in *Baumgartner’s Bombay*. Similarly, the thematic shift in the novels of Nayantara Sahgal comes from *Plans for Departure*. The shift is from the family structure to the portrayal of rich class in the country as described in *Rich Like Us*. However, Desai returned to family structure with her latest fiction, *Fasting, Feasting* which has the changing familial structure as the main theme.

However, the concentration of Ms. Desai is wholly on the sensibilities of her women protagonists, which she did for over two decades, along with depiction of human relationships and specially marital disharmony, but Ms. Sahgal’s forte is the political novel and she has given us several astute descriptions of the partition era. She has also
offered her interpretations of history at the same time that she has trained her eye upon sociological details. Though, she has been occasionally criticised for restricting her imagination to the educated elite of India, this is an erroneous judgement of an author who is sensitive to the larger issues than her contemporaries which she brings into focus through the functioning of the people’s representative in politics and bureaucracy. Sahgal rightly recognises that political and social malaise is caused by the “preferences” expressed by men and women in power, she is able to create fictional figures who inhabit a very real world. In this relation, Jasbir Jain comments:

13. *Her characters and themes are essentially based on real life situations and thus, anyone can relate himself with them* (pp. 76).

The reaction of the main protagonists is similar in the works of Ms. Desai and Ms. Sahgal. The factor of escapism is found in the characters of both the novelists. One of the major gifts of the modern century is the increasing difficulty in living life. Thus, most of the individuals are confined to mere survival. But it creates a major problem for the sensitive people. So when they are dissatisfied by the people and conditions around, they find themselves in absolute dilemma. This is the problem with the characters of Ms. Desai and Ms. Sahgal. Their characters are sensitive and are devoid of any materialistic approach. They don’t get what they want and turn towards turning escapism out of
dissatisfaction such as Monisha in *Voices in the City*, by Ms. Anita Desai. In the novel, Monisha is utterly dissatisfied with her husband and her in laws and finds situations absolutely slipping out of her hands. But, instead of sorting a way out, she gives up by committing suicide. Similar is the case with Nita in *This Time of Morning*, who turns towards much elderly Kalyan Singh. Saroj is saved from the same escapism because of Vishal in *Storm in Chandigarh*, while, Raman saves Sita from the same in *Where Shall We go this Summer?*.

The characters of both these novelists, are sensitive, compassionate, intelligent and starving for love and harmony. They are similar and easily compared with one another. If Maya of *Cry, the Peacock* haunts the readers with her hypersensitivity, Sir Arjun Mitra of *This Time of Morning* gives the same feelings to the readers. Raman is a logical and positive character in *Where Shall We go this Summer?* by Ms. Desai and Vishal a strong, considerate and sensible character in *Storm in Chandigarh* by Ms. Sahgal. As stated earlier, both, Monisha of *Voices in the City* by Anita Desai and Nita of *Storm in Chandigarh* by Nayantara Sahgal opt for escapism. But, Uma of *Fasting, Feasting* and Saroj of *Storm in Chandigarh* are the real survivors at the end. Both Uma and Saroj are typical Indian females. Uma succumbs to the wishes of her parents and and suffers due to her mismatched marriage and Saroj succumbs to her husband, Inder. Both, Saroj and Uma are feeble. But, Ms. Desai and Ms. Sahgal have ultimately chosen the them to be the real survivors at the end. In this relation, Dr. K. Prasad comments:
8. *The main speciality of both Desai and Sahgal is their ability to bring out their weak characters, the only survivors at the end. Probably, they want to tell us that sometimes, the zeal for life and the ignorance of sensitivity helps in surviving.*

Gautama of *Cry, the Peacock* and Jiban of *Voices in the City* are similar to Inder of *Storm in Chandigarh* and Som of *The Day in a Shadow*. All the four are the tyrannical husbands who pay the cost of their dictatorial and feelingless attitudes. In *Cry, the Peacock*, Gautama is killed by his wife and in *Voices in the City*, Jiban’s wife, Monisha commits suicide. Similarly, Saroj leaves Inder in *Storm in Chandigarh* and Simrit divorces Som in *The Day in a Shadow*.

Mara is a woman of strength and resolution who runs a school at her own in *Storm in Chandigarh* and Bim of *Clear Light of Day* is enterprising and strong enough to look after her family by staying a spinster throughout her life. If there are survivors in the form of Uma, Saroj, Mara and Bim, there are also, the worst victims like Leela in *This Time of Morning* by Sahgal and Anamika in *Fasting, Feasting* by Desai. The former commits suicide because the traditional Indian values don’t permit an unmarried girl to be pregnant, while, the latter dies because the same values condemns a wife leaving her husband. Mira Mausi of *Clear Light of Day* tears off her clothes because of her failed marriage and Uma of *This Time of Morning* turns towards one night stands. On the other hand, if the marriage of Bim’s parents in *Clear Light of Day* is
successful, the marriage of Kailas’s parents is similar in *This Time of Morning*.

Along with victims and survivors, there are rebels. In *Voices in the City* Amla rebels by having an affair with Dharma, Simrit rebels by having an extra marital affair in the presence of her husband in *The Day in a Shadow* and Nita turns towards much elderly Kalyan Singh in *This Time of Morning*. Similarly, Nirode’s mother turns towards her neighbour after her husband’s death in *Voices in the City* and Rashmi shares an intimate relationship with Neil, after separating from her husband, in *This Time of Morning*.

Apart from rebels, there are women who are perfect wives such as Bim’s mother in *Clear Light of Day* and Kailas’s mother in *This Time of Morning*.

Both Ms. Sahgal and Ms. Desai are quite close in the portrayal of their characters. They prefer to analyse human relationships at a deeper level and are similar to each other in many aspects. The main reason of their sensitivity is their more or less similar backgrounds. Both Desai and Sahgal come from economically well – to – do families. But they differ in the context of parentage. Ms. Desai is a daughter of mixed an Indian father and German mother but Ms. Nayantara Sahgal belongs to an essentially elite, Indian family which is the first Indian political dynasty to rule over this country. Sahgal did her graduation from a foreign university, while, Desai is settled there. Ms. Desai is happily married, but
Ms. Sahgal had to opt for a divorce, later, getting re-married with an I.A.S. officer. Both the novelists belong to the educated and intellectual class of India. This factor brings the two together and makes both of them sensitive about the surroundings and the relationships.

Here are the two prominent Indian English novelists whose dramatization of relationships is the most exclusive and the most haunting in Indian fiction in English. They are the novelists who reflect the social milieu through the basis of gender and relationship.

Ultimately, it could be concluded that both, Anita Desai and Nayantara Sahgal, are the enduring women writers of the present decade. They have a special way of charting the pathway of feminine destiny in the country along with the depiction of the familial structure in their novels with a passion which is found in no other Indian English novelist. As Dr. N. K. Singh comments:

9. The passion of Desai and Sahgal is clearly visible from the relationships, they depict. This passion while separates the two from the other Indian writers in English, it also binds the two together making them similar to each other in many aspects.
REFERENCES

5. Vrinda Nabar,