CHAPTER II
Anita Desai And
Her Feminine Consciousness

The second chapter I have taken for research is about the feminine consciousness of Anita Desai. First of all "What is feminine consciousness?" should be known. A woman can't be defined only by saying that she is a woman but her definition is according to her "consciousness or awareness of her own femininity". The circumstances of a woman's life are dependent upon her society and this society makes her realize that she is a female. She has to become aware of her femininity. Actually this awareness of femininity is known as "Feminine Consciousness" or "Feminine Sensibility".

Because of this consciousness women get their feminine attitude. After comparing their thinking about Feminism with that of men, we find that there is a wide difference between them. It is both male and female writers who have written on Feminism and on woman in English Literature. The literature shows that feminine sensibility and attitude. While attitude of some writers is aggressive, other's is mild. Women writers are conscious of their femininity and it is seen directly in their writing. Only their outlook seems to be some different. The writer's sensibility is revealed through the inner depiction of her women protagonists. The depth of the women characters' inner world reveals the feminine sensibility of the writer and confirms whether it is mild or aggressive.
A feminist is one who is awakened and conscious about women’s life and problems, and feminist consciousness is the experience in a certain way of certain specific contradictions in the social order.¹

The contribution of our writers, especially women writers like Gita Mehta, Nayantara Sehgal, Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, Kamala Markandaya etc., in improvement of the women plight, can’t be ignored. If our writers had not written on women, on their plight and on their feminine consciousness, Feminism would be only a failure, nothing else. Our literature has forced women’s education, their independence, their equality with men and their rights as human beings. Indian women writers write in different ways but the message or conclusion of all their writing is always the following:

“Woman should rebel against her subordinate position; she should get education and economic independence. Her equality with man is her birthright. She must be aware of her social, economic, political and religious rights.”

A basic difference is found among the thinking and outlook of different writers and it is evident in their literature. As I have taken English novelist Mrs. Anita Desai in my topic for research, now the question that arises is “What is the attitude of Mrs. Desai towards feminism?” or in other words “What is her feminine consciousness?” Her novels reveal that being a modern feminist she suggests that the allusion of masculine superiority lies in the area of physical strength. Through her characters, she shows her awareness of women’s position in society. Being a woman, Anita Desai is not unknown to the plight of females in Indian male-dominated society. She has very successfully depicted this plight of
women-world in all her works. Her feminine consciousness is considered by the fact that she thinks that home is only a dreary desert without the presence of women in it. According to her, proper importance and respect should be given to woman otherwise the wheels of the chariot of family can’t run smoothly.

Her feminist outlook is not vague, partial and monotonous but is always suffused with poetic exuberance and moral imagination. ²

Anita Desai, as a contemporary writer depicts the conflicts and struggle in which the women find them now-a-days. She has also described efficiently women’s problems of adjustment and acceptance today. She has been successful in exploring different facts and aspects of feminine psyche. She has deeply plumbed the psyche of the Indian feminine. Her characters are endowed with a subtlety of sensibility. This quality puts them in a different class than that of other writers’ characters. Her characters show a peculiar mould of behavior and sensibility.

In all the novels of Anita Desai, the two important stages of elementary feminine and transformative feminine are significantly present. ³

Anita Desai, one of few Indian women novelists in English, has made an attempt to understand the unpleasant or struggling situation of her female characters. Many other Indian women novelists have been making the voices and achievements in the field of Feminism. But Anita Desai is not completely pleased with their views and achievements. It is due to their interest in the psychological aspect of their women characters which has been commonly marginal. Anita
Desai seems to be standing ahead the group of Indian women writers who throw light on the inner climate of feminine sensibility.

Desai is not completely a feminist but being a woman she probes the interior self of her women characters better than that of male protagonists. A critic argues in his critical scrutiny of Anita Desai’s novels:

Her novel is concerned with the emotional world of women, revealing a rare, imaginative awareness of various deeper forces at work and a profound understanding of feminine sensibility.

Anita Desai depicts the feminine psyche- not only of common women but also of abnormal women. She presents different aspects of women-life. She presents the predicament of sensitive women characters who face difficulty in adjusting in the present social set-up. Delving deep into the human psyche of her women characters, Anita Desai explores the feminine sensibility. Her novels are study on feminine sensibility of her women characters. She enlightens the submissive and passive feminine psyche of women in her novels. Her novels present the evidence of her consciousness of problems of women and she tries to tackle them by her psychic point of view. It has been done by her through her women characters. Anita Desai is regarded as an artist who has exceptional ability to study and express the feminine sensibility in a suitable manner.

Anita Desai’s most of the protagonists are women through whom she explores her feminine sensibility and her main concern is with the inner journey of her protagonists. Her preoccupation is with the woman’s inner world, her problems, her frustration, her sensibility and conflict inside her mind. Desai
believes that a woman’s fate is connected with her femininity, her sex or her being a woman. She is concerned with the exploration of the psyche of her women characters- of thought, emotion and sensation.

Anita Desai has tried to present the woman with her inner self as the central figure and it can’t be denied that she has been successful in presenting the predicament of women. Her works give a distinct image of women in the families. It seems that she understands the women’s reactions and responses to problems in different circumstances, their problems, sorrows, perplexities, complex working of their inner selves, their emotional involvements and disturbances. She has made an attempt to project a life-size picture of the contemporary women with all their desires, hopes and frustrations.

Anita Desai’s feminine consciousness can be understood better by comparing it with that of other Indian women writers. Actually all of the women writers are aware of femininity but their feminine outlook is quite different. They have taken different kind of women characters through whom they have explored their varying feminine outlook. Although all the women novelists have written on the same subject Feminism, their ideologies and their feminine attitudes are different.

Although many Indian novelists like Kamala Markandaya, Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, Nayantara Sahgal, Shashi Deshpande, Shobha De etc. have tried to explore the Indian feminine, Anita Desai is totally different. Kamala Markandaya’s female protagonists, struggling against poverty and starvation establish themselves in Indian women’s identity. Ruth Jhabvala exposes the
Indian women with social prejudices and their familiar compulsions. Bharti Mukherji’s main concern is “quest for identity of her women characters”. Shashi Deshpande throws light on the depressing influence of society on her women protagonists.

Virginia Woolf’s concern is with womanhood as a whole and Feminism is no aesthetically acceptable to her. Kamala Markandaya’s concern is with human beings and feminine sensibility pervades her fictional works. Jhabvala is aware of the position of Indian women in families and her novels explore the change in her attitude in changing cultural context. Nayantara Sahgal explores the need of woman’s equality with man and her relationship of mutual trust, love and understanding with man. The depiction of psychological traumas of the frustrated women is found in Shobha De’s works. Mahasweta Devi depicts the oppressed lives of women of lower classes. Women writers of west like Margaret Atwood, Angela Carter, Emma Tennant, Michele Roberts, Alice Walker etc. have experimented with the supervision of male authority. Among all Indian and Western women writers, Anita Desai keeps her own different place.

Desai has evolved her own technique in challenging female repression— not through platitudinous rhetoric or polemical statements but through a sensitive poetic ‘psycho-narration’.  

It can’t be denied that Anita Desai’s ideology and technique of writing, both are different from those of other Indian women novelists. The works of Anita Desai, a leading feminist, are really embodied with artistic skill. Her extreme cerebralism shown in her novels can’t be ignored. Some other eminent women
writers like Kamala Markandaya, Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, Nayantara Sahgal etc. are concerned with social and political issues of East-West encounter but the main theme in Mrs. Desai’s novels is “existence of women in male dominated society”. She seems to be attracted towards the mental agony and sense of insecurity in her protagonists’ lives. She explores the mental trauma with failures and frustrations of her women characters so efficiently that it attracts the readers. In an interview with Yashodhara Dalmia she said,

I find it impossible to whip up any interest in a mass of women marching forward under the banner of feminism. 6

Anita Desai’s feminine consciousness and feminine attitude has been shown through her women characters. She has taken a wide range of women in her novels through whom her feminine sensibility is known. She portrays the women who are in familial and social ties protesting against humiliation, ill treatment and injustice. Her protagonists are self-realizing persons struggling against the subordination under the male-dominated society. Her most of characters are eccentric or crazy. Most of her women characters are not common and women of fixed personalities. She entirely takes interest in the psychological aspect of the characters. She has depicted most of her characters as hypersensitive women who don’t seem to be chosen from the common range of society. She has not explored their problems related to food, house or clothing but the problems of femininity or inner psychic problems.

Her feminine sensibility is usually in the narrow confines of family life. She uses deep psychology to show the psychic reverberations of her women
protagonists. Her feminine consciousness can be considered by knowing her complex themes related to femininity or females. Her main themes are relationship between man and woman, woman’s quest for self, sexual repression and psychological struggle of her woman characters. Anita Desai always makes an attempt to enlighten the predicament of woman in Indian society through her characters. Her female characters suffer from alienation, privation, humiliation and negligence.

As Desai’s forte is the exploration of sensibility- the sensibility of her characters, she focuses her searching lens on the visible bit of reality which is like the tip of a submerged iceberg. The purpose of her writing is to explore this submerged truth and she does it through the exploration of the psyche of her characters.  

Anita Desai has depicted feminine psyche by portraying a gallery of women characters. This is why she is in some places labelled as a “feminine novelist”. She delineates the struggle of women against the oppressive environment of the society. In other words, she has thrown light on the patriarchal domination and on the incorporating psychic aspects of her female characters. Anita Desai’s some women protagonists don’t want to have children. In some of her novels, her women protagonists are barren or don’t like children. She has portrayed not only young and middle aged women, but also girls.

She has shown different ideas or attitudes of women in sexual matters. While some of her women characters feel deprived of sexual pleasures, some others take it as an act or quality of beasts. Although Anita Desai’s protagonists
are brought up to be quite or meek, they are highly sensitive who want to find an outlet to their pangs. Focusing on the women's oppression in India, through her women protagonists she highlights the missing individuality of Indian women.

Anita Desai's women characters become perplexed of their everyday life. Since they have feminine sensibility, they revolt against the subordination or ill treatment met to them. Her characters are sensitive persons who touch the limits of despair and try differently to be free from this despair. She delineates the inner lives of her characters who being the hypersensitive women, are in a dilemma. They are portrayed in a quest for identity or for a meaningful life. They have to suffer always for they make attempts to find honourable position, understanding and emotional contact in this patriarchal society.

Anita Desai's feminine consciousness can be seen in the feminine sensibility of her women protagonists or characters because she is involved with her characters. Her involvement can be explained by her own words. She has stated that all her writing is "an effort to discover, to underline and convey the true significance of things."

Her most of characters are introverts. They live in a different world created by them. They feel estrangement or alienation from the outside world. Their lives are full of anguish, silence, emptiness and longings and Anita Desai has depicted these things expertly. After some time, her women take different steps to get freedom from this tension and perplexity. Anita Desai has shown different attitudes of women towards their problems and because of these different attitudes they behave or act differently to be out of these problems. All
of them want to remove their emptiness, anguish and tension but they adopt different ways to get control on their problems.

Anita Desai has taken most of her characters from rich families who need not worry about basic needs of life like food, clothing and house. These characters can represent the psyche of common women but they are not real representative of common women entirely. Anita Desai handles the troubled phase in her characters proficiently, and this shows her feminist awareness. She understands the problems and predicaments of the women and depicts the growth of a female in male-dominated society. She reveals different aspects of women and this is the evident of her feminine consciousness.

Her women are emotional and struggle like prisoners in the prison of marriage or in their houses. They writhe in pain and struggle against social forces that make their survival difficult. They pine for emotional attachment, freedom and self-respect. They are quite intelligent but don’t get fulfillment in their lives. Mrs. Desai has also touched the feminine issues of violence against the women. Her treatment of some women characters throws light on the physical and psychic oppression to which they are subjected. She shows the intense suffering, loneliness and estrangement. Her female characters are mostly highly sensitive and neurotic. As a result of their failure in adjustment with the reality, they live in a world of dreams and imagination. Mrs. Desai’s women protagonists don’t resemble in their ideas. This is why they differ in their ways of searching the meaning of their existence.
Anita Desai’s almost all of the novels are the examples of her idea and that idea is following:

Whereas man is concerned with action, experience and achievement, a woman writer is more concerned with thought, emotion and sensation. ⁸

Anita Desai depicts the tumult and depth of the human soul—especially of woman soul. She uses thoughts, emotions and sensation in depicting the psychic aspect of women and plight of Indian women in patriarchal society. In some novels, she has used the techniques of flashback and stream of consciousness that are useful in portraying the women in pain and tension. Her feminine consciousness can be seen in these techniques. She depicts the mental state and feminine attitude of different types of women in the society. She doesn’t go round the characters but delves deeper and deeper into them.

She is a novelist of psycho-emotional situations and her main theme is woman’s position in her own family and society. She is mainly concerned with the depiction of psychological aspect of her women characters. She depicts emotional and psychological problems of women more than physical and social problems.

Anita Desai in both the form and context of her writings leaves unmistakably the feminine imprint without pausing to define “a female sentence”, “female time” or some other such inartistic formulation. ⁹

The themes and characters of Anita Desai’s novels are useful in considering her feminine consciousness. The story in most of her novels moves round her woman protagonist through whom Mrs. Desai reveals her feminine
attitude. Desai’s aim of writing novels is to discover one’s self or identity or to open the hidden truth of woman-life. This reveals her real feminine sensibility.

Anita Desai deals with the problems of women with their emotional responses to them. She deals with the isolation of women in this male-dominated society. While thinking about her concern and perspective, we come to know her feminine consciousness naturally. Anita Desai has taken some social issues in her novels and among them the institution of marriage is very important especially in the novels where the protagonist is a woman. Her novels are written around women characters whose marriages are ill matched or broken.

Anita Desai has depicted a wide range of women characters of all groups and ages. While someone is a married woman, other character is a child growing into girlhood. Some of her characters are old women. Their nature and attitude towards lives are different. Most of her women characters are neurotic and hypersensitive but some of her characters are intellectual. Some of her women, presented as keeps, don’t bother about the society and keep secret relationship with men.

Through these different kinds of women characters, Anita Desai’s feminine consciousness is revealed. She presents different feminine outlooks and feminine attitudes through her various characters.

Anita Desai is one of those novelists who have captured the vitality and changing roles of contemporary Indian women. What is apparent in all of her women is that they exercise their wills; they are mistresses of their own fates.
Thus, Anita Desai, being a woman has probed the inner self of her women characters expertly. This is the evident of her feminine sensibility.

Her first novel “Cry, the Peacock” is the story of a sensitive woman, Maya who feels alienated in her own house, living with her husband. Her husband, Gautama being a successful lawyer, has no time to share his wife’s feelings. An albino astrologer’s prediction about her death or her husband’s death in the fourth year after their marriage, haunts her. She becomes neurotic and one other factor causing this neurosis is her attachment to her father. In a fit of insanity she murders her husband and goes back to her father’s house.

In this novel, Anita Desai has depicted the feminine consciousness of a childless woman who is alienated from her husband and feels lonely and frustrated in her own house. As most of the Indian women, she is not happy in her house or satisfied in her life. In the beginning, she tries to adjust in her house but gradually time passes, and she becomes more and more perplexed. Through this character Anita Desai speaks of tumult of human soul, its depth and pathos also. Desai’s depth psychology is revealed in the portrayal of Maya’s mind. She has depicted Maya’s masochism expertly.

As is true of most of her novels, the major themes in “Cry, the peacock” are marital disharmony, loss of identity, escapism and a sense of meaningless of life. Much has been written on the themes and style of Desai’s novels. 11

Anita Desai has depicted the mind of “unwomanly” woman who is barren through her character Maya. Through Maya she has shown motherhood as the
ultimate objective of woman. Maya has been shown as a hypersensitive and neurotic woman. A reason of her estrangement seems to be her state of childlessness.

Maya feels deprived of worldly pleasures. Her husband is so much older than she, and he is a busy man, being a successful lawyer. He has neither enough time for sharing Maya’s feelings nor desire for sexual attachment. Maya belongs to a fairy world while Gautama has a typical masculine character in him. Her maternal love and solicitude in her relationship with other masculine characters like her husband, father and brother are significant in considering her feminine consciousness.

Assessing the function of symbol and metaphors K.K. Sharma says,

*Cry, the Peacock* is a typically feminine novel, a novel of sensibility rather than of action. It has the quality of an orchid and a flute about it. It concerns almost wholly with the terrors of existence, and it achieves its effects through a series of exploding and multiplying metaphors.  

Like some other female characters of Mrs. Desai, Maya also seems to be rebellious in nature. Dissatisfied in her life, she accepts a wrong way of coming out of her frustration. Her feminine consciousness is aggressive as she thinks selfishly—only about herself and murders her husband by pushing him down from the terrace in a fit of frenzy.

The writer presents the feminine sensibility of the woman who has accepted her subordinate position within marriage and has no self-identity. When her husband gives her occasional moment of companionship, she is grateful to
him. She becomes an emotional beggar. In the beginning, she shows passive aspect of woman-psyche but gradually her feminine sensibility becomes aggressive.

Anita Desai has presented different aspects of the woman in “Cry, the Peacock” through several characters who have their individual voice. The voice is metaphorical, not necessarily speech, but coming through the personality and the character of the women in the novel.  

Anita Desai’s second novel “Voices in the City” describes an Indian family affected by the city-life of Calcutta. Nirode, Monisha and Amla were bought up in luxury by an over indulgent mother. Settling down in Calcutta, Norode becomes absorbed into its Bohemian life. His elder sister Monisha gets married and lives in a traditional Hindu family. His younger sister Amla comes to Calcutta from the country to establish her career as an artist and gets involved with a male artist. Monisha takes a decision eventually and commits suicide. This event gives a twist to the story of the novel.

The three female characters Monisha, Amla and their mother represent three different kinds of women in Indian society and through these women characters, Anita Desai throws light on varying aspects of women-lives.

Main women protagonists Monisha, married in a middle class, socially respectable but plebeian family reveals the frustration in feminine psyche. She feels very lonely and frustrated with her tradition bound in-laws and so busy husband in her own house. She shows the feminine psyche and feminine consciousness of the women whose feelings are not shared by their husbands. In
plebeian families, the members don’t bother about a woman’s hobbies or feelings and this makes the woman estranged. This estrangement of feminine psyche has been revealed through Monisha. Monisha’s feminine sensibility is that of a sterile woman who craves for privacy. Her personal library is ignored by her in-laws, and one day she is accused of stealing money from her husband’s pocket. These facts make her alienated from the world and this alienation is a part of her feminine consciousness. When her loneliness and her frustration become unendurable, she commits suicide as many Indian women do at last.

Desai is not a feminist, but since she is a woman, she has completely probed the interior self of Monisha far better than that of Nirode. 14

Amla, younger sister of Monisha shows an opposite feminine consciousness to that of Monisha. She is a career-conscious woman who has come to Calcutta to establish her future as an outstanding artist. She reveals the feminine attitude of modern women who want to be independent. But in doing so, she comes in contact with an artist, Dharma and feels an attachment with him although she knows that he is married. This fact of her life throws light on a different aspect of feminine consciousness.

Anita Desai’s young characters crave for women’s lib. Even Anita of “Voices in the City” is not fortunate enough to free herself from the shackles of femininity. 15

Amla’s mother is the representative of the women who feel alone in their lives and seek companionship in the company of their friends without caring about their offspring who are carving their own destinies. She shows the feminine
outlook of a woman who is hated by her son but doesn't leave the company of her male friend. She seems to be indulgent.

Thus, " Voices in the City" is a study of different kinds of women psyche. These have been depicted through different women characters. In spite of being the members of one family, their feminine consciousness is totally different.

*Voices in the City* articulates Monisha's plight, psychic life and intimately shows the women like female birds in the cage. Monisha dies screaming for life, for the first experience of real feeling of pain awakens in her a desire to live.  

Anita Desai's third novel "Bye-Bye, Blackbird" is a story of love in the background of immigration and the strain of maladjusted marriage. Adit is an immigrant in London who lives with his wife Sarah. Sarah is an English woman who suffers a lot in her identity crisis. Dev, a new immigrant, comes to England to stay with them. Because of ill treatment with Indians, he feels disgusted while Adit is satisfied in his life here. Gradually situation changes and nostalgia is developed in Adit's mind while Dev feels attracted towards the English life. As a result, Adit decides to leave for India with his wife soon although she is pregnant. On other hand, Dev resolves to be settled in London. Sarah's feminine consciousness in this very novel is so attractive and praiseworthy.

According to Mrs. Desai,

*Bye-Bye, Blackbird* is the most rooted in experience and the least literary in derivation.
Anita Desai depicts Sarah’s feminine sensibility by focusing light on her identity crisis. In spite of being a working woman, she always searches for the answer of the question “who is she?” Though she is a working and independent woman, she is a devoted wife. She has to endure suffering and mental torture but she never loses her patience. She loves Adit so much that she suffers and gets mentally tortured but neither blames him nor complains against him. While going to India with Adit, she feels all the pangs and pains of leaving her own country or her motherland but doesn’t hesitate to go forward with him.

In the novel Sarah’s feminine sensibility is praiseworthy. Her parents accept her with her husband in spite of her marriage to an Indian. In her marriage to Adit, she breaks the racial rules. She breaks the social code of British society by marrying an Indian.

She has to hear the taunts of her colleagues and pupils but she never blames Adit for it. She always tries to keep her husband happy even while she suffers from mental agony of identity crisis. She feels that she has become an alien in her own country. She has to play two roles of Mrs. Sen and the Head’s efficient secretary in the school. She is mentally perplexed to know about her identity. The British people ruffle her with their taunts on her life with an Indian husband. Even after this, she loves her husband and leads her life according to him. She listens Indian music and prepares curry with spices for Adit.

In doing so, she can’t even discuss her problems or her mental agony with her husband. She knows only to do anything for Adit but never tries to get anything from him. Because of her feminine outlook, she doesn’t seem to be an
English woman. In other words, she has an Indian feminine consciousness. She tries to pretend to be happy with Adit’s Indian friends. She is so adjusting and compromising with her husband that she doesn’t refuse to go to India even when she is pregnant. She is not aggressive from any angle of femininity. Her feminine consciousness or her feminine attitude makes her able to prevent her marriage from being broken. Her silence is evident of her will to save her marriage. In this way, her feminine consciousness is really compromising.

Her next novel “Where shall we go this summer?” presents the predicament of a married woman who feels lonely and desires to triumph over her suffering of unusual existence. The woman protagonist of this novel, Sita becomes very disturbed and frustrated by the violence of the city and escapes by going to Manori Island.

Anita Desai explores the inner feminine lives of her female character, Sita. Sita, a married woman becomes disturbed and frustrated of city life. Being a woman, she can’t tolerate the violence of the city. Sita doesn’t seem to be happy in her married life and this fact points to Desai’s own attitude towards marriage. In the form of character, Sita, Anita Desai gives a picture of sensitive and lonely woman.

Sita reels out the story of the novel as if to unfold not the feminine magnanimity or the Eros laden manna, but to reject what is salutary and life affirming. ¹⁸

In this novel too Anita Desai depicts the emotional incompatibility between husband and wife. This incompatibility creates a sense of frustration in
Sita. For she is conscious of femininity, she feels frustrated and leaves her house with her children. Her retreat to Manori Island reveals her estrangement from people or society.

When she comes to know about her fifth pregnancy, she becomes aware of her femininity and decides not to deliver her baby. In her case “motherhood” is an aspect of femininity. The fact that she doesn’t want her baby come in this ugly world which is full of violence, is her love and affection for her undelivered baby. At the same time she doesn’t want to abort her baby. The fact that she doesn’t talk or behave logically shows her frustration, and this disturbance of mind is due to her feminine sensibility.

In *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*, there is aching void in the life of Sita as a woman, a wife and a mother. 19

The novel shows Sita’s estrangement from the city-life and then her return to the world of inner reality. Through Sita, Anita Desai depicts the feminine consciousness of a middle-aged married woman who is obsessed with her loveless marriage. Sita’s attitude towards feminism seems to be courageous when she says the great “no” to her life with her husband. Sita’s plight or predicament is symbolic of the loneliness and alienation of modern woman in her roles as a wife, a mother and a daughter.

One other female character of this novel is Menka, Sita’s elder daughter. She is a career-conscious and doesn’t like the atmosphere of Manori Island. She is eager to get admission in medical college and to go back to Bombay. In this way,
Anita Desai has depicted two different kinds of feminine consciousness through a lonely married woman, Sita and her young career-conscious daughter, Menka.

Sita (Where Shall We Go This Summer?) learns that life is but *a crust of dull tedium, of hopeless disappointment. It is now a critical commonplace that Mrs. Desai is a novelist predominantly depicting the feminine, abnormal sensibility.  

Mrs. Desai’s novel “Fire on the Mountain” tells the story of a lonely old woman, Nanda Kaul who is living in Carignano at Kasauli after her husband’s death. But the arrival of her great granddaughter disturbs her. Throughout her busy life with her husband, a vice-chancellor of the Punjab University who has betrayed her by keeping an affair with the Mathematics mistress, and her several children, she has always wished to live alone. One other woman character in this novel besides Nanda Kaul and her great granddaughter Raka is Ila Das, Mrs. Kaul’s old friend.

Nanda Kaul has always lived a life of compromises. She is not unknown to her husband’s extra-marital affair but she can do nothing besides keeping silent. Through her, Mrs. Desai wants to enlighten the plight of most of Indian women. She is an oppressed female who has to endure her husband’s faithlessness silently. In other people’s opinion Mrs. Kaul, the wife of vice-chancellor, is very fortunate and cheerful but in reality her inner life is full of grief and agony. Her heart is so full of bitterness that she wants to live in isolation not even with her own children.
A different aspect of her feminine consciousness is that she is not attached so much to her own children. But it doesn’t mean that she has not performed her duties towards her children. In her deeds she is a perfect wife and a perfect mother. She is the representative of the women who are not happy in their inner lives but pretend to be satisfied. Such kind of women neither complains against anyone nor blames anyone but becomes alienated from the world. Nanda Kaul is contented and satisfied in her isolated house and wants no disturbance in her isolated world.

Raka, Nanda Kaul’s great granddaughter is a small girl. She is by nature a recluse who is terrified to think about her drunkard father beating her mother and her weeping mother. Raka is a satisfied and independent child who never bothers about anyone. She is mistress of herself and prefers to go out alone rather than listening to her great grandmother’s imaginative tales. Her introvert or reserved nature was due to her traumatic childhood. She doesn’t like to play games. Through Raka, Anita Desai has depicted the psyche of a female child who is frustrated in her house and becomes a recluse by nature.

Ila Das, Nanda Kaul’s old friend is a welfare officer who portrays a pathetic character. In the end she is raped and brutally murdered by Preet Singh because she has tried to stop the child-marriage of his daughter. This shows masculine oppression over the feminine weakness.

Another woman character, Tara, Nanda Kaul’s granddaughter suffers neurotic breakdown due to her marital clash. She is abused and beaten brutally by her drunkard husband. In spite of this kind of ill treatment, she dare not leave him.
Anita Desai like all modern feminists would like to suggest that the myth of masculine superiority is somehow preserved in the area of physical strength. Through Ila Das’s rape and Nanda Kaul’s life of compromise, she shows her conscious awareness of women’s position in society, and this awareness is the only possible link of relationship between modern feminists and Anita Desai as a novelist. 21

Thus, Anita Desai has depicted different kinds of feminine consciousness through her different women characters in a single novel. She represents the passive and submissive feminine psyche of different females in this novel.

To understand Anita Desai’s changing feminine consciousness, we need the study of feminine sensibility and feminine attitude of her different women protagonists in her novels serially.

Her other novel “Clear Light of Day” is a family drama that covers a long period of time from childhood to maturity of Das children. The novelist depicts disturbing childhood-memories of Bim, Raja and Tara and their lives with the partition of India-Pakistan.

Main character of this novel is Bim who sacrifices too much by educating and getting her brother and sister married and taking care of her mentally-retarded brother Baba and alcoholic aunt Mira Masi. She is the eldest of the family and her parents had died. Therefore, she takes all the responsibilities of her family and remaining unmarried she fulfills them. This novel is a study on feminine psyche of girls, women and old woman.
Through Bim, Tara and Mira Masi, Anita Desai has thrown light on the different aspects of feminine consciousness. Before and after marriage Tara shows different feminine attitudes. Bim’s feminine sensibility seems to be compromising as she sacrifices all her happiness for the welfare of her family. Bim also presents the feminine sensibility of a self-dependent girl who is able to earn the money and take care of her family well. She is economically self-dependent but not a bit selfish. According to N.R.Gopal,

The novel is also a study in feminine psyche, not only that of girls and women but also of an old woman. ²²

In “Clear Light of Day” there are only three female characters but their feminine consciousness seems to be different.

Tara, Bim’s younger sister is an ordinary girl who seems to be waiting eagerly for her marriage. Her feminine sensibility is like that of most of common Indian girls who are eagerly busy in waiting for completion of their journey to marriage. The code of her philosophy of life was to be a mother and knit for her babies.

Thus, her feminine consciousness is passive. The girls like her don’t want any kind of career or to be independent. The aim of their lives seems to get married. Such type of women is far away from Feminism.

Through Mira Masi, the novelist depicts the feminine consciousness of surrogate mother. She is a virgin widow who has been thrown away from her husband’s house as garbage after his death. She has been kept in Das’s house to look after the children. She takes care of Bim, Raja, Baba and Tara as her own
children. Through her motherhood, an aspect of feminine consciousness is revealed.

Bim's feminine consciousness is different from that of Tara. While Bim thinks about her responsibility of her family and being like mother, looks after her younger brothers and sisters, Tara looks some selfish. She thinks only about her, gets married and settles in a foreign country.

Being a woman of rare virtues, a dauntless spirit, education and career, she emblematizes awareness. It will not be appropriate to say that Bim among all the female characters analyzed so far emerges more positive, more affirmative and one who completes herself both physically and existentially. 23

In this way, the novelist portrays Bim, Tara and Mira Masi through whom she depicts different aspects of feminine consciousness.

Her seventh novel "Village by the Sea" (1983) is a story of a family's survival in a small fishing-village in India. We find in this novel that Hari and Lila are siblings who live with their ill mother and drunkard father. They have to work hard to earn money to look after their two younger sisters and run their household works. Hari runs away to Bombay in desperation to find some work but Lila lives in the village to struggle alone. She struggles hard and makes her circumstances better.

Lila is an unmarried girl through whom Mrs. Desai has revealed different aspects of feminine consciousness. In spite of being a young girl of village, she
takes the responsibility of her family. She seems to be aware of her duties as a daughter.

Anita Desai, acclaimed to be adept at probing into the inner turmoil and turbulence, anguish and emptiness, silent longings and withdrawals experienced by hyper-sensitive women, treads a new path in the novel “Village by the Sea”. 24

Through Lila Anita Desai depicts the tender feminine sensibility of a young girl of thirteen years. In spite of being only thirteen years old, she is aware of her femininity and duties also. She belongs to an extremely poor family and represents many young Indian girls who don’t enjoy their childhood and look busy in earning money to run their houses. Her mother has been ill and in bed for a long time but her father is a permanent drunkard who never bothers about his wife’s health. Through Lila’s parents, Mrs. Desai represents the ignorance of wives by their husbands in India. Lila’s attitude towards life and her family reveals her affection and it has been shown as an aspect of her feminine consciousness.

By depicting Lila’s development and her strength changing the circumstances, Anita Desai throws light on the capabilities of Indian women. Through Lila she has shown that if opportunities and good circumstances are given to women, they can also be as assertive and productive as men. Thus, although this novel is a story of family, Anita Desai’s feminine consciousness depicted through Lila is noteworthy.
Her eighth novel “In Custody” (1984) is a tale of self-effacing man Deven who is a lecturer in a small college in Mirpore. One day he becomes glad to get a chance to fulfill his dreams when his old friend Murad asks him to take an interview of a great Urdu poet Nur. When Deven realizes that his dream is turning into a disaster, it is too late.

All the novels except “In Custody”, points to an inescapable; recurrent feminine tragedy arising out of the extraordinary sensitivity of women and the inexplicable insensitivity of men in relation to the finer aspects of life.25

This novel is considered to be only non-feminine novel of Anita Desai’s novels. But according to me, she has put an aspect of feminine consciousness through Deven’s wife Sarla even in this non-feminine novel. She represents the women who have usual aspirations to possess all the comforts but in their practical married lives, they get nothing but worries and have their dreams unfulfilled. Such type of women shows feeling of frustration, and this becomes a part of their feminine consciousness. She becomes upset because of distance between her and her husband and recalls that she was the choice of her husband’s mother and aunts but not his own. One other fact of her feminine consciousness is that although she is not happy in her life with her husband, when she comes back to house after some days, she becomes angry and has wrathful mood. Then, even in this novel about Deven’s life, Anita Desai throws light on one or two aspects of feminine life.
Her ninth novel “Baumgartner’s Bombay” is the life-story of Hugo Baumgartner who remains a wandering Jew all through his life. He has memories with him of the agonizing scenes of his childhood in pre-war Berlin. Then, he does business in Calcutta and Bombay. He was too dark for Germany but he is too fair for India. So in Germany and in India he remains a foreigner or a “firanghi” all over his life.

Through Baumgartner’s friend Lotte, we find Anita Desai’s description of another aspect of feminine psyche. It is the feminine psyche of a keep. Lotte is the keep of a Calcutta based Marvari seth Kantilal who keeps and maintains her in Bombay. He goes to her periodically for sex and enjoyment. Thus, Lotte represents the keeps and through her, the writer portrays the women for whom sex becomes a physical need as in her declining age, she initiates sex with Baumgartner. In this way, although “Baumgartner’s Bombay” is a novel about a male protagonist Baumgartner, through his friend Lotte, Anita Desai depicts the feminine consciousness of the women who are keeps of rich men.

Lotte succumbs to her lot submissively accepting the existing order of things in society. Grisela, on the other hand, is the “empowered” female dominating the male, thereby subverting the social order.²⁶

Anita Desai’s tenth novel “Journey to Ithaca” is a story of a young Westerner Matteo and his wife Sophie who have come to India in search of divine light. Matteo runs after spiritual love but the state of Sophie becomes realistic and she dislikes Matteo’s attitude and rebels against it but her pregnancy and illness pause her for a while. In Mother’s ashram in Bihar, when she gets recovered, she
finds that Matteo is enslaved by woman. She tries and discloses who the Mother is.

The novel is about Matteo and Sophie either equally but through Sophie’s mental state or mental psyche, Anita Desai presents the women of different feminine sensibility. Marital harmony between Sophie and her husband seems to be ended but although she is a Westerner, she doesn’t leave her husband Matteo in illusion about Mother. Instead of doing so, she tries too much, comes to know the reality about Mother and discloses it.

Her love and care for her unkind husband is an important aspect of her feminine consciousness. She tries too much to make her husband understand the fact of life and she has to endure the loss of her child but she doesn’t leave her husband in difficulty. Her loving and protecting nature and attitude reveal an aspect of her tender feminine consciousness. Her suffering, being a woman makes her aware of her femininity and it has been shown in this novel skillfully by Mrs. Desai.

In *Journey to Ithaca* Anita Desai presents the lives of European couple and Egyptian “Mother”. The novel actually deals with feminine sensibility through the characters.  

Her last novel “Fasting, Feasting” (1999) is a tale of Uma who is a plain and spinster daughter of a traditional Indian family. She is trapped at home and smothered by her overbearing parents. Her younger sister Aruna is not like her. She is ambitious who brings off a good marriage. Their younger brother Arun is disappointing son who is studying in America.
There are many women characters in the novel through whom we encounter different aspects of feminine consciousness. The main character of the novel around whom the whole story of the novel moves is Uma who is very simple and spinster. She shows the feminine psyche of the girls who are taught to do the domestic works since childhood. In many Indian families, the elder daughters are given the charge of taking care of younger brothers. This responsibility keeps them far from studies or career. Such type of girls shows a compromising aspect of feminine consciousness.

Aruna, younger sister of Uma seems to be so ambitious that some selfishness is seen in her character. Eager for her marriage, she completes her studies and brings off a good marriage while on the other hand, Uma’s marriage was proved to be a failure. Feminine consciousness revealed through Aruna is that of general women in Indian society.

One other woman character is Anamika, Uma’s cousin. She has been so brilliant and good at studies but her intelligence and ability are used to find a suitable bridegroom for her and she gets married in a family where she is tortured for dowry mentally and physically. Through Anamika, Anita Desai depicts feminine consciousness and helplessness as an aspect of feminine sensibility of Indian females.

In this way, through so many vivid women characters of different novels, Anita Desai has shown varying aspects of feminine consciousness. But having seen this closely, we come to know that there is a systematic change in the
attitude of Mrs. Desai towards femininity. She has shown her own attitude towards the problems of life through her varying characters.

Although in all of her novels different aspects of feminine consciousness come forth, the change is seen. In some of her novels, she shows aggressive attitude towards femininity or in other words, her feminine consciousness is aggressive. Her female protagonists like Maya and Sita are aggressive in their feminine attitudes. In some other novels, she reveals mild feminine sensibility. Her women of some novels show the feminine attitude that is gentle and moderate. These women are aware of their femininity but their feminine consciousness is not aggressive but mild. In her other novels, her feminine sensibility becomes compromising. In the beginning of some of her novels, the women become aware of their femininity but after some time they become so compromising or their feminine consciousness seems to be compromising or adjusting.

In her starting novels, her women are not ready to accept whatever meets to them and they become aggressive. They show their anger and frustration in different ways. Secondly, in her middle novels, her protagonists become moderate. Their feminine attitude is not aggressive. They do not react aggressively towards their feminine problems or plight. In her last novels, Anita Desai depicts a different kind of feminine consciousness that is compromising. In these novels, the feminine problems ruffle them as before but at last they compromise with them or become ready to adjust. Thus, Anita Desai’s feminine consciousness is firstly aggressive, then mild and at last compromising.
Anita Desai, an outstanding woman novelist is basically a novelist of feminine sensibility. A sensitive exploration of different aspects of feminine nature and feminine psyche is seen in her works. In her works we find that her women find the world so harsh and begin to live in their own world. This feminine world has been shown with exquisiteness by Mrs. Desai in all her novels.

Desai is a fatalist who believes that a woman's linked with her sex, with being a woman. Any effort to escape into freedom from this social menagerie is a terrible blow to one's personal identity.²⁸

Anita Desai has always given primary importance to the depiction of female characters. She tries to focus on the predicament of women in the society. She explores the feminine psyche of common and abnormal women. Anita Desai has explored the feminine consciousness of females of different age group, of child like Raka, married women like Sita and Monisha and old women like Ila Das and Nanda Kaul. Feminine sensibility of different kind of women like normal women, career-conscious women, working women, keeps, childless women and mothers has been depicted in her different novels.

Anita Desai is one of those few Indian novelists in English who have tried to understand closely the predicament of their female characters. She represents the welcome 'creative release of the feminine sensibility' which began to emerge perceptibly on the literary horizon after the Second World War. Anita Desai is explicitly, not pleased with the voices and achievements of Indian women novelists for *they have been content to
record and document and their interest in psychological aspect of their characters have been commonly marginal. 29

Anita Desai’s own feminine consciousness is revealed through varying female characters. These female protagonists show different aspects of feminine sensibility. Mrs. Desai’s feminine attitude has always been changing. Sometimes her feminine attitude is aggressive and sometimes mild, and in other novels her feminine consciousness seems to be compromising. In short, Anita Desai is an outstanding woman novelist and her contribution in the Indian feminine literature can’t be neglected. She has written a lot on feminine life and its problems. Her depiction of changing feminine consciousness through her female characters is worth mentioning.
Notes and References


   *Anita Desai, Where Shall We Go This Summer?* (Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 1982) p. 39.


