CHAPTER – I

INTRODUCTION
A special stress is being laid today on feminist literature and on the writing of women writers with view to defining how their work is different from that by men. Anita Desai, Kamala Markandaya and Nayantara Sahgal are considered to be the most significant Indian women novelists in English. In Markandaya's fiction the stress is on the rural background, and Nayantara Sahgal, while dealing with social problems, limits herself to the upper-class Indian society. In Anita Desai's novels, however, it is the exploration of the inner working of the female psyche that is most significant.

Anita Desai appeared on the Indian literary horizon in the year 1963, when her first novel, *Cry, the Peacock*, was published. The novel received a wide acclaim from the readers and critics. Her second novel, *Voices in the City*, was serialized in *The Illustrated Weekly of India* during 1965, which enhanced her popularity amongst the readers. Since then she has published seven novels - *Bye-Bye, Blackbird* (1971), *Where shall We Go this Summer?* (1975), *Fire on the Mountain* (1975), *Clear Light of Day* (1980), *The Village by the Sea* (1982), *In Custody* (1985), and *Baumgartner's Bombay* (1988).

Of all the contemporary women novelists, Anita Desai is the best known. However, not much is known about her life and views on literature. Unlike Mulk Raj Anand and others, she rarely talks about her personal life and thoughts. She says:
I confess I am afraid of speaking out about the art of writing, the mechanics of my craft. I have an intuitive and deep fear that by speaking of something subterranean and subconscious, I will destroy it—it is something so very frail.1

In her opinion, the creative art is something secret, and to make it public or to examine it in the cold light of reason is to commit an act of violence. It is something that must remain secret and silent.

Anita Desai has evoked a mixed response from her critics. Some have acclaimed her as a great artist whose "writings reveal inner reality and psychic reverberations of her characters".2 She is regarded as a writer whose goal is the examination of sensibility "... that clears or rumbles like thunder and suddenly blazes forth like lightening and is more compelling than the outer weather, the physical geography or the visible action".3 Others, however, have denigrated Anita Desai as a writer. According to them, she is "unable to invent events and episodes that may bring out the dramatic potential" in her writings, and "there are therefore no great scenes in her, no moments of marked beauty and intensity".4 Even her prose, which has won praise from Westerners, has not been

spared. F.A. Inamdar, for example, writes about the use of Desai's English prose that while going through her novels, "one may sadly remark that she found it marble but left it stone". Shiv K. Kumar also finds Desai's prose stilted and lifeless. He writes: "Never does the writer relax her grips on the style which often freezes into a strange academic anemia, stilted...it abounds in tritely compounded and palpably alliterative passages". Meenakshi Mukherjee, however, is of the opinion that Anita Desai's language is marked by three characteristics: "a sensuous richness, a high-strung sensitiveness, and a love of sound of words".

Feminism offers a fresh perspective for critical analysis, linking the study of literature with real life contexts. The novel, being rooted in reality, thrives in the complex of society with dense social structure. Social enviroment has changed vastly since the time of Jane Austen. Human experience, for centuries, has been synonymous with the masculine experience with the result that the collective image of humanity has been one-sided and incomplete. Woman has not been regarded as a subject worthy of interest and attention in her own right but merely as an entity that concerns man either in his real life or in his fantasy. During the last few decades,

however, a distinctly female literary tradition has grown out of the anxieties of women's life. Women writers have been drawn more to fiction-writing than to any other genre. The reality in women's life situations and its "interrupted" nature may be the chief reason for a close relation between women and fiction-writing.

The feminist concept of equality with men has undergone a significant change in recent years. The woman-centred perspective now locates specific virtues in the female experience. This concept defines those aspects of woman's experience which prove to be the potential sources of their strength with a promise of a better existence or better future for humanity. This consciousness articulates the hidden and suppressed voice, thereby generating power in the victims out of their own victimization.8

Feminism as a precisely defined concept relating to sociological and literary studies is a phenomenon of recent development. The discussion of feminism in literary context, particularly in the context of recent fiction in English, should prove an endeavour of a highly innovative nature representing a significant departure from the traditional mode of critical evaluation. We have not been able to see things as these feminist writers would want us

to see them. As a critical tool, feminism should aim at providing us an altogether new awareness of the woman's role in the modern complex world.

About two hundred years ago, Jane Austen as a writer had shown a sensitive awareness of the handicaps of her sex. A woman writer had to restrict herself only to certain permissible areas of life. Many other domains of human experience remained forbidden to her, and her creative talent never found a full-throated expression. The situation now has considerably changed.

The Present-day feminism is a historically specific movement, rooted in French Enlightenment thought (Mary Wollstonecraft) and in British liberalism (John Stuart Mill), and consequently wedded in deeply critical style to notions of truth, justice, freedom, and equality. In this connection the later eighteenth-century Mary Wollstonecraft, a British writer on women's rights and the nineteenth-century American suffragist Elizabeth Cady Stanton are particularly worth mentioning. Wollstonecraft in her "Vindication of the Rights of Women" in 1972 showed a clear sense of women's role and responsibilities as mothers. Elizabethan Cady Stanton argued in 1869 that "because man and woman are complement of one another we need woman's thought in national affairs to make a safe and stable government". and later in 1982 insisted on women's birthright to self-sovereignty".

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Toril Moi offers a critique of post feminism on the ground that it avoids taking sides. Gayatri Spivak has made an admirable effort to develop a materialist anti-imperialist feminism which draws on the insights of the recent post-structuralist, and post-modern theory. 10 Karen Offen, in her brilliant scholarly attempt to define feminism, has grouped different strands of feminism into two arguments: "Relational" and "Individualist". 11

A feminist novel for India is not a novel which a woman will write just because she is a woman and happens to know how to write. It will be written by one who has understood a woman both as a woman and as a person pressurized by all kinds of visible and invisible, external and internal, forces. Indian women novelists writing in English appeared in the literary scene fairly late, around 1874. The publication of Bankim Chandra's Raj Mohan's wife and Lal Behari Day's Govinda Samanta bore a testimony to the birth of a new era of freedom for the Indian woman, an era of increased opportunities and a more dynamic participation in the country's problems ushered in by the great social reorientation which came in at the turn of the century. 12

After Independence the status of woman in the

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Indian society underwent impressive changes due to spread of literacy, legislation and experiences of the freedom movement. Since the women novelists' socio-intellectual independence is tied up with India's political independence, Indian nationhood became a recurrent theme in all their early works. They concerned themselves with everyday Indian life, its customs, traditions and culture and the consequent clash of the Indian culture with Western values and ideas. These early novelists are generally traditional and often highly self-conscious. They preoccupied themselves with the problems of women and contributed to fiction some very intimate pictures of women, particularly during the period of adolescence, isolated in the purdah-clad families. They not only attended to problems of women in the Indian society but were also keen on portraying their social world, although in this respect they had a rather circumscribed vision. These novelists were, as it were, viewing society from their sheltered homes, not directly involved in the turmoil. Most of them came from the upper middle-class families and consequently did not have the opportunity to see the new society emerging out of a decaying colonial order.

Some of these women writers, however did try to give a realistic picture of India, particularly its poverty, squalor and oppression, human sufferings resulting from the evils of an unjust social system, but their preceptions lacked depth. In the Indian context, the concern of the typical Indian does not often go beyond the
family and the affairs of the family constitute for the average Indian the highest concern of life. He does not ordinarily involve himself with values or preoccupations that are entirely unconnected with his responsibilities as a member of a certain family. This means that by and large his socio-cultural concerns are of a traditional nature. Even intimate personal experiences and psychological habits tend to be dominated by conventional mores and traditional perspectives. And yet with all these psychological constrains, he can lead an independent human life, a life all his own with a number of secret impulses, urges and tensions controlling his inner life and not adequately understood or tackled by him, some of which could have socio-cultural factors for their sources and some others, primarily psychological. The earlier Indian women writers, while attempting to describe the life of an ordinary Indian man or woman, were largely satisfied with portraying the outer shell and rendering him her more conventional and typical than any human being really is. It is not surprising therefore that man-woman relationship in the novels of these writers is mostly dominated by the conventional Indian male viewpoint, without any proper insight into the complexity of the feminine experience.

It is after the World War II that women

novelists of quality began to enrich the Indian fiction in English. Tonu Dutt may be regarded as the first Indian woman writer in English. Her Bianca (1878) was published posthumously. She wrote within the limits of her own experience and thus her work turned out to be largely an autobiographical projection. Among other works of early women writers, Rajlaxmi Debi's The Hindu Wife, Cornelia Sorabjee's Between the Twilights and India Calling deserve mention. However, fiction writing by Indian women attained maturity only with the works of novelists like Kamala Markandaya, Nayantara Sehgal, Anita Desai, Santha Rama Rao and Attia Husain.  

Despite gloomy forebodings and diffident beginnings, the Indian English novel has compelled international attention, as is clear from the reception accorded to the fiction of Desai... Her novels have drawn worldwide attention and she stands in the forefront in the world fiction, in the company of novelists like Iris Murdoch, Doris Lessing, Margaret Laurance, Margaret Atwood and Flora Nwapa. Desai has been awarded the prestigious Sahitya Acadamy Award for her novel Fire on the Mountain and Authors Guild Award for excellence in writing for Where Shall We go This Summer?. Her later novels make a departure from her earlier writings. The shift in theme and technique had been initiated in In Custody. In these novels the softlight is not so much on the solitude and interior landscape as it was in the earlier works. Baumgartner’s Bombay throws a significant light on the

14 Ibid., pp.5-6.
Indo-German aspect of Anita Desai’s personality. More than that, it extends the horizon of human concern. The art and concerns of a great novelist are always evolving, and this is very much true of Anita Desai and her fiction.

Anita Desai is not a novelist whose predominant interests are social or sociological. She is, obviously, not pleased with the achievements of Indian women novelists, for "they have been content to record and document" and their interest in the psychological aspect of their characters has been, at its best, generally marginal. In her review of Amitav Ghosh’s The Circle of Reason, she shows her disfavour for the novelists who take interest in "the 'outer' rather than the 'inner' world, preferring the social to the psychological novels". Anita Desai, on the contrary, has written excellent psychological novels, which she has described as "purely subjective". She confides:

It has been my personal luck that my temperament and circumstances have combind to give me the shelter, privacy and solitude required for the writing of such novels, thereby avoiding problems a more objective writer has to deal with since he depends upon observation rather than a private vision.

Desai's main purpose in writing her novels is, to quote her own words in *Voices in the City*, to make us "See what the subconscious does to an impressionable creature, how much more power it has on them than sun and circumstances put together".17

Anita Desai excels in delineating human relationships. The most recurrent themes in her novels are "the hazards and complexities of man-woman relationships, the founding and nurturing of individuality, [and] the establishing of individualism" of her characters.18 Few Indian novelists in English have surpassed Desai in psychological delineation of protagonists. She tells one of her interviewers that as a writer, she is "interested in peculiar and eccentric characters rather than everyday, average ones".19 Her earlier novels almost invariably present the plight of introspective, hypersensitive women.

The recent decades have witnessed the emergence of a fresh awareness of woman situation, which has brought about an unprecedented shift in our appraisal of human condition. The importance of woman is being recognized in literature on various grounds. Earlier she had rarely been defined as a subject in her own right. For centuries, the


the human experience has been synonymous with the masculine experience. The importance of woman deserves to be seen in the context of what Michael Foucault calls "rupture" or "discontinuity" in history. Alex Comfort has asserted the value of "the ideology of the whole human being looking at the whole universe". 20 Woman is wronged in a society dominated by the male-oriented institutions and worldview, although she is the complementing principle to what Carl Jung claims to be the "psychic activity which transcends the limits of consciousness". When in determining the status and role of woman in the society "the ideal man posits opposite himself as the essential other: he feminizes it because the woman is the palpable figure of [the] other". 21

The discrimination and women's anomalous position have left indelible marks in the sphere of language also. Linguists like Stanley have posited a theory of "negative semantic space" for women. When women move outside their traditional roles of mother and wife, they say, they enter the semantic space "already occupied by the male sex". 22 Right from the beginning of their life, women are forced to feel dwarfed and acquire a highly circumscribed world view. To quote Bollinger, "Women are taught their place along with other lesser breeds, by the

implicit lies that language tells about them". 23 This unfortunate state of affairs has been responsible for many problems and confusions which women have been condemned to face.

It may be mentioned at the outset that while dealing with her female characters, especially their relations with men, their drives and responses and their sexual repressions, Anita Desai has made significant efforts to step out of the main current of narrative devices and linguistic techniques as developed by the earlier male novelists. She has tried to look at things essentially from the women's point of view. She keeps on trying to unite, like a resourceful poet, new verbal domains and integrate varying modes of perception and writing. Whether she succeeds or not in her efforts, one thing that is certain is that she is almost invariably eager to exploit various linguistic resources at her disposal.

While writing her psychological and purely subjective novels, Anita Desai feels free to employ the language of the interior, and the use and the free play of the language amply suits her temperament. What she writes is not an act of expression, reason and choice for her; it is a matter of instinct. Desai is conscious of the fact that she is writing in a language that has no tradition in India. But as she unravels the

mystery of the inner life of her characters, she does not face any difficulty in handling the English language. Like Khushwant Singh and Mulk Raj Anand, she is of the opinion that writing in English is not necessarily a handicap. She is neither apologetic nor defensive about her use of this language as a medium of expression. The English language has come to her in a natural way, and she is glad to be writing in a language as rich, flexible, supple, adaptable, varied and vital as English. English, she feels, is the language of both reason and instinct, of sense and sensibility, which is capable of both poetry and prose.

Characterization, themes and plots are the major aspects of Desai's writings, which deserve in-depth analysis. Characters comprise the most important and interesting aspect. Uniquely and intricately brought out, her characters generally indulge in a self-analysis and try to discover themselves in the process. Through the portrayal of their fear, insecurity, attachement and obsession, the writer beautifully brings out how they accommodate to or alienate themselves from their surroundings. Her main characters are extremely sensitive and intolerant towards any adversity and often rebel against the oppression from the family or society. Most of her female characters are responsible for their own actions and are free to choose their destiny, though they mostly opt for illusion rather than reality. Thus Desai's story, plot and style seem to be employed mainly to
delineate characters fully and clearly.

Although we come across similar themes in Desai's novels, she treats the same or similar issues from different perspectives. The protagonist finds herself alienated and experiences a sense of loneliness as she is unable to communicate with either the members of her family or with others around her. They drift away from the normal world and create their own world of dreams and illusions. Since her protagonists are cut out in a frame different from others, they resist the demands of society and turn out to be rebels. Because of lack of a proper channel of communication they become alienated and start brooding over their lives. All their wanderings and reflections finally bring them into new vistas of understanding which they had formerly ignored or rejected.

The novels of Anita Desai highlight interrelationships of men and women in typical Indian settings. There is depth in individual characters created by the novelist. It is not very easy to deal with many characters at the same time and describe their individuality in a way that makes each person stand out. Desai nevertheless manages to keep a balance so that the totality of the story does not slip out of proportion. The novelist may be taken to task for not having a strong storyline and a solid plot, her stories and plots remaining close to more realistic life-sketches rather than imaginary high ideals which do not exist in real life.
She does divide her novels nevertheless into natural sections interlinked and related to each other so well that the reader does not lose interest as the story flows naturally throughout. Her stories begin simply and grow gradually, reaching ultimately to a climax with which the reader is always satisfied; he may not be agreeing with the events, but he cannot help being impressed by the intention of the author.

Anita Desai's treatment of women in her novels has not been examined in detail, and there is a need to evaluate the psychological treatment of her women characters. If we try to understand why her characters behave the way they do, we will be better able to appreciate the problems Indian women have to face in the society. An attempt has been made in the present study to examine Desai's novels with a view to analysing her treatment of some of these important issues.

Alienation is one of the major issues dealt with in Desai's novels. Most of her protagonists alienate themselves by choice or be force. They suffer from many inner problems, the most upsetting being isolation. Desai has taken up this crisis which torments and threatens a sensitive soul. Obviously, her female characters are highly sensitive and suffer from an acute sense of alienation. Even while surrounded by members of their family and friends, they feel cut off and cannot become intimate with anyone. This unfortunate plight of her characters has been very well explored by the novelist.
Desai's novels shed significant light on man-woman relationship. Her protagonists are hypersensitive and alienated, because of which they do not open up or converse with others, and this situation worsens when this lack of sharing creeps into marital relations. Each novel presents the basic features of marital discord. Woman's individual identity is not accepted in society, because of which she finds herself incapable of adapting to married life. Unable to adjust themselves to their surroundings, Desai's women characters have to face psychic problems. To explore and reveal this psychic state is the major concern of the novelist. All of her protagonists—Maya, Monisha, Sarah, Sita, Nanda Kaul and Bim have to face psychological problems, which have been dealt with by the novelist, very ably. As for their status and role in society, they do not have any real place in their homes. Even the working women like Sarah and Amla have no independence or identity worth the name. An attempt has been made in the following chapters to discuss their plight and its treatment by the novelist on the basis of a close textual analysis of Anita Desai's novels.