Preface

This dissertation attempts to place in a critical perspective the theme of alienation in Indian womanhood in the fictional world of Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande and Bharti Mukherjee who have concentrated on the emotional world of women and their responses to the world around them.

The consciousness of the changed times on the one hand and the socio-cultural mores and values that have bestowed on them a definite role on the other have led to the fragmentation of the psyche of the contemporary Indian woman. Unlike her counterpart of the past, the woman of today is intensely aware of her familial and societal position. Caught between tradition and modernity they need to redefine themselves and their place in the family and society. The problems confronted by them are not entirely gender-specific, yet circumstances that trap most of them derive from roles assigned to women in the traditional Indian milieu.

Every Indian is shaped by the ethos of his culture which is extremely complex. Since an understanding of the personality development of the Indian woman is imperative to authentically analyse the female protagonists in the novels taken for study, this is a literary study gleaning information from sociology and psychology. Because of the absence of any consensus regarding the intricacies of human thought and behaviour, contributions from different psychological theories are taken. Though these novels are essentially women centred this is not a feminist study.

Woman has been the focus of many literary works down the centuries. One cannot easily ignore the Indian woman in an age of alienation and identity crisis. With their characteristic sensitivity and sensibility Desai, Deshpande and Mukherjee portray a wide spectrum of contemporary Indian woman belonging to different ages, classes and spheres in her various roles as daughter, wife, grandmother and breadwinner of the family. Not only the novels, the novelists themselves show a variety of backgrounds: Desai is of mixed parentage living in India, Deshpande remains a total Indian, and the Indian born, western-married Mukherjee lives in
America. While Desai concentrates on the hypersensitive urban woman in her domestic space and Deshpande deals with problems confronted by the educated, employed woman torn between tradition and modernity, Mukherjee transports us from the East to the West to understand the plight of immigrant Indians. Though these novelists have gained international acclaim, a comprehensive study about the treatment of the basic issue of alienation in their novels has not yet been attempted. Hence the scope of this topic. Since only those novels which centre on Indian women are analysed some of the novels of Desai and Mukherjee are excluded.

The introductory chapter defines the term alienation and traces its trajectory from theology to philosophy. It also tracks the concept of Indian womanhood and the contributions of women writers to the fictional realm of India. The successive chapters are devoted to the analysis of the alienated protagonists in the novels of Desai, Deshpande and Mukherjee respectively.

Chapter 2 focusses on the novels Cry, the Peacock, Voices in the City, Where Shall We Go This Summer?, In Custody, Clear Light of Day, Fire on the Mountain and Fasting, Feasting where Desai explores the disturbed psyche of the modern Indian woman. It analyses the incompatible marriages of these women who are burdened by the load of an equally dissatisfying past. While some are able to liberate themselves out of their dilemma by introspection and an honest appraisal of themselves, the others fail miserably.

Chapter 3 records the suffocation experienced by educated, thinking women in the institution of marriage which is governed by customs and traditions. Analysing The Dark Holds No Terrors, Roots and Shadows, That Long Silence, The Binding Vine, A Matter of Time and Small Remedies of Deshpande, it discusses the issues of gender discrimination, mother-child alienation, rape in and outside marriage, and extramarital relationship. The distinct phases of a Deshpande character--the present, separation and transformation--are also highlighted.

Chapter 4 concentrates on the alienation felt by dislocated Indian women in the novels of Mukherjee. Through The Tiger's Daughter, Wife and Jasmine it voices
the immigrant sensibility that is caught in the cross-cultural dislocation. It analyses the problems of alienation and assimilation throwing light on man-woman relationship as well.

The concluding chapter is a consolidation of the preceding chapters. After examining the various factors contributing to the alienation of the Indian woman by comparing and contrasting the three novelists an attempt is made to suggest a means to achieve their identity as individuals. The three novelists, withal the similarities and differences among them, try to assert the fact that inspite of the constrictive bonds life can be made meaningful by developing the sense of self-esteem. An honest appraisal of oneself will definitely help woman to emerge out of the image thrust on her. The healing power of love, that is not based on submission but on a determination to be sane, and a resolution to establish her own identity will aid woman to emerge out of the pits of darkness.