CHAPTER - I

INTRODUCTION

This study attempts to make a probe into the personal trauma experienced by some of the characters in the novels of Virginia Woolf and Anita Desai. A strange similarity can be perceived among the characters created by these two gifted writers, although they belong to socially and culturally different milieus. This similarity is rather interior than exterior. Since the human individual is an integrated being with a mind, body and spirit, the confused psyche of the characters in the novels of Woolf and Desai are viewed from different angles and thus takes a holistic approach in the analysis.

The protagonists in their novels are mostly disoriented individuals facing a hostile world around them. In order to express the agony experienced by their protagonists, Woolf and Desai use the interior monologue and the stream of consciousness as their narrative techniques. The abandoning of the traditional linear structure of the novel, provides them with the scope for padding their novels with a liberal use of symbols, motifs and archetypes. This in itself can be studied as an exclusive topic for comparison. Both Woolf and Desai are keen observers of Nature and what they observe – even if it is an insignificant creature like a snail or a praying mantis – gains inordinate magnitude, as it becomes a relevant symbol or
a metaphor in their novels. There are also a few dream sequences and visions, which the two writers use to project the inner anguish of their sensitive characters.

The archetypal pattern of the quest for an unattainable ideal is a recurrent theme in the novels of both Woolf and Desai. Memory and nostalgia form another of their frequent themes. Recollection of past memories causes tremendous psychological disturbances in most of the characters. It is because many of the conflicts and anguish suffered by them are rooted in some past event, usually in the family environment. Their novels trace the changing patterns of society, especially that of the family structure. Marital disappointments and frustrations are often dealt ironically in their novels, and they reveal the feminine point of view. In order to find an alternative to the male-dominated views of reality, they portray women who attempt to break through the suffering that traditional society offers them, in order to gain their self worth.

The second chapter, "The Making of the Novelists", makes an overview of the vision of the two novelists, Virginia Woolf and Anita Desai. A basic knowledge about the life and vision of these two novelists are necessary to understand why inner desolation is a characteristic paradigm in most of their novels. As for Virginia Woolf, her personal history itself is a prolonged sequence of existential angst. A child of intensely depressed parents, she had imbibed intense and exaggerated feelings of gloom. The sensitive Virginia's already insecure world was shattered with the death of her mother and the chain of deaths that took place in the family. The intellectual company of her Bloomsbury friends distanced her from all spiritual consolation. And finally her marriage to Leonard
Woolf, the most rational among the Cambridge intellectuals, helped only to drive her deeper into the psychological imbalance she was already experiencing. All the suppressed emotions within her found expression in her writings, especially in her novels.

Biographical criticism has been central to Woolf criticism, ever since her nephew Quentin Bell published the biographical sketch on her life, *Virginia Woolf: A Biography*. The publication of this two-volume biography in 1972 produced a torrent of interest in Woolf as a person rather than as a writer. It is still widely acclaimed as the most authoritative biography of Woolf, and it complements the published diaries and letters of Woolf and her autobiographical sketches in *Moments of Being*. In fact, an earlier biography by Aileen Pippett, *The Moth and the Star* was published in the US in 1955 with Vita Sackville-West supporting it. Infuriated to see Pippett quoting without permission the letters of Woolf to Vita, Leonard Woolf prevented the book from being published in England. More biographies of Woolf started appearing in the 1970s and 1980s by writers like Lyndall Gordon, Alnna Bond, Thomas Caramagno, Roger Poole, Jane Marcus, Cynthia Ozick, and Phyllis Rose. Nigel Nicolson, the son of Virginia Woolf's close friend Vita Sackville-West, also has written a biography in which he looks back on his childhood to present his memories of Woolf. He also evaluates her as a feminist writer and a writer on war.

Among these biographies, Roger Poole's *The Unknown Virginia* deserves a special mention here. Since its first publication in 1978, Roger Poole's book has achieved recognition as one of the classic studies of Woolf's life and
work. Poole revised the conventional view of Woolf as 'mad' by treating her breakdown as socially intelligible. The theme of madness was reconceived in order to provide an intellectual biography that traced Woolf's fear and resentment to her childhood and adolescence. He shows how Woolf's challenge to accepted conventions of communication, in both her life and work, is an appeal for meaning. Long considered radical and iconoclastic, this book now occupies a central place in the gender and modernist studies on Woolf. The fact remains that the Woolf scholars seldom acknowledge the rich philosophical context in which Poole has written this work.

The more recent studies on Woolf include a newer biography by Mitchell Leaska-Granite and Rairbow (1998), and Hermione Lee's *Virginia Woolf* (1996). Leaska has also written a book on *To the Lighthouse* and another work on Woolf's novels in 1977, and has edited some of her journals and letters. This proliferation of biographies proves Woolf's own statement that the modern post-Lytton-Strachey biographer has "ceased to be the chronicler; he has become an artist." Other aspects of Woolf studies include the psycho-analytical and feminist studies. In his *Critical Issues: Virginia Woolf*, published in 2000, Linden Peach has discussed Woolf as a political thinker, interested in the complex relationship between history, politics and language.

A very recent study on Woolf published in 2002 is a 'psychobiography' by a clinical psychologist, Katherine Dalsimer. Her book *Virginia Woolf: Becoming a Writer*, is an exquisitely sensitive exploration of the process of memory. Using Woolf's early journals, written when she was 15, 17,
and 21, and interposing those thoughts with Woolf's letters, book reviews and essays, as well as her novels, Dalsimer provides an excellent introduction to the core of psychoanalytic understanding of Woolf as a woman and a writer. In his Pulitzer Prize winning novel The Hours Michael Cunningham brings this literary idol back to life, as he intertwines Virginia Woolf's story with those of two more contemporary women. Both their lives are linked with Woolf's 1925 novel Mrs. Dalloway.

Scholars and common readers alike are exploring new grounds in Woolf studies. Virginia Woolf has been interpreted as a feminist, a modernist, a victim of child abuse, a snob, a socialist, a diarist, a pacifist, an incest survivor, an activist and foremother of women's studies. It is virtually impossible to categorize her into any particular slot; so varied are the influences she has on contemporary writers and popular culture. Reading Woolf by feminist theory, postcolonial criticism and cultural studies offers new insights on this great writer. She has even become a part of the political history of the early twentieth century.

Anita Desai is one of the world's best-known authors, a representative of the present day Indo-Anglian fiction. Her new style of writing is different from that of many Indian writers, as it is much less conservative than Indian literature has been in the past.

While the avalanche of biographies, diaries and personal letters of Woolf unravel before us the mind and feelings of Woolf, Anita Desai and her novels have remained as an enigma for decades. Though there are no such written
documents that can throw light on the personal feelings and the underlying theories of this gifted novelist, scholars, critics, researchers and students have never stopped marvelling at the supremacy of ideas in her works. The immense talent and massive erudition with which Desai deals with the ruminative mood and the presence of tacit realities in her novels have persistently intrigued the minds of the discerning readers. But in recent years Desai has scaled down the gap between herself and her readers by participating in interviews and discussions, and by expressing her thoughts in the reviews and articles, which appear occasionally in magazines, scholarly journals or in the newspapers.

Scholars have quite extensively and intensely probed Desai’s fiction, with a frequent thrust on the psychological and intellectual facets rather than the social, cultural or physical areas. J.P Tripathi in his Mind and Art of Anita Desai observes that Desai’s works prove that she “possesses one of the healthiest and psychologically most balanced minds in the realm of Indo-Anglian fiction”\(^2\). He emulates the sanity of her tastes and attitudes, in spite of the weltschmerz or the mood of melancholy in the characters in her novels. Usha Bande’s Novels of Anita Desai: A Study in character and Conflict provides an excellent and provocative introduction to Desai’s fiction. Bande surveys the novels of Desai during the period from 1963 to 1984 - from Cry the Peacock to In Custody. Concepts from Karan Horney’s Third Force Psychology are applied in her study to explore the psyche of the characters. S. Indira in her Anita Desai as an Artist: A Study in Image and Symbol throws light on the felicitous use of imagery and symbols in the novels of Anita Desai. Another work on the Symbolism in Desai’s novels is Kajali
Sharma's Symbolism in Anita Desai's Novels. Bidulata Choudhary has provided a perceptive study of the feminine sensibility against a fast changing society in Desai's novels in *Women and Society in the Novels of Anita Desai*.

Other than the above-mentioned studies, there are many full-length works and scholarly essays written about Desai's novels and her characters. The fine subtleties, the small but significant turn of events, the role of place in the formation of mental scene, the vitality of characters, the force of their personalities, the intricate web of relationships have all been examined by many researchers, that Desai has become a part of a new literary tradition of Indian writing in English. B. Ramachandra Rao, Meena Belliappa and Mrinalini Solanki are some of the writers who have written on Desai as a writer. Kunj Bala Goel has made a study on the language and theme in Desai's fiction. Jasbir Jain focuses attention not only on Desai's thematic concerns but also on her narrative techniques in her *Stairs to the Attic: the Novels of Anita Desai*.

Other than full-length books, there have been quite a number of collected volumes of scholarly articles on Desai. The Jungian critic Bettina Knapp has written a penetrating article on Desai's *Fire on the Mountain* in the volume *Women in Twentieth-Century Literature: A Jungian View*. There have been comparative studies too on Anita Desai. She has been compared with novelists like Kamala Markandaya, Arun Joshi, Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, and Margaret Atwood.

Although there have been many remarks about the similarity between Virginia Woolf and Anita Desai in the vast corpus of literary articles and
studies, there have been very few researches done on the topic. Asha Kanwar has made a comparative study on Woolf and Desai in her *Virginia Woolf and Anita Desai: A Comparative Study*, which was published in 1989. The comparison made in this book is on the pre-occupation with Time as seen in the novels of the two writers. Using the distinction made by Bergson between the clock time and the psychological time, Kanwar explores how Woolf and Desai use Time and Memory in their novels for thematic and formal purposes. G. Sree Ramulu has made a recent comparative study on Woolf and Desai in his *Voyage into Consciousness: The Fiction of Anita Desai and Virginia Woolf* with special reference to *Where Shall We Go This Summer* and *To the Lighthouse*. The comparison made by Sree Ramulu is on the introspective voyage made by Mrs. Ramsay and Sita into the darkness of their consciousness, and how it helps them to discover the 'order' beyond 'chaos'.

The third chapter of the present study discusses the different aspects of Inner Desolation, the central theme of this study. Desolation as such is a very complex experience that it cannot be explained in scientific terms. In a wider sense, the word 'desolation' means a sense of loneliness combined with grief. To use a medieval medical term, desolation is "Melancholy", the black bile that issues forth depression. In Psychoanalysis, desolation has a significant place in the scheme of things.

In this present study, the psychoanalytical theories propounded by Carl G Jung and his associates are used, with a special emphasis to the concept of individuation, in order to analyse the desolation experienced by some of the
characters in the novels of Virginia Woolf and Anita Desai. Mental disorder occurs when the ego and the unconscious change places. Individuation is the process of harmonizing the conscious with the unconscious. Desolation is, in fact, an integral part of the process of individuation. Only after passing through crisis situations, where the psyche experiences anxiety, conflict or anguish, can one reach the goal-point of individuation.

In Philosophy, desolation is termed as existential anguish. The existential loneliness or anxiety is a phenomenon, which is beyond the ordinary psychological dynamics. It is a terrifying sense of anxiety, depression, and loneliness, which has no particular external cause. It is an inward trouble happening somewhere deep within one’s being. A person struck with such an existential malaise, does not realize that he is at the door of the unconscious, which, if opened, could allow him to enter the realm of individuation. But most of the existentialists stop at the threshold and keep groping in the darkness of desolation, refusing to let go of their predicament. We meet such characters in the novels of Desai and Woolf.

Desolation has a spiritual dimension too. As a spiritual experience, desolation has been explicitly termed as “the dark night of the soul” by St. John of the Cross. St. Ignatius of Loyola in his *Spiritual Exercises* calls desolation the ‘darkness of soul’ or as the ‘turmoil of spirit’. Spiritual desolation is the experience of loving neither God nor neighbour. During the time of desolation, a person starts feeling anxious, trouble, restless and sad. He or she feels separated from God and thus becomes out of touch with his/her centre. The mind becomes
fragmented, frivolous and giddy. It prevents one from seeing reality in its right perspective, and the person becomes incapable of making any balanced judgments. The only remedy for such desperation is to try to get back to God. It will give a person the sense of being centred and at peace with himself. The characters in the novels of Desai and Woolf do not have faith in the existence of God. Such a lack of spiritual conviction keeps them forever in the labyrinth of their own confused psyche. As in Yeats’ Second Coming, they turn and turn in their intellectual and emotional gyres, because the Centre or God cannot hold them and hence mere anarchy is let loose in their inner selves. But that is the negative aspect of desolation. The spiritual aspect of desolation calls one to walk through the valley of Tribulation and the desert of desolation and even through the Slough of Despond, like Christian in Pilgrim’s Progress, but finally there is the Paradise awaiting, or the Spiritual Consolation. Unfortunately the characters of Desai and Woolf prefer to wallow in the slough of their despondency.

The fourth Chapter will focus on the inner desolation caused by the unhealed memories of some past hurts, which remain in the conscious, sub-conscious or unconscious psyche of certain characters. The desolation even leads to such drastic consequences like suicide. The novels chosen for this study are Woolf’s Mrs. Dalloway and Desai’s Cry the Peacock. The main focus of this study would be on Septimus Smith in Mrs. Dalloway and Maya in Cry the Peacock – both are manic-depressive schizoids. They begin their inward journey with some unremembered sorrow and slowly they begin digging out beautiful caves into their past memories. As the characters continually return to the past, they become more
aware of their fugitive present. Like most of the existential philosophers, Septimus and Maya can go only as far as the stripping off of the illusions of Consciousness and they stop there, confused and puzzled only to subjugate themselves to psychotic symptoms. The individuation process, on the other hand, demands active co-operation and conscious participation by the conscious self or the ego, in order to develop into a full human being. Clarissa in *Mrs. Dalloway* is a striking contrast to Maya. Although Clarissa makes a psychological identification with Septimus, she is able to remain detached and can even see in Septimus’s death her own tragedy. In fact, Clarissa feels released and relieved with the death of Septimus. It helps her to drift into a partly individuated self.

The fifth chapter deals with the remarkable similarity that can be perceived between Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* and Desai’s *Where Shall We Go This Summer*? The similarity is in the narrative technique and the poetic style that intensify the theme of desolation. Both the novels are set in remote islands. In *To the Lighthouse*, we meet a group of people gathered in the summerhouse at Finlay in the remote Skye Islands of Hebrides. It is their struggle with life, their vacillating movement from integration to disintegration and the underlying sadness and the inner desolation experienced by them that is depicted by Virginia Woolf. In *Where shall We Go This Summer?*, Anita Desai gives us a similar locale in the remote island of Manori and the protagonist Sita arrives there with her two children – Menaka and Karan – to revive her childhood memories in her ancestral house which has now become an empty and dilapidated edifice. If Woolf gives us a covert narrative of the inner workings of the souls of her characters, Desai’s is
quite an overt description of the paranoiac angst of Sita, which reaches almost the peak of neurosis.

The sixth chapter is a comparative study of Woolf’s *The Waves* and Desai’s *Voices in the City*. The plots of these two novels have nothing in common. Woolf’s is an abstract and mystical novel with a series of dramatic soliloquies, while Desai’s novel is much more concrete in form and theme. But the angst of isolation experienced by the characters in a hostile world gives the common meeting point. The Waves and Voices in the City can be considered the most mystical novels written by Woolf and Desai. In both the novels, the main thrust is the mental climate of the very intense and talented characters. Such intensity can be probed and expressed only by a profuse use of imagery and symbols. The image of the unshelled snail is a prominent symbol used by both Woolf and Desai, to present the existential anguish of the characters. It depicts the predicament of man in a hostile world.

The two novels *The Waves* and *The Voices in the City* reinforce the basic existential attitude of inner desolation. The characters revolve round their self-doubt and exaggerated self-consciousness. They are fundamentally lonely beings and they experience a separation from society. In such a solitary existence, they feel threatened and insignificant. They are frightened by the apparent meaninglessness of existence. Hence they search for significance by pretending to be unique. But even in the midst of this make-believe uniqueness, they feel irrelevant and frightened. If only they had turned their focus from their bloated self to the greater Being, or God, they surely would have found a real solution to their
problem. True and lasting individuation is possible only through a spiritual regeneration. And that is what the characters in the novels of Woolf and Desai lack.

The seventh chapter discusses how patriarchal tyranny and/or parental neglect can cause inner desolation in the children. The novels used for the discussion are The Years and Clear Light of the Day. Woolf and Desai narrate the stories of two families -- the Pargiter family and the Das family. In both the novels we meet a pack of children who are sheltered under the roof of their family houses, but experiencing deep anxiety and insecurity. The novels portray the disintegration and decadence of the families’ glorious past and the struggles and aspirations of the children and how they cope with the changes that occur in the family and in the individuals. The children are confined in an atmosphere of suppressed emotion. They are held together in a kind of bondage under the patriarchal tyranny. Some of the children struggle to free themselves by breaking all the chains provided by the enmeshing atmosphere in the household and thus escape into the freer world outside.

It is necessary to probe into their childhood days in order to perceive the beginning of their inner desolation. As children, they did not receive the care and attention of the parents. Instead, they were almost neglected by the club-going or bridge-playing or sick parent figures. The insecurity caused by the absence of strong parent figures in the household affected each of the children in various ways.
An attempt has been made in this study, to analyse two characters, who amidst the various characters of Desai and Woolf, have struggled their maximum to reach the point of individuation. They are Eleanor and Bim, who pass through the storms and struggles of life and attain the mental serenity to accept facts that cannot be changed. Their growth into maturity proves the Jungian theory that a person is certainly capable of consciously participating in his/her own development. As one learns to make free decisions, one actively co-operates with the process of self-development. Such co-operation belongs to the process of individuation in the narrower sense of the word.

The process of individuation is a gradual process, and is often imperceptible. It is created by an inner regulating force, which is at work within the very centre of one's being. It may take a very long period of inner struggles and confusion to attain individuation. The protagonists Eleanor and Bim experience great inner fury and rage in their relentless struggle to attain such selfhood. Both of them are strong and heroic women who try to overcome their disintegrating family conditions, by placing themselves in a sacrificial manner at the very core of the family situation.

Rooted in their ancestral homes, Eleanor and Bim live their silent lives, breaking their inner desolation and thus cross the threshold of individuation. The other characters like Tara, Raja, Kitty, Sally, Martin and the others are not fully individuated. They too have struggles; they too experience inner desolation. But they are afraid to delve deeper into their psychic selves. So they merge into the superficial flow of life and pretend to be happy in their make-believe sophisticated
world. Yet the individuation process cannot be considered complete even in the cases of Bim and Eleanor. They, too, like all other characters of Woolf and Desai, are unable to reach the spiritual height.

The final chapter is an analysis of the findings of the earlier chapters. The thematic context of both the novelists remains the same, because both explore the depths of human behaviour. The intuition, the intensity and the agony presented by them, reveal the inherent sufferings of the human soul in a fast changing world. But the total lack of spiritual anchorage, keeps them bogged down under the pressure of a negative desolation. Thus the study comes to the conclusion that the basic reason for the intense desolation experienced by the characters in the novels of Woolf and Desai is the lack of spiritual conviction. In order to become truly individuated beings, they have to become more coherent and God-oriented. At a time when the unity of their contemporary culture itself has been scattered, what they need is an interiority that can help them to reintegrate their fragmented selves. Instead, the interiority shown by them is a negative inner chill, which arises out of their spiritual self-abuse. They do not make use of their deep intuitive inner knowledge, which is poetic and almost mystical. Instead of turning it into spiritual desolation, which is a regenerative spiritual condition, they turn it into depression, which is a degenerative psychological condition.

Such characters lack maturity because a mature individual has to overcome such negative mental condition in order to fulfil the specific role of his personal life. He has to become responsible towards society and to his own conscience. A certain amount of self-detachment and an inclination towards a
higher Being – God – is necessary for this. Philosophers and psychologists like Viktor Frankl, Erich Fromm, Abraham Maslow and Krishnamurti have not only given related interpretations of this problem, but have also given ways to attain this goal.

Instead of overburdening oneself with the confrontation of the existential malaise, one should be challenged to fulfil the purpose of one’s life. Even unavoidable suffering becomes meaningful once an individual takes a positive attitude towards it. Man experiences his life as meaningful when he lives in God’s presence and dedicates himself to ends outside himself.

The attempt made in this study has provided a rewarding experience. The study discovers typical patterns of behaviour and distinct patterns of conflict. It is amazing to note the similarity when one makes an inward journey into the realms of desolation within the psyches of the characters created by them.
NOTES


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