CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION
The most important event in the history of women's liberation movement may be cited as the publication of *The Feminist Mystique* by Betty Friedan in 1963. In this work Friedan explains the psychological urges of a woman - that a woman wants to be more than an ideal wife, sister, and mother yearning to establish an identity of her own self, a female self.

The women's liberation movement is not a movement against men. It refers to a struggle to liberate woman from the traditional female role so that she can establish her own specific identity. Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* deals with the beginnings of the history of feminism. The first fighters for women's liberation were termed as "unfeminine," "masculine" etc in a derogatory sense. Some other feminist texts which have influenced educated women all over the world are Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, Helene Cixous's *The Laugh of Medusa*, Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of Their Own*.

Indian women novelists may also be said to have been highly conscious of the women's liberation movement. By and
large they have portrayed women and their stories with a consciousness of the injustices being meted out to women in patriarchal society. These novels have, more often than not, a feminist undercurrent. Usually these novels have a woman protagonist, a majority of them rebelling against the existing social setup. They discard the idea of being submissive, suffering, and sacrificing. The entire process demands determination and a will to stand by the cause of rebellion at any cost. Most of these protagonists are found paying a heavy price of their rebellion rather than submitting.

The writer's awareness of the individual needs of women like self fulfillment and identity formation have resulted in patterns of alienation, communication gap, broken relationships and identity crises. The major Indian women novelists who have been concerned with these themes are Nayantara Sahgal, Kamala Markandaya, Ruth Prawer Jhabwala, Anita Desai, Sashi Deshpande to name a few. Women in the novels of Nayantara Sahgal are liberal and unconventional. Saroj in *Storm in Chandigarh* refuses to succumb to social norms of feminine behaviour. She craves to establish herself as an individual
whereas for her husband Inder she is merely a wife. Sahgal depicts a woman's longing for love and understanding in a very moving fashion. Another character Simrit in *The Day in Shadow*, yearns for a free communication of ideas with her husband which proves disastrous. In all, Sahgal's women seek to establish a new order with changed standards where women can be their true selves, where there is no need for hypocrisy and where character is judged by the purity of heart.

Ruth Prawer Jhabwala is not so much concerned with the personality development of her women as she is with the double standards of Indian women in general. She deals with distortion of modernity and women's liberation. Shashi Deshpande happens to be the most important and sensitive writer among the contemporary women novelists of India. Her women are educated, self-conscious, sensitive and revolt against the rigid social and family set ups. In her novels like *That Long Silence* and *A Matter of Time*, she very subtly describes the silence that has been thrust on Indian women for centuries.
Anita Desai’s importance in Indian fiction is indeed great. She touches the nuances and subtleties of fiction hitherto unknown in Indian fiction in English. Concerned exclusively with the personal tragedy of the individual, Desai is not interested in social or political probings, the outer weather, the physical geography, or the visible action. She is not so much concerned with outer as with the inner weather. She is a painter of moods, of wills, of conflicting choices, and inner experiences. The subjects of her novels are not poverty or riches, wars, political upheavals, social evils, but the incompatibility of marriages and inharmonious man-woman relationships. This main thrust on the inner life of the individual, on myriads of inner impressions, passing fancies and fleeting thoughts, together with her razor sharp awareness of the futility of existence is perceptible in each of her novels. R.S.Sharma considers Desai’s first novel *Cry, the Peacock* “the first step in the direction of psychological fiction in English.”1 Her central theme is the existential predicament of an individual which is projected through incompatible couples - acutely sensitive wives, and dismal, callous, inconsiderable, ill-chosen husbands.
Anita Desai's chief contribution lies in the fact that almost all her women are not only liberated but go much beyond to the region of psychological and philosophical depths. In almost all her novels the story does not stop with the woman attaining liberation but goes for beyond into intellectual regions. Desai's concern does not merely lie with radical feminism and women's liberation. She lives and paints a scene where women can be threshoned to be liberated. In many cases the narration starts after the independent identity is established. Whether it is Maya in *Cry, the Peacock*, Bim in *Clear Light of Day*, Uma in *Fasting, Feasting* - all are mentally advanced in the real sense of the word. Her women are sensitive, sometimes hypersensitive and hence turn out to be emotional misfits trying to maintain their individuality, "either withdrawing into a subjective world, often acting in ways society considers neurotic or mad; or they cultivate coldness or indifference, refusing to give in." This peculiar strain in her women characters makes them resort to self imposed isolation that results in the women protagonists experiencing a sense of alienation even while living within a solid, secure, traditional family set up.
One of the predominant themes in Anita Desai’s writings has been the theme of alienation that has come to assume great importance in the modern age. The theme of alienation has also been dealt with by American novelists like Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, Henry James, Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner and Saul Bellow, to name a few. Among Indian novelists in English, the theme has been touched upon by Mulk Raj Anand and Kamala Markandaya, and has been dealt with extensively by Arun Joshi and Anita Desai.

‘Alienation’ is a term which has been in use in theological, philosophical, sociological, and psychological writings for a long time. For Marx, alienation meant man’s dehumanization and his estrangement from other fellowmen, even from the product of his own labour. Sidney Finkelstein defines ‘alienation’ as “a psychological phenomenon, an internal conflict, a hostility felt toward something seemingly outside oneself which is linked to oneself, a barrier erected which is actually no defense but an impoverishment of oneself.” For Erich Fromm, the term “meant a mode of experience in which the person experiences himself as an alien.” Broadly speaking ‘alienation’ refers to man’s
estrangement from some one or something with which he was attached or identified - his family, his group, his society and even his own self. Anita Desai depicts these facets of alienation very convincingly in most of her novels.

In Desai's novels, most protagonists are alienated from the world, from society, from families, from parents and even from their own selves because they are not average people but individuals "made to stand against the general current ... who fight that current and struggle against it." All her women characters ranging from a young wife to a mother of five children to an aged spinster to a wronged daughter and wife suffer from a similar kind of solitude and alienation. Different factors contribute to their alienation and consequent suffering. But the period of alienation does not merely make them suffer endlessly but proves to be a period of painful learning and realization.

"Like her American counterparts, Desai sees more deeply, darkly, privately, and like her English counterparts, her emphasis is an appropriation of reality with the high purpose of bringing order to disorder, by reflecting the anomalies and dilemmas of
the ‘untrampled territories’ of life in the New World." The women characters in her novels have their material needs taken care of by wealth and servants, but their emotional needs remain unsatiated. Since her characters are sensitive, the protagonists are affected by trivial things such as muffled whispers, a leaking tap, creating shoes, groaning beds, moaning hinges and tick-tocking clocks. In her novels, Anita Desai seems to be struggling “towards the mastery of a violence which seems to threaten not only her protagonists but also her own self. Right from her Cry, the Peacock, this violence has persisted in her work as a kind of inevitability, forcing one to conclude that it has some kind of metaphysical or psychological significance not yet explored and analyzed." The characters are portrayed as engrossed with the present, look backward in time, and visualize future as well.

It is through a sense of alienation the protagonists manage to look at their problem in a subjective manner and arrive at an appropriate solution or resolution in the end. While for Maya in Cry, the Peacock who becomes neurotic and insane during the period of alienation from her loving but incommunicable husband the resolution seems to lie in death. Maya’s pet dog,
Toto, dies in the fourth year of her marriage. The dog's death initiates turbulent emotions in her mind. She becomes so obsessed with the predicted disaster that every trivial thing becomes an intimation of the impending danger and she is frightened by the prospect of death. Gautama leaves Maya emotionally and spiritually starved and insecure. And finally she pushes her husband down the roof of their bungalow in the course of an evening walk on the terrace, and kills him. Later she kills herself just when she was about to be taken to a mental asylum. Thus the years of alienation and suffering explode into neurosis first, and end in violent death - death for both Maya's husband and for her own self.

For Sita in *Where Shall We Go This Summer* - who runs away to her childhood home in order not to give birth to another child because of a sense of insecurity that results from the fact that her four children are more close to their father - the solution lies in compromise or a return to her position of a wife in a traditional family set up. The incompatibility of the down-to-earth life of Bombay and her repressed childhood wishes centering on her father play havoc with her sensitivity. So her fifth pregnancy
upsets her and becomes the constant cause of conflict with her husband. The islet is a projection of her other self, her other identity. She knows there exists a close tie between herself and the island, but she knows that it is the island that alienates her from her instinctive drives. The parallel existence of these two levels of awareness in her mind gives rise to her identity crisis. At the end, she simply compromises with her destiny and returns to Bombay with her husband and children to accept her role as a wife and mother in a traditional family.

In *Clear Light of Day*, Bim, who is burdened with the responsibilities of her mother and her handicapped brother remains unmarried when her elder brother and sister fail to take up the responsibility. Her sense of alienation results from her real and imaginary entrapment in family responsibilities from which she tries to escape. But a feeling of detachment and renunciation follow the period of alienation thus making Bim sacrifice her idea of freedom and be content with her lot.

Uma in *Fasting, Feasting* goes through the period of alienation even as she is in the presence of her parents. Her two
bitter encounters with marriage land her in her own parents' home where her presence is inevitable but where she is treated as some one insignificant and unimportant. After withstanding several types of insults and discrimination in her own home Uma is transformed into a mature woman with spiritual bent of mind under the influence of Mira-masi. To compensate for all denials and unsuccess, she finally takes refuge in complete devotion to work and duty which enable her to accommodate herself in the society rather than be rejected.

Thus the experience of alienation proves to be an important theme and phase in the novels of Anita Desai and in the lives of her female protagonists respectively. A sense of alienation not merely haunts and hurts Maya, Sita, Bim, and Uma but also paves way for the final resolution of their problems. Four of Anita Desai's novels namely Cry, the Peacock (1963), Where Shall We Go This Summer? (1975), Clear Light of Day (1980), and Feasting, Feasting (1999) representing the four decades of Anita Desai's literary work from the 60's to 90's respectively have been taken for study.
REFERENCES:


