CHAPTER 8

CONCLUSION
CHAPTER 8.1

Fasting, Feasting

Gender discrimination is one of the prominent themes in Indian women writing in English and in other Indian vernaculars. Anita Desai’s recently published book Fasting, Feasting (1999) shows apart from many other things, how women have to lead a life of suffocation and undeserved sufferings – both physically and mentally in a male dominated patriarchal frame work; how life in such a callous family trundles on at a slow pace under the prying eyes of the parents; how a girl child craves for parental affection but in the end, gets nothing but frustration, isolation and discriminatory treatment and, above all, how the neglected child slowly develops the horrible sense of trauma and other associated psychosomatic diseases. A thorough study of the persecution meted out to women in this novel reminds us of The God of Small Things by Arundhati Roy where the same discriminating attitude is found in the case of Ammu, Margaret Kochamma, Baby Kochamma (in her early childhood life) and Rahel. But while the protagonist, Uma in Fasting, Feasting, is a meek docile and a passive sufferer, Ammu in The God of Small Things, jets her fury and resentment and breaks the age old rule of ethics: “who should be loved and how and how much”.

Anita Desai in Fasting, Feasting which was nominated for Booker prize 1999 (she missed it second time and the prize went to coetzee for Disgrace; tries to recapture the family life in two different cultures and places them side by side in a fictional paradigm as if to make a comparative study of the problems of women. It appears that in this novel she steps
out of her forte—‘private vision’\textsuperscript{12} and subjectivity. The thing which matters most in Anita Desai is her truthful portrayal of the women characters who are seen suffering from the \textit{sense} of existential problems and passions. Women in her works are hypersensitive, solitary and helpless. They always show their mettle and possess all the virtues of a great character. But unfortunately, they are denigrated, isolated and tormented by the patriarchal domination.

The novel \textit{Fasting, Feasting} deals with the story of two very different worlds- an extremely orthodox and domineering Indian family and an unusually idiosyncratic family in Massachusetts. Uma, the protagonist of the first part of the book represents, the attitude of the author. Through this female character, Anita Desai wants to expose the hypocrisy and male chauvinism in a particular conservative family. She shows how Uma bears the brunt of many insults and abuses flung by her own parents. Though she is most neglected child of the family, yet she is needed all the time. In the very opening of the book, the author connotatively presents the luxurious life of the parents through the image of the ‘swinging sofa’. The opening passage is so rich in both matter and manner that it suggests the ensuing events and the discriminating attitude of the parents to their daughters. It opens: “on the Veranda overlooking the garden, the drive and the gate, they sit together on the creak\textsuperscript{ing} sofa-swing, suspended from its iron frame, dangling their legs so that slippers on their feet hang loose. Before them a low round table is covered with a faded cloth, embroidered in the center with flowers. Behind them, a pedestal fan blows warm air at the backs of their heads and necks.”\textsuperscript{3}.

If the passage is practically analyzed, we find that there are certain worlds and phases which are highly suggestive and are so beautifully
placed that they point to the story as a whole. Sitting on the sofa swing and
dangling their legs back and forth, the parents are imagined as selfish and
luxuriant characters doing nothing but giving only orders to the protagonist,
Uma. The cacophonic sound prevails over the whole passage and clearly
suggests the intention of the sitting parents. The adjective ‘creaking’ heightens
the effect of the dominating parents whose hearts seem to mutter and
grumble without any reason. The reason of the frustration and step motherly
treatment can be sought in the psychology of the parents – such parents
who are more interested in a boy child than in a girl child. The phrase ‘faded
cloth’ explicitly shows the faded and darkened attitude of the orthodoxical
male society. The term pedestal fan; seems to show the ill fated, frustrated
Uma who went on working without any vest, blowing warm air to the family.

The family in which Uma is brought up, is highly conservative, traditional
and bragging. Everything is in the direct control of Mama Papa. Every activity,
every moment of life in this family is well within the grip of Papa (Mama
Papa). A family outing on a Sunday evening turns out to be more of an
exercise under the strict control of papa which may be read as Mama- and
less of a pleasure trip – half of Mama Papa’s life is spent on the swing in
their Veranda. Mama-which may be read as Papa – keeps ordering the
cook through Uma from her swing throne only. The parents don’t do anything
in the house and visit the coffee house and the clubs. For them life is either
ordering Uma for one or the other job or attending get togethers and club
meetings. Both their daughters are very submissive and seldom rebel against
the step motherly conduct of the family. Mama once recalls her past days
when she was a child in her parents’ house she remembers : “In my day
girls in the family were not given sweets, nuts, good things to eat. If something
special had been brought in the market, like sweets or nuts, it was given to
the boys in the family.” (6).
Well, a cyclonic wave comes to sweep off the remaining affection, when late in life Uma’s mother become pregnant again for the third time. In glaring contrast is the delicious joy with which the birth of a son is heralded. Anita Desai, a keen observer of human nature, highlights this dichotomy in parental behaviour. The long awaited event galvanized Papa in a jiffy, while Mama moved about with her “Chin lifted a little into the air”(31) making sure that everyone around saw and noticed it. It is almost as if the birth of a son had eclipsed the existence of the two daughters altogether. Desai is at her narrative best as the event of such great import is announced “A Son”(16). The word seems to stand in its own strength, all by itself. That is all there is to it in the paragraph. Nothing follows it. A word that seems to echo and reverberate all around, a clarion call, a trumpet sounded from the high heavens. “What honour, what status.”(31) The family is never the same again. It came to a standstill, as it stood around Mama’s hospital bed, “peering at this wonder”(16). But it is Papa’s reaction that holds them spell-bound. In the hospital, he hardly looked at his son, his emotions held tightly bottled up; but once he reaches home, the corked feelings explode with a ‘bang’ He literally goes berserk.

He sprang out of the car, raced into the house and shouted the news to whoever was there to hear. Servants, elderly relatives, all gathered at the door, and then saw the most astounding sight of their lives-Papa in his elation, leaping. Over three chairs in the hall, one after the other, like a boy playing leap-frog, his arms flung up in the air and his hair flying.

When Mama came home weak, exhausted and short tempered, she tried to teach Uma the correct way of folding nappies, of preparing watered milk, of rocking the screaming infant to sleep. As she goes out to do her home work, all of a sudden comes the call of Mama to leave all the homework. She asks her to first do the works related to the infant. The novel present a typical Indian family syndrome where the boy is showered with all the goodies and is offered all the opportunities and freedom. To crown the effect Uma is prevented from going to school and told mercilessly to stay at home to help Arun.

Uma’s face, looking up from the stock of nappies she was trying to fold seemed to irritate Mama. She twitched her toes and snapped: we are not sending you back to school Uma. You are staying at home to help with Arun (18).

Owing to lack of proper attention and opportunity Uma fails in the examinations. She struggled to work out her sum, to remember dates and to spell the words, but failed. She wept with shame and frustration. Mama again got an opportunity to say:

‘You know you failed your exams again. You’re not being moved up. What’s the use of going back to school? stay at home and look after your baby mother? Then, seeing Uma’s hands shake as she tried to continue with folding the Nappies. She seemed to feel a little pity. ‘What is the use of going back
to school if you keep failing, Uma?
She asked in a reasonable tone. ‘You will
be happier at home. You won't need to do
Any lessons. You are a big girl now.
We are trying to arrange a marriage
for you. Not now,’ she added, seeing
the panic on Uma’s face. But soon.
till then, you can help me look after
Arun. And learn to run the house.’
She reached out her hand to catch Uma’s.
‘I need your help, beti,’ she coaxed,
her voice sweet with pleading (21-22).

Uma, who wants to continue her schooling, hopes to find support from her
fathers in this matter, but he also let her down. Her mother feels that the
Christian teachers are affectionate to her because they want to convert
her. Poor Uma fails to understand why she has been deprived of her schooling.
Uma's mother's attitude is narrow and parochial. Uma’s is a poor girl,
neglected in the family and denied education. She suffers all her life as a
girl, and then as a woman. She is not even allowed to take music lessons.

What a great irony! From the time of Arun’s birth, it is decided that
Uma no longer needs to go to school. Classes are over for her. But the
abiding impression Uma as of her brother's childhood is just one word
‘education’. There is a “maniac determination” (120) in Papa to see him
doing well in studies. Night and day he is burdened with studies, tuition’s
and great piles of books and notes. At the end of a grueling day, the child
shuffles off to his room “with the gait of a broken old man” (119) throwing
his books in a series of thuds he collapses on his bed. No vocations, no
holidays. The way Papa drives Arun makes Uma wonder, “Was he fulfilling through Arun a dream he had there under the streetlights, or in the shabby districts courts?” (121) so Arun is to be sent abroad for studies. A foreign degree is a must. There were no two ways about it. But when the letter of acceptance from America came, “he held his lips tightly together…… not the hint of a smile, laugh or anything: these had all been ground down till they had disappeared” (121) He blankly stared at the letter as “he faced another phase of his existence arranged for him by Papa.” (121) Uma, high strung and sensitive, can visualize the “deep well of greyness that was his actual existence.” She longs “to stir up that viscous greyness, to bring to life some evidence of colour, if not in her life, then in another’s.” Of course Arun paid scant attention to her, but as he boards the train for Bombay, he looks back at her and “suddenly noticed how old she looked: his sister Uma, already beginning to stoop and shrink. He threw her a stricken look” (122).

Uma gets shocks after shocks. But she like a fruit tree, bears the blows of the bricks thrown by a naughty boy and in return gives the sweet fruit to him. Her sister is married to a rich man. She undergoes two traumatic experiences related to matrimony. In the first case they visit the family and settle the marriage. A negotiated dowry is given to them and engagement ceremony is held. Later on, when her Papa goes to get a date for the wedding, his father refuses to do so on the excuse that his son is not ready to marry and has decided to go to Roorkee for higher education. He does not return their money either. In the second case, Uma is married to Harish, a man of fatherly age, but he does not behave like a husband. It was revealed when Uma wrote letters to her parents telling that Harish was away in Meerut on work and had not return. Papa, later on, learnt the fact that they had been duped. Actually, Harish was married already. He had
a wife and four children in Meerut where he ran an ailing pharmaceutical factory to save which he had needed another dowry. Perhaps this is why he married Uma. In course of time her marriage is cancelled much to Uma’s dismay, her father brought her back. She is considered ‘ill fated’ by the family and no more attempt is made to get her married. She remains single all through her life. In the character of Uma, Anita Desai has presented a very dismal picture of Indian marriages. Within her own family, she is treated no better then a servant, always carrying orders of parents and helping in running about household, even though there is a cook.

Uma’s little escapade when, inspite of parental disapproval she goes out to dinner with her odd club footed cousin Ramu, is a vignette to remember. It is one evening Uma really enjoys. She almost giggles her heart out. But when she returns a little tipsy, the high balloon on which she had drifted is punctured by the sight of Papa who “comes thundering towards them with a face as black as the night,” (52) while Mama’s face glints “Like a knife in the dark growing narrower and fiercer as it comes closer (53) she hisses as she grasps the girl by the shoulder and pushes her into the room: “Quiet, you hussy! Not another word from you, you idiot child! …………… You, you disgrace to the family nothing but disgrace, ever! (53) on the other hand, they remain blissfully ignorant (or do they choose to) of Aruna’s frequent secretive jaunts as she goes off riding the bicycle rickshaws to the cinema; her half truths that she went there with girl friends from school, not mentioning “the young men who took the seats behind them, or even beside them, tempestuously throwing out a knee, an elbow, or even a hand at times, and contriving to touch the little, flustered, excited creatures,” following them home on their bicycle, “and singing ardently along the way” (80). Even the way the girls are married off is markedly different. While
Uma’s farcical marriage is a “drab, out rate affair,” (101) Aruna’s was a splendid one, chic and untraditional: a cocktail party a day earlier and the wedding reception in Carlton Hotel, the air thick with the perfume of tube roses and whisky, while the Tiny Lopez band played dance music. A truly fairy tale affair. Her marriage turns out to be successful. She settles in Bombay, and queens over her husband, her hearth and home.

Mira Masi was very dear to Uma. Mira Masi’s ritual’s, routine, food habits, laddoos and her stories – all enliven her at the visit of Mira Masi. Mira Masi finally goes and settles down in the Himalayas. Uma greaves to join her there but knows that she shall never be permitted to do so. Mira Masi’s favourite deity was Shiva and she had always brought him along with her. Unluckily the idol was stolen by another pilgrim. Mira Masi was frantic and scoured the world, all pilgrim spots till she found him in a shop in Varanasi. She had, had a dream about her Shiva’s whereabouts, and had traced him down. Her joy knew no bounds at this reunion. Mira Masi had taken Uma with her to an ashram beside a river. Uma felt free for the first time in her life. “She had never been more unsurprised or happier in her life.” (57) when Uma is away for about a month, Ramu, the black sheep of the family, Anamika’s brother, and Arun are sent to bring Uma back.

The novel throws light on the false dichotomy between the private and the public in this society. The same men who profess support for equal rights for women in public, deny their own wives and daughters these rights. When Dr. Dutt offers Uma the job of taking care of the new nurses in the Medical Institute while they are in training. Uma finds the idea as novel as that of being launched into space, never having aspired so high in her life. But her hopes are shattered when the ruthless parents go to the
extent of lying that the mother has to undergo hysterectomy and hence cannot do without Uma’s assistance. Papa rises to his feet at or Dr. Dutt’s approach. He is “quite capable of putting on a progressive, westernized front when called upon to do so- in public …… Not within his family of course.” (141) when the two domains are regarded as being separate, injustices against women in the home are seen as a personal matter and remain unchallenged an undressed. What is not realized is that personal problems are apart of a system – which can be changed. The refusal to recognize unpaid work seach as house work, is another example of the distortion of perspective caused by such a division.

For Papa, a working women, that is, one “who dared presume to step into the world he occupied,”(143) was an aberration. At Dr. Dutt’s job offer Papa responds piously that as long as they were there to provide for her, she would not ever need to work. Dr. Dutt’s retort “But she works all the time!” (141) points to the absurdity of the public / private dichotomy.

Anita Desai introduces Anamika who is beautiful, well mannered, intelligent and rich, only to focus on dowry death. She is beautiful well mannered, intelligent and rich only to focus on dowry death. She is burnt alive by her in laws even when she is beautiful and rich and has brought dowry for them. All her scholarships, distinction beauty and good behaviour fall flat in her husbands house. There she is treated worse than animals; she is beaten regularly by her mother-in-law for no fault of hers, she is finally burnt alive. This tragic episode shows the falsity rampant in our society. After hearing of Anamika’s sorrows at her husband’s home earlier, Uma had wished, “I hope they will send her back. Then she will be home again and happy” (71) which had been rebuffed by her Mama, “How can
she be happy if she is sent home? What will people say? What will they think?" (71) Now Uma prefers to say nothing but blunderingly ask, "the letter – letter from Oxford –. Where is it? Did you – did you burn it?"

Ironically the image of the letter flashes past our mind at the pathetic death of Anamika whose marriage had been settled due to this letter to her credit. The realistic lines show that Uma is not a mute, dull insensate thing but a quiet, sensitive and keen observer of false values being flaunted in society. However, Anamika’s death is just a mentioned – affair to highlight the brides condition in India.

It is to be noted that Anita Desai is one of the great champions of the woman’s cause and her identity crisis in a male dominated societal framework. She also favours the quest of the ‘free woman of the world particularly in the Asian diaspora she strongly stresses the need of a woman’s activity in every field of life. She holds the view: “Privacy and silence are unnatural conditions to Indian women, intensely social as they are, without silence and privacy, no to consecutive and comprehensible lives can be written. The social system from long has been opposed to independent work and intellectual exercise by women. Why do we not have an Indian Mrs. Carlyle or a Scishonagan or a lady Murasaki? There was no literary tradition at all that women writers could follow even if only as camp followers."

The second part of the novel takes us overseas to the Patton family. This family is again a strange one. Arun becomes the link between the Indian family of Mama Papa and the American family of Pattons. Though Mr. Patton does not command an unchallengeable control over his family, the children – Melanie and Rod – are still not living in bliss. All members of this family seem to be going their separate ways. There is Rod who is fitness freak, there is Melanie who is a victim of Bulimia. There is again
Mrs. Patton, who loves shopping at the food mat only. Whereas Mr. Patton loves nuts only, day in and day out. In her efforts to maintain equalibrium
in this strained atmosphere, Mrs. Patton poses as if she enjoys eating the
preparations of Mr. Patton, but secretly she hates them. Arun comes to
her as a hope, and she whole heartedly joins him in his vegetarianism
This family seems to be on the verge of breaking up, but recovers by the
end, as if helped by a magic wand.

The title of the novel is oxymoronic and the use of a comma makes it quite unusual. Apparently it appears to deal with starvation versus gluttony,
plenty versus scarcity, and, though food together with it physical consumption
does figure prominently in the second half of the book, the meaning goes
much deeper. Once again, the comma splitting the title gives us an inkling
of the structure of the novel. The book is divided into two, though unequal,
parts. The title applies to various levels of theme. On the one hand, it is
fasting it the emotional level. The girls Uma and Arun craving for parental
affection and love, but getting none instead. On the other hand, Mama
and Papa basking and feasting in each other's company. Then there Arun
who feasts on the love of Mama Papa and care of Uma. But gradually as
he grows up, he is seen thirsting for freedom. Aruna, as a young, lovely
and coquettish girl, finds her own way of feasting. Her marriage seems to
take her on prolonged feasting spree, whereas it makes the already arid
life of Uma even more unbearable. Marriage for Uma comes as fasting
and as feasting for Aruna. The Patton family story again resolves around
the concept of fasting and feasting. On the one hand there are Mrs. Patton
and Melanie who are literally fasting and on the other there is Mr. Patton
who is feasting virtually. Then there is Melanie who- for want of sympathy
on the past of her parents - is starving for attention.
Thus, Anita Desai a great observer of men and manners aptly shows the constant urge of women's freedom in fasting, feastings she seems to give a good retort to the dictum prevalent in society that the women should be judged and perceived as object and not as subject. Woman is not a mere traditions tossed toy in the hands of conservative society. She is not a spineless wooden creature subjective to male authority. Anita Desai’s treatment of feminism is different in the sense that her protagonists are generally rebellious in nature; they suffer only to learn how to encounter, the harsh realities of life. Like the tragic heroes of William Shakespeare, Anita Desai’s female characters learn by suffering. It is suffering which purifies the ‘dross of desire’ in the characters. K.R.S. Iyenger is of the opinion that in Anita Desai “the inner climate, the climate of sensibility that clears or rumbles like thunder or suddenly blazes forth like lightening is more compelling than the outer weather the physical geography or the visible action.” Moreover, her feminist outlook is not vague, partial an monotonous but is always suffused with poetic exuberance and moral imagination.

Thus, as we have seen earlier also Anita Desai’s novels have generally been preoccupied with neurosis in individuals. Maya, Nirode, Sita, Sarah, Nanda Kaul, Raka, Baumgartner – all have shown symptoms of varying degrees of neurosis, novel after novel. Fasting, Feasting is no exception to this. Anita Desai focuses on interpersonal relationships and at the core, the beating of women’s heart can be heard. It is Uma who provides the readers with the novelist’s perspective. In fact, Part I comes clearly as Uma’s story. Through the character of Uma, Anita Desai has presented a very gloomy picture of the oppressed and discriminated female gender. The blame goes to the false sense of male ego and perverted social values and practices. The woman who is praised high and not only idealized and made a divinity in scriptures, is in practice mal–treated, abused and exploited by our society.
NOTES

CHAPTER 8.2

The focus of the foregoing analysis of this study has been on the quest pattern of the heroines in Anita Desai's novels. This presentation can claim a unique stance in that it has attempted a study of the mystique of the feminine using concepts which have imparted a new dimension to the study of woman character as such, speaking simplistically.

Anita Desai is one of the most thought provoking creative novelists in the realm of Indian fiction in English. She has added a new and significant dimension to the fiction and to the portrayal of the suffering of women. The thing which distinguishes Anita Desai from other novelist is her preoccupation with the study of the inner world of the individual, particularly the undeserved miseries and untold sufferings of the woman who are ruthlessly persecuted and rendered vulnerable, alienated and helpless. Ruth Prawer Jhabvala deals with the social background; Kamla Markandya stresses on the several contemporary problems - social, cultural, economic, political; Nayantara Sehgal is absolutely devoted to social and political problems, "the outer weather, the physical geography of the visible action", but Anita Desai's main concern as a novelist is to explore the unfathomable depths of the mind which is always deceptive: "Her fictional milieu is mostly overcast by shadows and half shadows, mist and fog, a world half revealed and half concealed, partly real and partly fictitious. Her central theme is the existential predicament of an individual which is projected through incompatible couples - acutely sensitive wives, and dismal, callous, un-understanding, ill-chosen husbands."

In other words Desai prefers the inner reality to the outer, the insight to the sight. Her search for the truth is related to the search for the soul- the
inner life - and in the life of the body - the outer life. Her notion of life is richly influenced by Virginia Woolf who observes: “Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged: life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the begining of consciousness to the end”.

Anita Desai has certainly made a revolutionary departure from the tradition of fiction writing in India by avoiding the social and political obsessions and by resisting the strong urge to cater to the western audience. Her concern is always the psyche of an individual, never a social group. The choice of peculiar characters and interior milieu gives her immense freedom for exploration and scope to probe into the depths of feminine psyche.

Anita Desai’s heroines emblematise an individuality which is unmistakably the creation of Anita Desai. From *Cry, the Peacock* her first novel to *Fasting, Feasting*, the novels taken up for study in the foregoing analysis. Desai, is concerned with a world where always and everywhere the corpses will be unambiguously of the hyper-sensitive, over reactive feminine. It is a world where feminine is misunderstood, is thwarted, is stifled. Yet it is an uncanny feeling of the over-sensitive feminine alone. The male order or the masculine principle operates with all its non-chalance as if unruffled and unconcerned. Her heroines like Maya, Monisha who have been victim paradigm in this study, collapse under the weight of accumulated shadow which they could not resolve because of their own inadequacy. They are the hapless victims on the roadside and Desai also perhaps does not hold out any hope or redemption for them. Sita and Nanda Kaul still out of their zones of complacence and negativity to encounter the reality of the deliverance. They are eons away in space and time, beyond the negrodo negativity of their predecessors Maya and Monisha and in whatever
measure, make peace with their individuated, clarified, reformed consciousness. Bim of all the heroines makes it for this union with a translusence which is an experience of altruism, which is a feeling of achievement of self, which is a transcendence from the personal to transpersonal agape. Sarah among all the heroines is the most reticent in her conduct, her clamourings if one may say so, which hazard this conjecture, are perhaps subdued and if at all they surface into a concretion, it is because of the triggering of her dormant consciousness by the inter-play of east-west ethos, culture, shadows, prejudices etc. by Dev and Adit. Amla has been given little scope to measure upto the intricacies of her other heroines. But within her alloted parameters, Amla conducts herself as a spokesman of the liberal feminine who can monitor well and transmit well her psychic needs, responses without collapsing under their burden.

It is important to state that Desai’s heroines are much taller and shoulder high than the stereotyped; run-of-the-mill elementary feminine. This detailed discourse has endeavoured to explicate the strain in the psychic functioning of these heroines which compromises with nothing short of transformation or as Erich Neumann puts it the transformative feminine. It is another matter that there are victims in this exhibition yet it is also gratifying that these are the ruins of the milestones which point the progress towards the integrations with self. Fulfilment of the quest for self is not a sine qua non in the journey of every protagonist. It is rather that point of completion which stirs activity in person who is often visited by psychic inadequacy or who has suffered the hallucination of a deja vu, of being there. Quest thus connects him with that vital fulcrum which is ever going and ever renewing process.
Although the quest remains unique in the case of each heroine, certain patterns would emerge. Quest is not a chartered course where every quester may find familiar steps rather every quester has to move into the unfamiliar and establish his own counters of communication. At times the quest begins with the experience of numinosity, apprehension of an ideal, and the individual finds himself involved in a constant efforts to apply that experience in the texture of the mundane existence, where as it is not always possible to so transform one's facticity with a simple wish. Maya seeks the Radha-Krishna ideal in her relationship with her husband. Her quest is fixated on the actualisation of this ideal relationship and it is as result of that complex situation of a fixated ego ideal that her quest is aborted without even stirring the dynamics of its progress. Monsiha, on the other hand, has powerful transference on to the ways of intellection and compromises with nothing short of that. She can operate in the routinised drudgery of living without any overt complaint. She becomes the victim because of lack of integrating power to streamline the world between her actuality and her idealisation. Maya atleasat promises quest in that she makes the reader walk with her some distance to monitor her irritation with life, while Monisha demonstrates a static posture of a character who would wish thing to happen rather than throw the gauntlet.

In the second pattern one can club together Nanda Kaul and Raka these two characters are a special study case of questers. Here the quest begins at a time when Nanda Kaul is retired a withdrawn into an incubus-like state where she is not ar-sailed by the humdrum, by the muck, by the gross externality. Ironically, this incubus becomes the core or the nucleus of their possible transformation. It is during this retreat that she is visited by the call of individuation. In psychological parlance quest has often been
taken to commence in the second phase of one's life. Nanda Kaul is attracted to Raka by the child's natural instincts to reject, to maintain an attitude of careless disregard for company. Raka refuses to relate herself to the world and regales in being ruined: "I am shipwrecked and alone. She cling to a rock-my boat, alone in my boat on the sea....." (61-62) Here we have seen two characters making a connection with a world through the consciousness of the discards, the rejects. Raka for Nanda Kaul is the emblem of disorder and disharmony beyond repair, beyond redemption.

In the next category we have Sita and Sarha. Sita the heroine of Where Shall We Go This Summer? has four children, a fairly comfortable life in Bombay, and is nearly middle aged. Ironically still she seeks an escape from this world which to her symbolise effect, ennui and death. The incident of the crows scavenging the eagle accost her with the inevitable reality of death, the love making of the old man and young woman shock her into an awareness of the living and consequently she seeks resolutions to those miasmic experience in a mysterious retreat to the Manori island. In the end Sita reconciles and compromises with her life situation and accepts life in its natural stride. Her return to Bombay is the progress of a pilgrim to selfhood. Manori Island also serves as a symbol of purgatorial experience to awaken Sita to her essentiality of a wife and a mother. Sita's quest is also classical because she connects with the masculine via an encounter with an exaggerated, fantasised, unreal manifestation of the fake masculine embodied in her father. Sarah of Bye-Bye, Black Bird is unique among the heroines of Anita Desai while she emblematises all that represents eros in its multi-dimensional reaching out qualities of love, relatedness, feeling etc. Her logic virtues result in her experience of new awareness. Her successful marriage seems to challenge E.M. Foster's prophesy in Passage
to India that the inter culture marriage is not acceptable. Sarah transcends the limits of the selfish core to seek an integration of her own self she is a quester who not only jumps across and ultimately transcends the barriers of race, colour and creed, but also makes a connection with her quest for a shared self. She seeks a new home, a new name, a new country for her progeny yet to be born. In this fashion she exalts above the personal, ordinary and mundane to be a part of the continuum, she discovers a pattern of self for herself which will also repeat in her progeny.

The other two heroines of Anita Desai in whom we find a greater clarity of perception are Bim and Amla. Bims rage in the early part of the novel is almost neurotic but her vision soon acquires authenticity. She finds her lost self and achieves self-realization the novelist reveals her state of mind, which is now positive and affirmative: “Although it was shadowy and dark, Bim could see as well as by the Clear Light of day, that she felt only love and yearning for them, and if there were hurts, these gashes and wounds in her side that bled, then it was only because her love was imperfect and did not encompass them thoroughly enough, and because it had flaws and inadequacies and did not extend to all equally.” (165) Thus there is a progression from disharmony to harmony, from alienation to affirmation, in the case of the protagonist and along with her in the thematic perceptions of Anita Desai in a newer manner bringing in ‘the time’ as a dominant character.

Amla in her quest transcends the crisis in her life and in the process realises her true self. Existentially also, such a state is co-terminus with one’s capacity to exude eros and extend love, compassion and fellow-feelings. She makes a supreme connection with a new dimension of her personality or to put it in psychological terms, she transcends her ego and is on the road to
self. The rationale of Amla’s triumph on the road to self lies in her ability to “consciously recognize her individuality”. Which proclaims a state of individuated ego. Thus Amla also has an affirming faith in life and appears to be one of the most promising female character.

Anita Desai as a novelist, in fact has deeper realms to inquire and explore. The psychic life - its turmoil, irritations and complexities appeal her more than the outer reality she investigates into the invisible inner world. In *Journey to Ithaca* the author has described the quest theme. The spiritual quest of two characters has been described that of Laila the leading female protagonist and Matteo the male protagonist. In this novel Anita Desai has raised Laila to sainthood. This is the only example of treatment of women hood in this manner by Anita Desai.

In her latest novel *Fasting, Feasting* Anita Desai returns to the central concern of her earlier works - women’s oppression particularly gender discrimination. Through her protagonist Uma the novelist has tried to show that how there is an open preference for a male offspring, females being seen as a liability, how daughters in this society are denied autonomy and marriage is seen as the only path for women. Keeping face before the community is of utmost importance and it is a great shame for a woman once ‘given’ in marriage to return to her parents’ home. The novel is narrated from the perspective of Uma and makes the point that in this world too women’s individuality is not recognized. It also exposes the degrading and exploitative nature of the dowry system and throws light on the ease with which the bride’s marital family is able to murder her and claim that she had committed suicide. Thus in *Fasting, Feasting*, the female gender is an oppressed and discriminated lot. Anita Desai exposes very successfully the inner life and inner conflicts and predicament of her characters.
The thrust of this study has been to focus the uniqueness of Anita Desai as a novelist who has dissected the components of the feminine psyche like a crafty surgeon. Here-to-before a brief overview of the other Indian English novelists has been pressed in order to show the perspective of the amazing individuality of Desai’s characters. What is significant in Desai’s novel is the gallery of complex portraits, neither typed nor prototypes but specific archetypes. Most of the female heroines discussed in other Indian English novelists like Kamala Markandya, Ruth Prawer Jhabwala or Anand’s Gauri terminate with a king size catharsis and more often than not neither make an abrupt departure or via a detour return to the modified situation. It is in this context that it will be reasonable perhaps to summarise Desai’s achievements through the four paradigms of catharsis, elucidation, education and finally transformation. Maya and Monisha are handicapped by their psychic inadequacy to cathart their shadow. They are the victims who explode by the sheer intensity of their suppressed psyche and end up fatally mocking the immense capabilities of the feminine. Sita and Nanda Kaul are also stuck up similarly like Maya and Monisha yet they reach a terminal at Manori and Carignano respectively which connects them axially with the cathartic valves. They commence a dialogue of elucidation moving on to education, where Sita rejects the mystique of father as mere illusion and Nanda Kaul laments the loss of a physical, emotional vital self. Through education they are the prospective pilgrim towards the road of transformation. It is not important whether they reach there. Voices in the City is so much preoccupied with the nausea of Nirode and despair of Monisha that Amla has received scant attention of scholars and critics between Nirode’s neurotic outburst and mother’s withdrawal Amla stands as an emerging self. Sarah despite being sensuous and introvert is different from Anita Desai’s peculiar female order. She is more in the mould of Amla. Sarha’s character has more power.
Bim perhaps is a classical achievement of Anita Desai, unparalleled in the Indian English fiction. She is a classic achievement in the sense that Desai has orchestrated her journey towards self-hood neatly as if through a chartered course. It will of course be too facetious to suggest that Desai schematically formulated Bim, but it is a fact that Bim’s quest clearly and vividly moves to the paradigms discussed here-to-above. She cathartes, elucidates and she educates herself so progressively towards that deep valley of transformation.

The study of these novels is highly rewarding as they record not only the growth of Anita Desai as a literary artist but also as a person moving slowly from self-alienation to self-actualization, from darkness to light. The helpless ‘cry’ and bewildered protest of Cry, the Peacock and Voices in the City pave way for an intense search for authenticity and the resultant revelation of the poverty of romantic vision in Where Shall We Go This Summer?, Fire on the Mountain, Clear Light of the Day, Journey to Ithaca and Fasting, Feasting. The protagonist in each of these novels is ‘learning to live with oneself, with one’s conscience, one’s own illusions and despairs”². Anita Desai projects their reconciliation with self and environment through an artistic way by presenting their epiphanic experiences novelist believes:

I don’t think anybody’s exile from society can solve any problem. I think basically the problem is how to exist in society and yet maintain one’s individuality rather than suffering from a lack of society and a lack of belonging.³

Thus the reconciliation of the protagonists in her later novels is not an acceptance of defeat, but a movement towards self-actualization bringing in a harmony of inner and outer selves, in short, the achievement of wholeness.
NOTES

