CHAPTER VI

Conclusion

The present study has been justified mainly on two grounds; on the one hand, it analyses the position and importance of women in the modern society and on the other hand, it explores how women have moved towards self-awareness and understanding. This is an attempt to depict life-size women with throbbing pulse, yearning for recognition and acceptance, longing for self-expression and individuality who assert themselves and gain dignity and independence and walk hopefully to the future to serve the larger community.

Feminism is a much discussed topic today. The present thesis attempts to apply feminist concepts in the Indian context. The study reveals that Indian English women novelists have shown great insight and deep understanding in portraying their women characters. This study can claim a unique stance in that it has ventured to find out how far women have succeeded in asserting themselves.

The first two chapters provide a theoretical backbone to the thesis and in order to substantiate the theoretical arguments, a survey of Indian English fiction and the emergence of Indian women novelists is made in the first chapter. The second chapter discusses the origin and growth of feminism and its influence on Indian English women novelists. As mentioned earlier, the first two chapters are theoretical in nature and form the basis for the other chapters that are analytical. The introductory chapter presents a bird’s eye
view of the origin and growth of Indian English fiction and the emergence of Indian women novelists with specific reference to Anita Desai, Nayantara Sahgal, Shashi Deshpande and Namita Gokhale.

The first part of the first chapter is a general survey of Indian English fiction. During the nineteenth century many new forms and trends entered literature. The most important of all these new literary forms was the novel. The rise of fiction in Indian English literary field is not an isolated event; it is distinctly related to the social, political, cultural and economic conditions of the time. The struggle for independence and acquisition of freedom had a rejuvenating experience in the field of arts and literature and channelised them to new directions. In the fertile soil of Indian English literature, fiction grew rapidly, contributing some of the remarkable works to the genre. Though the first Indian English novel appeared in 1864, it was only in the 1920s and 30s that Indian English fiction began to bloom magnificently and carve out its identity. The novels of the 30s reflect the socio-political conditions of the time such as the struggle for independence, the burden of foreign rule, etc. Interestingly, the novels of the 50s marked a flourishing and steady growth dealing with issues like partition and its aftermath. The novels of the 1960s are subjective and introspective and have a personal tone. The growth of science and technology, providing new vistas for English education, the introduction of Indian English studies in the universities and colleges – all these gave great impetus to the growth of Indian English novel. The 1970s was a period of economic decline, strikes and turmoil. The political
conditions like the Emergency adversely affected the literary field. The novels published during this period reflect the then existing conditions of the society.

The 80s and after, mark the emergence of the new generation writers. This period witnesses a tremendous change in the socio-political conditions of the country. The assassination of Mrs. Indira Gandhi and the resultant violence and the massacre of the Sikhs had its impact on the literary field too. In addition to the socio-political issues, the novels of this period ventured to explore the individual's interior world. The new generation novelists experimented with new forms and themes highlighting the importance of national integration and communal harmony. The modern novels have a wider canvas than their predecessors encompassing diverse cultures and ideas. The modern novelists' handling of language is so effective that it fully expresses the ideas they want to share. The characters in the novels of the new generation are insecure, anxious, tense and sceptical. Yet they are able to see the brighter side of life. The modern writers have enriched the Indian English fiction field with their novel and experimental themes and techniques.

The second section of the first chapter focuses mainly on the major differences between men's writing and women's writing. The portrayal of women characters by male writers, of course, has certain limitations as their knowledge about the feminine psyche is either unreal or incorrect. Their women characters are devoid of reality and truthfulness. The male writers present women as types or even idols. Men idealize women characters by bestowing upon them all virtues and qualities. Some of the novels simply
mention women characters without giving proper presentation. They are appendages to the heroes.

In some novels women characters find somewhat significant roles or proper place, but even there they fail to grow fully as real individuals. For example, Rosie in R. K Narayan’s The Guide, though presented beautifully and given ample space, lacks a wholesome and integrated growth. It may be because men writers either neglect them or are unable to present them effectively. Men picture women as they know them, or as observed by them, but it is devoid of originality and authenticity. Till the emergence of women writers, female characters are portrayed from men’s point of view alone, as he imagines or hopes a woman ought to be, which is far from reality. When women write about women, it becomes original, authentic and credible. They describe a woman’s feelings and thoughts from a woman’s point of view; hence more realistic and truthful. It is the simple fact that women can understand women better than men understand women.

The third part of the first chapter deals with the emergence of women writers. The impact of western education on Indian women is debatable. In addition to western education, the influence of western educated women helped Indian women immensely in emboldening and asserting themselves. The reform movements by William Bentick and Raja Ram Mohan Roy helped to uplift the position and status of Indian women. Women’s writing is closely related to the socio-political conditions of the time. They are not unaware of the current issues of their time. It is important to note that though women
writers came to the forefront during the last quarter of the nineteenth century, they began to make perceptible contributions only after independence. Women writers focus mainly on the problems of women and the circumstances in which they live. The early women writers such as Toru Dutt, Cornelia Sorabji and Swarnakumari present the social and economic issues of the time where women are neither secure nor free.

The post-independence era marked the emergence of a number of efficient and noted Indian English women writers whose works enlightened and enlivened the otherwise passive, docile Indian women. Social reforms as well as the awareness gained by women emboldened them to react vehemently against the patriarchal system of society and the oppression and cruelties they suffered. The changing status of women had its impact upon the writers' views also which gave further impetus to the resurgence of women.

Interestingly, all the women writers are aware of the customs and traditions that prevailed in the society which curtailed their freedom and made them suffer much. The focus of almost all the women writers is on the plight of women in the male-dominated society. They discuss at some length the social and political issues of the time. Kamala Markandaya discusses social and personal issues of the time. Her novels like Nectar in a Sieve and Some Inner Fury are closely related to the day-to-day problems of ordinary people's lives. She treats men and women equally. Ruth Prawer Jhabvala mainly deals with the sophisticated upper class women of urban India. Her novels concentrate mainly on the themes of east-west encounter and marital
dissonance. Bharati Mukherjee deals with the expatriate experience of the Indian women in the West and the resultant conflicts. The modern women novelists like Gita Mehta, Raji Narasimhan and Arundhati Roy also deal with the plight of women in the modern society and their emergence in to individuality and identity.

The last section of the introductory chapter focuses on the novelists selected for study. Anita Desai, one of the foremost names in the Indian English fiction world, reflects the psychological struggles and tensions of her characters. Her interest lies mainly in the subtle and complex psychological states of women characters who are torn and tormented within, either because of their own flaws or because of their surroundings or because of both. A journey within is an important trait of all her characters. Desai gives due importance to the political, social and economic problems of the society, but her main concern is to explore the inner climate and mental agonies of her characters. Though mainly a political novelist, Nayantara Sahgal successfully blends the personal world of human relationships with the impersonal world of politics. She modestly admits that her focus is on human beings and not on men and women as separate entities. Sahgal is a writer with a vision and her characters march towards the future optimistically and hopefully.

Shashi Deshpande has enriched the Indian English literary world with her memorable characters. All of her protagonists, though they undergo struggles and tensions, look hopefully to the future and make life possible and worth living. She delves deep into the psychological complexities of the
individual mind and treats them as individuals. Namita Gokhale freely and openly discusses the lives of her women characters. She believes in the equality of the sexes and her characters are individualistic and independent women. Her novels reflect the real conditions in society and lashes out at the hypocrisy of the male-dominated world. She does not spare either men or women for their follies and flaws. Her novels constitute "a broad encompassing feminist vision, visualizes a female space in the patriarchal society. In this space women can foreground their subjectivity and are self-sufficient enough to live with dignity and self-respect,"¹ observes Subhash Chandra.

Like the first chapter, the second chapter is also purely theoretical, and discusses in detail the emergence of feminism and its influence on Indian women novelists. Feminism is a positive movement which intends an integrated development of women and wishes to eradicate the age-old social evils of male-domination and female-subordination. It aims at providing awareness to women. Feminism tries to question the inequality and injustice meted out to women in society. For centuries, the patriarchal social set-up has turned a deaf ear to women's clamouring for equality and justice. Men are always favoured and get good education, care and freedom, whereas women are not only denied education, but also consideration as human beings, and are marginalized. Women are even treated as commodities where men determine their value. Men are privileged in all the fields at the cost of
women. Feminist movement critiques and resists the androcentric stance of society.

For ages, women have suffered stoically the burden of male superiority and domination. Literature and religion have a great role in keeping women in the subservient and docile position. Generally in the writings of men, women are side-tracked and belittled. There are writers who hold women in high esteem in their writings, but in practical life, all these turn out to be merely a mirage. The negative and derogatory attitudes of writers and religions towards women too have pushed women from the main-stream of society to the periphery, making men the law-givers and masters.

Women’s attitude to herself too is pathetic. She is conditioned in such a way as to accept the docile, subservient position assigned to her by the patriarchal society. It is very clear that woman’s secondary position is thrust upon her by the male-dominated society. Woman, either unaware of her dignity and ability or unable to fight against the existing social codes, has accepted her fate meekly, much to the advantage of the male world. But that is the past history. Thanks to the advantages of education and newly gained awareness, woman today has begun to fight against male chauvinism and strives boldly to safeguard her dignity, individuality and independence.

The term feminism came into use around the 1890s replacing ‘womanism’ and is widely used now. It refers to the intense awareness of one’s identity as a woman and genuine interest in solving woman’s problems. Interestingly, feminism is not confined to women only, and it is not a
movement restricted to the advocacy of woman's rights alone. It is a movement against injustice and exploitation. There are a number of men, for example, John Stuart Mill or Raja Ram Mohan Roy or Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, who have supported and stood for women's causes.

Feminism in the West has had its moments of ups and downs. Though the world's first organized movement on behalf of women was officially inaugurated in 1848 and in 1920 it achieved its goal of women's right to vote, after a few years the feminist leaders and the movement itself vanished into thin air, leaving no footprints behind. But after the Second World War, feminism began to show signs of resurgence. The feminism of the post world war II profusely transformed the lives of women not merely in the United States but also throughout the world. The publication of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* in 1949 had great impact on the world of women.

The awareness gained by women gradually changed their strategies of reading literary works. Feminist Criticism has protested against the exclusion of women from the field of literary criticism which has traditionally been considered a male-dominated area. Writers like Elaine Showalter, Betty Friedan, Virginia Woolf, Kate Millett, etc. gave great impetus to the women's movement. The best feminist texts speak not just about gender, but about the need for justice and equality of sexes.

The 1970s and after mark the prevalence of the second phase of feminism or what is now popularly known as modern feminism. It has resulted in a worldwide awareness of the oppression of women and
subsequently in protests against male-domination. Modern feminism is rooted in French Enlightenment and British Liberalism and is closely related to the notions of truth, justice, freedom and equality.

The different types of feminism – radical feminism, cultural feminism, Marxist feminism, socialist feminism – all ultimately aim at the emancipation of women and their attainment of dignity and independence. In moulding and shaping feminism, the part played by Marxism and Structuralism cannot be undermined. Industrial revolution and the World Wars also have accelerated social changes and the emancipation of women. The industrial revolution initiated women into productive labour and thereby to economic independence which in turn helped in raising the status of women. Postfeminism is an oft-used term in the West today which intends to cover the different configurations of feminism and post-modernism.

The second half of the second chapter discusses the origin of feminism and feminist writing in India. The condition of woman – whether in India or in the West – is the same and she suffers neglect and injustice at the hands of man. A movement like feminism is essential in such a circumstance to enable woman to gain awareness of her potentialities and strengths. Feminism arrived in India in the 70s, but people looked at it suspiciously and contemptuously. The average Indian woman, even the educated Indian woman, is forced to be content with the role assigned to her by the society, i.e., to be a submissive, docile house wife. Feminism tries to shake off this lowly position of woman.
Surprisingly, Indian history reveals that woman had a very bright social status in the pre-epic period. In course of time she lost that position and was pushed to a secondary status. Significantly, in India, reform movements commenced under the able leadership of men like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar and others. In addition to this, the influence of western education and western educated women engineered the reform movements. Inspired by the reformers and encouraged by political leaders, namely Gandhiji, more women came forward to take an active part in the freedom struggle. Moreover, the Indian Constitution provides a host of laws which theoretically treat the sexes as equal. Hence, at first, Indian women looked at western feminism sceptically and suspiciously and they felt that feminism is alien.

Ironically, the actual condition of woman in India is pathetic and deplorable. Indian women continue to suffer due to their ignorance and male arrogance. Moreover, they are conditioned in such a way as to suffer injustice and inequality silently. Exploitation and oppression prevail in Indian society in a ghastly and monstrous form. In such a circumstance, a movement like feminism is all the more important to awaken and enlighten women. The Indian woman has begun to gain awareness that she is also a human being like men; so gender equality should be safeguarded.

During the seventies and eighties, the western feminist movement received great acceptance and exposure in India. A number of articulate women, especially creative artists, were greatly influenced by the movement.
The Indian women novelists like Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, Shashi Deshpande, Raji Narasimhan, Gita Mehta, Namita Gokhale and Arundhati Roy positively deal with women-related themes in their novels. Many heroines in their novels struggle and strive hard to shake off the shackles that enchained them and gain dignity, independence and individuality. The women novelists, especially the four novelists studied here – Anita Desai, Nayantara Sahgal, Shashi Deshpande and Namita Gokhale – knowingly or unknowingly deal with woman’s problems and with how they fight bravely to rise above man-made rules and achieve self-awareness and understanding. These novelists can be called women writers, as none of them confirms that they are feminists. They do not profess any special affinity with feminist theories nor do they reveal any strong anti-male stance. They may not be formal feminist writers in the strict sense of the word, but it should be remembered that feminism can mean different things to different people.

Arshia Sattar in her article states:

Feminism is no longer a single voice that speaks for all women irrespective of creed and colour. It is, rather a ‘rainbow coalition’ of rights, desires, agendas, struggles, victories. Not all issues apply to all women, our battles need not be the same and, more and more we tend to speak for ourselves rather than for all of us.²

Whether they are feminists or not, they stand and speak for women’s cause and empowerment. They create women characters who move towards self-awareness and self-actualization. These novelists present a women’s world from a women’s point of view.

After providing the theoretical background for the study an attempt is made to analyse the main concerns and ideas in the subsequent chapters.
Chapters III, IV and V together constitute the main part of the thesis. They discuss twelve novels of the four major Indian women novelists in English writing in the second half of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century. The novelists studied – Anita Desai, Nayantara Sahgal, Shashi Deshpande and Namita Gokhale – have left indelible marks in the field of Indian English fiction. They have shown admirable understanding of the problems and the predicaments of women.

Chapter three discusses how the women protagonists in the initial stage of writing of the novelists studied become victims unto themselves. The heroines – Maya of Anita Desai’s Cry, The Peacock, Simrit of Nayantara Sahgal’s The Day in Shadow, Sarita of Shashi Deshpande’s The Dark Holds No Terrors and Paro of Namita Gokhale’s Paro: Dreams of Passion – are victimized mainly by their odd and peculiar characteristic traits or flaws. In addition to their weaknesses, they are victimized by other characters also. Moreover, their childhood experiences, particular circumstances and life situations aggravate their victimization; yet primarily they are victims of their own making that hinder them from being wholesome, mature individuals.

Neurotic and hysterical Maya, passive and reckless Simrit, egoistic and self-centred Sarita, eccentric and selfish Paro – all face the inevitable fate and doom due to their flaws. All the four heroines defy or try to defy the existing patriarchal code of life and free themselves from the chains round them. In their attempt to free themselves and assert their individuality, Maya loses her husband and sanity, Simrit and Paro break away from marriage only to be tied
up again; Paro kills herself, and it is only Sarita who, after much turmoil and tension determines to patch up the gap and takes the positive step to start afresh. These women do not cut themselves off either from the family or from the society, but protest against injustice and exploitation. Marital incompatibility and strong desire for life are common features shared by these heroines.

The fourth chapter deals with the protagonists who rebel against the unjust customs and traditions of the society and after much struggle and trouble survive, though torn up and bruised, and live with dignity and pride. Sita in Anita Desai's *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*, Sonali in Nayantara Sahgal's *Rich Like Us*, Sumi in Shashi Deshpande's *A Matter of Time* and Gudiya in Namita Gokhale's *Gods, Graves and Grandmother* fight against the patriarchal and male-dominant society's codes, question the injustice and inequality, and assert themselves to lead a free and dignified life. It is important to note that a return journey to the childhood home by the heroines helps them become matured and mellowed individuals. After much introspection, they prepare themselves to face the realities of life and lead a refined life. All the protagonists suffer due to the male world and bleed profusely, and yet do not lose their hearts, but fight courageously.

Unable to withstand the violence and bloodshed around her and holding the utopian idea of keeping the child she is carrying in her womb without giving birth to it, Sita in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* flies to her childhood home in the island of Manori. She finally takes the positive step
to return to her family and home which is indicative of her growth. Nayantara Sahgal’s Sonali, though at first shattered and depressed due to male arrogance and dirty politics, soon regains her poise and mental quietude and determines to fight against inequality and exploitation. In her new-gained awareness she even moves forward with the decision to serve the wider community. Sumi, the heroine of Deshpande’s *A Matter of Time*, instead of breaking down when faced by adverse circumstances, keeps her mental balance and equips herself with courage and determination to face life single-handedly. Gudiya, Gokhale’s heroine, experiences the bitter taste of negligence and indifference both in childhood and at the hands of her husband, yet faces life with courage and optimism. She effectively makes use of her practical wisdom and common sense and sends her husband to Bombay and thus saves herself. All the heroines of this group unearth their abilities to face the challenges of life boldly even in adversity. The journey motif plays a vital role in the lives of all the protagonists discussed here.

The protagonists studied in Chapter V – Anita Desai’s Bim of *Clear Light of Day*, Nayantara Sahgal’s Shan of *Lesser Breeds*, Shashi Deshpande’s Madhu of *Small Remedies* and Namita Gokhale’s Shakuntala of *Shakuntala: The Play of Memory* – fight bravely against the man-made rules and the oppression and discrimination they are meted out by men and male-dominated society, and come out victoriously. The protagonists travel far and wide and in the process gain maturity and self-awareness. While Shan, Madhu and Shakuntala literally undertake travel, Bim makes an inward journey to her
own self and the outcome is the same - all gain emotional maturity and greater understanding about themselves. Yearning to acquire knowledge is a common factor shared by all the heroines discussed in this chapter. Urge for independence and freedom is stronger here than in the case of the protagonists discussed earlier.

Bim in Clear Light of Day proves that a woman can have the strength and courage to face the harsh realities of life single-handedly without breaking down under the weight of problems, and come out victoriously. Bim is the most representative of Anita Desai’s protagonists who is neither a dreamer nor an escapist, but a sensible practical-minded woman. Shan in Lesser Breeds, though she experiences the bitter aspects of life even as a child, learns greatly from those experiences and in the course of time attains independence, dignity, strength, maturity and awareness. In spite of the loss of her father and grandmother she takes the strong and mature decision to serve her country and the people. Madhu, Shashi Deshpande’s heroine, gains the mental courage and strength to accept the reality of her son’s death during her stay away from home. In her new-gained awareness she realizes that the fault lies within her as much as with others and decides to go back to her husband. In her self-awareness she extends a helping hand to all in need. Shakuntala, the heroine of Gokhale, has a perceptible growth from a weak girl to a strong woman. She has the courage to leave everybody who is unstable and insensitive to her. She never risks her freedom and individuality, even to keep the family knot intact. In her self-awareness she understands the folly of
her actions, but never regrets them and says with confidence and dignity that she has not wasted her life. All the protagonists studied here, except Shakuntala who loses her life half-way, traverse towards the future with greater hope and optimism to serve the wider world.

It is interesting to note that the protagonists studied show a surprising resemblance to each other and possess many similarities; at the same time, their special characteristic traits set them apart from each other showing perceptible differences and varied individualities. All the protagonists studied hail from upper class or upper middle class families, the only exception being Gudiya in Gods, Graves and Grandmother. In all the novels, family breaks down at some level either due to marital discord or because of some other problems. None of the heroines is totally cut off from familial ties and societal bonds, but they stick to these orbits and protest against injustice and oppression.

Most of the heroines studied do not enjoy and experience motherly love and affection. Sonali and Sumi enjoy motherly love and care. Sarita not only does not get mother’s love but has only bitter memories about her. Paro does not get motherly love and is even denied the safety and security of home. Sita’s mother had run away from home, giving up her children. Maya, Madhu and Shan have lost their mothers. Gudiya’s mother had given her up and run away with another man. Nothing is mentioned about Simrit’s parents. Bim can only recall how they were neglected by their mother. Shakuntala has a love-hate relationship with her mother. So most of the protagonists show no
predilection for motherhood. None of them, except perhaps Madhu, sees anything positive in the idea of being a mother.

Only Shan and Madhu enjoy real fatherly love. The fathers of the other protagonists are either dead or selfish or negligent and indifferent. Most of the heroines have a bleak, unhappy and colourless childhood. All the heroines except Sonali and Sumi, have no good reliable sisters. Sita has a sister who she never liked because her father seemed to dote on her. Bim’s sister is a foil to her, though later they become close friends. Only a few heroines have brothers. Maya suffers due to the tug of war between her father and brother. But her father shows special interest in his son’s education and social status while neglecting her education altogether. Sarita feels jealous of her brother for the preference he gained over her and his drowning and the accusation of her mother that she has caused his death leave deep scars in her psyche. Sita’s brother is not much help to her. Bim has a love-hate relationship with her brother Raja. Shakuntala hates her brother as her mother prefers him to her. Thus, none of the protagonists has a strong and intimate relationship with her brother.

Marriage and marital relationship form an important aspect of the lives of most of the protagonists studied. Marital incompatibility is a common factor in most of the novels, though breakdown of marriage occurs only in a few cases, as in Nayantara Sahgal’s *The Day in Shadow*, in Namita Gokhale’s *Paro: Dreams of Passion* and *Shakuntala: The Play of Memory*. Husband and wife fail to understand and accept each other as they are, and the gap between
them widens to such an extent that reunion is impossible or rather difficult. Maya kills Gautama; Sumi and Shakuntala lose their lives. In some cases, after much mental struggle and months of separation or break, it is the woman who takes the initiative to keep the family intact. For example, Sarita in Shashi Deshpande’s *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, Sita and Madhu in Anita Desai’s *Cry, The Peacock* and *Small Remedies* respectively take the initiative and hope to reunite with their husbands. Gudiya, in Gokhale’s *Gods, Graves, and Grandmother*, conveniently gets rid of her husband. In the case of Desai’s and Gokhale’s protagonists, marriage never provides the sense of security, freedom and happiness that the protagonists expect from it. Being disappointed and dejected, they overreact to the situations they face. These women lack the inner strength and optimism that is characteristic of Sahgal’s and Deshpande’s women.

The husbands in the novels studied are domineering and selfish persons. The heroines defy such dominance, yet they try their maximum to adjust with their husbands. It is only when they cannot bear anything more that they begin to act or rather react. The husbands are indifferent, insensitive men who fail to understand their wives properly. Lack of understanding on the part of the husbands or even lovers is a common element in all the novels. Along with this, lack of proper communication plays an important role in the lives of all the heroines. The feminine concept of female friendship and sisterhood find place in the novels studied.
All the twelve protagonists undergo moments of loneliness and isolation at one time or the other in their lives. The feeling of homelessness, rootlessness and alienation are experienced intensely by them. In Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande and Namita Gokhale, loneliness and alienation are set mainly against socio-psychic background whereas in Sahgal it is set against a socio-psychic as well as political backdrop.

The conflict in each novel grows out of the protagonist's gradual awareness and final rejection of social fetters imposed on her by the society. In every novel, the heroine has moved one step further away from the stereotype woman to a woman who possesses self-awareness and individuality. Most of the women characters discussed are determined to live in self-respect. They no more wait and wail for the husband. Though the protagonists question the traditional laws and customs of the society, finally most of them conform to it.

Love of life or desire to live is a common character trait shared by all protagonists, though ironically enough, some kill themselves whereas some others meet with an untimely death. Courage, will-power, urge for independence and dignity, determination to fight against inequality and injustice are shared by all the protagonists studied. Though Maya and Simrit appear passive and docile, they are not so as they possess tremendous strength and innate qualities. They all move towards self-awareness and self-realization. It is however important to note that all the novels, maybe with the exception of Cry, The Peacock and Paro: Dreams of Passion end on a note of
hope and optimism, as the protagonists take the control of their lives and tread towards the future with determination and dignity.

The society presented in all the twelve novels is a patriarchal, male-dominated society against which the heroines fight. The society manifests its age-old male supremacy under which the women suffer, suffocate and finally rebel. A journey away from home or away to the childhood home or an inward journey is a common motif in all the novels discussed. After the journey, the protagonists become mature, strong and bold enough to face the harsh realities of life and gain self-awareness and understanding.

Significantly, each protagonist has her own individuality and shows a marked difference from others. A comparative evaluation of the growth of women towards self-awareness in the selected novels of the four novelists reveals this. Desai’s and Gokhale’s protagonists are capable of dissent, but incapable of finding a solution to their problems, with the exception of Bim and Gudiya. Sahgal’s and Deshpande’s heroines, on the other hand, show a more mature and realistic approach to life. Though their heroines – Simrit, Sonali, Shan, Sarita, Sumi, Madhu – are troubled and feel hemmed in by social shackles and patriarchal mores, they try to achieve individuality and move towards greater self-awareness and understanding. On the contrary, Desai’s and Gokhale’s heroines fail to adjust with life’s harsh realities. Hence they succumb to tensions and problems like Maya and Paro or flee to a dream world like Sita and Shakuntala. Sahgal’s and Deshpande’s women are stronger, bolder and more mature than Desai’s and Gokhale’s protagonists.
A discussion of the protagonists who belong to the different stages in the writing of the novelists concerned is interesting. It reveals that there is a gradual evolution of the characters from the initial stage to the third stage through the intermediate stage. Anita Desai’s heroines – Maya, Sita, Bim – represent progressive phases towards self-awareness and understanding. They show a perceptible growth and upward movement from Maya’s infantile nature through Sita’s acceptance of life as it is, to Bim’s self-realization and maturity. Bim shows a development as a heroine and also represents a growth among Desai’s protagonists. She is the most emancipated among Desai’s heroines and moves towards greater self-realization than her predecessors Maya or Sita. Indira Nityanandam observes the growth of Desai’s protagonists: “From Maya who wants to be merely a loved wife to Sita who questions the need to bear a child evolves Bim who has the courage to face life alone and on her own terms.” In the words of Ranu Uniyal, “Desai makes an outward movement in her fiction from the intense subjectivism of Cry, The Peacock through transitional and exploratory novels like Where Shall We Go This Summer? and Fire on the Mountain to the ‘reconciliation’ of outer-inner dichotomy in Clear Light of Day.” It is with Bim that Anita Desai shows a protagonist’s will-power and determination to move away from the home into the larger world. She is able to make choices which are not in agreement with the traditionally accepted social codes.

Nayantara Sahgal’s protagonists reveal the progressive phase of feminine self-perception. Her women are emancipated, educated individuals.
Their personal lives are intertwined with the political life of the country and the times. The heroines suffer due to the existing social customs, political hypocrisy and male arrogance. Though they undergo bitter moments of misunderstanding, injustice and exploitation, they never yield. With will-power, courage and determination, they fight single-handedly against the evils of society. There is a visible growth in Sahgal’s portrayal from the passive, exploited Simrit to the emancipated, self-willed and bold Shan through the free, individualistic and awakened Sonali. Simrit is crushed under the pressure of male arrogance and exploitation. Though she survives, it is after much mental torture and suffering. Sonali also suffers greatly due to male chauvinism and filthy politics, but attains the self-awareness to give up everything, even marriage, that curtails her individuality, dignity and freedom and moves single-handedly to serve suffering humanity. Shan is the most emancipated and matured among Sahgal’s heroines. She is neither a victim of bureaucracy nor of oppression. In her greater self-awareness and nobility, she gives up her own comforts and happiness to serve the country and the people at large. Thus Shan moves towards greater self-awareness and independence than her predecessors Simrit and Sonali.

In Deshpande’s novels, marital incompatibility or marital discord gives an impetus to the protagonists to start introspection leading to self-awareness and self-realization. To all her protagonists who are discussed in this study, disappointment in their marital lives has been a problem, but never an insurmountable problem. Rather than escaping from marital bonds, they try
and succeed in finding out a solution to the problems. A balanced, practical approach characterises all the three protagonists discussed – Sarita, Sumi and Madhu – who face the situation squarely and find a positive way out of their dilemma. A journey away from their home helps Deshpande’s protagonists question their relationships and attitudes, analyze their problems and find out a solution.

Though all her characters move towards self-awareness, the degree of their growth is varied. Sara is a victim of her own making and when she realizes this, she agrees to transform herself into a mature, refined woman. Unlike Sara, Sumi does not allow herself to be victimized. In moments of trials and troubles, she keeps mental tranquility and balance and faces life courageously and moves towards greater self-awareness. She asserts herself by finding a job. Madhu is the most matured and emancipated among Deshpande’s heroines. Though she also suffers much due to marital incompatibility and tragedies in life, her self-awareness enables her to be a free, refined and mellowed individual. In her awareness and understanding she not only decides to live a new life with Som, but determines to serve the needy also. Thus she evolves towards better self-awareness and greater understanding than Sara or Sumi.

Namita Gokhale’s heroines show a visible upward movement towards self-awareness and self-realization from the eccentric, ego-centred Paro through the independent, self-reliant Gudiya to the enlightened, mature and self-confident Shakuntala. Paro fails to channelise her strengths and abilities
in a proper way and unable to accept the realities, kills herself. Gudiya possesses immense inner strength and vision to look hopefully to the future. In spite of her suffering, Gudiya never allows herself to be shattered and crushed. Her practical wisdom and intuition which she has inherited from her grandmother allow her to see the bright aspects of life and gain self-awareness. Of the three heroines of Gokhale, Shakuntala is more emancipated and individualistic, for she never compromises with anybody who tries to curtail her freedom or destroy her dignity.

All the twelve heroines studied make an upward movement towards growth and understanding, though in varied degrees. In the process Maya and Paro yield themselves to the existential problems; Paro, Simrit and Shakuntala break away from marriage; Sumi and Shakuntala meet with accidents and lose their lives half-way; Gudiya frees herself from the humiliating marriage bond conveniently; Sonali, Bim and Shan take the bold step to remain single and serve humanity; Sarita, Sita and Madhu reunite with their husbands and family and start afresh. Significantly, all the heroines fight against the existing social systems and social evils such as injustice, inequality and exploitation. While some lose the battle, some survive though bruised and bleeding and others become victorious. The women protagonists studied represent the feminist ideas of freedom, self-awareness, individuality, independence, self-confidence and dignity. In short, the present study shows a gradual evolution of the protagonists towards self-awareness and understanding.
NOTES


