CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

There is a woman at the beginning of all great things

- Lamartine

The research scholar has carried out extensive research into Women Characters in Shashi Deshpande’s and Anita Desai’s Novels. Indian English Literature may be defined as literature written originally in English by Indians by birth, ancestry or nationality. Indian writing in English has a relatively recent history. It is only one and a half centuries old. Indian Writing in English has blossomed and matured and come to hold a place of its own in world literature. M.K.Naik observes: “Though its growth in later years far exceeded that of most other forms, fiction was actually the last to arrive on the Indian English literary scene.” (Naik 106)

Fiction, being the most powerful form of literary expression today, has acquired a prestigious position in Indian English Literature. The beginning of Indian English fiction is marked by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee’s Rajmohan’s Wife (1864). The Bengali writers mainly dominated the period from 1864 to 1900. Widely known novelists of this period are Toru Dutt, Lal Behari Dey, K. Charkavarti, Kamala Satthianandhan, Behramji Malabari, A.P.Dutta and others.

Toru Dutt’s maiden romance Bianca or The Young Spanish Maiden, published in 1879, is an autobiographical novel. Lal Behari Dey’s Bengal Peasant Life or History
of a Bengal Raiyat (1880), the best Indian English novel written in latter half of the nineteenth century, is a realistic novel. Though their works are immature, they tried their best to treat contemporary issues. Indian English fiction has taken many strides forward ever since it started. The pioneers Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan, Raja Rao and Bhabani Bhattacharya laid the foundations of narrative. Some of these pioneers have derived inspiration from the older narrative methods combining them with their own methods.

In the pre-independence era, novels like Rabindranath Tagore’s The Wreck and Gora, Mulk Raj Anand’s Untouchable and Coolie, R.K. Narayan’s Swami and Friends and The Bachelor of Arts, Raja Rao’s Kanthapura and other works gave firm footing to the Indian English fiction. Satish Kumar says

During this era the toddling Indian English novel, in spite of many hindrances and handicaps, has learnt to stand firmly on its legs. A conscious and artistic pattern has evolved itself. The novel has become a great literary force, a powerful medium for creating social and national awareness and for suggesting ways of changing society. (Kumar 53)

The Indian English fiction attains maturity, full flowering and wide acclaim in the post-independent era. The novels experience a change in their themes. The themes of current happenings, cross cultural conflict, rural events and the traumatic experiences are seen in the novels of Bhabani Bhattacharya, Nirad C. Chaudhri, Kushwant Singh,

In 1980s, yet another breed of Indian fictionists in English emerged. It included Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth, Upmanyu Chatterjee, Shashi Deshpande, Shashi Tharoor, Amitav Ghosh, Sudhir Kakkar, Dina Mehta and Arundhati Roy. Apart from these, some lesser writers have also emerged on the contemporary scene such as Shiv K. Kumar, Saros Cowasjee, Vasant A. Shahane, K.V.Subbaram and Ranga Rao. Writing about the recent fiction, Prof. K.R.Srinivasa Iyengar says, “The future of Indian fiction has given ample evidence of vitality, variety, humanity and artistic integrity.” (Radhakrishnan 166)

Anita Desai has added a new dimension to the Indian English fiction. She was born in the year 1937 in Mussoorie, a hill station near Dehra Dun in northern India. Her father D.N.Mazumdar was a Bengali entrepreneur and her mother Toni Nime hailed from Germany. They married when it was still rare for an Indian to wed a European woman. Anita Desai was the youngest of three sisters with an elder brother. Growing up, Anita Desai spoke German at home and Hindi to friends and neighbours.

She first learned English when she went to school. It was the language in which she first learned to read and write, and so it became her literary language. She began to write in English at the age of seven. She was educated in Delhi at Queen Mary’s Higher Secondary School and Miranda House, Delhi University, where she received in 1957 a
B.A. in English Literature. In the year 1958 she married Ashvin Desai, a businessman. They had two sons and two daughters – Rahul, Tani, Arjun and Kiran. Anita Desai’s youngest daughter Kiran Desai has followed her mother into print. In the year 2006, Kiran Desai won the Man Booker Prize for Fiction for her second book *The Inheritance of Loss*. She was the youngest person to win the prestigious award.

Anita Desai left India at the age of forty-five. When she finally ventured abroad, it was to America. Two of her children went to study in the United States and she felt the need to be with them, to provide them with a home. Anita Desai duly took up teaching jobs, first in Massachusetts, then in the city of Boston. She has taught writing at Girton College and Smith College in England and at Mount Holyoke College in the United States.

She is a professor of writing at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge, Massachusetts. She is a member of the Advisory Board for English of the National Academy of Letters in Delhi and a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters. She is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature in London. Anita Desai currently shuttles between Boston, Mexico, England and Delhi.

The literary career of Anita Desai started with short stories. Later her interest was not confined within the four walls of short stories. She took equal pleasure in trying essays, articles and reviews. Anita Desai, the short story writer, emerged as a promising novelist on the Indian literary horizon in 1963. The literary world of Anita Desai is vast,
crowded with characters from various fields of life. Her experiences and minute observation make her novels vivacious, lively and glorious. Anita Desai says,

> Literature has seemed to me more interesting, more significant and overwhelming than the real world. Later, other writers meant more to me. In my twenties when I first began to work seriously and consciously on my novels, it was D.H.Lawrence, Virginia Woolf and Henry James that influenced me more strongly. (Srivastava 217)


Anita Desai has received numerous awards. In 1978, she won the Sahitya Akademi Award for *Fire on the Mountain*. In 1979, her novel *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* won the Federation of Indian Publishers and Author’s Guild of India Award for Excellence in Writing. In 1983, Anita Desai received the Guardian Award for Children’s Fiction for her novel *The Village by the Sea*. In 1990 she received the
national honour of Padma Shri, given by the government of India for service to the arts. She was awarded the literary Lion Award in 1993. *Baumgartner’s Bombay* earned her the prestigious Harold Ribalow Prize. Anita Desai has been shortlisted three times for the Booker Prize. The Booker Prize represents the very best of contemporary fiction. *Clear Light of Day* was shortlisted for the 1980 Booker Prize. *In Custody* was shortlisted for the 1984 Booker Prize. *Fasting, Feasting* was her third novel to be shortlisted for the Booker Prize.

Anita Desai has quietly but consistently practised her craft for over forty-eight years. There is an unhurried, laidback quality to her work that draws the reader in, like a flame attracts a moth. In the age of quick-reads, Anita Desai still draws attention with the same unwavering quality to her work that she first displayed when she penned *Cry, The Peacock*, back in 1963. Anita Desai is justifiably renowned for her keen, subtle eye and her elegant prose. An air of melancholy runs through most of her works. People see a window into their lives through her works. Anita Desai says, “I did not set out to write a cheerful, amusing or optimistic book. I never go back to a story once it is in print. If I did, I would want to rewrite it entirely and at that stage cannot.” (The Hindu 2008)

Another famous contemporary Indian English novelist is Shashi Deshpande. Shashi Deshpande was born in the year 1938 in Dharwad in Karnataka, South India. She is the second daughter of the famous Kannada dramatist and Sanskrit Scholar, Sriranga. She received an English education at a protestant mission school in Karnataka. At the age
of fifteen Shashi Deshpande went to Mumbai, graduated in Economics, then moved to Bangalore, where she gained a degree in law.

She had a very free, unhampered childhood. Her father was very liberal. He did not differentiate between his son and two daughters. At the age of twenty-four, Shashi Deshpande married a doctor. She lived happily with two lovely sons – Raghunandan and Vikram. Despite marriage and motherhood, she felt very incomplete, even dissatisfied. After marriage, when she was living in Mumbai, she did a course on journalism at the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, and worked for a couple of months as a journalist for the magazine ‘Onlooker’. Then she had completed her M.A. in English Literature. She lives in Bangalore with her husband Dr.D.H. Deshpande.

Roots and Shadows. Shashi Deshpande’s first novel, won the Thirumati Rangammal Prize in 1984. That Long Silence was given the Sahitya Akademi Award for 1990. Her novel, The Dark Holds No Terrors received the Nanjangud Tirumalamba Award for 1990. Her work has also been translated into a number of Indian and foreign languages. Shashi Deshpande says,

Each new novel comes as a surprise – one never knows what is coming and where it is coming from. To me, a novel is basically a story. About people. So when I write a novel, I write about humans and human relationships. Of their struggle to make sense of life, to understand their place in the scheme of things. (The Hindu 2008)

Shashi Deshpande has been quietly writing for the last thirty-three years. She deals with the inner world of the Indian women in her novels. She has shown an Indian woman as a silent sufferer who has to bear the brunt of the male dominating society. Her depiction of women’s world is authentic, realistic and credible. She articulates human emotions, fears and feelings as experienced by human beings especially by women. Shashi Deshpande is one of the eminent writers in Indian English literature. Shashi Deshpande’s advice for aspiring writers: Keep reading, keep writing, and do not expect to make a living out of writing. Hold on to your job. (The Hindu 2008)

Shashi Deshpande is one of the few Indian writers in English with a corpus of work. She has successfully handled different forms. She has explored broader human
concerns. Her work has been strong on literary qualities – the imagination, the story fused with its telling, with the structure, with deeply drawn characters. Shashi Deshpande says,

Certainly there has been much vigour and confidence as well as good writing in Indian Writing in English in the last few years. But there is no room for complacence. It has to go a long way before we can call it rich.

We need many more books in all genres – romance, historical fiction, crime novels, children’s books, drama and poetry. While non-fiction is doing well, short stories are dwindling, poetry remains invisible except to poets and poetry lovers, crime fiction is still not making its presence felt and we do not have enough books for children of all ages. (The Hindu 2008)

In general, Indian creative artists in English abound from the nineteenth centuries Indian prose writers are many. Indina poets are only a handful. Of all the genres, fiction is largely touch upon. North Indians were mostly the pioneers; south Indians followed them but never aped them. For the research, Anita Desai, a north Indian by birth and Shashi Deshpande, a south Indian by birth are to be compared and contrasted, with specific references to their chosen novels. They cannot be branded as feminists as they bring to limelight the strengths and weaknesses of women, which may either help them or serve as an obstacle and hinder their progress in society. Undoubtedly Anita Desai and Shashi Deshpande serve as eye openers to the Indian patriarchal society.
Shashi Deshpande is a forceful novelist. She talks with a powerful voice. She
seems very sure of herself and she makes her voice heard. Anita Desai bears a striking
similarity to Shashi Deshpande. She gives voice to the sufferings of the silent race. She
portrays the pitiable condition of women with a sureness of touch. The characters come
alive in the novelist’s skilled hands. Even though Shashi Deshpande and Anita Desai
have written many novels, only five novels have been taken for the research – Shashi
Deshpande’s Roots and Shadows, That Long Silence and Anita Desai’s Cry, The
Peacock, Where Shall We Go This Summer? and Fasting, Feasting. The whole study
is divided into seven chapters.

The first chapter Introduction deals with the growth of Indian English fiction.
The second chapter entitled Submissive and Subservient Women presents meek and
submissive women like Mini, Narmada (Atya), Jaya, Jeeja, Manda, Maya, Leila, Uma
and Anamika. In Shashi Deshpande’s novel Roots and Shadows, Mini was in a pitiable
state. She was not in work and so many refused to marry her and it hurt her so much. She
felt hopeless. She did not have the courage and determination to rise above her problems.
Narmada (Atya) was a symbol of love, patience and tolerance. Widowhood and
childlessness knocked her for six. She sacrificed everything for the family. She was the
servant of everybody, each day. In Shashi Deshpande’ novel That Long Silence, Jaya’s
happy childhood stood in total contrast to her cheerless life in her husband’s house.
Marriage marred her happiness. She was expected to lick her husband’s boots and she
should dance to her husband’s tune. Toothless Jaya kept her mouth shut. Jeeja was kept under by her husband and he forced her to obey him by beating her but she never complained about her loveless marriage and her good-for-nothing husband. Manda led a life of misery and she never enjoyed a high standard of living or great prosperity in all her days. Manda’s whole life was a constant battle against poverty. Poverty crushed all her hopes. She sacrificed her life for her worthless father.

In Anita Desai’s novel Cry, The Peacock, Maya had a lovely nature and it was not really in her nature to be aggressive. Unfortunately marriage made Maya’s life miserable. Her husband did not mind her innermost feelings. He ruffled her feathers and tried her patience. He laughed at her innocence and trod over her weaknesses and took everything for granted. Maya felt betrayed. Leila’s husband was on his last legs but she carried him through his illness and inability and helped him survive a difficult period. The pain was almost too great to endure still she showed remarkable endurance throughout her life. In Anita Desai’s novel Fasting, Feasting, throughout her life, Uma tasted bitterness only. Her parents never took an interest in her studies. She was imprisoned and deprived of basic rights and simple pleasures. There was no one to soothe her pain or to heal her broken heart. She was caught in a web of worries and it was inescapable and inevitable. Anamika’s life after marriage bristled with problems. Mother-in-law made life difficult for her. Nine times out of ten, Anamika was doing household duties. She was their unpaid servant. When her mother-in-law gave her the rough side of her tongue,
Anamika turned the other cheek. Anamika made a martyr of herself and sacrificed her own wishes and dreams.

All the characters have been silenced by the male chauvinists. They feel the lashes of the men’s tongues but they never breathe a word and they never beak their silence. They are beaten but they never cry. They are kicked but they never shout. They are tortured but they silently endure. They are trampled underfoot and they die a slow and painful death.

Women are the silent sufferers. Their opinions have never been sought. Their feelings have never been respected. Their silence and inability to fight back against the attackers made them undergo lifelong sufferings. If they had registered their protests they would have been spared. They shed tears of pain but their agonized cries never reach their fathers’ or husbands’ ears. Many women maintain silence even in the face of great discontentment and discomfort. They are silently enduring all the hardships. As a result they are compelled to swallow a string of inedible bitter pills. From the very beginning itself, if one registers her protest, she will not be compelled to do that again. Silence gives consent and so it leads to many undesirable and unfortunate consequences.

The third chapter entitled **Brave and Brilliant Women** gives a fascinating insight into independent-minded women like Indu, Mukta, Nilima, Leena, Maya’s mother-in-law, Nila, Menaka, Miriam and Jamila. In Shashi Deshpande’s novel **Roots and Shadows**, Indu had a dynamic personality. She distinguished herself by her courage. She
was unstinting in her efforts to help. When Indu assumed her new responsibilities, she had a mountain of work; she was determined to rise to the challenge. In Shashi Deshpande’s novel *That Long Silence*, Mukta was unafraid to speak her mind. She led a perfect life and she never evaded her responsibility. Her motto was that one should not live for oneself alone. She acted as a mother hen. She cared for the people as she worried about them a lot but expected nothing in return from them. Nilima was very young but she had a great deal of maturity. She was very much concerned about her nearest and dearest. She acted with no thoughts of personal gain. She had nerves of iron and so she put up a good fight. She fought with courage and determination. Her fighting spirit, her mental fortitude and her great inner strength made her stand out from the rest of the characters. Leena was easy-going and she never minded anybody or anything in her life. She had a will of iron and she had no hesitation in speaking her mind. Optimistically and fearlessly she conversed with others.

In Anita Desai’s novel *Cry, The Peacock*, Maya’s mother-in-law did social work and was busy round the clock. She never took anything seriously especially her children’s cold and distant behaviour. Nila was self-reliant and independent. She was able to do or decide things by herself. Her husband gave her a hard time and rocked the boat but she was unafraid of the challenges and withstood difficulties and troubles. In Anita Desai’s novel *Where Shall We Go This Summer?,* Menaka was not only brave but also brainy. She never dwelt on any illusion rather she was highly realistic and eager
to achieve something great. When there was nobody to take decisions for her, she herself took the decisions and those decisions were prompt and fitting and her move was smart and sensible. Miriam was bold and boisterous. She was not controlled by rules, regulations or conventions and she was unrestricted. Jamila did the business in an efficient and determined way. Very audaciously and courageously she tackled the toughest customers.

These brainy women stand tall. They show that they are able to deal with anything and they rise to their feet. They are kept shackled but they manage to break free from their confinement. They find a way when there is no way. Their intelligence, fortitude and confidence are their crowning glories. Their actions revive, refresh, and rebuild the lives of the wordless women. Their attitudes are just the tonic the silent sufferers need.

The fourth chapter entitled Aggressive and Oppressive Women deals with arrogant women like Akka, Mama and Aruna. In Shashi Deshpande’s novel Roots and Shadows, Akka was as tough as old boots. Akka’s regime was a repressive regime. She ruled with an iron fist. Wealth gave her an authoritative tone of voice. Family members shuddered with fear and no one had the courage to argue, fight or compete with her. She had the final say in every matter. She never hesitated to speak her mind and it would take a long time to heal. In Anita Desai’s novel Fasting, Feasting, Mama was a hard taskmaster. She was totally unsympathetic. Her eldest daughter was in her bad books.
The bloody-minded mother destroyed her daughter’s life in order to uplift her son. Aruna was the embodiment of selfishness. She had an air of importance and superiority. She did not allow herself to be dictated to. Woe betide anyone who got in her way. She picked holes in everybody’s words and quibbled over small matters. She ruled her husband with a rod of iron and silenced him with a glare.

This is one aspect of a woman’s character one has not seen before. They are totally unsympathetic and they make life difficult for others. They mock the needs of other people and there is a streak of sadism in their nature.

The fifth chapter entitled Rebellious / Villainous Women gives an account of strong-willed women and bad women like Sita, Sunanda-atya, Kaku, Pom, Sita’s mother and Rekha. In Anita Desai’s novel Where Shall We Go This Summer?, Sita was tough and uncompromising. Her expectations and ambitions were highly unrealistic. She was a woman with a rebellious temperament. She quibbled over trivialities. She was defiant and uncooperative. She expected to be obeyed by other people and she did not care about their opinions and feelings.

In Shashi Deshpande’s novel Roots and Shadows, Sunanda-atya’s actions were motivated by guile and greed. When her son decided not to sit for his exam, she backed him and she defended him. She was riding for a fall and her case was beyond redemption. Kaku did not know how to make polite conversation. She was a great one for idle gossip. She talked venomously and she could not keep her mouth shut. She gave full vent to her
bitter feelings and her words were extremely unpleasant and unfriendly. In Anita Desai’s novel *Cry, The Peacock*, the ill-mannered Pom’s behaviour was often appalling and bad. She was very obstinate at times and showed a total disregard for other people’s feelings. In Anita Desai’s novel *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*, Sita’s mother fled to Benares with jewels in a very young age deserting her husband and children. She never nestled her baby in her arms and the child never snuggled up to her mother. The rash and mad decision taken by her wreaked havoc on the family. Rekha’s father had been the bulwark of her life, always a calming spirit, but Rekha did not mind her father’s demise. Her father vanished into thin air suddenly and completely. Rekha shook and shrugged off her father’s memories very easily.

This is the terrifying aspect of women. These trouble-loving and trouble-creating women are unwilling to obey rules. They speak as if they have lost the milk of human kindness completely. They disturb the peace and they are always restless.

The sixth chapter deals with **Techniques**. Technique includes everything that the novelist uses for narrating his/her story. On finer level it means imagery, symbolism, point of view, chronological order of events, stream of consciousness, schematisation of chapter division. Every writer has his/her own peculiar choice of words and structures which make his/her writings unique. Anita Desai’s greatest asset is her language and the novelty of theme and technique in Anita Desai’s novels are not isolated elements. They are inter-related at many levels of structure and texture. Her themes are
original and entirely different from those of Indo-Anglian novelists. Anita Desai is able to narrate the story, to portray the characters, to convey the mood, to evoke the atmosphere, to probe the psyche of her characters successfully. For this she uses flashback technique, stream of consciousness technique and symbolism. Shashi Deshpande is one of the finest exponents of her craft today. Readers encounter an intimacy, a kind of secret bonding with her, as if she were speaking to them alone. Everything is said as it should be, not a superfluous word to be found anywhere.

The seventh chapter **Summation** gives the scholar’s feelings. After having an indepth study of these five novels, the scholar has unearthed many disturbing facts. Both the writers glorify women and their works are women-oriented. They deal with silent sufferings, servility, subjugation, submissiveness and male chauvinism. Women are expected to submit and subdue to others but they should break these barriers and wrong expectations into pieces. Now the time has come for them to break their bondage and breathe freely. They should make their own decisions and fight their own battles. They should not bury their feelings. They should break their silence. Education alone can free the subjugated women–race from dependency. Education and employment make the women stand on their feet.

This research will serve as a wake-up call for the long-suffering women.