Chapter VII

A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF WOMEN CHARACTERS AS PORTRAYED BY VIRGINIA WOOLF AND ANITA DESAI
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A critical comparative study of the women characters in the novels of Virginia Woolf and Anita Desai needs a preliminary discussions of the major prevailing conditions that had their corresponding impact on the writers. When Mrs. Woolf started writing her major novels, she had been influenced by the new technique in modern novels known as the Stream of Consciousness that became an influential force in the field of modern fiction. All the psychological theories propounded by Freud and Jung had their total impact on the major writers of the twentieth century like D.H. Lawrence, Virginia Woolf and others. Almost every modern writer was trying to explore the various psychological theories relating to the human behaviour and human relationship. Fresh exploration in psychological studies led to open new vistas in the field of criticism, poetry and novels as a result of which we had the emergence of such critical concepts as ‘Oedipus Complex,’ ‘Stream of Consciousness’ and such other concepts. But the main influence of the new psychology was on the art of characterisation leading to the emergence of some of the
major writings in modern fictions. Novels like James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, Lawrence’s *Sons and Lovers*, and *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, Virginia Woolf’s *To The Lighthouse* and *The Waves* are some of the important examples of this group of novels.

As one analyses from the specific portrayal of the characters in their major novels, one finds that a particular novelist is chiefly guided by altogether a new psychological theory, concept, an idea. Thus, a study of the portrayal of women character by Virginia Woolf immediately makes us confront with the major psychological crises that are created in the lives of women character vis-a-vis the various changing social circumstances that surround them.

As discussed above, Virginia Woolf must have absorbed many of the new ideas of psychology from her Bloomsbury friends, before 1920. Her short review, ‘Freudian Fiction’ shows a working acquaintances with the main principles of psychoanalysis. Lytton Strachey’s brother James translated Freud’s works into English, and they were first published in Britain by Virginia and Leonard Woolf’s Hogarth Press in 1924. Though Virginia Woolf did not read Freud for herself until the late 1930s, but the obviously
psychoanalytical interest and features of her novels can be accepted as part of the artistic community's response to new psychological theories of time. This new subject-matter was revolutionary, and was shocking to many. The traditional structure for human activity of motive - decision - action - result was wiped out by Freud’s theory of the unconscious. Dark impulses and hidden instincts took the place of speeches, conscious intentions, public behaviour and manners which gradually seemed to become irrelevant. Thus, there was a radical change of emphasis from the description of external reality to an attempt at description of the inner feelings. So the new subject-matter of psychology was an inseparable part to smash the conventions of the novel, and the need to find new technique and forms.

Further it may be noted that the exploration of feminist insight and experience is a constant subject in Virginia Woolf’s novels. At the time when she was arguing against Arnold Bennett, Woolf had been particularly offended by the argument in his Our Women (1920) that intellectually and creatively man is the superior of woman. She expressed her hostility in essays, articles and letters to newspapers. She considered Bennett, Galsworthy and Wells as
inferior writers whose conventions were ruin and whose tools were death. She found them as tyrannical patriarchs. So also their views extended in their novels which being a patriarchal product emphasized on material details and dull mechanism of plot. Her consciousness for being a woman and a writer also urged Virginia Woolf to cast down the conventions the patriarchs had built. The feminist subject-mater of her novels both influenced, and developed with her innovations in form and technique. Thus, being influenced with the new psychological thought and form, she is chiefly concerned with an unconscious level of experience in her characters. This means that her characters do not always work in a logical or rational way. We cannot expect to know what they will or what they feel from reading about their thoughts. In other words, Virginia Woolf presents most complicated characters whose feelings and thinking can be properly understood only by an analysis of their mental processes. This is seen in almost all her novels in which her characters, particularly her women characters appear with thoughts which seem to contradict their feelings with actions and speeches which appear to disconnect or contradict their thoughts. This is chiefly because of the new psychological impact.
As for example, we can take the novel *Mrs. Dalloway* and the character of Clarissa. Here, Clarissa thinks in a way that appears to contradict her feelings and in case of men, Peter Walsh also appears with contradictory ideas. It is clear that his mind is a mass of contradictory feelings and thoughts. He identifies with conformist boys, or rebellions young men. He laughs at the conformists and respects them. He has 'been through' the 'troubles of the flesh', or he 'trampled under ...?.... temptations' in a great renunciations. There are lists representing each side of Peter Walsh's conflict: on one side, 'duty, gratitude, fidelity, love of England;' on the other side, 'sensual pleasures or daily preoccupations', 'life, with its varieties, its irreticences' and 'temptations'. Peter Walsh is emotionally carried away, marching with the young soldiers and passing statues. He is carried away following a strange woman, living in a romantic seduction fantasy. Peter describes the strange woman's character using paradoxes. She has contradictory pairs of qualities, being 'young, but stately; merry but discreet; black, but enchanting'. We know that Peter has been attracted to Clarissa for a long time, and has just run out from a disturbing meeting with her, and we know that he is in love with a young fair haired woman called

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Daisy, in India. It seems reasonable to suggest that 'stately ...... discreet ...... black' may be the restrained and cold qualities of Clarissa; and 'young .... merry..... enchanting are the qualities he looks for in Daisy, which he also looked for in Clarissa before she rejected him. The young woman of his fantasy, then, is better than either the woman he lost or the woman he has won : she is a combination of the two.

Similarly, when we analyse her novel *To The Lighthouse*, we find the same kind of psychological analysis that reveals the mind of the character: "*for Mrs. Ramsay, outside life falls away; and a sunken, dark self rises to the surface, becoming active.*" The mental process thus represented is plain. Mrs. Ramsay's conscious control of her mind is relaxing, and the part of her mind that is normally hidden, her unconscious, is rising to the surface. In her trance like state, Mrs. Ramsay allows the light, which is also herself, to lift up, repeat and add to 'some little phrase or other which had been lying in her mind'. The phrases that emerge in this way are very revealing: 'Children don't forget'. We know that her son James has been hurt by his father, and that he only resolves the dispute on the eventual journey to the Lighthouse years later,
after Mrs. Ramsay’s death. Mrs. Ramsay has negotiated between her husband and her son, and has tried to calm the boy’s feelings but the underlying truth she knows is that ‘Children don’t forget.’

Next, Mrs. Ramsay says ‘It will end’. Perhaps ‘It’ which has a capital ‘I’ refers to the details and duties of her everyday life. We know that Mrs. Ramsay acts as the focal point for her large family and for her visitors and takes all the pressure of their conflicts and moods upon herself. The underlying truth she knows is that this duty and labour is not eternal: ‘It will end’, as all activities end, with death. Mrs. Ramsay’s next ‘little phrase’ is ‘It will come’, which implies that death will come. We know that she has ambivalent feelings about the effort she makes in her day-to-day life. She feels that she must continue to make these efforts, but she is weary and sometimes longs to give up. So, her dual attitude to death — both postponing it and desiring it — is aptly expressed in the two phrases ‘It will end’ and ‘It will come’.

Finally, suddenly, she adds ‘We are in the hands of the Lord’. This phrase expresses two relevant feelings. First, an absolute and passive submission to a greater power. The effect of this on
Mrs. Ramsay’s life would be to release her from her strenuous efforts at molding and making peace in her family. Secondly, following the two phrases which remind her of death’s inevitability, the phrase suggests either religious faith or the desire for a religious faith.

This is the thought that breaks the spell and Mrs. Ramsay reacts against it with annoyance. As we move into the novel the metaphors develop further. The light that helped to induce her trance is now like a searchlight. Its power is hinted in ‘met the third stroke’ and confirmed in ‘searching’ and ‘purifying out of existence’. It seems that this phrase, part of the ‘wedge of darkness’ that she willingly encouraged, is unwelcome and must be destroyed because it is a ‘lie’. Also, the Lighthouse is Mrs. Ramsay looking at herself ‘like her own eyes meeting her own eyes.’ By the end of the passage, however, she has connected the identity she feels with the beam of light, with much softer and more natural things, ‘trees, stream, flowers’; and looking into herself she no longer sees a lie being purified ‘out of existence’ but, ‘there curled up off the floor of the mind, rose from the lake of one’s being, a mist, a bride to meet her lover’. A change has clearly taken place. There was something offensive, and she turned the light on it to destroy it. A
moment later, however, the light sees ‘a mist’ which is compared to a woman’s sexual desire expressed in the language of weddings; and we know how important marriages are to Mrs. Ramsay. In the middle of this process, Virginia Woolf says that she ‘praised herself..... without vanity, for she was stern, she was searching, she was beautiful’. But this phrase ‘without vanity’ might be a ‘misfit phrase’, an unexpected phrase. ‘Without vanity’ stands out because it is false modesty: everything else about the sentence emphasizes her pride in her beauty and in her stern, honest character. The sentence shows the building up of an ego in Mrs. Ramsay. Meanwhile, the repetitive activity that led her into the dangerous trance when her knitting, is ‘suspended’.

By using the summary technique, one can find out the new process in Mrs. Ramsay: “Mrs. Ramsay tries to expel a thought from her mind. However, it does not disappear, but changes into something vague and attractive.” 2 These characters have tried to expel thoughts from their minds before, but this paragraph reveals another consequence of the process: the unwelcome thought changes into something more attractive, with romantic attributes. So it seems that Mrs. Ramsay’s character in the novel wholly confirms this
process, which brings unwelcome ideas into romantic 'mist', is at the heart of her character. Thus, it makes us understand why she imagines herself matchmaking for the Rayleys and others, and why Lily feels such pressure from her, to marry William Bankes.

As moving deeper into the novel, we find the tone of internal argument. We see the mind of Mrs. Ramsay arguing against the 'lie', the unwelcome thought, trying to banish it thoroughly from her mind. Eventually, Mrs. Ramsay has fought her way out of the relaxations of her trance, and 'without being aware of it' she knits on, 'firm', 'stiffened', and 'in a habit of sternness'. The novel thus reveals certain mental process to us. First, Mrs. Ramsay's repetitive, passive state is conveyed as a kind of trance suggested by hypnotic agents (the Lighthouse) and automatic activity (her knitting). Second, she tries to repress an unwelcome thought, diverting her mind to pleasanter subjects, boosting her ego, and arguing against the hostile idea. Third, the hostile thought undergoes a change which manifests itself into something more attractive after it has been pushed out of her mind. This thorough self analysis brings us to an extraordinary subtlety of perception into the character of Mrs. Ramsay. It shows Virginia Woolf's creative insight and the detailed naturalness, the
convincing logic, of the way her character's mind works. While considering the novel as a whole, these small and short moments explain many of the larger traits of the character. But one should not forget that Mrs. Ramsay is a literary character created by the author to serve her purpose. So one has to make an attempt to understand the themes that make Mrs. Ramsay's mental life: religion, death, the struggle of day to day existence, romantic and sexual fantasies and modern rationalism. This ultimately leads as to understand Virginia Woolf's literary aims. Mrs. Woolf first tries to expose how the prominent features of a personality especially their aims and dreams, have their origin in something else which has been rejected or 'repressed'. For example Mrs. Ramsay's preoccupation with marriage is seen to arise out of her ambivalence about death, and her repressed desire for a religious faith.

Second, she is writing about modern consciousness: Mrs. Ramsay's rational analysis of an unjust world, her concern for 'the poor' and her strict oppositions to belief she considers false, make up a rational liberal attitude that was relatively new when the novel was written. Finally, she writes about death. Mrs. Ramsay avoids the thought of death except in rare moments, by filling
her mind with duties and activities for her family. On the other hand her weariness of constant struggle and effort is shown, suggesting that we may also desire death. It is also in the context of death that life seems without purpose, and responsibility for rationalising our existence is an unnatural burden, impossible to sustain.

At the end it may be noted that the themes of *To the Lighthouse* are broadly applicable to *Mrs. Dalloway* as well. Clarissa’s parties, and mending her dress, are part of an effort she devotes to maintaining her self-image as ‘Mrs. Dalloway’, wife of Richard; and can be compared to Mrs. Ramsay’s duties as wife, mother and hostess. Clarissa’s regrets about Peter Walsh, and her ambivalent feelings about suicide, are an undercurrent comparable to Mrs. Ramsay’s desire to give up, to rest, and her ambivalent attitude to death.

As one moves to her next novel, *The Waves* one finds that Virginia Woolf chiefly makes an attempt to analyse the thought process of her character. This may be seen in the following paragraph:

> "Sitting down on a bank to wait for my train, I thought them how we surrender, how we submit to the stupidity of nature. Woods covered..."
in thick green leafage lay in front of me. And by saw flick of a scent or a sound on a nerve the old image – the gardeners sweeping, the lady writing – returned. I saw the figures beneath the beech trees at Elvedon. The graders swept; the lady at the table sat writing. But I now made the contribution of maturity to childhood's intuitions – satiety and doom; the sense of what is inescapable in our lot; death; the knowledge of limitation; how life is more obdurate then one had thought it. Then, when I was child, the presence of an enemy had asserted itself; the need for opposition had stung me. I had jumped up and cried, 'Let's explore.' The horror of the situation was ended.³

Actually in this novel which is made up of largely reflections rather than moments of actual experience the characters tell their own mental and emotional life as a series of monologues. In this paragraph, Bernard's feelings about day-to-day existence have developed. He begins with 'some doubt, some note of interrogations' and he 'hesitated', questioning simple actions. Then he questions more fundamentally: "It goes on; but why?" asks for a reason for the whole process of human life, including reproduction. There is
a tone of contempt for the obviousness of nature in the list of processes, e.g. ‘the gardener dug’ makes a mockery of his labour, and we hear ‘the usual gabble’ of birds. Eventually, Bernard’s tone indicates both fear and resentful anger.

The chief psychological analysis of Virginia Woolf appears in particular moments and situations where she presents two male and female interactions in her novels. The following passages from the novels reveal the situation very well:

So thought Septimus, looking up, they are signalling to me. Not indeed in actual words; that is, he could not read the language yet; but it was plain though, this beauty, this exquisite beauty, and tears filled his eyes as he looked at the smoke words languishing and melting in the sky and bestowing upon him in their inexhaustible charity and laughing goodness one shape after another of unimaginable beauty! and signalling their intention to provide him, for nothing, for ever, for looking merely, with beauty, more beauty! Tears ran down his cheeks.

It was toffee; they were advertising toffee, a nursemaid told Rezia. Together they began to spell t...o...f......
'K ...... R ......' said the nurse maid, and Septimus heard her say 'Kay Arr' close to his ear, deeply, softly, like a mellow organ, but with a roughness in her voice like grasshopper's, which rasped his spine deliciously and sent running up into his brain waves of sound which, concussing, broke. A marvellous discovery indeed – that the human voice in certain atmospheric conditions (for one must be scientific, above all scientific) can quicken trees into life! Happily Rezia put her hand with a tremendous weight on his knee so that he was weighed down, transfixed, or the excitement of the elm trees rising and falling, rising and falling with all their leaves alight and the colour thinning and thickening from blue to the green of a hollow wave, like plumes on horses heads, feathers on ladies, so proudly they rose and fell, so superbly, would have sent him mad. But he would not go mad. He mould shut his eyes; he would see no more ......

For she could stand it no longer. Dr. Holmes might say there was nothing the matter. Far rather would she that he were dead! She could not sit beside him when he stared so and did not see her and made everything terrible ...... he was not Septimus now. She put on her lace collar.

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She put on her new hat and he never noticed; and he was happy without her. Nothing! could make her happy without him! Nothing! He was selfish. So men are. For he was not ill. Dr. Holmes said there was nothing the matter with him. She spread her hand before her. Look! Her wedding ring slipped — she had grown so thin. It was she who suffered—but she had nobody to tell.

This extract reveals the gender-roles and gender-attitudes of the two characters. There is no need to look far: ‘He was selfish. So men are’ leaps off the page: Rezia’s explanation for Septimus’s behaviour is that he is a man and therefore selfish. One can see and trace her views of gender-roles, starting from this clear statement. As we analyse these paragraphs one can see other elements which attributes to Rezia’s attitude which comes from her views and thoughts of male and female roles. Thus, one finds she is very loyal and ashamed. She ‘could tell no one’: not even to her mother about her feelings about her husband Septimus. Rather she makes euphemistic excuse for his state of mind: “Septimus has been working too hard.” These lines speak about Rezia’s exaggerated loyalty to her husband, and regards his weaknesses as a secret she must guard at all costs. But, from inside one can see
that she also feels ashamed that her ‘man’ is not ‘manly’ because he invents the male virtue of overwork (sacrificing his health to provide for her) to explain his breakdown. Secondly, one finds Rezia is puzzled by the question of courage. She is confused about Septimus which makes us deduce certain stereotyped attitudes: ‘And it was cowardly for a man to say he would kill himself, but Septimus had fought; he was brave; he was not Septimus now’. Rezia feels it’s a cowardly act for ‘a man’ to threaten suicide; may be this implies that it would be excusable for a woman to do the same for she thinks men should display stoicism and perseverance. She is confirmed about Septimus’s masculine courage because he has fought in the war; this of course, is an extremely naive attitude. She does not even take into consideration of Septimus being a willing or an unwilling soldier as she believes courage belongs to historical romances about war not the anonymous suffering of modern warfare. However, the most revealing aspect of her attitude is that it shows a ‘man’ as an unreal animal, different from herself. For most human beings including herself, Rezia feels ‘courage’ is a matter of determination overcoming fear. In other words, it is the result of a struggle, not a simple affair of wearing or not wearing a jacket.
Yet she imagines that either Septimus’s courage is ‘present’ (he had fought; he was brave) or absent (‘it was cowardly for a man’), as if he were not a human being at all. Such nonsensical conclusion of Rezia as she does not understand how a man can be brave and not brave at different time proves Virginia Woolf’s comment on these attitudes. Even she satirises the stereotyped gender attitude by following it through to an absurd conclusion: ‘he was not Septimus now’, which is nonsensical. Next we find in these extracts is Rezia’s attempt to attract Septimus’s attention by means of external trappings of femininity: like putting on lace-collars, .... of which Septimus never noticed. May be Rezia does not know any other means of appealing to her husband through feminine adornment. This shows how Rezia with her shallow ideas of gender-stereotypes reaches a false conclusion about Septimus: ‘and he was happy without her’.

All these aspects of Rezia’s attitude towards her husband are straight-forward, and Virginia Woolf reveals them with clear, critical precision. Such thoughts and attitudes treat ‘men’ as being different and incomprehensible and lead to false conclusions. It only leads to Rezia’s sympathy for herself. When we first read Rezia’s
thoughts in these extracts, we think her an ordinary woman with an ordinary set of attitudes, struggling to understand a difficult situation. This also shows Mrs. Woolf's trenchant critical analysis of Rezia's attitudes at the same time. These gender - attitudes distort her relationship with her husband, hindering understanding between them and encouraging her to pity herself.

Here, Virginia Woolf uses the same technique as with Rezia, to show the inadequacy of Septimus's obligations to his wife. Just as her shallow stereotypes led Rezia to the absurd conclusion 'he was not Septimus now', so Septimus can only resolve the conflict between his madness and his duty to Rezia, by reaching a similarly ridiculous, impractical conclusion. Thus, Virginia Woolf's men are often preoccupied by questions and problems that seem pretentious. For example, Mr. Ramsay pursues abstruse philosophical questions, and Richard Dalloway thinks of politics and the problems of society. Thus, these men seem to ignore the women in their lives, supposing their male preoccupations to be 'important' and thus an excuse.
In *The Waves*, Virginia Woolf highlights the contrast between boys and girls by emphasizing the secrecy of Susan’s and Rhoda’s private feelings. One of the extract from the novel (from pg 17-19) describes the boys (Neville & Bernard) immediately considering themselves as members of the institution whereas the girls hate institution. The details of the girls’ thoughts again provide a contrast. Neither of the girls think of what they will study, and Virginia Woolf is careful to keep the girls’ emphasis on physical things, not abstractions. For example, the building comes down to ‘the smell of pine and linoleum’ and ‘brown serge’ for Susan. For Rhoda, the significant details of their ‘exercises’ is that they will write ‘in ink’ because the desk have wells for the ink.

In such series of light touches, Mrs. Woolf has established a connection between the contrasting reactions of the girls and boys and has added delicate cultural and mythological elements to suggest the ‘male’ and ‘female’ tendencies: a masculine tendency towards the abstract; towards masculine conformity and ideals of clarity and openness as against the feminine emphasis on concrete individuality and things that are hidden below the surface and the masculine heroic self-denial in contrast to feminine sensual
indulgence. This does not mean that men and women are born with essentially different characters. Virginia Woolf does not suggest that. What she shows is that gender roles began to be formed in primitive times, and that they are now so deeply embedded in tradition, so pervasive and powerful that they are almost indistinguishable from 'nature'. The imagery of Neville's and Rhodha's paragraph hints at a further idea: that gender roles have been so powerful throughout prehistory and history, that they account for fundamental dualities and conflicts in cultural and religious development. For example, she hints that 'male' and 'female' principles were at work in the struggle between the Greek pantheon and Dionysus; and in the thousand year struggles between Christianity and the 'Old Religions' or nature-worships of Northern Europe. Thus we cannot exaggerate Virginia Woolf's view of the power and importance, throughout the history of humanity, of sexual attitudes. No doubt, Mrs. Woolf's analysis of male and female stereotypes is in harmony with the main tenets of twentieth Century feminism. For example, the depiction of Mr. Ramsay's demanding ego, and his need for his wife's praise imply a criticism of man's traditional assumption of superiority. Rezia's confusion

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over courage exposes male military bravado. Mrs. Ramsay's presumptions of a 'courtly' role with her husband, and her matriarchal responsibilities, follow a feminist analysis of courtship and family roles, and family structure. The relationship between characters and their gender role is ambivalent. On the one hand, it inhibits and frustrates the individual from expressing himself and herself or from forming honest emotional relationships. Likewise we see Mr. Ramsay's drive to be 'brilliant' and famous is due to his need for Mrs. Ramsay's admiration, in their courtly-love relationship. On the other hand, the gender-role tempts and attracts characters who use it as a safe haven: it helps them to avoid their fears. Many of Mrs. Woolf's characters are anxious and insecure about their identities, when they confront infinities such as nature and death. When confronting the awful on the formless, characters find relief in adopting a nice, safe gender-role. In this way, Mrs. Ramsay shelters under her husband's supposed superior wisdom, rescuing herself from 'pessimism' or despair.

Further, it should be noted that Mrs. Woolf in the novel *Mrs. Dalloway* like Freud, accentuates the traumatic dislocation stage of female development, by juxtaposing the moments of
fulfillment with Sally and violent intrusion by Peter in as sharp a contrast as possible, in *Mrs. Dalloway*. She also portrays the sexual and emotional 'calcification' that Freud describes in older woman. Clarissa has always responded coldly to men, and she sees this as a failure, letting Richard down, while her idea that her virginity has remained despite motherhood is symbolised by the narrower and narrower attic bed, where she reads about Baron Marbot and the retreat from Moscow, 'a victory achieved by icy withdrawal (p.88). The narrow bed is implicitly linked with a grave, so her sexuality is associated with death. In contrast, and in the same paragraph (*Mrs. Dalloway* pg.26-27), Mrs. Woolf writes an extraordinarily erotic description of her passionate responses to women.

This has been very well pointed by the eminent critic Elizabeth Abel who takes the image of 'a match burning in a crocus', together with other elements of this erotic passage which brings together 'male and female, active and passive, sacred and profane' as suggesting an experience of 'completeness' which is simultaneously masculine and feminine, in Clarissa's relations with women. This brings 'fusion' rather than distinctions Freud's theory insists upon, and bypasses the Freudian claim that some development paths or
outcomes are ‘immature’ or ‘abnormal’. In short, ‘she valorizes a spontaneous homosexual love over the inhibitions of imposed heterosexuality and finally observes:

The opposition between Clarissa’s relationship with men and women modulates to the split between her present and her past, her orientation and emotional capacities on both sides of the Oedipal divide. Woolf, like Freud, reveals the cost of female development, but she inscribes a far more graphic image of the loss entailed, questions its necessity, and indicates the price of equating female development with acculturation through the rites of passage established by the Oedipus complex.⁵ [Elizabeth Abel]

This shows that there are carefully orchestrated echoes of Clarissa’s developmental story, in that of Rezia Warren Smith, who passed from a feminine and pastoral world of sisters and mother in Italy to the arid masculine ugliness of London. Several verbal echoes and common images link the two women’s stories. However when Virginia Woolf decided to make Septimus the sacrificial hero, preserving Clarissa from death instead, she ‘reverses narratives tradition’ (p. 91) in which women are sacrificed in place of men.
Thus, when we analyse the women characters of Virginia Woolf, we find that she chiefly goes deep into the mental process, psychological reaction and various other psychoanalytical exploration of her women characters vis-à-vis the thoughts and actions of the male characters. Such psychoanalytical study adds new dimensions to her novels as well as make her characters most lively and realistic. As one moves from Virginia Woolf to the women characters of Anita Desai one finds that like Virginia Woolf, she presents her stories from the middle, flashing backward and forward revealing the entire story in a dramatic sequence. Above all like, Virginia Woolf, Anita Desai is interested chiefly in presenting the various reactions that the women make in altogether different situations as the success or failure of a woman lies in her tact of dealing with such situations. She believes that the role of women changes according to changing situations. Above all, she wants that her women characters should find their true self only with a correct self realisation. It is with such belief and art of characterisation that Anita Desai has been able to project her woman characters in her novels.
Anita Desai is rated as a great artist chiefly in her art of characterization, displaying a psychological insight into the inner self, painting a realistic picture of Indian setting and background. But it is her deep interest in her women and their reaction to the various aspects of life that add a new dimension to her novels. Not only does she excel in portraying these feminine characters, but also makes a psychological study to lay bare the innermost feelings of these women. Such pre-occupation seems quite natural on her part, for she, like her characters, is very sensitive and it is this sensitiveness that gives her an insight to make a very successful in depth study of her women, Srivastava aptly observes on this aspect of her art:

*Being a sensitive woman novelist and gifted with good observation, sensitiveness, a penetrating analysis and a skill to paint with words, Anita Desai creates a rich gallery of characters, both male and female, though dominated by the latter.*

It is to be noted here that the novels of Anita Desai are not meant to explain theories of philosophy and psychology, but they reveal her involvement for the upliftment of women who are seen as worst sufferers, highly suppressed by a social 'tantalization' or marital discord. Her sensitiveness and sincerity, therefore, have
driven her to study the women and their reaction to the various social, economic, political and cultural taboos under which they are struggling in their destitute conditions.

Her feminine characters, while revealing their psychological reactions, usually point out to the changing environment in a given society. The conflict of a country with its history is seen through a woman like Sita's attempts to confront her past. Brijraj Singh thus observes:

*And even as Desai works on the limited canvas of middle class Civil Lines Delhi, She is able to bring into her work the larger political themes of the day: Partition, Hindu-Muslim riots Independence and the new India, and the emancipation of women. Desai's world may be small, but it is a world through which the same winds blow as sweep through the whole of the sub-continent.*

It becomes quite clear, as one goes through her various characters, that Anita Desai makes her own choice in portraying her various characters; they are always selected from those women who have been subjected to social injustice and mental or psychological torture. Regarding the choice of these characters she observes:
I am interested in characters who are not average but have retreated or been driven into some extremity of despair and so turned against or made a stand against, the general current. It is easy to flow with current, it makes no demands, it costs no effort. But those who cannot follow it, whose heart cries out "the great" No who fight the current and struggle against it, they know what the demands are and what it costs to meet them.8

Whatever may be the reasons, it is, as mentioned earlier, the feminine sensibility that always encourages her to emphasizes on their portraits.

Darshan Singh Maini considers her first novel, Cry, The Peacock as "a typically 'feminine' novel, not because it is a story of a woman told by a woman, but because ... it is the fruit of feminine sensibility ..." R. S. Sharma considers that novelist through Maya's tragedy, conveys "social fatalism into a coherent pattern to communicate the tender sensibility of a woman".9

Female characters are given prime importance in all her novels in which the artist focuses in displaying the innermost feelings and deep recess lurking in the hearts of these women. In
all her major works like Cry, the Peacock, Voices in the City, Where Shall We Go This Summer, Bye-Bye Blackbird, Fire on the Mountain, Clear Light of Day, In Custody and Baumgartner’s Bombay, she lays equal emphasis on the feminine characters and takes special interest in projecting the essential features that dominate their characters. In almost all these works, women, who are portrayed as the chief protagonists and who are depicted as suffering in a meticulous world dominated by man, who in the guise a father, a brother, a husband or a lover, presents a constant threat to their integrity, intuition, peace and happiness. These characters are painted in various colours and portrayed in varied roles – starting from the role of housewives to that of enlightened professionals in educational institutions; in each and every changing situation, they have reacted sometimes violently and sometimes silently, unheard, unknown by others. The restricted surroundings have treated them as helpless birds of cage. The shadow-play of success and failure of these women has opened a new vista in novel writing. The result of this anatomy will certainly be far-fetching and quite interesting.
Maya, the most important character in the novel, *Cry, The Peacock*, is carefully drawn by the author. She experiences and feels more than it is discrete or desirable. Her sensitiveness obsessed by a childhood prophecy of disaster prevents her from leading a normal life with husband Gautama.

Toto’s death is the first sign of her abnormality which invoke a series of consequent reactions. The usual decaying flesh seems unusually terrific to her and it is this peculiar insight that suggests her highly emotional and hysterical response to worldly events. Soon after the incident, the agony of missing the pet lurks in the blank spaces of her mind, making her more and more restless. What disturbs her more is the crazy sense of self-centeredness of the material world and the deserted, abandoned line of appreciation of life both big and small. The cold indifference of Gautama is presented against deep concern of Maya for Toto.

It is important to note here that glimpses of changing modern life are brought for more constructive effect. Maya’s suffering is her own creation - this is the trait that governs the heroines of Anita Desai. Her classic sense of enjoyment fails to appreciate the
club life. Mrs. Desai's heroines are not ordinary women. They are women of sense and sensibility. Maya, in the second part of the novel, with a high sense of values can differentiate right from the wrong. Dance and dinner cause her headache. The black mask of humanity, sadistic pleasure associated with the cabarets, and crazy colour of the dim-lit-club with the drummer—his teeth flashing 'white in a dark, simian face' are like fragments building up a citadel of highly sensuous, vulgar life. Her sense of civility which cracks before this hudibrastic display of humanity, of aesthetic life, is conveyed much more powerfully through this hatred for cabaret dancers. This ultra-modern sense of enjoyment that becomes a threat to modern life, squeezes her of ardency. She remarks herself:

...... I felt myself trapped at an oneiric ball where the black masks that I had imagined to be made of paper turned out to be of living flesh, and the living flesh was only a mockery, a gathering of crackling paper. It was perverse, it was wrong, but it was a fact, a fact that had been taken for the truth. Values were distorted in that macabre half-light with its altering tints, at an hour when those values would have been all-important. 10

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In a sense, it is this humanitarian trend of Maya's personality that influences her view of the parties. Parties, no more, provide entertainment. They are hollow parties giving detestable information about something or other, discussing loop-holes in other's family life. They are not benevolent but exhibit an air of superficiality and the children in the process are neglected, most, perspiring in sleep. The novelist, thus, builds a gripping sense of fatal disease of chasing, of imitation a foreign custom under the veil of falsity. The futility of shaking off this weakness, instead of making her character weak, points out more of her sense of morality and lack of acceptance of modern life.

Mrs. Desai, while projecting the character of Maya with all her miseries and suffering, also analyses the shortcomings and drawbacks that add to her difficulties in life. One of the basic flaws in Maya's character is her inability to reciprocate. This is the fact behind a series of bitter experiences. She demands Gautama's attentions. She wants to be the centre of his thought and action and access to his exclusively enclosed male world. But one thing is strictly forgotten by her that demand should be accelerated by efficiency. The cross-currents of life drift them apart revealing more and more
of their inefficiency. Arjun's complete dependence upon servants strengthen this.

Her failure to find preoccupation, submergence of her self and life is hinted. The way she shuts herself in her room in summer days and her leisurely and self-contented life brings 'no promise', no sweetness but like summer heat burns her own self.

Apart from these, Maya's character unfolds a new vista of novel writing. She is delineated as a unique character of suffering.

In her next novel *Voices in the City*, Anita Desai, presents another image of woman through the character of Monisha whose suffering, unlike Maya of *Cry, The Peacock*, is her own creation. Her extraordinary power of visualisation, as is usual with Anita Desai's heroines, endows her with sharp reactions against the changing social values and ethical degradation. Apart from her, two other voices, of Nirode and Amla, are presented to bring out the exact quality of the character. It seems that like Jane Austen, Mrs. Desai is also interested in comparative characterisation. Gilber Ryle puts it as follows:
She pinpoints the exact quality of character in which she is interested, and the exact degree of that quality, by matching it against the same quality in different degrees, against simulation of that quality, against deficiencies of it, and against qualities which though different or brothers or cousins of that selected quality.  

*Voices in the City* is a struggle for freedom. It is this high sense of honouring euphonic individualism that separates Monisha, Amla and Nirode from the rest of the stream. Through personal suffering, through renunciation of the putrid world, to unite self and the soul - the characters chase their own solutions. To be freed from doubt and disillusion through suffering is beyond other’s comprehension. Monisha, through her adoration for ‘our feet in the grass’, Amla’s appreciation of art, and painter Dharma and Nirode’s experiments with failure enforce this. Ironically enough, elder characters like aunt Lila interpret it as the ‘diseased young generation’ and feel dejected. Images of emancipation, the horse in the race course trying to escape beyond the city, the kite flying high, strengthen this. Monisha’s unnatural silence and unobtrusiveness only emphasize the distance she has covered from ‘reality into realm of colourlessness’.
Philosophy is a great fascination for the heroines of Mrs. Desai. It is this philosophical interpretation of sentiments that regulate the pattern they follow. In moments of difficulty, she recites passages from the Bhagbat Gita. She obligates herself with higher objects like the fruits of action, attachment, involvement, wisdom. These contrive to explain substantially her detachment through which the spiritual quest is made towards a greater attainment. Peace is the ultimate wisdom to end all misery – this principle captivates her for the attainment of meditative mind that will enable to land in a visionary secluded world of her won, devoid of all misery. The radical changes brought forth, put up a great challenge to the characters. Social changes have brought a remarkable devaluation in the standards of living. ‘Harsh voices’, ‘Putrid breaths’ and ‘moist palms’ emphasize increasing darkness poverty and disease. Overflowing gutters, speak of the ‘uneasy lassitude of conscience’. Trade houses with swelling iron safe, declare shunning of ethics and the modern cult of materialism. To Monisha, there is no escape from it. The ‘yellow flame’ of bitterness, the bonfire of anger - burning of trams and buses and of innocent – victims remind T.S Eliot’s *Four Quartets* where feet before faces show a similar sickening
sight. Monisha is terribly tired of this vast crowd, leans over and shivers at this ugly sight of the city. Even at night, there is no relief. The sunset is all ‘ashes and swamped by smog’. Images of decay, of disintegration, endow a suffocating sensation to the entire novel. The stars seem pale with tuberculosis. Monisha fails to pull her on amidst this sordidness, the wasteland of civilised humanity.

In spite of clumsiness in spiritual crisis of the characters, Mrs. Desai has emphasized the monotonous cryptic bargains of a feminine mind. Monisha, like Maya, is a victim of the situation. The diminished dingy situation of the physical world drains out every drop of life from her. Though she is uncommunicative, her suicide is a confession of failure; through her reaction she disregards the idea that women place themselves in bondage to men, whether in marriage or out. All their joy and ambition are channeled that way, while they go parched themselves. The end of the quest is at last clear. Her reaction is violent but it upholds that death is more welcome than mean existence.

In her novel *Bye-Bye Blackbird*, which lacks much of the vigour and artistic talent of earlier novels, Mrs. Anita Desai projects
altogether a different picture of woman. Sarah, the chief woman character, is painted as a lifeless doll without spectacular spiritual depth and insight. Attention is given to her English origin but not to herself. Minor Indian women characters such as Mala, Bella, Ratna, the old Punjabi lady are not spiritually rich. They merely cluster around to densify the ordinary situation and put a customary contrast between East and West. On the other hand, concentration has been shifted to Dev and Adit, the male characters of the novel.

Mrs. Desai's little India in England draws attention to noticeable haunt for Indianness in English self. Sarah, with her Anglo-Saxon origin, is 'Oriental' in gentleness and submissiveness. Though she is alien to Adit's land, she is well-aware of the torried oriental heat and ugliness. Sarah and Adit feel:

The emptiness and sorrow, the despair and rage, 
the flat grey melancholy and the black glamour 
of India. They themselves were tossed about by 
the flood like flotsam and then became a part of 
it, the black flood.12

Her anguish is anguish of loneliness. Torn between East and West, she is simply an epitome of miserableness. Her reactions are
more against racial discrimination than against the dreariness of the physical world. The author puts it:

But unreality had swamped the paper walls of her fort, turning them soggy, making the pages float away on dim waves. In the centre she set, feeling the waves rock her, and then the fear and the questioning began.\(^{13}\)

Against a vast and complex background of characterization, it is surely a dexterity of hand to endow them with life and vivacity.

One of the major heroines of Anita Desai is Sita in the novel *Where Shall We Go This Summer*, a novel that displays, once again the great artistic sense of the art of characterization of the novelist. Here she presents the protagonist as a pessimistic and whimsical victim of situation. Her sharp sense puts her in troubles. People seem to her like pariahs—"They are nothing - nothing but appetite and sex. Only food, sex and money matter. Animals"\(^{14}\)

She is unaccountable and uncongenial. Unlike all other heroines of Mrs. Desai, her suffering and her ultra mundane sensation are of her own making. Her first entrance in her father-in-law's 'age-rotted' flat infuriates her to revolt against their
‘sub-human placidity’ and ‘sluggishness’. She is bold enough to declare war against conventionalism, and accepted facts of life—to eat and prepare something to be eaten. The fantastic ‘vegetarian complacence’, absorption of the women in the dual facets of life like cooking irritates her and urges her to behave provocatively by starting smoking. She lacks Monisha’s silence brooding, timidity and hence, her shift to a small flat—her own flat, is more appropriate, Mrs. Desai with her unusual skill of narration vividly depicts the hysterical denunciations and the abstract glimpses of the unattained moments of the middle aged heroine. Even the sea fails to bring relief from the ‘aggression and violence’ of the city that affronts upon her living nerves. She identifies herself with those rocks in the sea which are ceaselessly spilled, and littered with the rotten carcasses of fish’. The city objectified through the hissing sea, shudders her with an apprehension of revealing more of the disputable world.

A series of reactions major as well as minor convey the swelling tide of emotion that becomes a threat to the solidity of her very existence. One such reaction is against the black drama enacted in the ‘crow theatre’ where murder and infanticide can happen. She leans out to perceive the vulgar world. The violence
of the menacing world, very usual with Mrs. Desai, is narrated with an objective co-relative. ‘The rapacious claws and beaks’ of the crows ready to tear a weak helpless eagle, ‘either wounded or too young to fly’ speak of the numerous acts of violence. The wretched woman, unused to the opposition and aggression of the this blistering life, thinks herself to be the crawling creature trying to withdraw into some safety shelter. The whole day is spent to protect the eagle from the invasion with the help of the absurd cork and the toy gun. Her hysterical subjugation to this subtle but small incident makes her ridiculous before her children and husband. They think that such acts of drama are created willfully to embarrass them.

The turmoil, clash and clamour of the devil city are once again depicted through the quarrelling ayahs. The violence, the aggressiveness of these screaming women with their beastly dirty nails remind Sita of the vulnerability of modern soul. She marks the important change as follows:

“It is like living in the wilds” she said to her husband at night, “One may be attacked – one’s children may be attacked in the streets”.

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Sita as wife is against any compromise. Anita Desai is again at her best in describing the struggle between 'yes' and 'no' between Raman's 'you must' and Sita's 'I can't. The 'sound of battle' for existence, is the 'sound of distress', to her. Her inability to find meaning in meaningless society, the resulting clash, as the book refers to, is obviously the resulting melancholic distraction. Raman's prose and Sita's passion only emphasize the distance between the two. It only points out her inability to connect the individual with the society. Hence B. Ramachandra observes:

The novel may, thus, be seen as a parable on the inability of human beings to relate the inner with the outer, the individual with society. It is a story of illusions melting away in the cold light of the everyday and the common-place. While it is clear that the author's sympathies are with those who say No to society, if not in thunder, at least with a quiet passion and defiance, it is also evident that the author does not project an one-sided view of the human problem. 16

Between two uncompromising attitudes of Maya's madness and Monisha's suicide, Sita is the only heroine of Mrs. Desai to understand and succumb to the word 'only connect', the only
compromising link between the prose and the passion of life. Her reaction proves that it is very difficult for a woman, however modern she may be to get rid of the situation she is once placed in. In spite of her dislike to the ways of world, to the traditional life of loyalty, she resumes her return journey to adjust to the role of wife and mother. Hence, she accepts defeat, crumples her passion and minglesthe prose of life for the betterment of human relationship.

Turning to her next novel, *Fire on the Mountain*, we find that Anita Desai sets on to probe into the problematic life of an elderly lady, Nanda Kaul. It is sheer weariness, mental fatigue that prompts her to move away from the world of duty and responsibility. Certainly, she is created not out of leisurely fancy, but far more scrutiny, to open the shutters of a pathetic sheltered life.

The first part of the story informs of the family that is more likely a miniature world in itself. As the Vice-Chancellor’s wife, she was ‘at the hub’, the pivot of the family, like the city in *Voices in the City*. She recollects with distaste the stifling sensation under that intense responsibility. ‘Too many trays’ of tea have irritated
her. Their disorder and unpredictable excess become a threat to her very existence. So she has been forced to keep her 'hour of rest' and practice stillness. To defend her, she behaves with determination by not responding for an hour.

The book emphasizes a growing burdens of duty and increasing restlessness that simply was too much for her. The society reflected through the visitors, the work load thrust upon in the pretension of duty started unnerving her. Later in life, with the children grown up and away, the subdued passion for enchanting loneliness brings her to the mountains. The book refers to her relief as follows:

She had been glad to leave it all behind, in the plains like a great, heavy, difficult book that she had read through and was not required to read again.17

Her retreat to Carignano in pursuit of leisure resounds Shelley's Ode To The Westwind:

Oh, lift me as a wave, a leaf, a cloud, I fall upon the thorns of life, I bleed.

As we come to know, she is not the 'fire' on the mountain but a bright apricot squashed and torn by a hoopoe. The dreariness
of the physical world objectified through the hoopoe, emphasizes vulnerability of self that she tries to protect.

The novel, thus, may be noted as a story of inabilities of human beings to ignore the world, to place oneself in another’s position. Nanda’s feigned isolation, forced banishment fails before Raka’s natural, total rejection of the society. She is thus drawn, as the only link between the outside world and the inner world of the heroine. Her instinctive, effortless refusal of discipline, order and obedience, her exploring self, has to match in her great grand mother’s guarded dislike for clamour. Her inborn genius, gift of avoiding, is an alarm to drag Nanda out of her shell of pretension.

So also her inability to spin fantasies to charm the child. Her enchanting descriptions of the past life, the mystical expeditions of her heroic father, fantastic rendering of facts, and the zoo in the parental house in Kashmir fail to smother Raka. She, independent in her pursuit of nature, “could not bear to be confined to the old lady’s fantasy world when the reality outside appealed so strongly”.

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The novel further tells of falsity to which Nanda is forced to. Her conjugal life was not all love and sincerity, but the terrible betrayal of her husband prompted her to a life of silence. The children were alien. The graces and glories were a fabrication to drive the present. Though the novelist draws out the characters with understanding, she ventures all the same, not to present one-sided view. A life built on lie, on escape, is not the solution to one’s tragedy. Therefore, the glass house of safety, carefully erected around her, is bound to break with an intruder like Raka. Ila Das is also mistaken. Her fanciful world of highhandedness, recitation of poems and lavish upbringing are ramshackled with the advancing time. One thing is important - her misery is not her own creation but is inflicted upon by the passing social current. Her past, as welfare officer is quite exhilarating but the poverty, the risk of undertaking such a job is also challenging. It hints not only at the growing responsibility of woman, but also the skill required. Dedication is not the only thing to supplement. It is the lack of tactful handling that has brought the saddest happening to Ila Das. However, Mrs. Desai within the limitation of heat and dust storms, has tried to present sweeping views of the roles and reactions
of human characters seen in the climax and preceding anticlimax of life. As it is, she wants to say that helplessness of the woman to find a suitability of existence can be eradicated, not by introspection but by constructive intuition.

In her most perfect and outstanding novel *Clear Light of Day* Mrs. Desai shifts the scene to Delhi where she presents the character of Bim, a bright, slap-dash head girl in school, accepts life as a challenge to her intelligence and discards the accepted luck of women to marry and to be merry. She wants to work, to do things and become a lecturer in adult life. She clings to that pattern of life that “pluck the dead heads off arose bush dusted grey with disease” while the younger sister Tara, strikes a fine contrast to Bim, who becomes the cause of much of the worries and frets of the former, the latter never gives up her freakish and fruitful traits; on the contrary she becomes a constant threat, an object of fear which swings almost to the point out her shortcomings.

She has the faculty of cutting her short. The hours she spent in school were admonished with reproachful tones - Bimla was set as an example to tease her, to beat her. She was meant to a dismal
apathy. The novelist comes alive with a clash of two temperaments, very personate in their outlooks to the same thing - the school and the house. Charity to her, has the ‘sour reck of vomit’. If Bim stands for the solidity of life, Tara is a perspiring little figure, getting knotted at each step.

The problems offered to Bim in the Book - Raja’s (her brother) long illness, parents death, taking over family’s responsibility, difficult in handling Mira Masi and above all, her own career and Baba, cannot be dismissed as ordinary ones but the challenges of the changing times. It is not Raja, who takes up the father’s position as expected, but Bim, self composed, authoritative, at the same time ‘fretting, conscious of failing’ trying not to let it show. Everything has been left to her. She is drawn out of her maidenly stupidity. She is neither morbid not philosophically obsessed. The novelist has described her as a manageress, with natural frailty, fright in need of protection. All the same, she whispers herself not to panic. Drabness and drudgery, too many worries, do let others to misinterpret her as abrupt and staccato. But according to the writer, she is beyond other’s comprehension. Amidst her usual sardonic look, life is nothing but interesting enough. Raja’s heroism has only
poetic ideas of heroism and loyalty. Birn’s introspection is no less poetical but it is stained with the harshness of reality. That is why she stays back to presume the role of a housekeeper.

Another problem concerning women repels Bim, she reacts sharply to Jaya and Sarla’s early marriage. The novelist is very much sympathetic with Bim on this issue but she is not one-sided. The reader is provided with the other side of the problem through Tara’s pleading. Bim is irritated and pleads for higher education for the girls. She feels that marriage is not enough to last the girls the whole of their lives. Instead they should do things, live with self-respect and be independent but Tara is drawn out to mark the formality of the pattern and insist on its continuance. The target of the elders, in case of a daughter is simply to give them up in marriage and be freed from the burden. At times the characters act as mediums for conveying messages. Bim’s fear becomes true when the two Mishra sisters are abandoned and come back to live with the parents soon after their marriage.

Bim reacts against Raja’s hypocrisy, loss of individuality by a process of inheriting his father-in-law. Fathering one baby after another is looked upon as a crime, a most ridiculous thing. A
life of luxury and pomp, all the feeding is not only disgusting but a terror to her. It is Bim's intuition that Raja, in spite of all his fulfilled desires, is still unhappy because vocation is what he needs, not hobby. It is terrible to find him to gratify his boyhood desires, to drive his son to fulfill his own ungratified desires.

Bim in spite of her shortcomings is not free from Desaiian characteristics - one of which is, she does foresee all the terrible things in advance. The novelist says that it is her trouble. Her resentment is not against the world of extravagance but against the blow to her standards. Her elevated sense of consciousness, of self-respect makes her to be misunderstood.

Mrs. Desai keeps dropping hints at the necessity of change in the patterned outlook of the women. On this occasion Bim is used as the voice. She teaches her students to be different from the women of the past, to be new kind of women. They should not be left to feel themselves fools or to make fools of themselves. Self-respect and asserting, they should have. She is disappointed at her inability to manage on her own, her handicappedness, her going
down on her knees for help to Bakul or Raja while dealing with Sharma and the business.

Adult Bim is shown different from Bim of adolescent days. The childhood disaster - the well with the drowned cow, fills her with apprehension. She thinks that she will one day end up in that well. The growing frustration, much imagined, much -debated hero and heroine gives a touch of melodrama to the story. The reader is made conscious of the growing abnormality of the heroine towards the end of the book. Tara is the first one to sense this unwanted vacuum in her sister.

The novel ends with a note of anguish and regret particularly when she appears torn between acceptance and resentment, love and hostility, understanding and misunderstanding of all those who become a part of her, weighed down with exhaustion. Like the bereaved emperor she utterly alone and defeated, very well carries the consequences of every deed, good or bad with her. She reflects as follows:

Strange that I came with nothing into the world and now go away with this stupendous caravan of sin.20
This break-down in her innermost self is a realisation of reality, of confession. Nothing hidden, no more shadows but the clear is light. The novelist, thus, observes:

\[ \text{They found the courage, after all, to float in it and bathe in it and allow it to pour onto them, illuminating them wholly, without allowing them a single shadow to shelter in.}^{21} \]

Lack of self realisation on the part of a woman is a great drawback that Mrs. Desai aims at focusing in the character of Sarala, Deven's wife, in her next novel *In Custody*. A woman who knows the difficult moments and yet is unable to rise to occasion and hold the fort is a poor thing without any sense of reality. This is what Mrs. Desai attempts to strike through the protagonist Deven whose helplessness, suffering and nobility are described in terms of self-realisation that fails to find any response in his wife Sarala who has been portrayed on the familiar front. The harsh realities of life produce in her a sense of frustration and resentment. She has been mentioned only in his hints, within a framework of restricted appearance. She, like Deven, is also a victim. Her defeat and failure are presented as follows:
He understood because, like her, he had been defeated too, like her, he was a victim. Although each understood the secret truth about the other, it did not bring about any closeness of spirit, any comradeship, because they also sensed that two victims; ought to avoid each other, not yoke together their joint disappointments. A victim does not look to help from another victim, he looks for a redeemer. At least Deven had his poetry; she had nothing, and so there was an added accusation and bitterness in her look.  

Mrs. Anita Desai moves to finer artistic achievements in her latest novels Baumgartner’s Bombay which chiefly deals with foreign settings and European characters. The novel deals with story of Hugo Baumgartner, the central character. Rising from the unforgettable past of childhood trauma buried in Berlin to a successful businessman in Bombay, Hugo remains a foreigner everywhere, with a clear picture of pre-war Berlin presenting narration of a family caught in the criss-cross of changing time and sympathetic delineation of a mother, this novel marks a departure from her earlier ones. As remarked by a critic it “throws significant light on Indo-German aspect of Anita Desai’s personality.”
It is, however, the feelings and anguish of Mrs. Baumgartner that bring out the note of the woman in contrast to her counterpart. Mrs. Baumgartner’s “love with living” is very well contrasted with a pervading feeling that there is only rift and waiting in life. Hugo was aware of the gap between his parents:

Hugo, instead, remembered the figure of his father, left behind in a wrapping of blankets, he felt uneasy, sensing a rift, a break between his parents that might have existed for all these years but of which he was only now really aware. He kept his eye on his mother, suddenly so much younger.23

Like most of her novels, it also tells a curious tale, full of silent reactions to darkness of Hitler’s society and grimness of Bombay. Hugo is agonizingly aware of his outlandishness. The perilous sense of firanghi – ‘accepting but not accepted’. It is the story of his life – ‘the one thread that ran through it all’ (p.20.) He remains an outsider all along:

In Germany he had been dark – his darkness had marked him the firanghi. In both lands, The unacceptable.24

Both Hugo and his mother are afraid of isolation. They are isolated from the rest wherever they go - Hugo, in India, is a solitary
foreigner. His mother shares the same feeling in Germany. It chases them and becomes a 'dark, monstrous block'. There was no peace because they are always shadowed by their own past.

Their own life is 'hopelessly tangled' by the presence of 'choice and history'. Such existential dilemma brings nothing but anguish to most of the chief protagonists in Desai's former novels. Sarah, Sita, Manisha, Nirode and Maya analyse the problem to find their distinct 'voices'. Although Hugo always is drifted to think other matters that chase him constantly.

The quest for life and love and a pervading feeling of apprehension corrodes Hugo and he finds 'no return', from it. He, like Maya, cannot get himself rid of the childhood trauma of comforts and dreamy life. In him, one finds a mixture of Monisha's silent brooding. Nirode, Amla and Sita's desire is for a sort of release from the terrible oppression of the city. More important, through him, Desai once again emphasizes on the dirt and maddening uproar of the metropolitan life. Hugo, Lotte, Habibullah, Julius, Gala, like helpless creatures, fly from one city to another. Finally it is of no use because with the passage of time Hugo discovers:
But there was nothing to look at, it was all gone, and he shut his eyes, to receive the darkness that flooded in, poured in and filled the vacuum with the thick black ink of oblivion, of Nacht and Nebel.25

Calcutta, the city of ‘black back streets, its desolation, its hopelessness seems perfect to Baumgartner, but Bombay where ‘dark shapes sprawl in night’ succeeds in killing him.

Mrs. Desai brings -fresh insight into the understanding of the female psyche by depicting their problems and worries which find expression through their reactions. Lotte is a victim of situation. Her war is a different one – ‘war within war within war’. In her, there is a reflection of Hugo’s attitude even though she disguises her disquiet with ‘laughter and foul language’ If she is the poetry of life, Kanti Sethia, her so called Indian husband, is the prose of life. Lotte reacts;

Business, business, nothing else matters to the man. Then he gets tired, then he needs a change.26

After Hugo’s murder, she loses all control and feels to be ‘suddenly so old’ but the blood stained post cards – the letters of Mrs. Baumgartner to her son – provide her with clues to a ‘puzzle, a
meaning to the meaningless? The problems of Hugo are also her own problems. But she learns to be more careful by rising above the situation. The struggle is to start. The ‘ordeal’ is once again to find out her own identity—“In my beginning is my end”.

To sum up, in Anita Desai’s portrayal of women characters in her novels, the first feature of that strikes everyone is her psychoanalytic method along with the use of what may be called the ‘poetic prose’. She has, however, added a new dimension to her fiction by taking up the cause of the neglected class of the society. Her prime concern is to lay bare the hard covering of emotions to bring out sheer womanliness in them to prove that they are beings not devoid of feelings and are in search of love and affection in life. Maya might not have been an introvert and a killer or Monisha, a self-destroyer or Nanda, exiled among the crowd, had they got sympathetic attention from their husbands. Feminine sensibility of Anita Desai has prompted her to explore those tender areas of characters which have been neglected for years in India. Their projection, therefore, marks a new age: “These rebel-victims are not the outcome of an eccentric vision of the author but they are indicative of the
emergence of this disquieting stance which modern literate stands to project”. 27

Each and every woman of her helps in a better understanding of marital life. Major and minor – every portrait, is well thought and befitting to the position acquired in the novel. A helpless Mira Masi unfolds the shrunken past of Bim and her family.

Mrs. Desai by projecting women comparatively in sober roles tries to focus on the submissiveness of them. Sita at last reconciles and Nanda retreats to a lonely place with all their suppressed agonies to keep the wheel of life running. Bim excuses Raja by her introspection under clear light of day.

Anita Desai believes that “A woman novelist has something new to bring”, and she has brought it. She has continued to produce novels which elicit wide-spread critical interpretation. Within the thematic context of exploring the depths of human behaviour, the settings range from the pre-and post-Independent India to England and Berlin. The wide variety of settings as well as the different tones and surface structures of her novels present dilemmas to critics attempting to make an assessment of her literary works.
While projecting the various traits of her women character, Mrs. Desai expresses her dislikes for warrior's attitude in women, though in spite of such attitude, she does create characters like Maya, Sita and Bim. She seems to point out that role of women changes according to situations. Therefore, Maya in a killer's role is as much acceptable as Sita in unruly wife's role. Bim is befitting to the role of a manageress and teacher because of the peculiar situation. They want to fight and prove the power of women. But under this hard shell of a warrior, the soul of a brooding spirit with the desire of living like a perfect individual comes to the notice.

Mrs. Desai hints that elder women as manageress should be in full control of the house. Their carelessness may bring disaster to the family. Monisha's mother, Bim's mother, Raka and Sita's mother are examples of this type. On the other hand, the Punjabi lady in Bye-Bye Blackbird, Gautama's mother, aunt Lila and Mira Masi are quite successful as mothers and manageress. Also we find women in artist's role. Except Amla and Menaka, others are not seen with painting or drawing. But Mrs. Desai has described vividly the artistic bent of mind of the chief protagonists in every novel. In fact, this spirit of the artist is responsible for their personal agony.
and disaster. Each novel is rich with highly sensuous poetic passages. The appreciation of these passages describes the state of mind of the characters and their perfection as artists.

Mrs. Anita Desai seems to rise to great heights in her art of characterisation, particularly when she makes use of history in order to make her women find their true self or come back to a correct self-realisation. In his illuminating comparative study of the use of history and the individual, Dieter Riemenschneider aptly observes:

*Thus by directing her explorative beam of light deeper and deeper into their lives, the past of her adult characters, Desai reveals more and more of their true selves to us and to themselves. Tara and Bim eventually realise who they really are so that they can live more truthfully to themselves and each other. Bim becomes reconciled to her life in the house which initially only appeared to satisfy her expectations from life; Tara accepts living with her past failings, as we have said, without blaming others or seeking their forgiveness. The past, re-experienced in its fullness, needs no further explanation.*

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Thus, an analytical study of each of the two novelists in the parameter of psychological theories and psychoanalytical interpretation distinctly reveals that both Virginia Woolf and Anita Desai are chiefly concerned with the psychoanalysis of the minds of their characters, essentially the women characters who occupy usually the centre place in their novels. Needless to say, each novelist has been influenced basically by the modern psychological interpretation of their behaviour, actions, reactions and response under given circumstances. Of course in case of Virginia Woolf, we may note that there is direct impact of the various psychological treatises and psychological doctrines which were easily available to her as she belonged to a literary circle that was close to the emergence of psychology as a fresh subject. In case of Anita Desai we find the artist is making use of such psychological study through a filtered process so as to get the correct application of these psychological theories on her characters. In any case it can be concluded that both the artists have achieved great success in delineation of their characters in general and the portrayal of their women characters in particular chiefly through psychoanalytical process.
NOTES

2. Woolf, Virginia : *To the Lighthouse* 1927, p. 57 – 59
7. Ibid, p. 190
13. Ibid p.34
14. Desai, Anita : *Where Shall We Go This Summer* Orient Paperback p. 47

15. Ibid., p. 43 - 44 :


18. Ibid p.100


20. Ibid p. 169

21. Ibid p. 177


24. Ibid p. 20

25. Ibid p. 56

26. Ibid p. 118
