Chapter IV

Anita Desai as a Feminist Writer

Millions are condemned to a stiller doom than mine, and millions are in silent revolt against their lot. No body knows how many rebellions ferment in the masses of life which people earth.

Virginia Woolf, A Room of One’s Own

Although the British divided India and then withdrew from the country in 1947, English, their language remained here and flourished as a medium of instruction on the levels of higher education and also continued to inspire creative writers. Indian writing in English is a literature born of confluence of Indian and European culture. As is well-known, it is both an Indian literature and a variation of English literature. Our contact with the Western people ushered in Renaissance in India, and significantly the Renaissance in modern Indian literature begins with great people like Raja Rammohan Roy, the early Indian masters of English prose.

Ancient India had no novelists, but it had many great story tellers. The rise of the novel in India is associated with social, political and economic conditions in India. Fiction was the last to arrive on the Indian English literary scene. Indian English fiction has flourished in the last hundred years. Indian writers in English have made significant contributions to the area of fiction. As H.M. Williams says, it is really "the most popular vehicle for the transmission of Indian ideas to the wider English-speaking world" (109). The
"big three"—Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan and Raja Rao—established the Indian novel in English on a strong foothold.

Raja Rao holds woman in high esteem. He thinks that a man can fully know and realize himself through woman and she is the only reality. Man finds in woman an amalgam of sensuality and spirituality. In *The Serpent and the Rope*, it is very clear in Rama's relationship with Savithri and Madeleine. In *The Cat and Shakespeare*, through Shantha he proclaims that a real woman is the real protector of man. Mulk Raj Anand is more preoccupied with the pathetic plight of the oppressed classes than gender discrimination. His *Untouchable*, written under the deep influence of Mahatma Gandhi, is an archetypal novel about the worst of evil of Indian society—untouchability. Bakha suffers humiliation at the hands of caste—Hindus. In *Coolie*, Anand presents Munoo to show his attack on the class system, capitalism and communalism. *Two Leaves and a Bud*, is again an attack on the evil effects of imperialism and exploitation of helpless labourers. Gangu goes to Assam and joins service in a tea estate where he is exploited by the English masters and their Indian stooges. R.K. Narayan portrays the passive feminine disposition of women in his novels. His characters reveal and reflect the grave realities of human life. His women characters have the spirit of tolerance and submissiveness. Savitri in *The Dark Room* is exemplary in this respect. She is subjected to all sorts of tyrannical behaviour of her husband, Ramani. Sampath's wife Kamala in *Mr. Sampath* is also an ordinary and conservative-
minded woman. She fails to prevail upon her husband to give up the idea of a second marriage with Shanthi. Raju's mother in *The Guide* also belongs to the group of traditional women. She thinks that a married woman's place is by her husband's side only and suggests to Rosie to go back to her husband. All these women have very similar approach to life.

*The History of Indian English Literature* shows that the last quarter of the 19th century is a significant period in the history of Indian English fiction. The very emergence of women writers during this period is of remarkable significance. In the pre-independent period, the emphasis was on culture. But after independence the focus shifted. Before independence the writers dealt with Indian life, culture, customs, traditions and the clash between Indian culture and Western values. Since the dawn of independence, women writers have made conscious and sustained attempts to present the predicament of women. They also tried to convey their ideas of social reform. Professor Alphonso Karkala rightly observes:

> They also tried to tell the world the obstacles women faced and the disadvantages they suffered in an orthodox Hindu world. These women writers struggled to give form and shape to their autobiographical accounts, which attracted publishers both in India and abroad. (78)
Toru Dutt's *Bianca*, Raj Laxmi Debi's *The Hindu Wife*, Cornelia Sorabjee's *Between the Twilights* and *India Calling* are some of the works of early women writers. But it was with the works of novelists like Kamala Markandaya, Ruth Prawar Jhabvala, Nayantara Sahgal, Anita Desai, Santha Rama Rau and Attia Hosain that Indian English fiction by women writers attained a certain kind of maturity. A noted feature common to all the women writers of this period is that their theme is invariably the Indian woman. The writers were preoccupied with the problems of women. It is well remarked that in the Indian literary scenario, the crux of feminism is that the Indian woman is caught in the trap of transition from tradition to modernity.

The early novels show woman in her traditional role, mainly as a housewife and child-bearer. The writers are preoccupied with her suffering. They suffer mostly because of the husband's infidelity, childlessness or a harsh mother-in-law. The early novels of Mulk Raj Anand, Bhabani Bhattacharya and Kamala Markandaya illustrate the traditional image of women. In Anand's *Coolie* (1936), Laxmi, the wife of Hari, a coolie, lives in sub-human surroundings but she always stands by her husband. Sajani in *Two Leaves and a Bud* (1937) accompanies her husband Gangu to work on the tea plantations in Assam. She prefers death to the sight of her husband suffering. In Bhabani Bhattacharya’s *So Many Hungers*, Kajoli looks after her husband and often goes without food even in her first pregnancy. Rukmani and her daughter Ira of Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954) are also
similar in terms of readiness to sacrifice. Rukmani goes with Nathan and
remains with him through thick and thin. Nalini in A Handful of Rice, ill-
treated by Ravi, represents the average lower middle class wife.

In the words of Swami Vivekananda, "In the West the woman is wife.
The ideal of womanhood in India is motherhood—that marvellous, unselfish,
all suffering, ever forgiving mother. The wife walks behind the shadow" (10).
In India, the ultimate goal of womanhood is to be the mother of a son.
Society as well as religion looks on women from this point of view. This
concept of womanhood as motherhood is reflected in literature especially in
early Indian English fiction. Munoo in Mulk Raj Anand's Coolie clings to the
memory of his dead mother, and Prabha's wife sees a son in Munoo. In The
Village, though Lalu’s mother is harsh towards her daughter-in-law, she is
gentle with her son. In R.K. Narayan's world of Malgudi, mother is the
channel to bring the erring children back to normalcy. In the Dark Room,
Savitri intervenes between the father and the son when the son is beaten for
no fault of his. Indian English novelists have mostly shown the mother pure
and protective. In Indian culture, the mother image is all pervasive and so
quite naturally, appeared in Indian literature in a glorified manner. Idealised
characters of mothers loom across over the pages of Indian English novels.

The woman in the family as pictured in the early Indian English novels
is more traditional image than a rebellious one. Later when she stepped into
society, she became bolder. The rebellious women who came out of the
family set up are found initially in the novels dealing with the freedom
movement or in the novels which reflect the East-West encounter. As said by
Shirwadkar:

It was Gandhi’s call to women that had a stirring effect. The old
and the young, the bold and the timid, the rich and the poor
joined the non-violent struggle led by Gandhi. Their whole-
hearted participation in the struggle for emancipation indicated
that they had acquired enough moral courage. (119)

The traditional image became an object of pity and later realistic images of
women were presented. Through education, women emerged in society from
the kitchen and ignorance. The writers clearly demonstrate an awareness of
the new situation. They showed women’s frustration because of the double
standards adopted by men in relation to women. In the later novels the
woman suffers because of "the incompatibility between her individuality and
awareness of herself and the traditional views of her husband and the in-laws
or a refusal to submit meekly to the double moral standards implicit in a male-
dominated society" (Meena Shirwadkar 49). Mulk Raj Anand’s The Old
Woman and the Cow (1960) illustrates this. Gauri rebels against all odd
situations. Ruth Jhabvala’s Gulab and Esmond’s wife in Esmond in India
(1958) also undergo transformation. When Gulab finds that Esmond is incapable of protecting her, she has no hesitation to leave him.

The attitude of women underwent a change when they started learning and earning. They became aware of their own individuality. The change in society required a corresponding change in literature. The change in women's attitudes is portrayed with greater awareness in the novels by women writers. The best example in this regard is Anita Desai. In order to place Anita Desai in proper perspective, it is essential to compare her with the contemporary women novelists who share her theme of human relationship. The contemporary women novelists are Kamala Markandaya, Ruth Prawar Jhabvala, Nayantara Sahgal and Shashi Deshpande.

Kamala Markandaya depicted women in her novels with sensitivity and realism. In her two novels *Nectar in a Sieve* and *Some Inner Fury*, she introduced the sub-genre of feminist writing in India. What she advocates is the concept of feminine autonomy. But she does not try to probe women's inner most thoughts. She "deliberately dwells upon economic, sociological, political and religious aspects of India, highlighting the problems of penury and superstition and their concomitants" (Prasad xxx). Her *Coffer Dams* focuses on the question of industrialization.

Ruth Prawar Jhabvala's *Get Ready for Battle* is the story of Sarala Devi, who lives away from her husband, an idealist and a reformer. She
incites her son Vishnu to fight against injustice. In *The Nature of Passion* tradition and environment become incompatible. Nimmie, a modern girl who believes in emancipation goes to clubs but the family she lives is old and conservative. The themes of her novels are clash between traditional codes and modern aspirations. She has "a feminine contemporary urban sensibility in contrast to that of the masculine Victorian novelist of the sea and of lands beyond the seas" (Iyengar 450).

Nayantara Sahgal also portrayed the plight of women. According to her, in the present patriarchal society, man is the master of woman's life and the creator of her destiny. Sahgal is also regarded as an exponent of the political novel. *Rich Like Us* takes up the issue of colonialism in the context of sati. *The Day in Shadow* centres on Simrit. The novel delineates a suffering woman, Simrit, in Indian society. She decides to dissolve a seventeen year old marriage. The novel conveys a message that a divorced woman is stigmatized for ever in the society.

Shashi Deshpande's fiction delineates woman's condition in India in the 70s and 80s. She is much concerned with woman's eternal quest for life. Her women characters are independent beings free from the restrictions imposed by society and culture. Jaya in *That Long Silence*, Saru in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* and Indu in *Roots and Shadows* illustrate this. Jaya questions herself and her relationship with her husband Mohan, who is on a
charge of misappropriation. Saru comes home after 15 years to claim her rightful place within her parental home. The important message that the novelist gives to the readers is that, women have to take up the responsibility of their life and nobody is going to do it for them.

The women novelists of recent times have very strong links with Western life and culture, either by virtue of their parentage or through marriage. But they all show a special attachment and love for their mother country and its life and culture. Their writings are characteristically Indian in spirit and tone. "They represent a significant creative surge in the Indian English literary scene which was set in motion by writers of great promise like Toru, and being carried forward by writers of much greater promise like Anita Desai" (R.S. Pathak 109).

Anita Desai (1937- ) has links with Western life and culture through her German mother. Her Indian link is through her Bengali father and also through marriage. She hails from an upper middle class family. She has found a prominent place in book reviews, journals, interviews and seminars. Her published works include novels, collections of short stories, stories for children, articles and interviews. Her works have won wide acclaim and her novels are a major contribution to literature. They are Cry, the Peacock (1963), Voices in the City (1965), Bye Bye Blackbird (1971), Where Shall We Go This Summer? (1975), Fire on the Mountain (1977), Clear Light of Day

Anita Desai, the active woman writer in the Indian English fiction for more than four decades, is the recipient of many awards, from inside India and from abroad. Her Clear Light of Day was short listed for the 1980 Booker Prize. In Custody was also short listed for 1984 Booker Prize and it has been filmed by the Merchant Ivory Productions. Fasting, Feasting was short listed for the covetous Booker Prize, but ended as a runner-up. She won Royal Society of Literature's Winifred Holtby Memorial Prize for Fire on the Mountain and the National Academy of Letters Award in 1978. She has been awarded with the Author's Guild Award for Excellence in writing for Where Shall We Go This Summer? She is a very good academician. She is a member of the Advisory Board of English for the National Academy of Arts and Letters in New York and of Girton College at the University of Cambridge. She teaches in the writing programme at M.I.T.

Anita Desai is unlike R.K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand and Bhabani Bhattacharya whose main interest is mostly the portrayal of aspects of life related to outward reality. She is unlike Ruth Prawar Jhabvala and Kamala Markandaya who are interested in East-West encounter and the tensions
arising out of socio-political change. Anita Desai is a unique writer, who tries to explore the interior world of her characters. As R.S. Pathak comments:

Anita Desai is one of the few Indian novelists in English who have tried to understand intimately the predicament of their female characters. She represents the welcome "creative release of feminine sensibility" which began to emerge after the World War II. Anita Desai is a novelist of considerable merit and has enriched the Indian novel in English in more ways than one.

(89)

Anita Desai emerged in the Indian English literary scene with the publication of her first novel *Cry, the Peacock* in 1963. As Desai is no exception to the fact that the Age influences the writing of a novelist, a close look into the cross section of the period in which she wrote the novels is necessary to understand the theme of her works and the perspective she developed.

This period is marked by confusion among people about the modern and traditional viewpoint towards life. As said by Rajiv Sharma:

The individual felt the existential dilemma in his life. He experienced the sense of nothingness and despair about the mystery of human existence. This led the individual to a
continuous quest for identity in the constantly changing social reality. (63)

After independence, it was the period of industrialization and advancement of technology. This influenced the personality and attitude of people in metropolitan cities. Soon after the Chinese attack in 1962, there was economic depression and unemployment. People were much affected by prevailing sense of dissatisfaction and the depression. People were unhappy and worried about unemployment. This depression and disillusionment caused a sense of alienation in all walks of life—social, religious, political and economic.

In India, our traditional concept of family is rooted in the joint-family set up. Due to the social and the economic changes after independence, this family set up got shaken up. Some of the traditional values could not find a place in the newly evolved style of life, and the people longed for changes from the old set up.

In the last three decades the gap between the old and the new generations has considerably widened. Modern materialistic culture has disintegrated the old Indian traditions and the modern youths in India are face to face with different types of challenges. These changed conditions have caused a sense of
alienation in the Indian family life, wherein each individual feels alienated from one another. (Rajiv Sharma 64-65)

Industrialization, technology, modernisation, search for jobs all contributed to the separate settlement of nuclear families and the disintegration of joint family. This caused a spirit of alienation in the urban as well as rural areas of India.

It is in the period of depression soon after the defeat of India in the Indo-China War in 1962 that Anita Desai wrote her first novel Cry, the Peacock, wherein we come across innovation in style and concept. D.S. Maini rightly observes that her innovations make her "a disturbing and demanding presence in Indo-Anglian fiction" (216). She is rated as a great novelist in the art of characterization, displaying a psychological insight into the characters and in many other respects. Her characters are refined and sophisticated. The special attention she gave to her portrayal of women added a new dimension to her novel. Srivastava rightly observes, "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" (Introduction xxxvii). Anita Desai speaks of the concept of woman in Indian mythology:
Her ample bosom and loins, her enticing curves and buxom proportions make her not merely the ideal mother but the ideal woman–consort, lover, plaything. . . . Around her exists a huge body of mythology. She is called by several names—Sita, Draupadi, Durga, Parvati, Lakshmi and so on. In each myth, she plays the role of the loyal wife, unswerving in her devotion to her lord. . . . The myth keeps her bemused, bound hand and foot. To rebel against it—either in speech or action—would mean that she is questioning the myth, attacking the legend, and that cannot be permitted: it is the cornerstone on which the Indian family and therefore Indian society are built. (972)

It is her preoccupation with this Indian background that gives psychological depth to most of her novels. Desai’s double heritage—racial and cultural—has had an impact on her writing. "Writing became an act by which I clarified my experience, explained it to myself and completed it also" (Seguet 46). Desai proclaims her attitude towards India acknowledging her mother’s influence:

I am able to look at a country I know so intimately with a certain detachment, and that certainly comes from my mother because I’m aware of how she would have reacted to people and situations. I feel about India as an Indian, but I suppose I think about it as an outsider. (Robinson 2)
Desai's novels are rooted in the background of Indian culture and Indian society.

Female characters are given supreme importance in almost all her novels. In all her major and early novels like *Cry, the Peacock, Voices in the City, Where Shall We Go This Summer? Bye Bye Blackbird and Fire on the Mountain*, she lays stress on the female characters. In all these works, women are portrayed as chief protagonists who suffer in a world dominated by man—in the guise of a father, a husband, a brother or a lover. These men are presented as constant threats to their integrity and happiness. The women characters react sometimes violently and some other times silently.

In *Cry, the Peacock*, the most important character, Maya, suffers a lot due to the indifference of her husband Gautama. Monisha in *Voices in the City* reacts violently and proclaims in the end that death is more welcome than mean existence. Sita as wife in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* is against any compromise. For Nanda Kaul in *Fire on the Mountain*, the terrible betrayal of her husband prompted her to a life of silence.

As discussed in chapter II of this thesis, Elaine Showalter describes three phases of the emergence and growth of the feminine tradition—imitation, protest and self-discovery. Anita Desai's writings can be located in the third phase, because her novels not only show her awareness of women's problems but also her preoccupation with the processes of inquiring into the
subtle layers of feminine experience. Feminist issues such as identity crisis and freedom from the male-centered world are the main agenda in her novels. J.G. Masilamani rightly observes:

Anita Desai's preoccupation with the feminine sensibility is unique in the annals of the Indo-Anglian novel. Her feminism is not of the demanding, obtrusive, clamouring kind but constitutes sensitive portrayals of intelligent, gifted women married to gentle, dutiful but insensitive men and who are slowly sinking in the bog of a dull matrimonial relationship.

The point of view is nearly always that of the woman and the technique often adopted is that of the interior monologue. (169)

Not only in her early novels but in other novels like *Clear Light of Day*, *In Custody*, and *Fasting, Feasting* also she leaves a feminist imprint. Anita Desai's treatment of feminism is unique in the sense that her heroines are by nature not often violent but silent sufferers. K.R.S. Iyengar says that in Anita Desai, "the inner climate, the climate of sensibility that lours or clears or rumbles like thunder or suddenly blazes forth like lightning is more compelling than the outer weather, the physical geography of the visible action" (464). Though the settings of her novels are entirely in India, they do not deal with the problems of Third World feminism. As quoted by Raman Selden, she never agrees with Aristotle who says, "Female is a female by
virtue of a certain lack of qualities" (*Feminist Criticism* 128). Her feminism is not an imitation of European penis envy.

In the light of the feminist critical theory discussed in chapter II, the early novels of Anita Desai can be examined as the feminist manifesto. Ann Lowry Weir is of the opinion that through her protagonists Anita Desai gives the readers valuable insight into the feminine consciousness (154). Gajendra Kumar says:

Anita Desai prioritises the predicament of women and visualises life for a woman as a series of obligations and commitments. Broadly speaking, Desai's themes, characterisation and image discuss the confinement and lack of freedom. In addition to existentialistic reality of life she evokes the sentiment and sensibility of their role and respect in society. (64)

The novelist's attempts to convey the feminine themes and sensibility through her medium need analysis. In her novels Desai has portrayed women of different ages and types. Maya is married and hypersensitive, Raka is only eight years old and Nanda Kaul and Ila Das are old. Monisha is an intellectual.

In Desai's novels, one can notice a compelling urge of women for freedom and self-dignity. Maya complains that she is treated as "a wild beast on a leash" (*CP* 108). Monisha wants to thrust her "head out of the window"
but the "bars are closely set" (VC 110). Sita's fascination with the foreigner whom she meets on the roadside shows her longing for freedom. Nanda wishes to be "shipwrecked" (FM 61). The novelist never justifies the reactions of her heroines whether it is Maya, Sita, Monisha or Nanda Kaul. She just allows them a chance to react.

Anita Desai is not a self-proclaimed feminist writer. She does not have a proclaimed commitment to the feminist movement. Yet we can notice a feminist dimension in her fiction. She denies the significance of theories in the creation of a work of art. She says:

I think theories of the novel are held by those of an academic or critical turn of mind, not the creative. A writer does not create a novel by observing, a given set of theories . . . he follows flashes of individual vision, and relies on a kind of instinct that tells him what to follow and what to avoid, how to veer away from what would be destructive to his vision. It is these flashes of vision, and a kind of trained instinct that leads him . . . not any theories. ("An Interview with Anita Desai" 100)

But she is quite aware of women's problems, for she writes about women's problems in the present day:

They live mostly in such confined spheres and therefore their field of observation is at the same time more restricted and more
intense. This leads to their placing their emphasis differently from men, on having a very different sense of values. Whereas a man is concerned with action, experience and achievement, a woman writer is more concerned with thought, emotion and sensation. At least, one would think, but this is not by any means always so. ("An Interview with Anita Desai" 100)

The novelist keeps her women within the purview of "thought, emotion and sensation."

Anita Desai most often gives stress on the feminine tragedy arising out of the marital disharmony. Cry, the Peacock in three parts deals with the various forms and aspects of Maya's struggles. The first part is about the death of her pet dog, the second part, narrates the tragic death of Maya's husband Gautama. The third part is about the protagonist's loneliness and isolation after her husband's death. In Voices in the City, the elder sister of Nirode after marriage leads a servile existence within the rigid confines of a traditional Hindu family and dies a tragic death. Sita in Where Shall We Go This Summer? is leading a dead life—a disillusioned and loveless life. Nanda Kaul in Fire on the Mountain is a victim of loveless marriage. All these novels underline the tragedy of the fair sex.

Desai's women characters are always seen hypersensitive, lonely and helpless and they are tormented by the patriarchal domination. Chikwenye
Ogunyemi says, "A feminist novel is not just one that deals with women and women's issues, but it should also posit some aspects of a feminist ideology" ("Womanism" 64). Desai's early novels best illustrate that they are feminist novels. D.S. Maini has rightly said, "Cry, the Peacock is typically a feminine novel, a novel of sensibility rather than of action" (221). Sita in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* goes beyond Elaine Showalter's "female phase." Sita returns from the island to her husband and family not to be accepted. She comes back with a courage to face life with all its, ups and downs. She illustrates that feminism is a sense of courage. Sita's return was not a search for identity but for reintegration. Ila Das in *Fire on the Mountain* illustrates the problem of a woman social worker in a male-dominated society. She challenges male authority and tries to emancipate the poor and suppressed village women. "As a heroine and a feminist, Ila Das combines energy, determination and courage to protest male-dominance which relegates women to positions of subservience and submission" (Rosenwasser 102).

Desai is concerned mainly with women's emancipation. Maya urges for understanding, Sita looks for dignity and Monisha pleads for privacy—a room of her own to read and a little money she could give to a brother. These women firmly press their claims. Desai is a great champion of women's cause and she suggests very powerfully, that the status of women should be raised or upgraded and that woman's active participation in every field of life can change the tragic undertones of her life. She opines:
Privacy and silence are unnatural conditions to Indian women, intensely social as they are. Without silence and privacy, no two consecutive and comprehensive lines can be written. The social system, from long has opposed to independent work and intellectual exercise by women. Why do we not have an Indian Mrs. Carlyle or a . . .? (Indian Writing in English 58)

The history of Indian English novel records that the Indian English novel till 1970s treated themes of political and social importance. They dealt with princes and paupers, saints and sinners, white men and babus, farmers and labourers, untouchables and coolies. Raja Rao, Kamala Markandaya and Kushwant Singh dealt with themes like East-West encounter, materialism and spiritualism. Portrayal of human mind was quite alien to them. It is with the arrival of Anita Desai that the theme of feminine psyche was given adequate attention. Desai's fellow women writers like Kamala Markandaya, Ruth Prawar Jhabvala, Nayantara Sahgal, Santha Rama Rau and Attia Hosain are not concerned with the complex psychic dimensions. They mostly give stress on social, political and cultural matters whereas Desai's stress is on the inner feminine sense and sensibility. A critic rightly argues, "Her novel is concerned with the emotional world of women, revealing a rare, imaginative awareness of various deeper forces at work and a profound understanding of feminine sensibility" (A. Hariprasanna 81).
Feminine fiction in Indian writing in English depicts in varying shades the issues of women with or without an acute awareness of feminism. Anita Desai's novels gain a special significance for her feminism. Her novels deal with feminine psyche. She probes into the inner realm of her female characters, but remains a mute observer. But she is eloquent even in her silence. K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar has remarked that Anita Desai's "forte is the exploration of the feminine sensibility" (464). Desai's novels very well expose her awareness of women's problems, and she had tried to look at them from a psychic point of view. She thus proves herself that she is an artist working in the anvil of feminine sensibility. It seems that her purpose in writing is, as she said in *Voices in the City*, to "see what the subconscious does to an impressionable creature, how much more power it has on them than sun and circumstances put together" (229). In the words of R.S. Pathak, "Desai's novels give an expression to the long-smothered wail of a lacerated psyche" (95).

Anita Desai has presented in her novels the tragic predicament of sensitive women characters who look for personal identity. Sarah in *Bye Bye Blackbird* is a victim of male-chauvinism. She is sensitive and an ill match to her husband in tastes and attitudes. The novel depicts the psychic turmoil of Sarah who longs to have a face of her own. Desai presents mostly married women, who are conscious of their lack of identity and oppressive conjugal bond. Sarah faces identity crisis after her marriage.
She had become nameless, she had shed her name as she had shed her ancestry and identity, and she sat there, staring, as though she watched them disappear. Or could only some one who knew her, knew of her background and her marriage, imagine this? Would a stranger have seen in her a lost maiden in search of her name that she seemed, with a sudden silver falling of the light of glamour, to an unusually subdued and thoughtful Adit? (BBB 31)

In Desai's works, we can notice that the quest for identity is enacted as a journey of the woman protagonist. This journey of the heroines is not physical but psychological.

As a feminist writer Desai introduces the theme of women's freedom in her novels. Her young women characters yearn for freedom. But quite unfortunately none of her characters could free themselves from the bondage. Maya thinks, "I had not escaped. The years had caught up, and now the final, the decisive one held me in its perspiring clasp from which release seemed impossible" (CP 95). Monisha describes her plight:

Why am I so sad? Why am I so afraid? . . . They put me away in a steel container, a thick glass cubicle, and I have lived in it all my life, without a touch of love or hate or warmth on me. I
am locked apart from all of them, they cannot touch me, they can only lip-read and misinterpret. (VC 247)

Sita desires to be free and that is why her fascination for the foreigner. She feels that she is tied with a chain, which can only "throttle, choke and enslave" (WSWGT8 87).

It is said that woman is more a fury than a fairy. Her charm is irresistible but they invariably spell ruin and disaster. But what Anita Desai tries to prove through her novels is an idea that without the presence of woman, home is hell. Shantha Krishnaswamy observes, "She is occupied with interiorising the consciousness of the woman and the economics of life does not bother her except when they are noticed as adding to the chilling, monotonous and soulless aspects of existence" (243).

Desai's female protagonists belong to the patriarchal family system. They have little power in their family and they remain marginal. They are social outsiders as well as existential outsiders. Maya, Monisha, Sita and Nanda Kaul are all best examples. Though they are endowed with feminine sensibility, they are sensitive individuals. Hence they don't have a respectable identity in the male-dominated society. They are forced to live according to the traditional roles ascribed to women. As Krishnaswamy remarks:

Through her characterisation, Anita Desai has fashioned a new concept of feminist fiction, not only to lock horns with male
supremacy but also to make us aware that we are not to settle for existence itself being absurdity, nausea or nothingness. The woman is on a ceaseless quest, for a meaningful life not only for herself but for humanity in general. (244)

Her themes are about women. The characters sometimes react strongly and sometimes sensitively to the male-dominated society. She writes about sensitive women in an insensitive male world. Her theme is the existential predicament in the present social milieu where the male is the ruler and female is ruled over. Through the characterisation of Monisha, the novelist presents the plight of women who are like caged birds. Her female characters are beleaguered by men. In *Cry, the Peacock*, Maya's integrity is dissolving under various pressures mainly because of her life partner of intellectual sensitivity.

Though she had a European tradition, her novels remain essentially Indian. Desai challenges the image of Indian women stereotypes, especially of the middle class. She presents their original pathetic situation with a longing for fulfilment in the family and society. Most of her women are housewives, but they are unhappy one way or the other. Desai thrusts a voice and desire into the being of these women.

In her early novels *Cry, the Peacock*, *Voices in the City*, *Bye Bye Blackbird* and *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* her focus is on the women
caught in the male-centered world. In *Cry, the Peacock* she presents a neurotic woman, and neurosis is identified as a way out for women from the society where men rule. The marriages of her female characters collapse or are on the verge of collapse because of the emotional incompatibility between partners. As said in "Gender, Culture and Text," the journey of Sita can be viewed in feminist terms "as the refusal of the temporal order and the search for a landscape that would accommodate their need" (95). Nanda Kaul and Ila Das are victims of emotional and physical violence against women. Her female characters are role models of bold feminist assertion. She looks at Indian feminine sensibility with great psychological insight. Helene Cixous says:

> Women must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies—for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text—as into the world and into history—by her own movement.

*(The Laugh of the Medusa 875)*

It seems that what Anita Desai does in her novels is placing her self into the text.

The modern woman realized that she is not as helpless and dependent as a child. That is why Maya says, "And you will think me a tiresome child
for it, for showing what you once called my 'third rate poetess's mind'" (CP 113). The educated woman of today has also realized that it is man's in-built tendency to overlook woman's wishes, likes and dislikes. Maya's interest in Kathakali dances, her request to Gautama and his reaction illustrate this. Man has such a tendency even when evaluating books. Virginia Woolf says how books are often evaluated. "This is an important book . . . because it deals with war. This is an insignificant book because it deals with the feeling of women in a drawing room" (A Room of One's Own 77). On the death of the pet dog, Gautama says to Maya: "You go chatting like a monkey. I am annoyed that I have been interrupted in my thinking" (CP 16). Woman finds it hard to be under the protectoral shell of man, whether he is brother, husband or father.

Gautama does not understand the altered sensibility of women. The traditional roles were inadequate in the altered context. Both men and women find it difficult to define the new contexts and to play the new roles. Post-independent period opened up innumerable avenues for women to work or to play roles other than the domestic. Hence a depiction of her status is needed.

In the post-independent fiction, the suppressed women came to light through Anita Desai. "You know nothing of me and of how I can love" is really the voice of the new woman (CP 112). The new woman's crusade
against suppression often makes her feel alone and isolated. Maya, Monisha, Sita and Nanda feel this.

It can be noted that though there are some male protagonists in a few of her novels, the plots develop on the fortunes of the female protagonists. The narration in majority of the novels is in first person—from a female protagonist—who with the depth of experience and with the intensity of involvement can tell the story. Whatever may be her techniques of narration, whether stream of consciousness or lyrical tone, it is to lay bare the agony of her females. N. Sethuraman says:

> Each of her novels in its own way lays bare the unrecognised tender yearnings, the thwarted desires and the stifled talents of women in a male-dominated society. This may be claimed as the major contribution of Anita Desai to Indian fiction in English. (132)

R.S. Pathak rightly remarks, "Anita Desai has made significant efforts to step out of the main current of narrative devices and linguistic techniques as developed by the masculine approach. She has tried to look at things essentially from a woman's point of view" (92).

In *Clear Light of Day*, Desai tells the story of Bimla and Tara, the two sisters of Das family. Bimla has no time for her own life because she is so much preoccupied with family responsibilities. Though she sacrifices a lot for
the family, what she gets is acrimony and bitterness. The widow Mira Masi is discarded by her in-laws. Her transformation into a mentally disordered alcoholic is the final blow that marked her fate. She dies as an insane person. She is deprived of her property and financial liberty. What she got in her life is a feeling of insecurity and seclusion. Her life symbolises the violence against widows.

The marital life of Tara and Bakul is under strain. Tara's individuality is lost by her dominating husband.

He even came close to her and touched her cheek, very lightly, as if he could hardly bear the unpleasant contact but forced himself to do it out of compassion. . . . She felt that she had followed him enough, it had been such an enormous strain, always pushing against her grain, it had drained her of too much strength. *(CLD 18)*

This shows male's archetypal power over female. Tara always desired to come out of the gloomy disease-ridden house into the world of laughter, love and comforts.

On seeing Baba's calm sleep, Bimla sees the clear light of day. She thinks:
How she loves him, loved Raja and Tara and all of them who had lived in this house with her. There could be no love more deep and full and wide than this one, she knew. No other love had started so far back in time in which to grow and spread. Nor was there anyone else on earth whom she was willing to forgive more readily or completely or defend more instinctively and instantly. (CLD 101)

In Bim, the novelist presents a woman whose education makes her to go against the conventional marriage plot. She says no to marriage, but she does not reject womanhood. She can be seen as the new Indian woman. Through Mira Masi, Anita Desai personalises the social suppression of women. Although through the different female characters, Desai describes various issues related to women, she does not prescribe a solution, and hence the artistic value is not compromised.

In In Custody, Nur Sahib rejects his ugly wife for the glamorous temptress, Imtiaz Begum. When Deven recollects that Sarala was not his choice but that of his mother and aunts, Anita Desai delineates the gulf between the husband and wife. Sarala remains a devoted housewife and she never tries to liberate herself. Here also Desai presents a feminine issue. The two wives Sarala and Imtiaz Begum do not revolt or complain against their marital disharmony. They are not economically independent and so they
remain submissive to their husbands. It seems that through these characters Anita Desai tries to convey the fact that if women are not self-sufficient, they have to suffer a lot from the hands of men. Deven ignores the stark reality of his family life:

Deven had been more a poet than a professor when he married Sarala—he had only been taken on as a temporary lecturer—and still had confidence in his verse and for the wife of a poet she seemed too prosaic. Of course, she had not been his choice, but that of his mother and aunts, crafty and cautious women, . . . what they had not suspected was that Sarala, as a girl and as a new bride, had aspirations too; they had not understood because within the grim boundaries of their own precarious lives they had never entertained anything so abstract. (In Custody 67)

In Journey to Ithaca, along with the theme of quest for spirituality, Desai depicts the revolt of female characters against the social environment. Laila is sent to places like Cairo, Paris and Milan for studying the Arabic language. But she longs for individual freedom and joins the troupe of Indian dance. The idea of eternal freedom always haunts her. Finally she comes to the Himalayan regions and seeks her regeneration through her master.

Part I of Fasting, Feasting portrays the picture of women in post-colonial Indian society. Part II describes familial existentialism in America
and the plot revolves around female characters. In the novel we are introduced to a couple called Mama Papa and their three children Uma, Aruna and Arun. The birth of Arun, the long waited heir of the family rings the death knell of Uma's academic pursuits. Uma fails to come up to the expectations of her mother, being clumsy and lacking confidence for either housework or baby sitting. The parents make efforts to get her married, the ultimate aim in the life of an Indian girl. The boy's family demands the hand of Aruna, Uma's younger sister. Another proposal comes for Uma. The boy's parents ask for dowry under the pretext of using it to build a house for Uma and their son. But they broke off the betrothal with the excuse that the boy was going for higher education. The money was not returned as it had been utilized for the construction of the house. Aruna is married to a rich man. Though Uma was married to Harish, a man of fatherly age, he was away in Meerut and did not return. He was already married and the father of four children. Uma is brought back to her parents' home as a divorcee.

Through the characterisation of Uma, the novelist tells us that a girl's life in India is that of subjugation both in her parents' home and in her in-laws'. What Uma depicts is an issue of feminine existentialism. At one time we see Uma desperately wishing to be somebody else's daughter. She pleads Mrs. Joshi, "Won't you adopt me, Aunty? Won't you let me be your daughter now Moyna is gone?" (Fasting, Feasting 131)
The portrayal of Anamika, Uma's cousin illustrates the picture of a typical patriarchal family set up. The husband was much older than her and she was ill-treated by her in-laws. Finally she had poured kerosene over her body in the early hours and set herself ablaze. All the women—Uma, Aruna, their mother and Anamika—are victims of tradition and customs in a patriarchal family system with limited economic resources.

In part II of the novel, Desai portrays two more women characters. The only woman character who enjoys freedom is Mira-Masi. Anita Myles observes:

Mira-Masi is on a spiritual quest and knows the real value and meaning of freedom. . . . She does not denounce her familial relationships, in fact she relishes gossiping and carrying letter from one family to the other yet she does not neglect the spiritual side of her life. Thus by renouncing materialism, ignoring the covetous attraction of the material and the social commitments and yet not completely surrendering her interaction with the external world, she has gained inner freedom and tranquility. (32-33)

Amar Nath Prasad opines:

Anita Desai, a great observer of men and manners aptly shows the constant urge of woman's freedom in *Fasting, Feasting*. She
seems to give a good retort to the dictum prevalent in society that woman should be judged and perceived as object and not as subject. . . . Anita Desai's treatment of feminism is different in the sense that her protagonists are generally not rebellious in nature, rather they suffer and suffer only to learn how to encounter with the harsh realities of life. (45)

The various themes that Desai dramatizes in *Fasting, Feasting* are gender discrimination, women's undeserved suffering in a patriarchal familial set up, girl child's craving for parental affection and all these themes come under the purview of feminism.

Thus from the evaluation of the themes of her various novels, we have identified the recurring themes of Anita Desai's novels as women's struggle for existence, their quest for identity, their pursuit of freedom and their rebellion against oppression at every level.

Jane Austen comments, "Men have had every advantage of us telling their own story. Education has been theirs in so much higher a degree; then pen has been in their hands" (*Persuasion* 237). When women turned to fiction writing in the Indian English literary scene, startling different notions about the female world and shocking reality about their inner world emerged. Through her themes, characterization and images, Desai tried to raise pertinent questions regarding the status and role of women in society. It seems
that the novelist is more concerned with women's freedom—the liberation from the overburdening clutches of a male-dominated society. Woman does not look for freedom outside the house but within. The protest is not for equality but for the right to be acknowledged as individuals—capable of intelligence and feeling.

Feminism is the ideology of women's liberation, and Anita Desai is awakened and conscious about women's life and problems. In an interview with The Hindu, Elfriede Jelinek, the Nobel Prize winner for literature in 2004, when she was asked about her reaction on being addressed as a feminist writer, she comments:

As an intellectual woman, one can only be a feminist. . . . Of course, feminism is a stereotype with which one demolishes all uncomfortable and unpleasant achievements of women. It is easy to be part of a general opinion and then to joke about these women. The patriarchal system that still prevails has the power to make fun of every woman whom they don't like. (3)

Anita Desai's novels work through a feminine consciousness. She has by and large written about women characters and is preoccupied with the theme of incompatible marital couples. Her women characters suffer in one way or other at the hands of men or in the society. She exploits the situation of
women's suffering in her novels to present problems that confront women in a male-dominated society.

Meena Belliappa observes that Anita Desai's writings clearly show the "new direction that Indian fiction is taking in the hands of the third generation of urban writers . . . a deliberate growing away from a debased tradition of fiction as romance to a more meaningful wrestle with reality" (51-52). To quote K. Meera Bai:

Anita Desai's women are hyper-sensitive and highly individualistic. Though they do not voice their protest against uncongenial surroundings and insensitive people, their bruised selves let out a silent cry. They refuse to yield and compromise and prefer death and miserable life. In their existential struggle they suffer intensely but refuse to be crushed. (30)

The very essence of feminism is the refusal to be crushed and the attempt to express, fight and protest. Anita Desai's characters' way of protest and self-assertion are different. "Her women do attempt to assert their independence and self-sufficiency, but their quest for identity is thwarted at significant junctures" (R.S. Pathak 107).

As N.D. Chandra says:

She is primarily interested in the portrayal of female protagonists as living in separate, closed, sequestered worlds of
existential problems and passions. Each individual is portrayed as an unsolved mystery, being hyper-sensitive, solitary and introspective. These women have their material needs taken care of by wealth and servants, but their emotional needs remain unsatiated. Desai's female characters are not traditional rather they come alive in their dynamic process, always probing and changing, viable and mutable. They are engrossed with the present, look backward in time and visualise future as well. Thus Desai probing into the women's psyche, has opened up avenues for the study into the various social, cultural, political, economic, feminist and sexual issues. (49)

Anita Desai, dealing with feminist issues, lays bare gender discrimination.

Chaman Nahal defines feminism:

I define feminism as a mode of existence in which the woman is free of the dependence syndrome. There is a dependence syndrome: whether it is the husband or the father or the community or whether it is a religious group, ethnic group. When women free themselves of the dependence syndrome and lead a normal life, my idea of feminism materialises. (17)

In all the women characters in Anita Desai's novels, we can notice a sense of existence, free of dependence syndrome. Maya, Monisha, Sita, Nanda Kaul
and Uma, long for an independent existence. So based on the theories of feminism discussed in the second chapter of this work, we can conclude that there is a strong feminist thrust in her writings.

All these arguments point out that, through her women characters, Anita Desai tries to focus the attention of the world to gender inequality. The main object of her works is women. Her novels reveal the multi-faceted nature of feminine existence—as a member of the society, as a wife and as an individual. Psychologically speaking, man and woman need each other's loving company. So feminism is not and it should not be anti-male. That is, though Anita Desai is a feminist in outlook, she is not anti-male. Still feminism should hold up women's issues, the issues which stand as stumbling blocks in the growth and grandeur of women.

Human beings differ in their nature, attitude and also in their reactions to situations. Anita Desai understands that her way of warring against traditions, patriarchy and male domination is being a feminist writer. She knows that there are a number of powerful ways of fighting in feminism itself. So she goes through the "road not taken." To quote Shashi Deshpande:

The truth is that women, like all humans, have many forces working on them, often at the same time. There's history, culture, religious and political faiths and beliefs, the class and family you are born in, family beliefs, the people with whom
you live, relationships and mutual expectations. Feminism is but one of these forces working on women's lives and feminism is something each woman will see differently. And therefore decisions differ; all women cannot take the same path. Nor are the alternatives confined to rebelling or conforming, walking out or remaining as a victim. (15)

Anita Desai raises the issue: the struggle in woman's psyche when she confronts a world of man-made ideology.