CHAPTER SIX

SUMMATION

Comparative Literature is a disciplined academic exercise aiming at cultivating superior standards of literary judgment. It enables one to find out certain dominant trends in the literature produced in two different cultures separated by language, space or time and study the commonness or influences if any. Comparative literature also helps one to understand that despite the differences at the surface level, there is a current of commonness underneath. It is the study of this relationship that makes a scholarly analysis rewarding.

The first chapter ‘Introduction’ discusses the importance of the study of comparative literature which provides a rare chance to study the interrelatedness of literature from a variety of aspects. An attempt is made in the present study to show the points of comparison and contrast in the treatment of the women protagonists of Anita Desai and Margaret Laurence, their quest for identity and survival in the male-dominated society and the excellent craftsmanship of both the novelists as seen in the select novels.

Comparative literature transcends boundaries. Literatures may be compared to a better understanding of one another. ‘Comparative literature’ implies a study of literature across national frontiers using comparison as its main instrument in the broadest possible framework--inter-lingual, inter-cultural, and inter-disciplinary.

According to Remak, there are two schools of comparative literature. He explains that the French School of Comparative Literature is historical, positivistic and diachronic whereas the American School is literary, analytic and text-oriented. The French School of Comparative Literature gives more importance to factual evidence. The American School is criticism-oriented searching for “influences.” The French comparatists relate literary criticism to literary history.
The American comparatists attempt to find out “parallels” transcending literary traditions. In this thesis the American School of Comparison is adhered to and an attempt has been made to find out parallels between the select novels of Anita Desai and Margaret Laurence in terms of Gynocentricism, quest for identity and survival, Geo-centricism (Eco-Criticism) and style and technique.

What is common between Indian English fiction and Canadian fiction is that both are of recent origin and being a virgin field of research both offer great opportunities for study. Further, with the recent closer ties between India and Canada at social-political-economic spheres, a comparative study of literatures produced in these two countries will help to further the contact between these two countries.

Comparative literature is indeed a challenging discipline which examines the relationships and similarities of literatures pertaining to different peoples and nations in terms of theme, characterization, structures, stylistic techniques, etc. It transcends national boundaries. It is a study of all literatures with a view to arriving at a universal view of literature independent of national, racial or cultural demarcations.

In a world shrunken into a global village and interconnected as never before, comparative literature provides a golden and valuable opportunity to study the interrelatedness of the literatures of the world from different aspects. Flat background, motivations and actions of characters, settings and themes are some of the main areas of comparison.

The Romans were credited with initiating comparative study. Yet comparative literature as a scholarly discipline is hardly a century old. It was Coleridge and his classmates who made meaningful efforts in comparative literature. A comparatist tries to find out the implications and the underlying similarities and differences which help the reader in getting a deeper and better comprehensive understanding of the artists.

The present study is based on the perception that a comparative analysis of the novels of Anita Desai and Margaret Laurence offers more critical space in unravelling the quintessence of
the novels of one in terms of the other. In this thesis an attempt is made to analyse the points of comparison and contrast in the treatment of women, the quest for identity and survival of the protagonists and their craftsmanship. The researcher is convinced that a comparative study of these two authors and their writings, belonging to two different cultures and separated by time and space with no imaginable influence on each other can be an aesthetically and intellectually rewarding exercise.

The amazing and astonishing similarities and corresponding disparities in the works of these two authors could possibly be the natural outcome of the commonness found between India and Canada which were ruled by England. The European colonization has resulted in new patterns of cultural behaviour and value system generating new tensions in society. While Anita Desai focuses on themes such as tradition versus modernity, erosion of conventional value systems, marital discord, collapse of the joint family system, ambivalent cultural responses to the impact of the western civilization, social and economic differences, the lure of getting rich even through questionable ways, colonial consciousness, etc. Margaret Laurence attempts to give voice to the passions, hopes, aspirations, and apprehensions of the new emerging nation. Multicultural or cross-cultural ethos is the common thread that binds both the authors and their novels centre around women and their sensibilities.

Anita Desai is unique in the sense that she portrays each of her characters as an unsolved mystery. Each of her novels probes into the innermost depth of the human psyche unfolding the mysteries, inner turmoil and chaos found in the minds of her characters. She has emerged as the most outstanding woman novelist, preoccupied more with the inner world of sensibility rather than with the outer world of action.

It is true that Anita Desai’s central focus is on the inner lives of her characters. Her protagonist turns out to be a rebel refusing to follow the established taboos. And as a result she becomes alienated. Her women brood over their lives which finally bring vistas of understanding
of what had been ignored or rejected. Thus Desai’s universe is something unique and private. She believes that literature should deal with life and death.

While in most of the Indian fiction the characters are types Anita Desai’s protagonists are individuals with distinct identities of their own. Her central theme is the existential predicament of an individual. Desai’s first novel Cry, the Peacock portrays marital discord engendered by mental incompatibility. Death motif is another theme that pervades throughout the novel. Maya’s killing of her husband in a fit of insane fury and later killing of herself because of the feelings of guilt and remorse springs from marital alienation.

Marital discord due to emotional sterility is the main theme of Desai’s Voices in the City supplemented by the theme of alienation and isolation. The novel as a whole represents the individual consciousness of the three siblings in their quest for inner and outer reality. Desai’s novel Bye – Bye Black Bird has for its theme the racial conflict and social reality of the coloured immigrants in London.

Anita Desai’s fourth novel Where Shall We Go This Summer? also deals with the marital discord between Sita and Raman who are poles apart temperamentally. Fire on the Mountain is the story of Nanda Kaul’s self-willed isolation caused by her unhappy married life. Her world of isolation is juxtaposed with her invented illusory substitutes of reality.

Desai’s Clear Light of Day with its theme of accommodation and reconciliation centres on the nostalgic attitude and the maturing consciousness of Bimla. The novel is an emblem of selfless love which alone has the power to light human life with gracefulness. In Custody, Desai’s eight novel, is the story of a hapless college lecturer who overcomes his inability to establish identity in his private and public life with order and dignity graced with a positive vision of self-sufficiency.

While Anita Desai portrays the plight of Indian immigrants in Bye-Bye Black Bird, she presents the mental agony experienced by Hugo Baumgartner, who, a victim of religious persecution in his own country and uprooted by Nazism, comes to British India to lead a new
life. In India he is alienated as an immigrant because of racial discrimination, resulting in murder. It is artistically depicted in the novel Baumgartner’s Bombay.

In Journey to Ithaca, one finds a shift in the subject matter of Anita Desai from mankind to spirituality. The novel deals with the themes of the quest for truth, ultimate reality and ecstasy by Matteo and Sophie, the neo-European couple and Laila, a mysterious Mother. No other modern novel has achieved a perfect blend of humanity and divinity as Journey to Ithaca.

Fasting Feasting is a story of expatriate Indians. It depicts two different worlds— an extremely orthodox and domineering Indian family in which Uma, a victim of male chauvinism and the other, an unusually idiosyncratic family in Massachusetts expounded through the maladjusting Arun. ‘Fasting’ in the title reveals the emotional and intellectual starvation of Uma and Arun. This is the natural outcome of their satiated feasting of materialistic pleasures. Their parents locked in a loveless marriage affect them much. The patriarchal and matriarchal power structure is authenticated through the assertion and fulfillment of gastronomical needs.

The Zig Zag Way is the story of Eric’s private quest of tracing his family’s history for identity in a ‘ghost’ mining town in Mexico against the backdrop of the exploitation of the Mexican Indians and the attempts made by their redeemers. Eric’s quest for his roots results in his realization of the past and the present in a moment of quiet and powerful epiphany.

Canadian literature is the fruit of the British seed planted in the American soil. Like Indian English fiction, Canadian fiction is of recent development. Three fiction writers, Hugh Maclennan, Sinclair Ross and Morley Callaghan parallel the trio of Indian English fiction. Hugh Maclennan was the first writer to articulate Canadian tradition in fictional terms. He depicts the vision of Canada in Barometer Rising. He explores Anglo-French relations in Two Solitudes. His novels are always didactic. Sinclair Ross dwells on imagination and its failure in Canadian fiction. His first novel, As For Me and My House, has become a Canadian literary classic setting
the precedent for the genre of Canadian prairie fiction. Morley examines the urban problems in his novels.

The Canadian fiction took a new turn with the appearance of women novelists. In fact, all the predominant Canadian novelists are women. They are eminent feminist writers exploring women’s issues with a nationalist framework while Margaret Atwood’s novels deal with the emotional independence of men and women and their search for self-discovery and self-reliance. Edible Women depicts the relation of sexes in a consumer society where men view women as commodities. Surfacing is the story of a young woman’s search for survival. Lady Oracle is about Jean Foster’s craving for identity and The Handmaid’s Tale treats the theme of exploitation and subjugation of woman in terms of sex. Alice Munro’s tales explore the emotional life of the inhabitants of rural Canada. Carol Shields presents the issues of social plurality and cultural differences. Margaret Laurence, along with Margaret Atwood and Alice Munro, focuses on the new woman who is intelligent, confident and assertive. They have created a strong breed of woman characters who have a sense of self or battle hard to find it.

Margaret Laurence stands unequalled and unsurpassed in the Canadian fiction. Like Anita Desai, she has broken fresh grounds. She examines the problems of women and the Canadian dilemma of identity. Two major themes in Anita Desai’s novels, quest for identity and survival also figure in Margaret Laurence’s works. Her novels, like those of Anita Desai, centre around female characters and probe deeper and deeper into their interior terrains.

Laurence’s first novel This Side Jordan set in the Gold Coast brings out the psychological tensions on both the Africans and the English men as a result of their colonial experience and how it uproots both the Africans and the British, making the Africans dispossessed in their own land and the British exiles both in Africa and in their home land.

Margaret Laurence could achieve the eminence of a great creator of Canadian sensibility through her Manawaka novels. The Stone Angel, the first of the Manawaka series, is about the spiritual pride of the protagonist Hagar Shipley, alternating between her reminiscences of the
past and the present. It recalls Nanda Kaul of Anita Desai’s Fire on the Mountain. Her quest for
dignity and survival retains her strong will, independence and self-determination which can be
seen from her refusal of help from the nurse even at the edge of her life.

A Jest of God successfully captures Rachel Cameron’s obsession with her fears and
inhibitions of her Christian values. Her bond of duty to her widowed mother makes her an
oppressed individual and isolates her from any human contact. Not only Rachel but also all the
characters in the novel are isolated in one way or the other. The Fire Dweller has its kernel
themes like quest for identity, freedom and man-woman relationship. The Diviners, the last novel
in the Manawaka series and Margaret Laurence’s magnum opus, belongs to the genre of
Kunstlerroman. This constitutes the odyssey of an artist who emerges from apprenticeship to
maturity. This novel is about the quest for identity by Morag Gunn. It is autobiographical in
nature.

There is yet another similarity between Anita Desai and Margaret Laurence. Both excel
in short story writing too. Margaret Laurence’s A Bird in the House is a collection of eight
stories set in Manawaka. It can be called a gynocentric Kunstlerroman. The Tomorrow Tamer
and Other Stories is set in the Gold Coast against the background of colonial mentality. Jason’s
Quest shows that Margaret Laurence’s literary genius like that of Anita Desai extends to the
delights of children.

The second chapter ‘Gynocentricism’ investigates the central characters of the select
novels of Anita Desai and Margaret Laurence. The selected novels of Anita Desai and Margaret
Laurence are gynocentric in nature. They centre around women characters who are not average
but have retreated into some extremity of despair or made to stand against the general current. A
parallel study is made between the female characters of both the novelists. Their attitudes to life
and their reaction to life situations are analysed focusing on their status as women in their
respective societies.
Both Anita Desai and Margaret Laurence show marked resemblance in their treatment of women and their focus is on gynocentricism. Both explore the emotional world of women, revealing a rare imaginative awareness of the various deeper forces at work and a profound understanding of the feminine sensibility as well as psychology. The two novelists resemble each other in the use of style and techniques such as stream of consciousness, internal monologue, poetic-style, suppression of plot, and objective characters and camera-eye technique of description. They also effectively use certain symbols, imagery and settings to paint the mental states of their characters. All these distinguishing qualities form the core of the present comparative study of their novels.

It is true that many critics have analysed the novels of Anita Desai and Margaret Laurence. But little has been done in comparing the novels of both these writers within the purview of gynocentricism, geocentricism and their style and technique in addition to the quest for identity and survival. The present study is intended to fill the gap.

Gynocentricism deals mainly with the female self and women’s personal, historical, sexual and non-political positions and asserts their individualism. The advent of deconstruction as a linguistic philosophy paved the way for a literary movement that sought to destroy the boundary between masculine and feminine through writing. It was only in the beginning of the 18th century that women writers broke off from stereotyped writing giving expression to their nature, feelings and aspirations. Simon de Beauvoir’s The Second Sex differentiates between sex and gender, Kate Milltet’s Sexual Politics analyses the tasks of feminist critics and theorists, Elaine Showalter’s A Literature of Their Own shows the way to write the true literature of woman free from patriarchy’s strategies and Betty Freidan’s The Feminine Mystique stresses the need to defy the idealized female image and sex roles as defined by the phallocentric society.

Anita Desai and Margaret Laurence are from two different continents and quite naturally they will be different in their perspectives in the treatment of their woman characters and their
approach to feminist ideology. While Margaret Laurence’s approach to feminism is to break away without compromise, Anita Desai’s approach is to portray women’s rights and their individuality without demolishing the integrity of the family and reconciling with the social or political obligations outside home.

The novels of both Anita Desai and Margaret Laurence are predominantly gynocentric in nature. Their novels can be evaluated in the light of feminist critical framework as gynocentricism is all pervasive in their works. The plot and action revolve around women concentrating on the consciousness of individual heroines set to flout the patriarchal norms. Yet the two novelists are not feminists who march under the banner of feminism. Their works entirely differ from those of men writers. Their’s is essentially a feminist style which is not to be confused with feminity. Both focus on the inner quest of their protagonists for self-assertion and self-actualization in the face of the rigid codes of behaviour in a conformist society. Their women often turn out to be rebels, fighting against the patriarchal paradigms. But there is a vital difference. Desai’s women do not renounce their familial or social ties but are rebels in that they do not conform to the normal code of life of the patriarchal set up which demands total submissiveness to men.

The problems presented by Desai encompass the issues raised by feminism. Though she is not a proclaimed feminist, her concern with the empowerment of women echoes the voices of the feminist writers in the Indian context. Her women seek a distinct identity of their own. They want to have dignity and equal importance as that of men and no wonder they are in constant conflict with society. Her female characters are presented with throbbing pulse longing for love, acceptance and recognition, longing of self-expression and individual fulfilment.

Both Anita Desai and Margaret Laurence explicitly as well as implicitly dismantle the pernicious gender norms constructed by males for self-advancement. They examine female experience and the conforming norms of society. One can notice a remarkably perceptive and sensitive exploration of the deep recesses of feminine nature and female psyche. Both the
novelists turn away from the traditional themes of nationalism and socio-cultural questions but turn inward to come to terms with their own individual selves.

Anita Desai’s Cry, the Peacock deals with the inner tumult of Maya caused by her emotional incompatibility with her husband Gautama. Maya is an educated woman and she finds it impossible to accept the traditional norms. She was the princess of her father’s empire but unfortunately she could not become the queen to her husband. While she is passionate, sensuous, loving, her husband is cold, logical and philosophical. It is true that Gautama provides her with everything she needs. But he fails to meet her emotional and physical needs. Gautama is completely oblivious to Maya’s longing for physical intimacy and this intensifies her loneliness. She kills her husband in a fit of psychosis and puts an end to her love starved life.

While Maya’s trauma springs from emotional validity, Monisha’s plight in Voices in the City is both emotional and physical. Anita Desai seems to question the value of marriage which does not give due place for women. Monisha suffers neglect and her dignity is under constant threat at the hands of her in-laws and her husband. Her identity is submerged in Jibban’s existence. She suffers from marital discord which is even more acute than what Maya has experienced. Her self is weary, eager and wounded. She is no better than a slave in the joint-family. A brief moment of self-discovery helps her know her real self. Unable to bear her real self she sets fire to herself to put an end to the despised self. Her suicide is a confession of her failure but it strongly registers Monisha’s disapproval of women’s bondage to men. But Otima, her mother, subverts the established male-dominated code and is projected as an icon of liberated woman.

Desai continues the feminist ideology of individualism and autonomy for women in her next novel Clear Light of Day through the protagonist Bimla. While Bimla rejects marriage to escape the fetters of male domination, Tara takes up marriage as an escape from the problems at home. As a feminist heroine, Bimla achieves the freedom of the choice of deciding how she should be and what she should become of. Tara lacks Bimla’s strength and independence. Yet
she achieves some measure of satisfaction in losing her self-importance. Her identity merges with her husband and children. Another victim of the patriarchal society is Bimla’s widowed aunt.

In Where Shall We Go This Summer? Sita is an extended characterization of Maya. The novelist explores the realm of the feminine psyche of a high strung woman against the usual norms of the patriarchal society. While Maya and Monisha revolt against oppression in a typical feminine way of suicide, Sita takes up escapism to assert her individuality. Her quest for “wholeness” or “individualism” starts when she is pregnant with her fifth child. Her staunch inclination for individualism makes her appear neurotic. She feels that her real self could be found and rejuvenated by connecting with the past. Unlike the legendary Raman and Sita, the Sita and the Raman of this novel are utter foil to each other. Sita flees to her father’s island to find some sense in her life. Her flight is an act of protest against oppressive environment, false materialism and male domination. The success of her emancipation comes when Raman agrees to go to the island to farm. Unlike Maya and Monisha, she will not destroy herself. The very fact that Raman is changed much to live according to Sita’s wish speaks volumes for the magnitude of her success.

Desai’s Journey to Ithaca is the story of two women, Laila and Sophie, who undertake a journey for a personal quest for identity. They rebel against their surroundings. While Laila aspires for spiritual emancipation, Sophie endeavours for earthly freedom. They display unusual courage and strength of mind to follow their heart’s desire of finding the truth of life–human love, humanism, realism, mysticism and a unified code for the universal vision of brotherhood. Laila finds that real India is different from the India of her imagination. She finds her Ithaca in the serene face of her guru. But Sophie’s quest is mundane. It is for living a harmonious life with Matteo. What is heavenly for him is hellish to her. She expresses her contempt for the ashram and its inmates by keeping her European identity. In fact, she breaks the code of the ashram by smoking a cigarette. Her attempts to change her husband fail. But she finally surrenders to him and creates an emotional tie with Matteo through her children who are an extension of her
husband. The death-suicide syndrome of Desai’s earlier novels changes into a balanced acceptance of life. Sophie is indeed a typical heroine of Anita Desai hovering between bouts of alienation and family ties, distress and hope, and revolt and compromise. It is a struggle in which family ties and compromise are ultimate victors. Sophie’s compromise is not a defeat. Through Sophie Desai has fashioned a new concept of feminist fiction.

Fasting, Feasting is a novel which deals with the subjugation of women by phallocentric male. While criticising male chauvinism, female apathy and reluctance and the novel expresses strongly woman’s voice for freedom and emancipation. The hunger motif suggests the hunger for attention and recognition. Both Uma and Arun feel entrapped irrespective of the culture and enveloping milieu by the oppressive bonds exercised by their parents. Desai tries to prove through the characters of Uma and Arun and their American counterparts Melanie and Rod that attempts of escape from entrapment can only be temporary.

Margaret Laurence like Anita Desai deals with female characters and their stories in her novels. The stories are told from their individual points of view. She has given unforgettable portraits of women wrestling with their personal demons, striving through self-examination to find meaningful patterns in their lives. Her devotion to the female movement has been the powerful basis of most of her novels. Rachel Cameron of A Jest of God resembles Bimla of Clear Light of Day. Rachel is trapped by her overbearing mother and this kind of existence isolates her from human contact. Unlike Bimla, her spinsterhood is imposed on her by her mother. A brief summer affair with Nick brings about a tremendous change in her perception. The fear of her mother and the society forces her to take steps to terminate her pregnancy. But finally she decides to rebel against the norms of the society to have the baby. Her words “I am the mother now” (A Jest of God 184 ) proclaim Rachel’s emergence as a free and independent adult.

Margaret Laurence’s Fire Dwellers is almost similar to Desai’s Where Shall We Go This Summer? Her protagonist Stacey Mac Aindra struggles to identify herself as an individual amidst
the roles of a daughter, a wife and a mother. Like Sita she feels trapped in marriage and like her she too wants to go to her native place. She makes a tyrannical mother of herself in her desire to become a good mother. Like Sita, she demonstrates her assertiveness with her family and friends. Even during his short stay at home her husband Mac is preoccupied with his own work like Raman. Like Maya she is also frightened of death. Though she is surrounded by many people, she feels alienated from herself. Like Sita she is bored by the routine. Mac’s reticence irritates and frets her and she feels hurt when he ignores her. She like Sita flees from household drudgery and escapes to her Manori. In spite of all her difficulties, she lives a sacrificial life for the safety of her children. It is Mac’s indifference that makes her enjoy physical contact with Luke. But she rejects his proposal to fly far north. She sheds all complexes, admits her wrongs and emerges as bright, hopeful, and fresh like the morning stars. It is not an exaggeration to say that Stacy in her person defines the ideal heroine who rebelled, battled, realized and recovered her identity not only as a wife and a mother but also as a woman.

The Diviners, Margaret Laurence’s masterpiece, is the story of the struggle of Morag Gunn for success as a writer and her sense of achievement on fulfilling her ambition. It is indeed a feminist text which critiques the position of a modern western woman in the phallocentric orthodoxy. The novelist does not create her heroine as a paragon of virtue. In fact, Morag Gunn has no inhibition about sex. She is a fully realized human being, self-reliant, self critical, painfully groping the wilderness of spiritual and mental unpleasantness to a paradise of her own making. Of all the Manawaka women created by Laurence, Morag is the most articulate. She has a strong urge to find her roots in order to establish her identity. Her relationship with her English professor Brook Skelton proves to be barren. The publication of her novel Spear of Innocence, however, gives her strength and confidence to leave Brooke. Her ‘pilgrimage’ to Scotland to find her roots makes her realize that her home is Christie’s real country. She is like the mother in Desai’s Journey to Ithaca who searches for the meaning of her life and truth.

The Stone Angel is the story of Hagar Shipley, a ninety-year old woman. She resembles Nauda Kaul of Fire on the Mountain. Both alternate between their reminiscences of the past and
the realities of the present. Both withdraw themselves from all social contacts. Both refuse to get any help from their children. They would not allow anyone to intrude into their private life. Both have never been happy in their married lives and do not feel intense grief over the death of their husbands. Nanda’s disinterestedness springs from her spiritual vacuum. Hagar’s preference for self-dependence and detachment evolves out of her pride. Both are self-willed and self-made women. If Nanda’s turmoil and the resultant withdrawal is due to her sense of betrayal and fear of being betrayed, Hagar’s emotional sterility is due to her spiritual pride inherited from her father. She loses her relations, friends, society and also wealth because of her unbending nature. It is again her rebellious and unbending nature that prevents her from acknowledging or reciprocating Bram’s love.

Both Hagar and Nanda lack communication which is a bridge to relationship. Nanda is unable to communicate with the milieu in which she exists. Desai associates her with a tree. Hagar too suffers from lack of communication. Hagar has stone-like indifference and stubbornness. She withdraws from others emotionally which consequently makes her an uncommunicative woman.

Both refuse to take refuge in homes for the aged. Of the two, Hagar is the greater loser. Her psychic tortures are more poignant than Nanda’s. Nanda is a passive sufferer while Hagar rebels. Stoicism is the distinctive characteristic of both. Both live a hybrid existence for most of their lives. In the case of Nanda, her doubleness is due to the patriarchal society. Hagar’s is due to her pride. Both reveal a change in their mentality and show the gentler side of their minds. Hagar succeeds in freeing herself from the bondage of her pride and expresses her love for others. Nanda gets drawn towards Raka.

Anita Desai and Margaret Laurence have been influenced by feminist movements. Through their novels, they have highlighted gynocentric ideologies and sought ways to liberate women from the confining roles defined by the phallocentric society. Women share common emotions and their problems are universal. They must struggle against those institutions, social
relations and ideas that keep them powerless and subservient to men. They can realize their self-worth through collective action and interpersonal relationship and emerge as liberated women.

The third chapter ‘Quest for Identity and Survival’ analyses how the women protagonists have deep quest for identity and try to have a meaningful survival. They struggle for an identity of their own. The novels taken for this study reflect the inner conflicts of the female protagonists.

Both Anita Desai and Margaret Laurence are not only similar in their centredness on women but also in their protagonists’ quest for identity and survival. In Cry, the Peacock, the identity crisis of Maya stems from several inter-related factors. She is a passionate and sensitive girl married to a practical-minded Gautama who is completely detached from emotions. She is a fractured-self starving for reaffirmation and re-discovery of her identity. Her identity crisis is more of socio-physic than of a psycho-ethic nature. Her quest for identity is concerned with her mental journeys in the world of reality and also in the world of illusion. Maya is identified with the peacock which represents for her the cries for love which simultaneously invite death.

Monisha in Voices in the City does not find anything worth in the life after her marriage. Her inability to bear a child, lack of intimacy with her husband, suspicion of her in-laws and lack of privacy create survival problems due to lack of identity. Her married life is marked by loneliness and communication gap. She leads a fragmented, strained and starved life in which she finds no meaning or worth. Her earnest endeavour to find identity and some meaning in life ends up in smoke. Her ill-matched marriage, her loneliness, sterility and stress of living in a joint family with an insensitive husband do not give her any worth or identity in life. Love, which could have helped her survive, is missing. Committing suicide is the only way for her to assert her identity.

In Where Shall We Go This Summer? Anita Desai presents an intense identity crisis of Sita. Her problem is due to maladjustment with her husband. She and her husband Raman stand for binary opposites. She hates Raman for his lack of feeling and her husband’s family for their subhuman placidity. Unable to live in the present, she identifies herself with her past and she
goes to Manori island as a kind of self-exile in her search for identity. This is indeed her final
effort to save her identity. The problem of survival takes its roots from identity crisis. But at the
end of her stay in Manori island, Sita comes out as a different personality. Now she is the
supreme commander of her life. Her quest for identity is over. She realizes that life is a continual
process of sacrifice, adjustment and compromise. Sita reconciles with her husband after asserting
her identity.

Nanda Kaul of Fire on the Mountain is an extraordinary woman, striving hard to
establish her own identity. She finds it impossible to survive in a family which demands hard
work from her but does not care about her feelings. It is very hard for her to survive in a busy life
without any reciprocation from her husband or children. Without any identity of her own she is
not able to survive in her husband’s home. In the Carignano island she tries to build her own
identity. She identifies herself with the scorched pines of the bare carignano. Nanda takes
possession of the island and starts her new independent life.

In Clear Light of Day, Desai presents three women --Bimla, Tara and aunt Mira who are
subordinated by a male-dominated culture. They survive by entering the male-dominated society
and adopting their language and culture. Bimla’s quest for identity makes her a professor in a
college. She fixed her identity when she decided not to marry. Though she craves for individual
identity, she does not forget her responsibility towards her family.

Desai’s Journey to Ithaca portrays the quest for higher human values. The word
‘Journey’ in the title of the novel represents the quest motif of a search for identity-Matteo’s
quest for spirituality and the quest for identity of mother and Sophie. Matteo is able to recognize
his identity in India. But Sophie fails to rertot herself in the real India. Her smoking of cigarette
in the ashram is symbolic of her attempt at preserving her identity and her failure to reconcile
with the adopted culture. She visits different countries but she is unable to strike roots in any of
the adopted lands. But Laila is different. She could acculturate herself to the various cultures she
passes through. It is in India that Laila as a spiritual quester achieves her identity.
Fasting, Feasting depicts the struggles of individual members to find their identity and happiness. Food is used to comment on cultural identity. It is the story of Uma, Arun and Aruna who attempt to find their identity. Uma is a pathetic victim of identity crisis. Unlike Uma, Aruna manages to achieve success through marriage. Uma becomes completely caged and entrapped in the clutches of her parents. Her mother is against her accepting the job offer and she prevents her from any social contact completely. Anamika, her cousin, fails to find her identity in spite of her marriage.

Margaret Laurence has created many memorable characters who also search for their identity and survival. In The Diviners, Morag Gunn’s identity is formed by the different roles she assumes in the course of her life. Her professional identity as an artist in the story is a prime aspect of her selfhood. Her quest for identity implies the search for coherence or unity. The title The Diviners suggests the resemblance between the search for water and the search for the self. Morag wants to become equal to men. Hence, she aspires to be an author. But she does not totally reject her former roles. She believes that it is possible to occupy a unified subject position in order to encompass the various roles of a writer, wife and mother. When Brooke reacts to her success as a writer with hostility and contempt, she embraces the new liberal humanist ideology completely and leaves him for self-identity and fulfilment. After her relationship with McRaith, she is convinced that a unified subjectivity is not a possibility. It is her success as a writer that gives her an identity as well as emotional and physical survival.

In The Stone Angel, the quest for identity progresses almost systematically from the problems of the persona and the adopted shadow. It is the story of Hagar Shipley who attempts to come to terms with her past and her present. She fears that she will lose her independence and identity if she is placed in a nursing home. She flees from her home and takes refuge in an abandoned building near the sea. But finally she realizes how her pride has prevented her from achieving happiness or peace of mind. As a result, she knows that she can leave the world peacefully as she has succeeded in freeing herself of any help.
The Fire-Dwellers is the story of Stacey and it is a beautiful analysis of issues relating to
gender, national and regional identities. Stacey’s life is the focus of an acute analysis of problems
connected with identity and survival. Her lack of communication with other adults deprives her
of any rewarding relationship and emphasises her isolation. This produces for her a crisis of
identity. The media’s messages make her feel that she is always falling short of in the activity
central to her existence. Luke with whom she has brief sexual encounter acts as a therapist. She
realizes that it is the world, not her home, which is the real prison. This realization leads to her
eventual choice to accept home and the restrictions it imposes. Thus The Fire-Dwellers is a
realistic study of the pressure on the sense of self experienced by a woman in the maternal role.

The fourth chapter, ‘Geocentricism’ studies how nature is used as a backdrop by both the
novelists. An attempt is made to study how the pictorial and the symbolic use of images culled
out from nature portray human experiences. It further delineates the role of nature in the life of
the alienated women and its symbolic significance.

Nature and locale play a vital role in the novels of both Anita Desai and Margaret
Laurence. Many novelists have used nature as a backdrop against which they develop their
stories. Both Desai and Laurence use the external landscape to portray the interior states of mind.
Nature which includes animals, birds and plants have a strong presence in the novels of Anita
Desai and Margaret Laurence. Nature acts both as a metaphor of hope and life and as an ironic
presence. Nature provides a symbolic dimension to the total meaning of Desai’s fiction and
becomes a sharing element of her form and style. An eco-critical approach brings out the
importance of the environment to the major themes in her works. It is nature imagery that helps
the reader perceive the unexplored realms of the female psyche. Through the evocation of such
images Desai transcribes the human condition and predicament.

Maya, the protagonist of Cry, the Peacock, is drawn away from pain into the world of
flowers that knows no pain. Her sad mood mingles with the mood of the flowers as she inhales
their scent. Maya and Gautama are poles apart and their divergent sensibilities are brought out
through the latter’s inability to differentiate between the smell of lemon and petunia. The beauty of the natural world has no attraction for him. But the seasons have a romantic appeal to Maya. The silk cotton trees remind her of her childhood days spent in the garden with her father. The garden has an element of fantasy attached to it. The mournful cry of the brain fever bird during the spring season upsets her violently. Her feelings of isolation and longings are coupled with those of the cry of the peacocks. There is indeed a kind of sublimity in the agonized inner cry of Maya when it is linked with peacocks.

The garden of Maya’s childhood and the garden at present intermingle as her thoughts flow from the past to the present. The garden appears to her as a symbol of symmetry, pattern and order which are absent in her own life. Desai uses nature images to unravel her distorted world. The images are poignant expressions of an extremely sensitive personality that Maya is. The imagery of Toto, her pet dog, is used as a structural device that is integral to the theme of the novel. The animal imagery introduces the theme of alienation and the death motif. They serve as the primary indicators of Maya’s psychic disorder.

Desai uses botanical images such as silk cotton trees with huge blossoms to suggest the painful reality of her barrenness. The images of pigeon’s nest filled with young ones and the pigeons coo to mate reminds Maya of her own loveless life and childless condition. Her unfortunate plight is aggravated when she sees rats suckling their young most tenderly. Her deranged mind is filled with the thoughts of snakes, lizards, and iguanas. These images are used to capture the predatory sensibility in Maya quite spontaneously and unconsciously.

In Voices in the City, the garden of Kalimpong is Monisha’s abode of peace. She escapes into the garden through memory to forget the violence, crowd and lack of privacy in Calcutta. The death-like stillness of the city makes her think about the garden. She loves the solitude of the jungles. Her dull existence and lack of communication with others drive her towards an inner garden, a garden of her own creation.
In Where Shall We Go This Summer? Desai highlights Sita’s deep psychological
involvement with nature and ecology. The modern civilization, being exiled from nature, makes
her unwilling to give birth to her fifth child and forces her to search for the magic of nature by
taking shelter in Manori Island. Her existence in the chaotic life leads her journey towards the
protective shield of ecology and nature. She reasserts her individuality and reestablishes
woman’s age old connection with nature. In Manori, it is nature that removes the veil of her mind
making her aware of the undisclosed realities of her heart. Metamorphosis takes place not only in
the life of Sita but also in Raman’s and it helps him understand Sita’s sensitivity and her
predicament. It is again nature that convinces Sita that her completeness does not lie in living in
isolation with nature without her family. Sita decides to go home. Thus nature plays the role of a
teacher and guide making her realize that the solution to the brutality, monotony, false pretension
and hollowness of the modern city life does not lie in escaping from these and living in isolation
with nature but in facing them bravely.

In Fire on the Mountain Anita Desai employs nature images to examine human
relationships and their significance. The aged Nanda believing that she has completed her duties
in life decides to be left alone to the pines and cicadas. Being grey, tall and thin she fancies that
she could easily merge with the pine trees and could be mistaken for one. Her sense of
identification with the pine trees suggests her desire for absolute stillness and withdrawal from
life. Her lonely house is symbolic of the solitary life of Nanda. Her desperate attempt to escape
from her friend Ila Das shows how Nanda feels persecuted like the worm dragged out by the hen.
The prey-predator image of the hen pecking at a worm is a cruel reminder of her past suffering at
the hands of her adulterous husband. She is compared to a bird that has been aroused from its
serenity at the arrival of Raka and Ila. The Mountain symbolizes Nanda and the fire is symbolic
of Raka’s wild nature. Throughout the novel images of lizards, eagles, parrots and fire occur at
regular intervals suggesting the impending tragedy. The manifestations of nature reflect the
psychological conditions of different characters. Nature is shown to be influencing the course of
events by directly affecting the characters. In fact, Nature itself is depicted as a character.
There is a marked similarity between the ways both Anita Desai and Margaret Laurence present their characters. Nature plays a significant role in Laurence’s novels as in those of Desai. Like Desai, Laurence also dramatizes events by using nature and its different elements. As symbolical objects flora and fauna play an important role.

Hagar in The Stone Angel is the product of the small prairie town, Manawaka. The landscape functions both on a realistic and symbolic level in her old age too just as it did in her childhood. Her ideal place is the cemetery and her oneness with the enthralling nature inside the cemetery reflects her longing to be away from the ‘madding crowd’. The dry prairie, the grey homes and the flowers such as lilac, lily and spring flowers are associated with death and funerals. The bald-headed prairie and the sweltering summers express concretely her hatred for her authoritarian father.

Nature means a lot to Morag Gunn, the protagonist of The Diviners, since her childhood. She always sees herself as part of nature. When her daughter Pique runs away from home, she finds consolation in nature. Morag tries to reconstruct her garden memories from a jumbled mess of old snapshot which allow her to emotionally re-live her paradisiacal past. Born and bred in the prairie, her desire for the ideal world takes her to the prairie people in the west coast. The blue heron, a totemic bird, symbolises to Morag the wholeness of the cycle of life and death. That very evening she realizes that her quest for the island has ended. She becomes spiritually and psychologically whole. She knows that she must go back to Manawaka.

Most of Margaret Laurence’s novels are set in or against the small prairie town of Manawaka. Only The Fire Dwellers is set in a city. This novel deals with the problems encountered by women in provincial Canada. This involves the sketching of the physical landscape, geographical locales, social structure and family relationships. This forms the backdrop of the novel’s action in addition to the mapping of the interior landscape of the narrator-protagonist. She admires the simple knowledge of survival displayed by the seagull
which repeatedly dropped a clamshell and ate the content after it craked. She would love to go to
the snow mountains alone and enjoy the snow on weird sculptures.

Anita Desai and Margaret Laurence use nature very effectively in their novels. Nature is
used not only as a backdrop but also as rich symbols to present human emotions and partake in
their emotional and psychological lives.

The Fifth Chapter ‘Style and Technique’ analyses the parallelism between the select
novels on grounds of style and technique. A comparison of the narrative techniques, language,
diction, style, direction and figures of speech, and phrasing does not only add to one’s knowledge
but also leads to a fuller understanding of these works of art.

Both Anita Desai and Margaret Laurence deal with the untrodden and unvisited regions
of human psyche. Their protagonists face the daunting task of establishing their identity, fighting
against negative and cruel social forces. They use specific style and techniques such as stream of
consciousness, interior monologue, diary writing, images, and metaphors, symbols and myths in
order to explore the interior regions of human psyche, obsession, inner motives, latent desires
and dormant impulses of the protagonists.

Anita Desai uses different techniques to suit the demands of the story. To probe into the
psyche of her characters she uses flashback technique, stream of consciousness interior
monologue and comparison and contrast. She has also made use of Indian words, German poetry
and nursery rhymes. A comparison between her earlier novels and the later ones helps one
understand and appreciate her style and use of language. One can find that Desai’s style has
changed from the earlier novels to the later ones.

Anita Desai’s fiction is different from that of other contemporary novelists like R.K.
Narayan and Kamala Markandaya. She does not use the traditional plot structure with linear
movement in terms of exposition, conflict and resolution. She neither philosophises nor indulges
in the exploration of any socio-political ideology. She is more concerned with form and
 technique. She follows the triptych structure in Cry the Peacock, Bye, Bye Black Bird, Where
Shall We Go This Summer? and Fire on the Mountain. Desai has the matchless ability to closely interweave form with the context.

Stream of consciousness technique is used by Desai in most of her novels which are marked by subtle psycho-analysis. Maya, Situ Nirode, Monisha and Amla are prisoners of their own stream of consciousness. Desai uses different narrative patterns in her novels. The first person narrative is used in Cry, the Peacock and the third person narrative in Voices in the City. In Cry, the Peacock, the first part is dramatic, the second is in the first person and the third is omniscient. In Voices in the City she adopts a slightly different technique. She employs the more conventional third-person mode of narrating the story. Desai uses fantasy to interpret reality in Where Shall We Go This Summer?

Diary writing is the usual method of articulation for women who are either silent or have been silenced by the traditional norms of society. Desai delineates the physical and psychic states of her characters through objective corollaries. Many critics consider Fire on the Mountain as stylistically most successful of her novels. The story is narrated from the author’s point of view. The most significant symbol that gets repeated is that of the forest fire. It is symbolic of an impending tragedy in the life of Nanda. It is kept throughout the novel and renders the whole novel artistically symbolic.

A number of animals, birds and plants are used to suggest the state of mind and condition of the characters. The cuckoo symbolises the call to domesticity. The eagle represents absolute freedom and detachment. The Hoopoe feeding her nestlings reminds Nanda of her tending the children. Raka is associated with a fish on a hook and crafty little mosquito. The image of prey and predator is the most outstanding one in Fire on the Mountain. Both the novelists have also made use of literary allusions to reinforce the sense and thoughts of the characters. Both of them have used a lot of native words to give native touch to their novels.

Anita Desai and Margaret Laurence also use a lot of similes and metaphors both conventional and unconventional. Desai uses metaphor to impart intensity to the feeling and
atmosphere. The comparison of Nanda to a worm and Raka to a cricket brings out their character and situation. Alliteration and onomatopoeia are the other figures of speech used by the novelist. Margaret Laurence uses the flashback technique in The Stone Angel and the flashbacks occur in a chronological order. The predominant symbol in The Stone Angel is the cemetery which symbolises Hagar. It also stands for Hagar’s coldness, her blindness to the virtues of Bram and her pride. The house also symbolises her pride and egotism.

Margaret Laurence uses a lot of imagery and symbolism in the novel. The image of horse is recurrent. Hagar is referred to as ‘an old mare’. She feels flighty as a sparrow. Avian imagery is used to describe John’s eyes which are as bright and watchful as birds. Margaret Laurence also uses flower images in the novel: The sun flower symbolises her empty life, marigolds her old age. In Desai’s Fire on the Mountain lilies symbolise purity, virginity and even death.

While Laurence’s The Stone Angel is lyrical in style Anita Desai’s novel, Fire on the Mountain, is known for its poetic prose. Laurence also uses a nursery rhyme throughout The Fire Dwellers. Another stylistic technique used by Margaret Laurence is the dropping of certain structural elements with a view to serving several purposes. Stacey’s irregular sentence constructions help the reader understand her thought processes, her feelings, attitudes, doubts and her limitations. The omission of certain elements creates the illusion of actual speech making Stacey’s world appear credible and identifiable. The skipping of a group of words also suggests a feeling of incompleteness reflecting her confused world.

There are two voices: the voice of Stacey and the novelist’s. The author’s voice follows the pattern of standard written English. It is conscious and planned whereas Stacey’s is automatic and spontaneous. Stacey’s voice is alive and dynamic but the author’s is neutral and non-committal. At times the author’s voice is coldly objective. Thus the novel has two important voices, exploring the same consciousness. But two voices merge when the author and the protagonist share an experience.
Margaret Laurence offers a double perspective on Morag Gunn. In the ‘Memory Bank’ and snapshots in the first three parts the flashback technique has been used to help the reader see the protagonist from inside. And the third-person mode compels the reader to view her from outside. Laurence also uses a technique called “active imagination” through which Morag’s inner progression is made evident. Thus it is clear that every word, phrase and image used by Anita Desai and Margaret Laurence is functional in their novels.

Anita Desai and Margaret Laurence, both outstanding women novelists, are basically novelists of feminine sensibility. Their novels explore the deep recesses of feminine nature and female psyche. They do not deal with the traditional themes of nationalism and socio-cultural questions. Consequently, their novels tend towards the subjective and the poetic, and instead of depicting socio-political realism they are mainly characterized by personal and subjective impressions.

The contemporary feminist movements have influenced Anita Desai and Margaret Laurence. Through their feminist literature, they have highlighted gynocentric ideologies and sought ways to liberate women from the confining roles defined to them by society and home. A comparative study of the personal, social, emotional and psychological problems of these women, their family and cultural backgrounds, their individualistic attempts to liberate themselves from the shackles, and the ways in which their lives are transformed so that they emerge as enlightened women, show that women are the same everywhere. Such awareness helps women to express their grievances and find solutions. From feminism one comes to understand that there is an institutionalized system of oppression based on the domination of men over women called sexism. Women should no longer allow such a system of domination.

Though Anita Desai and Margaret Laurence belong to two countries with entirely different geographical and climatic conditions they take special care in creating a specific setting
which acts as the locale and serves as the backdrop of the novels under discussion. Nature in
these novels is powerful and it influences the course of events by directly affecting the
characters. The role of Nature is so pervasive that it attains the role of a character. The novelists’
handling of Nature is such that they have immense symbolic significance in the novels of both
the novelists. Nature lends depth and meaning to what otherwise would appear to be simple
stories. Nature and the character’s temperament are so intertwined that the evolution of the
character gets influenced by Nature. Both Anita Desai and Margaret Laurence are noted for the
power of character portrayal and with force they present the inner struggle of the central
characters and their emotional responses. Their novels probe deep into the human psyche that
transcends all local, regional, nationalistic and cultural concerns.