CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Comparative Literature differs from the study of single literatures not in method, but in matter, attitude and perspective. It can go on extending its area of operation; its ultimate limit is the literatures of the whole world (Sisir Kumar Das 97).

Comparative literature is a highly challenging discipline which examines the relationships and similarities of literatures pertaining to different peoples and nations in terms of themes, characterization, structures and stylistic techniques, etc. It studies the inter-connection of literature with other cultural practices and with other disciplines like philosophy, psychology and politics. Unfolding the intricacies in the field of literary criticism and theory, it provides a wide range of ideas and methods of major literary schools.

Comparative literature is a branch of literary study which deals with the study of all literatures from an international perspective to arrive at a universal view of literature independent of national, racial or cultural demarcations. It assumes new functions as that of “ […] restoring a lost unity and universality, or that of enriching narrow native traditions by beneficial contacts with others” (Prawer 11). A comparative analysis enables one to cultivate superior standards of literary judgment and broadens one’s perspective by discovering certain dominant trends in literature and culture and makes one understand the precise relations between two or more literatures. The study of
comparative literature not only extends the scope of the interest and competence of readers but also widen their intellectual horizon.

National boundaries are not impediments to the understanding of the unity of all literatures. 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. This discipline compliments the study of single texts and cultures with the knowledge of other texts and cultures surrounding them. Systematic comparison can be done through literary genres, periods and movements in literary history, dominant themes and motifs, or through the reciprocal influence of two national cultures or civilizations. A comparative literary study recognizes divergences based on the social, educational, geographical and historical forces that have shaped different nations and writers and enhanced huge possibilities of exploring the interrelations between literature and other fields of knowledge and belief. According to Henry H. Remak, comparative literature is “the study of relationships between literature on the one hand and the other areas of knowledge and belief such as the arts, philosophy, history, the social sciences, the sciences, religion, etc., on the other hand” (3). He also observes that comparative study need not be comparative on every page nor even in every chapter but the overall intent and perception must be comparative. Remak explains that the French School of Comparative Literature is historical, positivistic and diachronic whereas the American School is literary, analytic and text-oriented. While 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 is made to find out the parallels between the select novels of Anita Desai and Margaret Laurence in terms of gynocentrism, quest for identity and survival, geocentrism (Ecocriticism) and style and technique.

The basic procedure of comparison is explanation and analysis. While comparison analyses and describes the similarities and differences of two or more items throwing new light and clarity on the objects under discussion. Literary comparison explains the similarities and differences between two or more works focusing on plots, characters and other elements of fiction. A comparison brings about something new. So, for a comparison to be illuminating, the items compared must appear different but have significant similarities.

Some common areas of comparison of literary works are: plot, character background, character actions, character motivations, setting and theme. Comparisons can be organized in two primary patterns: Block Method and Alternating Method. The Block Method deals with one work at a time describing all of its relevant ground and attributes of comparison and then the same is done with the second item using corresponding grounds for comparison which results in unified analysis. Alternating Method -otherwise called Element by Element Method pulls together details and forms a distinct impression of what each object is like. Here, in this work the Block Method is preferred for comparison.

The Romans were the initiators of comparative study. Tacitus studied the difference between the Roman and the Greek orators in his Dialogue on Orators. Scaliger made a comparison of Virgil and Homer and also Ovid, Horace and others. Quintillion in his Institution made a comparative study of the history of the Roman and
the Greek literatures. In the sixteenth century Rome, the practice of comparing one aspect of literature with another was widely prevalent.

Comparative literature as a scholarly discipline is only a century old. The first really meaningful efforts were made in the nineteenth century by S.T. Coleridge and his classmates. They discriminated between classical authors on the grounds of plain sense and universal logic. Francis Meres compared Shakespeare with Seneca and Plautus.

Comparative literature combines both the East and the West and the two are merging and unifying the world into a single whole. A comparatist finds out the implications and the underlying identities of both similarities and differences and gives their proper place in a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the artist.

The present study is based on the perception that a comparative analysis offers more critical space in unravelling the quintessence of the novels of one author in terms of the other. In this thesis entitled ‘The Predicament of Woman towards the Journey of Self-Identity and Self-Discovery: ‘A Comparative Study of the Select Novels of Anita Desai and Margaret Laurence’, an attempt is made to show the points of comparison and contrast in the treatment of women manifested in their gynocentric nature of their works and significance of Nature which shows how women's psychological nature is closely connected with Nature in terms of geo-centricism. This work also brings to focus the quest for identity and survival of the woman characters and the craftsmanship of the authors in expressing their ideas in the most effective manner through various stylistic or narrative techniques. A comparative study of these two authors and their literary products belonging to two different cultures separated by time and space with no imaginable influence on each other can be aesthetically and intellectually rewarding provided it is done on the basis of accepted methodology.
Influence has always been a key concept of comparative literature. The personality and psychology of a writer is revealed through the detection of influence in his/her works as no author or work originates in a state of vacuum. It is also true that literature is enriched by ideas borrowed by writers consciously or unconsciously regardless of being native or foreign. The creative genius of Anita Desai and Margaret Laurence is invariably enriched by the abundant influence of the great works of reputed authors.

Anita Desai’s innovative outpouring of her unique literary achievement observed in her novels springs from the strong influence of Nature and great writers on her thinking and writing. One great writer who shaped her art is Virginia Woolf from whom she adopted the stream-of-consciousness technique. When Desai was nine years old she read the great novel *Wuthering Heights* and this novel has had a significant effect in moulding her literary scoring. Other authors had telling impact on her. To quote her own words from her interview with Florence Libert:

When I was very young and beginning to write seriously, I suppose the influences were Virginia Woolf and D.H Lawrence and Henry James. And then I broke free of this tradition of British literature in which I’d been reared and started reading widely in Russian literature and found myself overwhelmed by writers like Dostoevsky and Chekhov. There was a time of my life when I was certainly very influenced by Camus […] And then I became very influenced more and more by poetry […] the model I had before me was Japanese poetry really, because they seemed to be able to compress and to regain the essence of what they wanted to say in a way I wanted to do in prose. Again a great deal of
Russian poetry like Mandelstam, Akhmatova, Tsvetaeva, and later on Milosz, Brodsky, and now I find that if I want to hold up any model for my writing, it’s always poetry, not prose (48).

While discussing the important factors that immensely contributed to the nourishment of Anita Desai’s creative ideas Jena Seema observes:

With her early childhood nurtured in a Brontean world she [Anita Desai] has imbibed the depth and hue of the fiction-writers of the West. If the Western writers presented her with general criteriology for her choicest field, the poets of the East furnished her with the charms of rhythms and style, whatever she heartily welcomed was deeply and successfully entrenched within to enrich her creative perspective (11-12).

Margaret Laurence seems to have derived inspiration out of her own tumultuous life which forms the essence of her fiction. Invariably, the author who has influenced Margaret Laurence most is evidently Sinclair Ross whose newly published novel *As For Me and My House* (1941) which later became a classic of Canadian fiction, came upon her as a great revelation to the searching eyes of Laurence. W.J. Keith quotes the words of Laurence:

[...] it seemed the only completely genuine... [novel] I had read about my own people, my own place, my own time. It pulled no punches about life in the stultifying atmosphere of small and ingrown towns, and, yet it was illuminated with compassion (69).
The novel is a relentless record of frustration and desperate hope of the prairies during the depression years. It is through this work that she has understood Canada and Canadian life.

Margaret Laurence was not only inspired by writers but she was also greatly influenced by her own experiences and the places where she lived. Her stay with her husband in South Africa and the African setting and sensibility enabled her to come out with her maiden novel *This Side Jordan* (1960). All her later fictions of the Manawaka series are set in the fictional town ‘Manawaka’ modelled after her prairie birthplace Neepawa. It is through the eye of Manawaka that she has tried to establish her pioneering Canadian sensibility as acknowledged by the critic W.J. Keith in *Canadian Literature in English*:

[…] the beginning of an essentially Canadian tradition passed on by the beneficiary to numerous younger writers who have benefited from her example. Manawaka [...] has passed into the national consciousness. Most impressive of all is the extent to which she offers a broad panorama of twentieth-century Canadian experience (161).

The reason for making a comparative study of the novels of Anita Desai and Margaret Laurence is to bring out the amazing similarities and corresponding disparities found in the works of the two authors and the comparison could possibly be the natural outcome of the commonness found between the two countries to which the authors belong. Both India and Canada were under the rule of the British Empire and are now members of the Commonwealth. India was subjugated and enslaved under the imperialistic hands of the Europeans for nearly three hundred years whereas Canada
became the home land for their permanent settlement. However, India can claim European lineage as the Aryans, the first inhabitants of the land, are said to have come from Europe as early as 1500 B.C and created a mighty civilization on the banks of the river Indus. India has a glorious cultural heritage which can be traced back to Vedic era. But the influence of the European colonization has brought forth some new patterns of cultural behaviour and value system which have generated new tensions in society. Twentieth century writers have taken due note of the political and cultural changes that have taken place. The themes and the art of characterization found in the literary works of these writers testify to it. These writers including Anita Desai focus on the themes of tradition versus modernity, dwindling of the conventional value systems, marital discord, collapse of the joint family system, ambivalent cultural responses to the impact of the West, social and economic differences, lure of getting rich even through suspicious ways, colonial consciousness as a hangover of the British rule, etc. But the task of the Canadian writers including Margaret Laurence, whose parents were chiefly Europeans, attempted to articulate the passions, hopes, aspirations and apprehensions of the new emerging nation and to carve out norms for cultural rootedness. Hence, their literary works are concerned with the question of a distinct identity of their own, prairies and their impact on the lives of people, the problems and aspirations of the natives, impact of the immigrant cultural feminism, etc.

Thus it can be understood that the one common factor that forms the base of the writers of India and Canada is the multicultural or cross – cultural ethos. Anita Desai and Margaret Laurence, two representative novelists of the two countries exhibit a deep awareness of the social, cultural and economic thematic patterns and poly – angular perspectives in their works. Their novels center around women characters and their sensibilities.
Indian literature in English has attracted a widespread interest both in India and abroad in the recent past. It occupies a prominent place in world literature. Indian Fiction in English has become the most characteristic and powerful form of literary expression today and has acquired a prestigious position not only in Indian literature but also in world literature. The novel is a distinct literary form which is undoubtedly of recent birth. Indian Fiction in English has a long and respectable history. The Indian writers began to write novels in English most seriously only after the First World War. National awakening and political uprising gave a great impetus to the writing of novels and the nineteen thirties and forties constitute the most flourishing decade in the history of Indian Fiction in English. It is around this period that Indian English novel has come of age in the hands of the three stalwarts, Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand, and R.K. Narayan popularly known as the ‘big three’ in the Indian-English literary world. The prominent trio of men novelists have brought international recognition to the new genre namely Indian English fiction by showing the world what India is by depicting the socio-economic and political realities of life.

Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand and R.K. Narayan form the first generation of Indian-English fiction writers, and they identify themselves with the aspirations of their compatriots and portray various phases of India’s struggle for freedom. Most of the Indian novelists for that matter are concerned with freedom struggle movement, partition, the clash between tradition and modernity, political events, etc. While Raja Rao with his philosophical bent of mind deals with Indian metaphysics, Mulk Raj Anand is concerned with the underdog and R.K. Narayan depicts the life of Indian middle class. Malgudi, an imaginary small town in South India, has become a permanent location in all his literary works.
Interestingly enough more novels came to be written after Independence when 
the second generation of Indian novelists in English emerged. They include distinguished 
writers like Bhabani Bhattacharya, Manohar Malgonkar, Khushwant Singh, Kamala 
Markandaya and so on. They widened the scope and horizon of Indian English fiction 
with their serious and meticulous depiction of contemporary social milieu.

The third generation of Indian English fiction writers have innovated new themes 
and techniques and new trends in Indian English fiction. The writers of this category are 
also called the younger generation of writers of whom Anita Desai is one. The prominent 
writers of this category are Arun Joshi, Ruth Prawer Jhabvala and Anita Desai. They 
portray in their novels the inner conflicts of the human mind. Jhabvala’s novels are 
about divided souls whose inner longings are at odds with their outer protective 
appearances. Anita Desai’s writing clearly indicates the new direction that Indian 
English Fiction is taking in the hands of the third generation of urban writers as her 
concern is not outer world but the deep inner workings of the minds of her characters. 
Anita Desai and Arun Joshi have used the English language with greater dexterity, and 
have made it a keener instrument for probing complex psychological states of their 
characters.

Women novelists of quality have begun enriching Indian English fiction only 
after the Second World War. They have made their chief contribution to the world 
literature showing their worth both qualitatively and quantitatively and have brought 
honour to India. Fiction writing by Indian women has attained a certain maturity with the 
works of novelists like Kamala Markandaya, Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, Nayantara Sahgal, 
Shashi Deshpande and Anita Desai who are said to be the most outstanding novelists. 
Their works centre around women who confront problems concerning tradition and
modernity, East and West encounter, clash between science and religion, and they portray the dilemma of modern women in the tradition-bound Indian society.

Kamala Markandaya is suggestive and feminine and presents a wide range of themes such as the social, cultural, economic, and political problems of her age. Her works often portray the tensions of her characters when they shift from rural areas to the cities. She explores the changes taking place in the Indian rural life as an effect of the profound changes taking place in the entire nation. The author achieved a great literary success with her first novel, *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954) which deals with the poverty of a South Indian rural life. *Some Inner Fury* (1955) explores the East–West conflict through the dilemma of Mira, a young woman who is in love with an Englishman during the tumultuous 1940s of India’s freedom movement. *A Silence of Desire* (1961) unfolds the layers of spiritual reality and mystic vision of India. *The Coffer Dams* (1969) portrays the Indo–British encounter resulting in despair and disappointment. The cultural clash figures again in her *Possession* (1963), a novel set in pre–independent India and England. *A Handful of Rice* (1966) tells about Indian city life. *The Nowhere Man* (1972) deals with the problems faced by Srinivas, an Indian immigrant in London, parent–child conflict and racist violence.

The next prominent novelist is Ruth Prawer Jhabvala whose works deal with the themes of the clash between traditional codes and modern aspirations and problems by people in urban India and the confrontation between occidental and oriental attitudes. Her first novel *To Whom She Will* (1955) gives an account of Indian Society – its rites and customs, marriage and love with an element of illicit relationships and the fatal consequences arising out of partition which uprooted millions of people. *The Nature of Passion* (1956) deals with a modern young girl, Nimmi, who fights for the cause of woman’s emancipation through her false pretensions to modernism and independence.
*Esmond in India* (1957) deals with incompatible couples and East – West encounter. *A Backward Place* (1965) is also a novel of marital discord due to incongruent mentality at the background of cultural clash. *The Household* (1960) is a comic novel arising out of domestic conflict set in a remote village. Her Booker prize novel *Heat and Dust* (1975) presents a love story which contrasts the 1920s and the 1970s. It deals with the sad and moving story of two English women who pay their visit to India and become the victims of this country. A quick purview of her works testifies to her appreciation of the Indian cultural heritage and spiritual significance in spite of her claim as an outsider.

Nayantara Sahgal, another major woman novelist, writes about the contemporary political realities and Indian women’s search for freedom and self-realization. Her works abound in political overtones. She confines herself to dealing with social problems and its effect on the upper class and the aristocracy touching the latest political ups and downs with a tinge of western liberation. Her first novel, *A Time to Be Happy* (1957) reflects the Congress activities and the events of 1942. *This Time of Morning* (1965) deals with the happenings in the political field. In *Storm in Chandigarh* (1969) she writes about the consequences of the division of Punjab into Punjab and Haryana. *The Day in Shadow* (1971) has the political movement of the society as its major theme, yet the problem of divorce and marital disintegration in a typical Indian setting are also beautifully dealt with. *A Situation in New Delhi* (1977) deals with the Naxalite movement and student unrest and has a reference to the aftermath of Nehru’s death. The author is also a renowned political columnist for different newspapers. Her writing is known for its simplicity and boldness. Though she never professes any specific political ideology or favours any political movement, all her major characters are centripetally drawn to the vortex of politics.
Shashi Deshpande’s novels deal with the pathetic and heartrending condition of women in the male-dominated society. *The Dark Holds No Terror* (1980) revolves round the unusual character Sarita who dares to challenge the age-old traditions by an inter-caste marriage with low-caste Manu. Her struggle does not prove to be fruitful. In *That Long Silence* (1988), she makes an aesthetic plea to free the female psyche from the traditional male domination. *The Binding Vine* (1993) presents a woman’s emotional bond with her children and illustrates how the bonds of love provide the springs of life to human existence. The novel also shows how a woman lives in Indian society as a spineless and wooden creature due to male domination.

Shobha De is a modern novelist famous for her frank and straightforward narration of sexual mania of the commercial world. She shot into literary limelight with the publication of her first novel *Socialist Evening* (1988) in which she openly discusses sex. Though most of her novels analyze various aspects of sex her works cannot be easily branded as pornographic. Her novels abound with fine images, symbols, words and phrases. In short, her main focus is to expose the moral and spiritual breakdown of modern society in which hapless and abandoned women strive for freedom.

The latest of the Indian women writers in English is Arundhati Roy, the most prestigious Booker prize winner for her debut novel, *The God of Small Things* (1997), a novel a noted for its linguistic inventiveness. The Booker Committee described ArundhiRoy as an architect of language. According to K.V.Surendran, Arundhati Roy is “an architect in literary circle moulding language in all shapes and sizes as was never done before at least in the Indian literary context” (50). The book is basically a novel by a woman about women. It has for its theme the life of Keralite society, their rites and customs, traditions and patriarchal dominations, the fatal consequences arising out of
divorce, the child psychology, the malpractices of Marxism and police administration, the persecution of the untouchable, etc.

Of all the contemporary Indian women novelists in English, Anita Desai is the most outstanding one. Among the Indian women novelists in English, Anita Desai occupies a distinctive place because she does something unique by portraying each of her individuals as an unsolved mystery. Her novels have drawn worldwide attention and she stands in the forefront in the world of fiction. Her novels add a new dimension to Indian English novels by concretizing the idealized abstract reality of life and probing into the innermost depth of the human psyche. Her novel unfolds the mysteries, inner turmoil and the chaos found in the mind of her characters. She has given a new turn to the Indian fiction in English by her unique exploration of the sensibility of the individuals. The inner workings of the mind assume significance in her novels. K.R.Srinivasa Iyengar rightly observes that her forte is “the exploration of sensibility – the particular kind of sensibility that is ill at ease among barbarians, and the philistines, the anarchists and the amoralists” (464).

Anita Desai’s works are different from those of other Indian women writers like Kamala Markandaya, Ruth Prawer Jhabvala and Nayantara Sahgal to name only the major women novelists. Unlike others her interest is to expose the innermost mental happenings of her individual characters. In Kamala Markandaya the stress is on the principal characters against diverse factors like economic, political, social and cultural situations in both rural and urban backgrounds. In the novels of Jhabvala, the social background is more important than the characters who enact various roles. Nayantara Shagal’s works focus on social and political problems faced by the upper class and the aristocracy in India. Unlike other novelists Anita Desai avoids socio-political themes and lays stress on the psychic life of her characters. Her novels explore human psyche to
unravel the mystery of the inner life of her individual characters through their consciousness. Desai uses the stream of consciousness method and interior monologues which become coincident with consciousness. She does not seem to be interested in depicting in her novels either social situations or political happenings. Her main concern is to show artistically how the individual characters especially women suffer a lot due to their inner conflicts and how they cope with the outer world. She herself says in an interview with Yashodhara Dalmia:

I am interested in characters who are not average but have retreated or been driven to some extremity of despair and so turned against, or made to stand against the general current. It is easy to flow with the current, it makes no demands, it costs no effort. But those who cannot follow it, whose heart cries out “the great No” who fight the current and struggle against it, they know what demands are and what it costs to meet them”. (The Times of India, April 29:1979)

Her novels are structured vertically in order to capture the atmosphere of the mind very effectively. She proves to be an introvert writer by involving the reader directly into the flow of the consciousness of the characters. Thus, Anita Desai is obviously different from other fiction writers by delineating the inner lives of individuals in their frantic struggle for emotional survival and to establish their roots. Unlike other Indian English novelists her main preoccupation is “with the inner world of sensibility rather than the outer world of action” (Alcock 15). It is this innovative bend of thought and writing which establishes her as one of the promising writers. Darshan Singh Maini rightly points out that her innovations make her “a disturbing and demanding presence in Indo-Anglian fiction” (121).
Though it is clear that her central focus is on the inner lives of individuals, her novels do not have fixed themes. She usually starts presenting a person who is cut out in a different metal from others. The person normally resists the demands of the society and turns out to be a rebel failing to get along with the established taboos. Consequently, they do not get a proper channel of communication and become alienated and start brooding over their lives which finally brings vistas of understanding of what had been ignored or rejected. Thus Desai’s universe is unique and private. Desai holds that literature should not stop with reflecting reality whether inner or outer nor should it be indebted to society or politics to bring about reforms, nor should it be didactic. According to her:

Literature should deal with more enduring matters less temporary and less temporal than politics. It should deal with life and with death. It should be too ironical and also too mystical to accept the world at face value and regard it as the whole or the only truth (Desai 2).

Thus it is quite obvious that her themes are different from those of other novelists. A regular feature in most of the Indian English novels is the treatment of characters as types rather than as individuals but Anita Desai’s characters are not types but independent individuals with special distinct identities of their own. Usha Bande aptly remarks “Anita Desai’s characters reveal her vision of life; they share her perceptions and they set out in quest of meaning. Like their creator they love solitude and privacy” (20).

The novels of Anita Desai deal with the themes of existential concern such as quest for identity, rootlessness, maladjustment, emotional survival, alienation, absurdity
of human existence, quest for the ultimate meaning in life and detachment and isolation. The novels also show how women in the contemporary urban milieu are bravely struggling against or helplessly submitting to the relentless forces of absurd life. Regarding her theme, Shyam M. Asnani rightly points out, “Her central theme is the existential predicament of an individual which is projected through incompatible couples – acutely sensitive wives, and dismal, callous, inconsiderate, ill-chosen husbands” (5).

Anita Desai’s maiden novel *Cry, the Peacock* (1963) portrays marital discord, the husband-wife alienation engendered by the temperamental incompatibility which forms the corpus of the thematic scheme. The novel as R.S Pathak says, is “the harrowing tale of blunted human relationship” (20). It is the tragic story of Maya – who is haunted by the astrological prediction of the death of either wife or husband. The novel gives a clear impression of marital incoherence and encountered conjugal life. The worlds of Maya and Gautama are sharply contrasted in their extreme feminine and masculine principles. R.K. Gupta says, “Maya is seething in agitation manifested in her multi–dimensional projections of companionship, materiality, of Keatsian sensuousness, of her identification with petunias, Gautama on the other hand is an Apollonian; he is into form, order, discipline, career and logomachies” (86 – 87). Another theme is the death motif which skillfully pervades throughout the novel. It is manifested in Maya’s segregation by society and astrological dilemma. In a fit of insane fury she kills her own husband. The aftermath happenings of Maya’s suicide are the result of her guilt and remorse which shows her religio-cultural deep rootedness. Maya’s tragedy springs out from husband-wife alienation. As Prabhat Kumar Pande rightly observes, “Maya’s tragedy is that there is no one to share her feelings. Childless, with an uncaring husband, she is lonely and loneliness is the bane and burden of her psyche. And to cap it all she is not even sexually satisfied” (83). Thus *Cry, the Peacock* is a typical feminine novel, a
novel of sensibility rather than of action, in which the concern is the terrors of existence. Navdeep Pannu aptly observes, “By connecting Maya’s neurosis to her marriage, Anita Desai transforms the conventional story of marital disharmony into a moving study of her psyche” (36).

*Voices in the City* (1965) illustrates the existential crisis of the three characters in the city of Calcutta which is hostile to them and where they lose their identity. The novel is primarily about “the dehumanization of man” (Gupta 45). In Anita Desai’s own words, the novel illuminates “the terror of facing single handedly, the ferocious assaults of existence” (Dalmia 13). The story spins around the protagonist Nirode’s obsession with failure and lack of decisiveness. According to H.M Williams, *Voices in the City* is “an ‘existential’ novel that explores the inner climate of youthful despair, epitomized by the over-acutely self-conscious Nirode that quotes of Camus, finding no meaning in his own life or in life at all” (91). His failure to establish a successful profession and to maintain a good relationship with the world disintegrates his whole existence and pushes him to a neurotic state and existential crisis. Marital discord due to emotional sterility forms another theme of this novel supplemented by the theme of alienation and isolation. Monisha, Nirode’s sister, suffers due to her husband’s total indifference. Her husband’s lack of concern and immense hardship she undergoes in the hands of her in-laws eventually pushes her to the extent of suicide. Anita Desai tries to expose the feminine psyche through Monisha who is a sensitive intellectual victim of ill-matched marriage. The theme of marital disharmony is also reverberated in the relationship of Nirode’s parents who are two different poles. Their destructive hatred and terrific fury towards each other affects the children and make them alienated beings. R.S. Singh rightly says, “the theme of alienation is treated in terms of mother-children relationship which itself is a consequence of dissonance in husband-wife relationship” (171). Amla, the younger
sister of Nirode, represents the frailty of the upper class society. The novel as a whole can be said to represent the individual consciousness of Nirode, Monisha and Amla in their quest for inner and outer reality. As Lionel Trilling points out, “the novel is a perpetual quest for reality, the field of its research being always the social world, the material of its analysis being always manners, as the indication of the direction of man’s souls” (212).

Bye – Bye Blackbird (1971) is a symbolic novel in which the author presents the East – West encounter. It is a love story in the background of immigration which has for its theme the racial – conflict and social reality of coloured immigrants in London. Maladjustment due to inter-racial marriage in England and in the motherland predominates the novel. Identity crisis is the major theme of this novel which is an outcome of racial – conflict. The story revolves round two Bengali youths – Adit and Dev and the former’s English wife Sarah. The author is concerned with the arrival and departure of the immigrated characters and their special effects on their inner psyche. The immigrant land provides attraction which finally leads to hostility and frustration in the principal characters. The nature of immigrants is well-justified by Erich Fromm. He states: “The same society: we are never free from two conflicting tendencies - from bondage to freedom and another to return to the womb (27). Another side of the novel is about the racial clash which arises out of inter-racial marriage, between Adit and the English girl Sarah. This ill – matched marriage brings about a great identity crisis in Sarah. Inter – cultural, inter – religious and inter – racial marriages are very complicated and they cause great hardships and adjustment problems which are difficult to tackle. Thus the novel is as Ramachandra Rao remarks, “a heroic, [. . .] effort to show the whole gamut of Indian immigrants in England” (47).
Where Shall We Go This Summer? (1975) is her fourth novel which portrays the tragic inner reality of Sita who is stifled by the cruelty and callousness of urban life. The theme of marital discord again predominates. Like Gautama and Maya, Jiban and Monisha, Sita and Raman stand apart emotionally due to temperamental incompatibility. Raman is a conformist who accepts the norms and values of society whereas Sita is a rebellion who defies the generally accepted norms of society. Raman does not have the slightest hint about Sita’s distress and he fails to understand her. This alienates Sita from her husband which plunges her into existential crisis. She is obsessed with her loveless marriage with Raman which gives her an insecure feeling. The marital discord between Raman and Sita is, as R.K.Gupta says, “based on the conflict of values, of principles, of faith even, or between normal, double social standards and the iconoclastic temperament of uncompromising honesty” (109). The problem of maladjusted life disintegrates her femininity and her maternal belief in childbirth and this is reflected in her flight to her father’s island to escape the harsh reality of life. But her decision to accompany her husband with a renewed spirit indicates a real sign of sanity. The novel’s depiction of the tension between sensitive wife Sita and the rational and practical husband Roman ends with “establishing victory of reason over fantasy” (Gopal 40).

Fire on the Mountain (1977) deals with the themes of withdrawal, loneliness and fatality which arise out of marital discord in the life of Nanda Kaul – a widow who withdraws into a private world of self-willed isolation. Isolation is the major theme of this novel which is obvious from the central character Nanda Kaul who leads a separate life in Carignano at Kasauli in search of absolute isolation. Her withdrawal has its roots in her unhappy married life from which she had always desired to be alone. Here is a story of a highly sensitive woman who longs for genuine love and care deceived by her husband’s infidelity and her children’s indifference. As R.K. Gupta says, “The novel
presents the agonised cry of Nanda Kaul, an old woman, who has had too much of the world with her and so longs for a quiet retired life” (119). The theme of withdrawal and lack of communication is found in the contrast between Nanda and Raka. The nostalgia for a lost innocence and an awareness of a decaying life stands contrasted in the psyche of the two characters. Nanda’s world of isolation cut off from the reality of human experience is juxtaposed with her invented illusory substitutes of reality. Even this substitute reality is destroyed by her friend Ila Das’ death which makes Nanda Kaul realize the essential absurdity of life. This novel is a telling comment on the system of values in our society. The contrast between stillness and movement is yet another theme of this novel. While Nanda’s withdrawal stands for stillness, a kind of psychic frigidity, the movement in the nature reminds the impossibility of absolute stillness which is evident in Nanda’s changed attitude towards Raka and her demise over her realisation of reality.

*Clear Light of Day* (1980) has the theme of accommodation and reconciliation. The novel centers on the nostalgic attitude and the maturing consciousness of Bimla. The main theme of the novel is isolation against the bondage of time as a preserver and destroyer. Regarding the theme of the novel Jeena Seema says, “The novel as a whole seeks the ultimate wisdom of life in one intuitive understanding and a rational acceptance of the various polarities and contradictions of life” (59). The novel unfolds the growth of the children of Das: Raja, Bimla, Tara and Baba starting from their childhood to their maturity. It depicts how the characters who move in the past and the present are unable to perceive the deep connection with each other due to their apparent divergences and differences. Bimla’s exploration of the depth of her whole life gives her the impulse for selfless reconciliation with her life under the control of love, understanding, forgiveness and mutual acceptance. The clear light of day is an emblem
of selfless love which alone can light human life with gracefulness. As S.Indira rightly
observes “Bimla seems to be offering the ‘morning hymn’, to ‘Time’ as it paves the way
for her regeneration so that she becomes a fulfilled individual who experiences love and
peace (150). In this way the novel succeeds in contrasting the violent and diseased world
of the adults with the dream life world of the children.

_In Custody_ (1984), Desai’s eighth novel, treats the theme of reconciliation which
is about a hapless college lecturer, Deven, who struggles with his inability to establish
his identity in his private and public life with order and dignity. The story centres
around his weaknesses and his overcoming of his trials and travails with a positive vision
of self – sufficiency. This average man surpasses fantasy and lands upon the realm of
reality. S. Indira comments: “The hero is more or less prosaic and the theme, the conflict
between reality and fantasy being shaped more by socio – economic and cultural factors
than by any psychic upheavals of the protagonist” (153). The usual theme of marital
discord is found in the gulf between the husband, Deven and the wife, Sarla who is a
mismatch to her academic professional husband in fulfilling his aspirations. Devan’s
passion to become the custodian of the Urdu Poet Nur’s poetry as suggestive of the title
has another implication that he himself comes under the custody of Nur’s family for
money. The central vision of the title, as R.K. Gupta says, is that “in taking
somebody into custody, one has also to surrender oneself to the other’s custody” (133).
In other words he gets ready to fight obstacles by reciprocating kinship. This novel
shows the author’s maturity of her artistic vision which has brought about a change in
her fictional world. As Meenashi Mukherjee says, this “change is towards a widening of
human concerns and a willingness to integrate concrete historical and specific cultural
dimensions in the creation of interior landscape” (5).
The Village by the Sea subtitled An Indian Family Story (1982) is a tale of the poor and the innocent people’s hard work for survival against the backdrop of Nature. The psychic obsessional worlds of the author’s former novels are missing in this novel. Everyday life of the people who belong to lower classes in the rural India is dealt with for the first time by Anita Desai. As J.P Tripathi says, “It is a narrative of a rare device taking the reader out of the psychic obsessional worlds to a sane, jovial life of health and hope and regeneration and the change is welcome to the readers and critics” (119). The author seems to say that poverty can be alleviated by hard work and human service as the novel flashes friendship, fellowship and community feeling which the opposite of existential alienation and isolation is. The significance of hard labour and its fruits are clearly shown through the industrious lives of Hari and his sister. They stand for all the working classes of rural India. While discussing the positive aspects of the novel J.P Tripathi remarks: that the novel “presents the concepts of evolution, change and adaptation, friendship and fellowship, service motive, awe of the universal forces and a sense of optimism, peculiar to this novel” (131).

Baumgartner’s Bombay (1988) is a powerful and piercing study of the modern phenomenon of immigrated person’s uncertainty resulting in melancholy, fear, perplexity and human solitariness. The novel presents an authentic picture of intense mental torture which arises out of tension between the individual and perverted social forces. Here an uprooted Jew, Hugo Baumgartner’s self – isolation is presented on a wide canvas of the variegated segments of the time past and time present. The rise of Nazism uproots Hugo from his own country, Germany, who comes to settle down in British India to lead a new life where he is alienated as an immigrant. In Bye-Bye-Blackbird, Anita Desai portrays the plight of Indian immigrants abroad and their love for their motherland but in this novel the author deals with the plight of a foreign immigrant
in India longing and yearning for his country and mother and this eventually leads to his murder at the end. The cruel murder of Hugo shows the meaninglessness and purposelessness of human existence.

*Journey to Ithaca* (1995) delineates the quest for truth, ultimate reality and ecstasy by examining the nature of pilgrimage to India through – Mateo and Sophie, young Europeans, and the Mother, a charismatic and mysterious woman; and the spiritual quest of the travellers who are never captivated by spirituality. The novel depicts the quest for divine light which shows the writer’s shift of subject matter from mankind to spirituality. The novel spins around religious and spiritual theme which is reflected in the life of a Neo-European couple in search of divine light. The central theme of the novel is ‘quest’.

Regarding the central theme of the novel, R.K Gupta rightly observes:

The quest is corroborated in pursuits of persons, places and books.

Thus, the novelist has a significant balance of tradition and modernity, East and West, humanism and spiritualism in her novel. No other modern novel has achieved the blend of humanity and divinity to such sublimity as *Journey to Ithaca* (142).

*Fasting, Feasting* (1999) depicts the story of expatriate Indians. The novel contrasts two cultures unveiled through the perceptions of Uma in India and her brother Arun, in America. In this novel Anita Desai depicts a realistic picture of the male-dominated Indian society in which women are shackled and tied down by the customs and the conventions of society. The story represents two different worlds—one an extremely orthodox and domineering Indian family in which Uma is suppressed and suffocated by male-chauvinism and the other – an unusually idiosyncratic family in Massachusetts expounded through the maladjusting Arun. The idea of oriental and
occidental contrast is supplemented with starvation versus gluttony and scarcity versus plenty. The novel projects two aspects of life i.e., ‘fasting’ hints at the emotional and intellectual starvation of Uma and Arun and this is an outcome of their satiated ‘feasting’ of materialistic pleasures. Marital discord is another major theme. The parents who are locked in loveless marriage always try to hate each other. The behaviour of the parents leaves a bad impact on the children. While discussing tradition and modernity, C.V. Tripathi aptly observes: “The novel depicts a conflict between tradition and modernity, between old and new values. The novelist insists on the need of carrying on the old tradition and adopting it to the needs of the changing time” (172). The novelist weighs the cross-cultural habits, tastes, and divergences involved in the representative Indian and American by establishing the power structure through the satiation of gastronomical needs. T. Ravichandran rightly points out, “[. . .] interestingly enough, in Anita Desai’s Fasting, Feasting, the power circles around a gastronomic centre. That is, the patriarchal / matriarchal power structure is authenticated through the assertion and fulfillment of gastronomical needs” (23).

The Zig Zag Way (2004) gives a subtle, miniaturist history of twentieth-century Mexico in which the author’s vision is focused on questions of culture and identity. The novel portrays the story of a young American, Eric who follows his girl friend on a scientific trek to the mythical, lush Mexico. The uncertain awkward young man Eric’s private quest of tracing his family’s history for self-identity in a ‘ghost’ mining town in Mexico is evoked at the backdrop of the exploitations of the Mexican Indians while looking at some of their redeemers like the formidable Queen of the Sierra, Dona Vera, widow of a mining Baron with a colourful, dubious European past of her own. With vivid sympathy and brilliant details, the author conjures up Eric’s grandparents and the poignant story of a young English girl whose grave is in a cemetery on a Mexican
Eric’s search for his root results in his realizations of the past and the present, on the day of the dead when the various strands of the novel come together hauntingly, bringing together the past and the present in a moment of quiet and powerful epiphany.

Besides her novels, Anita Desai’s creativity extends to the realm of short stories with reverberation of her sensibility observed in her novels. She has brought out a book for children, *The Peacock Garden* (1974), and a collection of short stories, *Games at Twilight and Other Stories* (1978). The stories in *Games at Twilight* deal with some of the subjects which can be found in her novels: the world of children, the domestic life, the brutality beneath innocent human relationships, tradition and individuation and problems of women. *Diamond Dust and Other Stories* (2000) is a wonderful collection of stories that are both serious and wonderfully entertaining.

Like India’s own complex literary heritage, Canadian literature is also written in more than one major language and it reflects a regionally diverse and multi-cultural society. The most significant trait of Canadian literature in English is its confluence of two main streams in the language--British and American as put by Wendy Keitner, “‘Canlit’ is the fruit of British seed planted in American soil, a commonwealth literature growing in North American context” (v).

Canadian literature is influenced by a motley of French, British and foreign cultures and as such it does not have a single indigenous culture to stand on its own. Naturally, Canadian literature is characterized by rootlessness. However, there is no denying the fact that Canadian literature, especially fiction, has shown a vitality of its own.

Interestingly, like Indian English fiction, Canadian fiction is also a recent development in the world of Canadian literature. It is only after the Second World War
that great novels of significance came to be written in Canada. The prominent men
fiction writers of this period who parallel the trio of Indian English fiction are Hugh
MacLennan, Sinclair Ross and Morley Callaghan.

Hugh MacLennan’s works reflect the real problems facing the Canadians and he is
the first to articulate Canadian tradition in fictional terms. His Barometer Rising (1941) is
a moral fable which portrays the vision of Canada at war between 1914 and 1918. Two
Solitudes (1945) explores Anglo-French relations in Canada. The Watch That Ends the
Night (1959) is an existentialist study of a man faced with a moral and psychological
crisis. MacLennan’s novels are generally didactic and were very popular in the fifties.

Morley Callaghan is a novelist who wrote about urban problems. His novels are
marked by the undertones of Roman Catholicism and often focus on individuals with
weakened sense of self. His first novel is Strange Fugitive (1928). Both Hugh
MacLennan and Morley Callaghan may rightly be considered as the founding fathers of
serious Canadian fiction.

Sinclair Ross is well known for his first novel, As for Me and My House (1941).
It became a Canadian literary classic which set the precedent for the genre of Canadian
prairie fiction. The novel is a relentless record of an isolated town in the prairies during
the Great Depression.

The Canadian novel has attained international standard as it increasingly reflects
nationalistic ideas by becoming “[…] a major participant in cultural debates about
nationality, ethnicity and regional identity, and more recently, aboriginality, gender and
sexuality” (Slemon 114).
The new nationalism has formed a generation of novelists of whom Margaret Laurence is one. These novelists explore their ancestral roots in their novels. The forerunners of this category are Sheila Watson, Margaret Laurence, Robert Kroetsch and Ruby Wiibe. They portray the life of the West. Robertson Davies, Alice Munro and Timothy Findley write about Ontario. Mordecai Richler and Leonard Cohen explore the life in and around Montreal.

The Canadian novels took an altogether new turn in the 1960s with the appearance of women novelists who have achieved international recognition. They have been recognized as eminent feminist writers for exploring women’s issues with a nationalist framework. All the prominent novelists in Canada are women. Most strikingly women novelists have not only dominated the Canadian literary arena but have made a great mark on the contemporary literary scene. The chief among them are Margaret Atwood, Carol Shields, Alice Munro and Margaret Laurence. They stand out as strong champions for the cause of women.

Margaret Atwood’s novels bear the emotional interdependence of men and women and their search for self-discovery and self-reliance. Her first novel The Edible Woman (1969) deals with the relation of sexes in a consumer society where men view women as commodities to enhance their social status. The thematic pattern shows woman’s endeavour to attain a human identity. Surfacing (1972) is a novel about a young woman’s search for survival and her quest to reconnect herself to her past in order to establish her identity. In the words of King Bruce, the novel “records a woman stripping her of social mask, defenses and ideas to discover her essential self” (213). The novel also brings into sharp focus the problem of Canada’s cultural identities in the seventies. Lady Oracle (1976) is a novel about a woman’s craving for identity and freedom which portrays the protagonist Jean Foster’s evolution to maturity. Joan Foster’s own account
of her unremitting exercises in heroism could be identified in every woman. *Life Before Man* (1979) prospects a breakage of a vanished past and lost future and unfolds the broken bits of time conveying a serious awareness of a possibility of the extinction of human race. *Bodily Harm* (1981) exposes the nostalgia and explores the inner life of a young journalist Rennie Wilford who blunders into a Caribbean revolution. *The Hand Maid’s Tale* (1985) treats the theme of exploitation and subjugation of women in terms of sex, procreation and love. It gives us a prophetic vision of the future world where male chauvinism would destroy the finest chords of wifehood, motherhood and womanhood. *Cat’s Eye* (1988) retrospects the relations between adolescent women.

Alice Munro is a Canadian writer known for stories which centre on the emotional lives of the inhabitants of rural Canada. Her tales are often set in Southwestern Ontario where she had spent her childhood. They are characteristically written from the point of view of a young or adolescent girl and have themes of particular interest to women. *Her Lives of Girls and Women* (1971) chronicles a young girl, Del Jorden’s development as an artist and her maturing as a woman in a series of stories. *Something I’ve Been Meaning to Tell You* (1974) explores the inner contours of the mind of a twice-married woman set against the blunted images of vain, quarrelsome and untidy men. *Who Do You Think You Are?* (1978) chronicles the inter-connected lives of the young Rose and her stepmother Flo. It also deals with the incongruency between Rose and her husband in failing to fulfil each other’s fantasy. *The Moons of Jupiter* (1982), *The Progress of Love* (1986), *Friend of My Youth* (1990) and *Open Secrets* (1995) are her other works which present darker stories of the rootlessness of contemporary Canadian life.

Carol Shields is an outstanding Canadian-American writer based in Winnipeg. She is a contemporary feminist writer who has a permanent position in the field of
literature. Her works are of great interest and thought-provoking which bear feminist themes. Some of her widely acclaimed novels are *The Rose Garden*(1977), *Happenstance*(1980), *The Orange Fish*(1989) and *The Stone Diaries*(1993) is her masterpiece which presents the issues of social plurality and cultural differences that form a diverse and complex population.

Margaret Laurence expresses the same kind of sensibility with that of the leading Canadian women novelists. Sudhakar Pandey writes in his “Introduction” to *Perspectives on Canadian Fiction*:

Margaret Laurence, Margaret Atwood, Alice Munro and other feminists attempt to focus on the ‘new woman’ self-awareness, independent, seeking to evolve an identity of her own. These writers, [...] tend to project the image of a woman who is intelligent, confident and assertive (120).

Marge Piercy, another eminent critic, observes the essential unity of thought underlying the works of the three most successful contemporary women writers:

Margaret Atwood, Alice Munro and Margaret Laurence, set out a powerful gritty sense of place, of daily life based on economic realities and conflicts, of different ethnic peoples contending in a setting these writers know from the weeds in the yard-by-name to the mortgages and the buried history. All three create a strong breed of woman characters who must earn a living, who have a keen sense of self or battle hard to find it (6).
The most dominant figure in the Canadian fiction is Margaret Laurence. Her deep compassion and technical expertise has made her Canada’s most revered novelist. Like Anita Desai, she is one among the Canadian women novelists who have broken fresh grounds by exemplifying how Canadian writers are breaking out of the narrower patterns of the past. The current problems of writing in Canada and women’s experiences shape her literary outlook. M.F Salat points out, “Laurence, in her writing, examines two important issues viz., the problems of women and the Canadian dilemma of identity, and attempts to discover, in fictional terms, modes to reckon with both the problems” (58). Both Desai and Laurence seem to take a new bend unlike their forerunners by turning away from socio- political themes and cohere in their unique dwelling on inner-self. King Bruce observes: “. . .both belong to a class of writers for whom the problems of colonialism and independence have passed. Local society is apprehended from within rather than by dialectic between national and imperial values” (31). Like Anita Desai, the two major themes that Margaret Laurence deals with are quest for identity and survival. Like the former her concern is with the inner working of the human psyche. Her novels centre around female characters and probe deeper and deeper into their interior terrains and focus so much on “…the inner world of feeling and sensibility that even the impact of feminist movements have generated more of poetic or lyrical articulation of the inner tension of women that social documentaries voicing the cause of women” (Ramamurthi 182-83).

Margaret Laurence made her debut with This Side Jordan (1960), an African novel, set in the Gold Coast of the 1950s. The novel brings out the psychological tensions of both the Africans and the British as a result of their colonial experience. The story speaks about Nathaniel Amegbe’s ambivalence and ambiguity with regard to his identity crisis arising out of the colonial mentality. It deals with the clash between the
native tradition and the values of the imperialists. The problem of adjustment is presented through the corresponding stories of the African protagonist, Amegbe, and his English counterpart Kestoe, by examining the effects of the colonial encounter on both the colonizer and the colonized. Irritation, suspicion, anger and hatred are the recurring outcome when their paths cross each other. Margaret Laurence juxtaposes and balances the main characters by showing their sense of double exile and dispossession in different ways felt by both the British and the Africans as a result of the colonial mentality. The colonial experience uproots both the British and the Africans where the Britishers become exiles both in Africa and in their homeland and the Africans experience the feeling of dispossession in their own land. This theme of ambiguity or rootlessness regarding the self and identity crisis engendered by the impact of colonialism emerges as a major preoccupation in Laurence’s subsequent Canadian writings. The exposure of Black-White conflict and the author’s overt didacticism testify the prevailing spirit of Africa. *This Side Jordan* can be considered as an apprentice work which she took up to write when she was in Africa. It is only her Manawaka novels through which she attained the height of a great literary creator of Canadian sensibility.

*The Stone Angel* (1964), the first of the Manawaka series, spins around the spiritual pride of the protagonist, Hagar Shipley, a ninety-year old woman alternating between her reminiscences of the past and the present in the closing days of her life that parallels with Nanda Kaul of Anita Desai’s *Fire on the Mountain*. The two time-levels follow only one theme- the aggressive, proud woman’s long search for freedom and dignified survival in the course of trying to come to terms with herself and life. The entire novel is on Hagar’s rage to live and about her fighting against extinction. Widely hailed as a Canadian classic, the novel deals with the gripping memories of Hagar’s rich childhood as the daughter of Manawaka’s Pharaoh, her subsequent rebellion and her
defiant marriage with a coarse farmer at the cost of her wealth and comfort, and the
death of her beloved son. Her assertive will spares her survival in all her difficulties,
while depriving her of her ability to have any meaningful human relationship. Her
indifference and stubbornness make her a self-willed woman even in her debilitated age.
This could be observed in her escape to an abandoned canary from being confined to the
home for the aged. Her reconciliation with reality enhanced by the flooded recollection
of her past drives her to self-realisation which is manifested in her honest self-appraisal.
Her quest for dignity and survival retains her strong will, independence and self-
determination which are revealed in her refusal of help from the nurse even at the edge
of her life which accounts for her undefeated death.

* A Jest of God (1966), the second novel of the Manawaka series, captures the
isolated protagonist Rachel Cameron’s obsession with her fears and inhibitions of her
small town Christian values which instill in her a paralyzing anxiety with regard to the
adverse judgment of society. Her bond of duty to her widowed mother makes her an
oppressed individual and isolates her from any human contacts. The main theme of this
novel is isolation which brings an invulnerable escape from the present. Her failure in
her attempts to break the bondage from her widowed mother leads to a meaningless life
in which she finds no dignity in the kind of life she lives. The feeling of failure in life
pushes Rachel to despair and she develops a negative self-esteem. If Hagar’s isolation is
due to her pride, Rachel’s failure in having a harmonious human relationship is due to
her low self-esteem. Avoiding the present, she takes recourse to interior voyage that
serves as a refuge from her inner solitude. In short, the novel is an inner-space fiction
which deals with the inner personal conflict of Rachel which is the outcome of her
alienation and solitude. Not only Rachel but also all the characters are isolated in one
way or the other whose sense of loneliness brings an invulnerable escape from the
present. The novel shows how a negative self-concept or low self-esteem is not congenial to harmonious human relationships.

*The Fire-Dwellers* (1969), the third of the Manawaka series, revolves around Rachel’s sister Stacy MacAindra, an urban housewife and mother of four children. She struggles to identify herself as an individual among the roles of a daughter, a wife and a mother. The novel deals with the themes of the quest for identity and freedom and man-woman relationship. It also depicts matrimonial ties characterized by lack of communication causing a sense of isolation ending in extra marital affairs. The novel describes the little serenity of Stacy in the seemingly self-destructive world around, baffled by her nightmarish anxiety to protect her children in the face of senseless brutality. Her existential anxiety and frustration echoes that of Sita’s predicament in Anita Desai’s *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* The novel deals with Stacey’s existential dilemma and her quest for identity tattered by the mechanical city life in Vancouver. Finding hard to cope with the wildness of the city, she attempts to find her identity and establish her individuality by breaking away from familial responsibility but her strong impulses retain her and the existence of her children forces her to survive the reality. There is a constant clash between her feelings and expressions and this accounts for her self-divided self. Stacey’s life is narrated through a mixture of science-fiction fantasy, adolescent memories and nightmarish vision of destruction and it threatens the limits of domestic realism.

*The Diviners* (1974), the last novel in the Manawaka series as well as Margaret Laurence’s magnum-opus, belongs to the genre of Kunstlerroman which constitutes the odyssey of an artist who emerges from apprenticeship to maturity. Its female hero Morag Gunn’s quest for identity as an artist takes a long journey from Manawaka to Ontario through Winnipeg, Manitoba, Toronto, Vancouver and London. The barriers
she passes through and the experiences she encounters contribute to the growth and
evolution of Morag as an artist. The initial manifestation of her artistic potentials, the
source of her inspiration, her long life-journey all stand to prove her emergence from
innocence to experience, the steady growth of an emerging female artist, the cultivation
and exercise of her literary talents. The mysterious process of literary creation provides
the theme and form of the novel; the major issues being rootlessness and search for
identity. The novel is autobiographical in nature and deals with such social issues like
women’s individuation, egalitarianism in the context of Canada’s divergent ethnic
culture and the literary validation of the Canadian experience for which Margaret
Laurence seeks to find resolution in *The Diviners*. In the view of Roger Matiz, Morag
symbolizes Canada itself. He rightly observes:

Morag[…](who) symbolizes Canada itself, investigates and
mythologizes her Scottish heritage and matures under the
domination of her English husband, but she eventually ejects
him for the authentic love of a Canadian Indian, who begets a
feisty personification of the racially and culturally unified
Canadian future (266).

Like Anita Desai, Margaret Laurence also excels in short-story writing. *A Bird in
the House* (1970) is a collection of eight short stories set in Manawaka. The collection
resembles a novel with its artistic cohesiveness in depicting Vanessa’s evolution as an
artist. Thus it could be called a gynocentric kunstlerroman dealing with issues of
creativity related to gender, growth, pleasure and pain amounting to a variety of artistic
and ideological assumptions and mythological authentication. *The Tomorrow Tamer
and Other Stories* (1963) is another short story collection set in Gold coast against the
background of colonial mentality which forms the major theme of these stories.
Anita Desai, Margaret Laurence’s literary genius extends to delight children also. *Jason’s Quest* (1970) is a children’s book which teaches the moral that knowledge can be got from books but wisdom can be acquired only from the experiences of life.

Anita Desai and Margaret Laurence exhibit a distinct and deep awareness of the social, cultural and economic realities around them with special emphasis on the impact of these factors on women characters, and they have also succeeded in transmuting them effectively into their literary experiences by assimilating the same in their fiction. Both have invested their work with multicultural perspective that widens and enlarges the frontiers of thought. Desai and Laurence show a marked resemblance in their treatment of women and their focus is on gynocentricism which means placing female human being at the center of one’s view of the world. These two fiction writers mainly explore the emotional world of women, revealing a rare imaginative awareness of various deeper forces at work and a profound understanding of feminine sensibility as well as psychology. Their novels are women-centered where women become the focal point and the stories are narrated from the women’s point of view. In addition to being gynocentric, their novels are also geo – centric in which nature is used as a back cloth for their works. Even a quick glance of their novels show their abundant application of flora and fauna and the elements of Nature which bring out the intrinsic features and the mind of their characters. They show a great influence of nature on their characters; sometimes nature is their friend or foe; at other times nature becomes a mere agent or a partaker and it holds high symbolic significance in their novels. The authors display a splendid artistic quality to suit their distinctive literary thought through their style and technique such as stream of consciousness technique, interior monologue, poetic style, suppression of plot, suppression of objective characters, descriptions and camera – eye technique. Moreover, symbols, imagery and appropriate settings are provided in the novels in order to bring
out the mental states of their characters. As novelists they have many distinguishing qualities, the chief among them being the subordination of the background to the character and the deft handling of language, imagery and syntax in order to convey the inner world of their characters. Thus it could be assessed that their works have originality and uniqueness. All these form the core of the comparative study of their novels.

Anita Desai’s substantial output is well received by both Indian and foreign critics. According to Narasimhan, the recurrent themes in the novels of Anita Desai are “the hazards and complexities of man-woman relationships, the bounding and nurturing of individuality and the establishing of individualism” (22). The works of Anita Desai is, as Ramachandra Rao observes, explore characters’ “identity, a study of their arrival at self-awareness” (213). Regarding Anita Desai’s use of imagery R.S Sharma says “there is a sustained effort in her writing to evolve a set of symbols, images or myths” (14). According to Madhusudan Prasad, “In her novels, she has generously employed symbols and images, charged with tremendous significance” (142). She presents the dilemma of modern man effectively. As Suresh Kohli points out, “No other writer is so much concerned with the life of young men and women in Indian critics as Anita Desai is” (14). Srinivasa Iyengar opines, “Her forte is the exploration of sensibility that is ill at ease in a sterile set up” (64).

Like Anita Desai’s novels, Margaret Laurence’s novels too have received a lot of critical acclaim. Her Manawaka novels offer to the readers “unforgettable portraits of women wrestling with their personal demons, striving through self-examination to find meaningful patterns in their lives” (Bailey 306). Margaret Laurence deals with two important issues in her novels namely “the female problem of a woman and the Canadian dilemma of identity, and attempts to discover in fictional modes to reconcile with both
the problems” (Salat 58). Her novels, says Usha Pathania, “probe deeper and deeper into the causes of a woman’s suffering in the context of interpersonal bonds” (41). Her novels steadily move towards “the discovery of the self, the landscape across which the journey takes place can never really be either geographical or cultural but the interior landscape which transcends all local, regional, nationalistic or cultural concerns” (Ramamurti 185-86). Clara Thomas sees the hallmark of Laurence’s fiction as “Perceptions and convictions about the dignity of men and women, their qualities of survival, and their need for freedom of the spirit” (48).

Though many critics have analysed the novels of Anita Desai and Margaret Laurence, very little attempt has been made so far in comparing the two novelists’ novels in the purview of gynocentricism, geocentricism, quest for identity and survival and style and technique. The present study is different from all other critical perspectives because it compares the female protagonists, their quest for identity and survival, significance of nature and the style and technique between the novels of these two great writers. As woman is the central focus of both the novelists gynocentricism forms the title of the next chapter.