It is a truth universally acknowledged that women, who are physically and mentally equipped to perform on par with men, have not only been denied existence as complete human beings, but also deprived of the opportunity to give expression to their feelings, their thoughts and their anguish.

As Sushila Singh puts it:

“Human experience for centuries has been synonymous with the masculine experience with the result that the collective image of humanity has been one sided and incomplete. Women have not been defined as a subject in her own right but merely have an entity that concerns man either in his real life or his fantasy life”.

The feminist movement, which started in the West in the 1960s, went a long way in arresting the injustice meted out to women. There had been an abundance of feminist writing which preceded and followed this movement, but there is much still left to be done to wipe out the age-old prejudices and misconceptions regarding women.

The term ‘feminism’ was first used by the nineteenth century French dramatist, Alexander Dumas, to refer to the then – emerging movement for women’s rights which was mostly limited to politics. It gradually spread across the world, securing complete rights for
women – political, social economic and educational. In the later part of the twentieth century, it swept across the world, shaking it out of its centuries - old complacency, making people think anew about age - old beliefs. In India, a population steeped in religious beliefs, superstition and tradition did not readily get influenced by this movement. The *Manu Smriti*, which has been widely accepted in India as a text laying down the rules of social behaviour, declares:

“Day and night, women must be kept in subordination to the males of the family: in childhood to the father, in youth to her husband, in old age to her sons. […]. Even though the husband be destitute of virtue and seeks pleasure elsewhere, he must be worshipped as God”.

Feminism, thus, plays little or no part in the lives of most Indians. A few Indian writers in English have attempted to challenge the age - old myths surrounding the man - woman relationship. Some have succeeded in their attempt, if not in finding an ideal solution, but, at least in creating an awareness of the exiting inequalities in society.

According to the historian Linda Gordan, feminism is “an analysis of women’s subordination for the purpose of figuring out how to change it”. Women constitute roughly half the world’s population, but their contribution in various fields of activity has been totally disproportionate to their numerical strength. Branded as the weaker sex they have been denied full justice – social, economic and political. An awareness of the inequalities present in society resulted in the Women’s Liberation Movement as late as the mid – nineteenth century. The credit for providing an impetus to such a movement must certainly go to pioneers like Simone de
Beauvoir, who sought to shatter the myth of femininity in her book, *The Second Sex*. First published in French in the year 1949, it was later translated into English making it accessible to the rest of the world. With frankness hitherto unheard of, she writes:

“All agree in recognizing the fact that female exists in the human species; today as always they make up about one-half of humanity. And yet we are told that femininity is in danger; we are exhorted to be women, remain women, and become women. It would appear, then, that every female human being is not necessarily a woman; to be so considered she must share in that mysterious and threatened reality known as femininity. Is this attributing something secreted by the ovaries? Or is it a platonic essence, a product of the philosophic imagination”.

Simon de Beauvoir draws heavily on various disciplines like biology, psychology and history to express her ideas clearly. She studies in detail issues like a girl’s education, marriage, prostitution, and domestic chores which she described as unpaid drudgery. She discusses frankly topics which were hitherto considered to be taboo – sexual initiation and sexual pleasure for women. She also seeks to debunk the sentimental propaganda about maternity.

Though Beauvoir’s book sowed the seeds for a revolution, it did not exactly initiate the Women’s Movement. The book which sparked off the Movement was Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique*, published in 1963. Fifteen years after graduating from college, Friedan conducted interviews with many of her erstwhile classmates and the results of this survey proved
that the general assumption of a woman achieving happiness and contentment in marriage and motherhood was false. Most of the women interviewed by Friedan were wives and mothers, ostensibly blessed with all the comforts of life. Yet the survey proved that they were merely playing the role of a devoted wife and loving mother and were supposed to seek fulfillment in it.

Friedan holds the view:

“For a woman, as for a man, the need for self-fulfillment – autonomy, self-realization, independence, individuality, self-actualization – is as important as the sexual need, with as serious consequences when it is thwarted. Women’s sexual problems are, in this sense, by-products of the suppression of her basic need to grow and fulfill her potentialities as a human being, potentialities which the mystique of feminine fulfillment ignores”.

Friedan’s book was followed by Kate Millet’s *Sexual Politics* in 1969. Millet is considered to be another important feminist of the twentieth century. She vociferously argues that in the patriarchal society, woman has been accorded a demeaning position. She gives a graphic explanation of the insecurities faced by woman and she anticipates the problem which society would face one day in the form of female foeticide with the result of rapid scientific development which would enable pre-natal sex determination tests.
She says:

“The gnawing suspicion that plagues any minority member, that myths propagated about his inferiority might after all be true often reaches remarkable proportions in the personal insecurities of women. Some find their subordinate position so hard to bear that they repress and deny its existence. But a large number will recognize and admit their circumstances when they are properly phrased. Of two studies which asked women if they would have preferred to be born male, one found that one fourth of one sample admitted as much, and in another sample, one half, when inquired of children, who have not yet developed as serviceable techniques of evasion, what this choice might be, if they had one, the answers of female children in a large majority of cases clearly favour birth into the elite group, where as boys overwhelmingly reject the option of being girls. The phenomenon of parents’ prenatal preferences for male issue is too common to require much elaboration. In the light of the imminent possibility of parents actually choosing the sex of their child, such a tendency is becoming the cause of some concern in scientific circles”.

Propagating the same brand of militant feminism, Germaine Greer feels that marriage as an institution must be abolished because, “If women are to affect a significant amelioration in their condition it seems obvious that they must refuse to marry”.
The Women’s Movement also produced a number of feminist novelists. Sylvia Plath’s *Bell Jar* took American women by storm. The novel depicts the transformation of the young, innocent and oppressed heroine, Esther, into a vengeful Diana. The novelist uses the exquisitely handcrafted mat made by Mrs. Willard, one of the characters in the book, to symbolise the oppression of women. This mat is not used for interior decoration as some object of art but rather as a kitchen mat to be soiled under the feet of Mr. Willard.

It makes Esther think:

“And I knew that in spite of all the roses and kisses and restaurant dinners a man showered on a woman before he married her, what he secretly wanted when the wedding service ended was for her to flatten out under his feet like Mrs. Willard’s kitchen mat”.

Other feminist novelists in the West like Margaret Drabble, Doris Lessing, Iris Murdoch, Marilyn French and Margaret Atwood have created a niche for themselves in the literature produced in this century. They have come a long way from the handicaps and constraints faced by their counterparts two hundred years ago. Women in those days did not dare defy the rigid norms laid down by society. While it was permissible for men to ignore social decorum and prudish notions of morality, a woman writer was expected to restrict herself only to certain areas of life. Even such writing was possible only after much sacrifice. Writing about women writers, Anne Stevenson comments:

“It is surprising how many spinster writers there have been: Jane Austen, Emily Bronte, Stevie Smith, Charlotte Mew, Mananne Moore, Elizabeth Bishop. These women may have suffered, but they suffered as women
who attempted neither to fight male domination nor compromise themselves to suit it. Theirs was a narrow independence, even a selfish one, but it was real. It was bought at the price of what used to be called ‘Womanliness’ - sex, marriage, children and the socially acceptable position of a wife’.

Society has undergone a great change since then. No longer do women writers have to assume pseudonyms, as in the case of George Eliot, to shield their identity. Women writers today enjoy a relatively greater measure of freedom and do not hesitate to explore regions of experience, which were earlier considered taboo. Even in a conservative nation like India, we now have Shobha De who has dared to enter the exclusively male domain of pornography and become a commercial success.

Feminism as an expression of resentment, at the unjust treatment meted out to women is reflected in world literature today. In India also the feminist ideas highlighted in the works of Simone de Beauvoir, Betty Friedan, Germaine Greer and a number of other feminists affected the consciousness of many learned intellectuals, particularly women writers. Indian women writers Kamala Markandya, Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, Nayantara Sahgal, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande and Bharati Mukerjee have done remarkable contributions to social changes by providing role models for the oppressed women.

The writers’ attempt to delve deep into the inner consciousness of their women protagonists marks the beginning of the progress of Indian women’s writing. The writers
mentioned turned their attentions to explore women’s inner selves, their emotional involvement and disturbances, and their reactions and responses to domestic and social problems. Woman is the central figure in their novels.

Feminism is a significant ideology that is rapidly developing in the modern age. It emerged as a concept in the West with women and the concern for the status of women in society as the nucleus. It later developed into women’s rights movement with the remarkable goals of emancipation of women, enhancing the superb ideas of an egalitarian society where the dialectics of male dominance and female subordination are erased.

The term ‘feminism’ has received a flux of meanings fraught with controversies. The Oxford English Dictionary defines ‘feminism’ as the state of being feminine or womanly. In the 19th Century, the word ‘feminism’ was used in French medical terminology to signify abnormal sexualism in both men and women. The Webster’s Dictionary versions of the term ‘feminism’ are (a) the principle that ‘women should have political rights equal to those of men; (b) the movement to give such rights for women. In the 20th Century the term got new perspectives other than its restrictive meaning as a movement for equal rights Sushila Singh in Feminism, Theory, Criticism, Analysis states: “the word ‘Feminism’ however must be understood in its broadest sense as an intense awareness of identity as a woman, and interest in feminine problems. Its meaning should not be restricted to the advocacy of women’s rights.” (21)

Indian writers writing in English present varying and conflicting images of woman in their works. On one hand Indian woman has been depicted as an embodiment of power- “Shakti” on the other hand, she is described as a second class human being. However, in recent years writers particularly Indian women
writers writing in English repudiate these images. In their works, woman emerges as an individual 
challenging her existential survival. Writers like Kamla Maikanday, Shobha De, Namita Gokhale, 
Gita Mehta, Uma Vasudev, Anita Desai, Bharati Mukhejee, Kamala Das, Nina Sibal, Shashi Deshpande 
and Kalini Sen Gupta aim at catching the whole woman alive in terms of feeling, intellect and emotions. 
Their major concern has been the Indian woman's search for identity by setting her against her millieu. 
Though writing in English these writers very skillfully and successfully capture the Indian ethos. At the 
same time, they show their deep insight into human nature, and their understanding of day-to-day 
problems.

In general, however, western feminists far outnumber their Indian counterparts and are a 
lot more stridently feminist in their approach. In India, the first generation of Indian writers in 
of material in the form of the freedom struggle and the women involved in it seemed to have 
escaped their notice. Anand, obviously, had been too deeply involved in championing the cause 
of the underdog in society to pay attention to the travails of women. His protagonist Gauri in *The 
Old Woman and the Cow*, however, is a fine example of his idea of women’s emancipation. 
However, at least some of Narayan’s women characters of everyday life try to assert themselves 
in their desire for a career or their need for physical gratification. If he has portrayed the meek 
and submissive woman in Margayya’s wife in his novel *The Financial Expert* and Savitri in 
*The Dark Room*, he has also created vibrant and sometimes radical women characters like Daisy 
and Rosie in his novels, *The Painter of Signs* and *The Guide* respectively. These heroines, 
however, are not role models whose experiences are meant to be emulated. Talking of Daisy, 
Shantha Krishnaswamy says:
“She is unique in that she is able to cast aside all culturally imposed feelings of guilt and shame on womanhood and sex. Narayan, however, in depriving her of personal fulfillment in marriage and domesticity, warns us about the excesses of rampant feminism which would lead to a destructive or deathlike androgynous blurring of the two sexes”.

The women in Raja Rao’s fiction are reduced to mere automatons. Those of his women characters, who aspire for more, end up feeling bitter like Saroja or settle for passivity like Savitri, dutifully playing her role as the wife of a government officer in *The Serpent and the Rope*. The women in his novels are victims of domestic injustice and tyrannical tradition, but he proposes no solution to their dilemma. This may be because as Shanta Krishnaswamy says,

“The culture he springs from and which he has imbibed so thoroughly in his entire being, precludes Rao from resolving the woman’s issue in concrete terms”.

In Bhabani Bhattacharya’s novels, woman is the epitome of all virtues and plays an important role in bringing about social reform. But in spite of being pure and noble, she is victimized. Kajoli, in *So Many Hungers!*, reveals an unconquerable spirit in the face of endless suffering and misery. The city - bred Mohini in *Music for Mohini* transforms the village, Behula, symbolic of a country steeped in superstition and obsolete customs, into a model village with the help of her progressive - minded husband. However, it may be said that ‘the picture he
paints of the woman is idyllic, tender and charming, sometimes even too optimistic to be realistic’.

Thus, while writing about women, men tend to go to extremes - either highlighting their weaknesses or deifying them and putting them on a pedestal, making the characters seem unreal. Women writers, on the other hand, are more honest in their portrayal of women in their novels. Kamala Markandaya very successfully portrays the double pulls that the Indian woman is subjected to – between her desire to assert her dignity as human being and her duty as a daughter, wife and mother. She also points out how the distortions in the economic and social order affect women more than men. Through her protagonist Rukmani in *Nectar in a Sieve*, she proves that within the traditional role, she can accommodate her other roles as a human being, and not through alienation and self-laceration, but through expansion and communion a deeper self-knowledge can be attained. Another example is Sarojini in *A Silence of Desire*, who is determined to overcome her problems in her own way. It is perhaps only in *Possession* that Markandaya transforms the traditionally suppressed woman into a domineering and tyrannical possessor. In most of her other novels, however, the woman is a source of dormant strength and shores up the male protagonist from collapse.

Anita Desai explores the disturbed psyche of the modern Indian women. Her protagonists are usually highly intelligent and sensitive women who end up exhausted and on the verge of mental crisis in their attempt to manage a home and children and find emotional fulfillment. They usually resort to drastic steps when their predicament reaches a climax. Maya in *Cry, the Peacock* is a highly sensitive, caring woman bound in marriage to the practical, down-to-earth
lawyer Gautama, who remains totally oblivious to his wife’s emotional needs. Physically and emotionally, her body and mind crave for attention, the denial of which leads to dire consequences with Gautama being pushed to his death by her. *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* describes the gnawing void in the life of Sita by reviewing her life as a woman, wife and mother. It is an intense story of a middle-aged woman torn between her desire to abandon her comfortable, albeit boring, existence and the realization that the bonds that bind her to it cannot easily be broken. Desai, in all her novels, presents the predicament of sensitive women characters, who find it very difficult to adjust themselves in the present mechanical and urbanized set up. She, however, makes no attempt to find solutions to their various problems.

Ruth Prawer Jhabvala is mostly preoccupied with the travails of the white women in India. She writes predominantly from her own viewpoint with her bitter experiences in an alien land. Her portrayal of women is very limited and narrow, and provokes Shanta Krishnaswamy to comment that

“Her examples of women in her fiction seem to make people unacquainted with India believe that all Indian women are contemptible, flighty or neurotic and pathetic creatures”.

Nayantara Sahgal, another prominent Indian woman writer, started writing before the feminist movement was launched in the sixties. Yet she has dealt with problems concerning women which went on to become major issues in the feminist movement. She writes sensitively of the way women suffer owing to sexist bias in a patriarchal set-up. In *The Day in Shadow*, she gives a sensitive account of the suffering of a woman in Indian society when she chooses to
divorce her husband. The protagonist Simrit feels diminished and humiliated not only by the stigma attached to divorce but also by the cruel ‘consent terms’ of the divorce which compel her to pay a staggering amount of tax on an income she cannot even use. The novel, however, cannot be labeled feminist because Simrit, in spite of her liberated way of thinking, does not have the courage to stand without male support. If it is not her husband Som, it is Raj, who she later depends on to solve her problems. In *Rich Like Us*, Ram inflicts great emotional violence on both his wives Mona and Rose. Though both the women are aware of the injustice done to them, habit makes them willing victims of exploitation and injustice. Sahgal, it must be observed, works out her feminist ideas in a limited world. She usually restricts herself to the study of women of one class -- the elite. She makes a close and sensitive study of the sufferings of the women of this class and shows how they refuse to remain chained to their subordinate roles and how they defy traditional norms in search of emancipation. Most of her works, however, also deal with the impersonal world of politics in a story running parallel to the main theme of the personal world of man-woman relationships.

Though not an avowed feminist, Shashi Deshpande occupies a significant place among the contemporary women novelists who concern themselves with the problems of women and their quest for identity. Deshpande’s creative talent and accomplishment have established her credentials as a worthy successor and contemporary to the writers mentioned above. Her protagonists are modern, educated young women, crushed under the weight of a male-dominated and tradition-bound society. Her attempt to give an honest portrayal of their sufferings, disappointments and frustrations makes her novels susceptible to treatment from the feminist
angle. She, however, maintains that her novels are not intended to be read as feminist texts. This is evident from what she says:

“A woman who writes of women’s experiences often brings in some aspects of those experiences that have angered her, roused her strong feelings. I don’t see why this has to be labelled feminist fiction”.

Ibsen, who heralded the idea of woman’s emancipation with his character, Nora, in *A Doll’s House*, also disclaims any connection with women’s rights. In a banquet held in his honour by the Norwegian Society for Women’s Rights, he says: “Of course, it is incidentally desirable to solve the problem of women; but that has not been my whole object. My task has been the portrayal of human beings”.

While it may not have been Deshpande’s intention to propound any particular theory, even a cursory reading of her novels displays a tremendous amount of sympathy for women. Most of her protagonists are educated and exposed to western ideas. As Ramamoorthy puts it, “Her heroines speak of Virginia Woolf’s *Room of One’s Own* and Betty Friedan and it becomes obvious that the women she has created are feminists if she is not one”.

Moreover, the attitudes and reactions of her protagonists to various issues related to women who are caught between tradition and modernity do provide ample material for treatment from a feminist angle.
One of the fundamental and rudimental concerns of feminism is to expose that a woman is a being. She is not an accompaniment of man. A woman is not the ‘other’; she is not an addition to man. She is an autonomous being, capable of through trial and defect, finding her own way to liberation. It is authentic that feminism in its early stages thought of Amazon Utopias, an all – female world where men have external limited activities.

Shashi Deshpande’s novels deal with the image of women in general and, at the same time, tries to explain how the change has taken place in women through the centuries, laying more stress on the 20th century change. Our society characterises woman as ideally sympathetic, gentle, warm, passive and dependent. Domestic life and the work patterns evince the concept that woman should be subordinate to and dependent on man. The great philosophers who have immensely contributed to the existing values of life have paradoxically treated woman as an object to be used by man. Woman is “God’s second mistake”, said Nietzsche. To Aristotle, “Woman is an inferior to man”. He again says that “the female is female by virtue of certain lack of qualities”. Schopenhauer says, “Woman is by nature meant to obey”. In Hamlet, Shakespeare refers it as, “Frailty, thy name is woman”. Shakespeare stands up to every critical approach including the sociological one. He is not a feminist. Even then, he concedes the notion of hegemony in The Taming of the Shrew where he makes Katherina council her daughter: “thy husband is thy lord, thy life, thy keeper, thy head, thy sovereign”. In Indian Vedic age Manu, the law giver of Hindu Dharma Shastra, clearly assigns woman subordinate position to man: “Day and night woman must be kept in subordination to the males of the family in childhood to the father, in youth to her husband, in old age to her sons[…]. Even though the husband be destitute of virtue and seeks pleasure elsewhere, he must be worshipped as God”.
In our society woman had no right to read the Vedas and so literacy became a rare quality in woman. The Digambra Jains held the view that woman can never attain salvation except by being reborn as men. All these definitions about woman’s conduct, behaviour and existence were given by men. But these notions began to change under the Western influence, coming through liberal education, forced new values and norms of life upon women. It became a time of social, cultural, economical and political change. In spite of the educational opportunities and economic independence women became conscious of their status. They took pen in their hands and started writing. The writers of the contemporary world came out swiftly from historical romance and mythic stories and presented the realities of the life of women. As the image of woman, family and society kept on changing all through the years, the writers’ views, too, were all changing result in a variety of realistic images.

Shashi Deshpande, one of the living dynamic women writers in Indian English Literature, born in Dharwad, India, is the daughter of the renowned Kannada dramatist and as well as a great Sanskrit scholar Sri Ranga or Adya Rangacharya. Deshpande is a graduate in Economics and Law. She pursued her education in Dharwad, Bombay and Bangalore. Her writing career began in 1970, initially with short stories. Her maiden collection of short stories was published under the title Legacy in the year 1978. Later, she has published many novels.

novels - *If I Die Today* (1982) and *Come Up and Be Dead* (1983) - and six volumes of short stories. Besides this, Deshpande has been actively involved in writing books for children.

Deshpande had written a novel titled *That Long Silence* which brought her lot of praise and appreciation. In fact, for her fabulous work in the novel, she received the Sahitya Akademi Award and Nanjangud Thirumalamba Award.

Her novel *That Long Silence* was translated into Hindi, Marathi, Malayalam, Tamil, Urdu, German, Dutch, Finnish, Danish, and Kannada. Her ninety short stories have also been translated into many languages. Her first novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors* was made into a full length feature film and she has also written a script for a feature film (Dristi). Her writings are complex but seamlessly woven narratives which explore the life of people specially woman.

The present study aims at evaluating Deshpande’s potential as a serious writer genuinely concerned with women’s issues. Trapped between tradition and modernity, her women Protagonists undergo great mental trauma in their quest for identity before they affirm themselves. A close study of her novels will reveal as to how well and how far she has been able to voice their concerns. *Roots and Shadows* (1983) her first novel, depicts the agony and suffocation experienced by protagonist Indu in a male-dominated and tradition-bound society. *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980), her second novel, is all about male ego where in, the male refuses to play a second fiddle role in marriage. *That Long silence* (1989), her third novel is about self-doubts and fears which Jaya undergoes till she affirms herself. *The Binding Vine* (1993), her fourth novel, deals with the personal tragedy of the protagonist Urmil to focus
attention on victims like Kalpana and Mira, the Victims of Man’s lust and Woman’s helplessness.

In her novel, *A Matter of Time*, Deshpande for the first time enters into the Metaphysical world of Philosophy. It is about three women from three generations of the same family and the way they cope with the tragedy that overwhelms them. *Small Remedies*, her latest novel, is about Savitribai Indorekar, the aging Doyenne of Hindustani Music, who avoids marriage and home to pursue her genius.

Except for a handful of critical articles and reviews full-fledged study of her novels has not been evaluated even after two decades of the appearance of her first novel *Roots and Shadows* (1983). Since, she is a woman writer with a broad humanistic outlook, a threadbare exposition of her novels from the viewpoint of feminist is rendered imminent.

Shashi Deshpande holds great worth as an Indian English Woman novelist. She is the only Indian author to have made bold attempts at giving a voice to the disappointments and frustrations of women despite her vehement denial of being a feminist.

Anita Desai relates herself to the high aesthetic values of literature. Most vital among these in her artistic power of applying the basic values of life to her novels successfully, making her achievement unique. Desai introduces in her novels a neo-psychological vein and projects a sensibility, which does not occur in other Indo-Anglican writers of fiction. She mainly lays stress on the art of characterization. She is deeply indulgent in the analysis of her characters and the
anecdotes are significant, as they reflect the obsessions and suppressions of her characters. R.K. Gupta states:

Anita Desai’s work is executed so thoroughly that her treatment gets the look of a philosophical system – a system which has been familiar to the world in the shape of “Existentialism”. In the 1950’s and 1960’s existential philosophy was quite fashionable urban-educationists. And she finds its theory suitable to her themes, as it is obvious in the total framework of her stories. This specific phase of existentialism –“the one alone, the man who has no record – appears to be a favourite subject of Desai’s novels. (Perspective 2-3)

Desai was born on June 24, 1937 at Mussorie, a hill station to the North of Delhi. She was the daughter of D.N.Mazumdar, a Bengali businessman and Toni Nime of German origin. She had started to write in English even at the age of seven and published her first story at the age of nine. At this stage itself she had read *Wuthering Heights* and was nurtured in the world of Brontes. At twenty she read the novels of D.H. Lawrence, Virginia Woolf, Henry James and Marcel Proust which exercised a deep impression on her.

As an Indian novelist and short story writer, Desai is noted for her sensitive portrayal of the inner life of her female characters. Most of Desai’s novels explore tensions between members of the family and alienation of middle class women. In her later novels Desai has dealt with such themes as German anti-Semitism, the demise of traditions and the western stereotyped views of India. Desai has been a member of the Advisory Board for English of the National
Academy of Letters in Delhi and member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters. In 1993, she became a creative writer at Massachusetts.

As an Indian novelist she focuses on middle class women. Desai’s style can best be approached from her own statement, “It is the movement of the wing one tries to capture, and not the bird. That is what a writer’s work is all about. He connects, he connects, all the time he connects” (Writers Problem 226).

Desai made her debut in 1963 with *Cry, the Peacock*. It deals with marital discord. This is the story of Maya, the story of her married life with Gautama. There is the exploration of the human psyche in Maya’s self-examination. Almost the entire story is remembrance of things past by Maya herself. The action of the novel takes place in Delhi. The brooding darkness is more potent that the outer forms and noises. Maya’s husband Gautama is a buddy, rich middle aged lawyer. She approaches an astrologer who prophesies death either for the wife or the husband four years after the marriage celebration. Three years they have lived together. The crucial fourth year is still upon them. The sense of spiritual reflection is keenly depicted. One day in the course of a dust storm, they are apart. They go up to the balcony and there Maya, in a fit of frenzy, pushes him and he falls down. Three days later, Gautama’s mother and sister take her to her father’s house at Lucknow, and it is tacitly understood that she will have to be put in an asylum. There is a sense in incompleteness in action and characterization, idea and symbol, but still it is a novel with great amplitude and is quite characteristic of Anita Desai’s specific talent.
In Desai’s second novel *Voices in the City* (1965), there is the delineation of the world-weary character. The double identification of Nirode’s mother *Voices in the City* with Kali, and Kali with death, so there is an organic relationship between an action and characterization. The central insight is that Calcutta is the city of noises and muffled voices, the city of death. Calcutta is no longer the city of joy. Kali the mother is also annihilation. The Maya-Gautama tragedy is re-enacted in Monisha-Jiban marriage in *Voices in the City*, because Monisha commits suicide unable to stand the strain of living in her husband’s house. Monisha’s brother, Nirode, and her sister Amla, are also in Calcutta and the greater part of the novel is devoted to Nirode’s experiments with failure. Everywhere one can hear only the hopeless wailing of the helpless, or the moan of the dying or the mute stare of the dead.

In her third novel *Bye Bye Blackbird* (1975), Desai moves out of familiar Delhi and Calcutta and clearly projects the physical and psychological prison in which the coloured immigrant in Britain is caught, and both the difficulties of adjustment there and those of return to India. In England’s green land, not many black birds are able to make their permanent nest, its salutary environment attracts some like Dev, but creates dislike and homesickness in others like Adit. The author forges against this background, her diverse and powerful theme, through vivid portrayal of Indian characters steeped in hatred of England. The stubborn ones only stay on; England says good bye to others. The black birds fly back home. This novel highlights the problem of the coloured in England, often complicated by inter-racial marriage.

Her fourth novel *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* (1975) has been compared to Virginia Woolf’s *To the Light House*, Margaret Atwood’s *Surfacing* and even Shakespeare’s
The Tempest. The heroine, who is in her fifth pregnancy, leaves her husband in a mood of uneasiness and goes to seek peace in an island, Manori, of Bombay where her father had once reigned as the local patriarch. The heroine, strangely enough, is named Sita and her husband is Raman. The novel is admirably structured in three parts from Monsoon or the present, Sita travels back to winter; and thesis and antithesis have confronted each other. Sita knows full well that Manori has changed and is certainly unacceptable to her children, and thus create some understanding with Raman and the world of Bombay is possible. Sita neither kills nor commits suicide; she does not go mad either. She sees everything and endures.

Her sixth novel Fire on the Mountain (1977), has bagged the Sahitya Academy Award. The scene shifts to Kasauli on Simla Hills. The central characters are three: Nandakaul, her great grand-daughter, Raka and Nanda’s old friend, Ila Das. Though the three are physically near to one another, they live in their separate loneliness, making but feeble and vain attempts to establish bridges of understanding. Nanda and Raka both hug their privacy. Nanda and Ila Das lack total sincerity and so every move for understanding each other becomes a new exercise in frustration.

In her next novel Clear Light of Day (1980), she extends the theme of the futility of living (married or single) with even greater force. Tara who is married to a successful diplomat and is the mother of two charming daughters is however bitten by a destructive sense of failure, since she has been of no help to her problem-ridden parental home. On the other hand, her unmarried sister Bim, a lecturer in a Delhi college has sacrificed herself to the drudgery of looking after a mad aunt and a brother who has refused to grow up. The other brother, Raja, who
often quotes poetry, has married a Muslim and gone away. The novel describes Tara’s visit to her parental home, rich with childhood memories, the stirring of the rotten drain of the unconscious, the sudden insights and the nameless regrets. With Bim, it was a question of somebody of having to shoulder the family responsibilities, and circumstances have made her do it. Tara’s coming then for a holiday and their unsatisfactory conversation prove to be needless scrubbing for Bim’s bruised heart. She cannot forgive Raja. She does not entertain any hatred for him. Bim impatiently pines for the reopening of the College, so that she may once more lose herself in routine, schedules, time table, rules and analysis.

Desai’s novel *The Village by the Sea* (1982) submitted “An Indian Family Story” appeared in London. It poignantly narrates the story of Lila aged thirteen, and her brother Hari, aged twelve, who having fallen on evil days, look after their younger sisters. It is difficult for them to run the house, as their father is unemployed and dipsomaniac and their mother is ill. Lila stays at home and Hari goes to Bombay where he becomes a servant in a restaurant. Panwala, a watchmaker instills confidence in him and trains him in repairing watches. Lila also brings about a change in her father who gives up drinking and devotes his energies to look after his ailing wife. On his return, Hari looks forward to setting up a watch repairing shop in Thul. In this novel Desai vividly captures the Bombay scenery.

*In Custody* (1984) is Desai iron story about literary traditions and academic illusions. The central characters are Nur, an Urdu poet, who has fallen on hard times and Deven, a professor of Hindi, who realizes that the beloved poet is not the beloved poet is not the magical genius he has imagined.
The author’s own German half of the parental heritage is in the background of Baumgartner’s Bombay (1988). Desai’s first language was German. It is the story of a retired Jewish businessman who has escaped in his youth from the Nazis. He comes to India and stays there in poverty, taking care of stray cats. A German hippie enters Baumgartner’s life and his reclusive existence is shattered.

Desai’s novels centre on existential concerns and are marked by their psychological depth and lyrical beauty. Her fictional canvas however is very narrow, as she finds it more worthwhile to explore a very limited space in human territory than she can be compared to Jane Austen who never ventured beyond the social concerns of her characters covering a large area. In order to compensate for the diminution of narrative structure and to lead depth and intensity to her fictional world, she turns to images and symbols. This mode gives ample scope for introspection, analysis, reflection and reverse.

Desai is a talented novelist who has imparted psychological depth to the Indian English novel. She explores with rare insight and observation of the complexities and intricacies of the human psyche. Her favourite themes – man-woman relationship, alienation, east-west encounter, violence and death are suffused with psychological implications. As Desai has close affinity with psychological novelists, in respect of themes and techniques, she literally uses symbols spontaneously and subconsciously. *Voices in the city* symbolize the varied voices of sensitive souls, which are futile and meaningless in the City of Death and Despair, Calcutta. The island of Manori in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*
Anita Desai’s ‘Fictional philosophy’ seems to crystallize in the novel, *Where shall We Go This Summer?* Sita, the protagonist has had a strange, unusual childhood spent amidst crowds without having any sense of identity or belonging. Her father, a freedom fighter, who settles later in an Island to carry out his social and spiritual experiments and her sister and brother are all alien and enigmatic to her. The neglect, the confusion and the isolation she suffered during her formative years makes her a very unpredictable, excessively emotional and intolerant woman. The story centres on Sita’s apathy, listlessness, “her insane” wish to keep her fifth child within the womb, and her fervent search for a meaningful existence. She goes back to the Island in order to find an answer to her dilemma but realizes that it can, no more sustain her confused and muddled spirit than the main land itself from which she ran away. She accepts her defeat gracefully and returns with her husband to Bombay.

The images in the novel help us to trace the theme of escape and reconciliation through the ‘Spiritual voyage’ of Sita. The Island is the controlling metaphor and symbol in the novel. Her life in the city is depicted mainly through the images of violence and her island life is teems with images of sea, sunshine, colour and flowers. It reveals the sense of gaiety, freedom and regeneration experienced by Sita and at the same time reveals the fine poetic sensibility and her acute awareness of the delicate, the beautiful and the sensuous in nature. The entire novel takes place against the background of the sea as it is present both in the Island and in the mainland.

In Desai’s novels, there is always a close correspondence between the mood or the psychic state of the character and nature. Nature participates in the human drama and highlights the mental state of the characters. In addition to violence around her, the ‘emptiness’ of her life
disturbs Sita. Anita Desai employs many images to bring out the futility and meaninglessness of her life and marriage. Images of darkness abound in this part of the novel after Sita’s return to the Island. As Madhusudan Prasad points out, “The house image is rich in symbolic evocation and is artistically contained in such a fashion as it line up the theme with psychological character of Sita”. (68)

Desai’s novels are concerned with the portrayal of the most troubled part of her protagonist’s life. The subject of interest in all Desai’s novels is the individual and her forte is the exploration of the inner sensibility of the individual. She is a subjective writer and also a powerful creative artist, whose writings have attracted critical attention in India and abroad. The recognition of the depth and variety in Desai’s novels testified by the fact that scholarship has been continuously growing upon her work. A study of her novels proves that she is mainly inclined to probe women’s psyche. She mainly focuses on the trials and tribulations, fears and apprehensions, joys and hopes, dilemma and predicaments, perplexities and paradoxes, in the physical and psychological lives of her characters in general and the protagonists in particular, to mirror the multi-dimensional reality in all its contours. In her novel the reader is brought face to face with the legitimate longings, dreams, hopes, fears, disappointments, and traumatic experiences that have been that the lot of women, hitherto ignored or trampled upon deliberately or callously by a patriarchal society. She turns aside from the main tradition of characterization like other Indian writers in English.

*Voices in the City* presents the plight of two women doomed and circumscribed in the claustrophobic space of Calcutta which is described as the City of Death. Monisha’s situation is a
typical representation of the social situation of numerous young brides in India who, unable to bear endless torment, provocation and pinching behaviour of the husband’s family members, end up as cases of bride-burning, suicide or self immolation. Monisha’s relationship with her husband is characterized only by loneliness and lack of proper understanding. The oppressive lack of privacy, her sterility and her in-laws suspicion, the absence of love and understanding for her and the resultant loneliness, within and without, go to make Monisha a pathetic figure. She realizes that there is no escape from her fate and she becomes a “Sleep walker, ghost, some unknown and dread entity” (VC 146). She develops into an incurable claustrophobic and commits suicide. Monisha is aware of the fact that it is a choice between death and mean existence. Her death, more than anything else in the novel, is the subject of great social significance.

The thesis seeks to investigate prevailing critical attitudes toward feminism and feminist texts. Furthermore, this thesis seeks to answer the question of whether a feminine form exists, and if so, to what extent gender affects literary form. Thus the latter part draws upon and challenges the scholarship of Anita Desai and ShasiDeshpande. Finally, the project seeks to appropriate aesthetics for postcolonial feminism, and ultimately suggests that it is in the interstices of feminism, post colonialism, and narratology that the ethical writers find the beginning.

Both narrative and feminist modes of critique have become increasingly prominent in recent decades; however, the impulses underlying these approaches remain at odds. Feminist critics build their work on the promise of heterogeneity the conviction that both the excavation of
difference and discursive constructions of difference will lead to gender equity. While narrative theorists seek homogeneity, creating categories based on the differences they perceive among narrative forms. In short, feminist critics approach texts inductively, or from perception to representation, with the former being our perceived social reality and the latter being narrative representation. In contrast, narrative theorists often begin their analyses at the level of the narrative, with the implication that either they or readers will draw conclusions based on these narratives about the perceived world. It is my project, then, to reconcile these approaches: by illuminating the reasons for the differing analytical modes Society has undergone a great change since feministic writing. No longer do women writers have to assume pseudonyms, as in the case of George Eliot, to shield their identity. Women writers today enjoy a relatively greater measure of freedom and do not hesitate to explore regions of experience, which were earlier considered taboo. Even in a conservative nation like India, we now have Shobha De who has dared to enter the exclusively male domain of pornography and become a commercial success.

Anita Desai explores the disturbed psyche of the modern Indian women. Her protagonists are usually highly intelligent and sensitive women who end up exhausted and on the verge of mental crisis in their attempt to manage a home and children and find emotional fulfilment. They usually resort to drastic steps when their predicament reaches a climax.

This thesis is organized as hereunder. The first chapter traces the history of Indian writing in English, Indian English Novels and introduces the authors with brief note on their major writings. The Second chapter reads Feminine Perspective in Shashi Deshpande’s That Long Silence and Anita Desai’s Cry, the Peacock. The third chapter reads Feminine Perspective in The
Dark Holds no Terrors, Where shall we go This Summer?. The fourth chapter deals with the novels The Binding Vine, The Voices in the City. The fifth chapter sums up the preceding chapters and rounds off the study with a conclusion and suggestions for further research. A list of Works Cited is appended to the thesis.

The thesis has been written and documented according to the guidelines provided by the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers* by Joseph Gibaldi, 7th edition (New Delhi: Affiliated East-West, 2004)