Chapter V

THE WOMAN IN THE WORKS OF THE NOVELISTS FROM 1951 TILL 1980

The women characters in the novels of 1951 onwards find themselves in a strange situation. On the one hand, they are expected to perform a multitude of tasks both in the house and outside it; on the other hand, they are expected to be docile housewives, conventional and traditional - as it has been in the society. A fallout of these conflicting expectations brings about a steady erosion in the man-woman relationship. It is obvious that over the years, a woman's position in society has undergone a vast change; but a closer look would reveal that there is still a tendency in some of the characters to hold on to the old tradition - as we see it around us, too. But, on the whole, expectations from women have certainly grown; for they have evolved into a new awareness and they have begun to ask the kind of radical questions that none of the heroines of the pre-thirties' novels was permitted to ask. Society of course, still regard women as the moral strength; but it is obviously not sufficient protection from society's pitfalls and dangers. Women are simultaneously the supporting pillars and the helpless parasites of society; and some of the most interesting writings of this period question and attack this disparity between man and woman as well as the concept of male dominance. And this
criticism not only shakes the structure of the family, but the structure of society as well. 1

Anyway, the old stereotype of the female character with strict moral divisions is gone; they have broken through the constricting bounds of conventional reticence and have emerged as the New Women (like Daisy and Rosie whom I have already discussed in the previous chapter) - women who are terrifyingly frank about themselves, their physical and emotional needs. They no longer accept the established order of women in society, but demand greater freedom of thought and action, and greater emancipation. They aim at taking their position in society freely, not by the side of their man, but free and independent, protected by law. They are ready to face aspects of female thoughts and behaviour which had previously been denied them, denied for the most part opportunities for an identity other than that of wife and mother. Now they attempt to find their own level in the society. Relationships between husband and wife, parents and children, home and family are explored. Individual relationship between man and woman is given importance by isolating and examining them closely. Their intimate and sexual life is written about in detail. These women reflect the dream, the yearning for identity in a world that has been fast losing its ancient moral code and customs. But along with this new
...ound freedom, there is also a catastrophe which has developed side by side – that of mental breakdown, madness, suicide, which the new women are helpless victims of, as in Anita Desai and Bharati Mukherjee's novels which I will be discussing in this chapter. This perhaps is the common penalty the new women must pay for their attempts at emancipation.

Attia Hosain's *Phoenix Fled* and other stories appeared in 1953, and in 1961 appeared her first novel *Sunlight on a Broken Column*. Here we see the conflict on the personal level – the woman character, Laila's fulfilment as against the expectation of the family and society. Her search for personal fulfilment brings her much pain and displeasure from her family members; but for Laila it is important to search for an identity of her own, and not be influenced by her family and society in which she was born.

Set against a changing political background, it is an autobiographical novel, the narrator heroine being Laila herself. Fifteen years old and an orphan in the beginning, and brought up by her rich, influential and cultured relatives, she spends the impressionable years of her life in Lucknow, in an orthodox Muslim family. Although aware of the fast changing political scene outside the four walls of her home, Laila does not take active part in it; but she is influenced by the impact
of the west on her; and her ideas and opinions are a strong
influence of the western education she had. She is also
aware of the suppression, the enforced purdah system in their
home. She rebels against this mute acceptance by the women­
folk in the family, especially where marriage is concerned.
Laila rebels against the false code of honour and hypocrisy
built by the men for their wives and daughters, when they
themselves lead a free and loose life, keeping courtesans.
Women are taught to accept everything without questioning, as
Uncle Mohsin says when choosing a husband for Zahra, Laila's
cousin -

Is the girl to pass judgement on her elders?
Doubt their capability to choose? Question
their decision, choose their own husbands?²

Certainly not! In the traditional society husbands are to be
chosen by the elders only and every chance at a prospective
groom is grabbed, for it is difficult to find suitable young men.

And when he strikes at the servant girl, Nandi,
towards whom he made sexual advances, Laila is enraged and
shouts at him that she hates him. But she is made to
apologise for her behaviour by her Aunt Abida,
My dear, there are certain rules of conduct that must be observed in this world without question .... never forget the traditions of your family no matter to what other influences you may be exposed .... never forget the family into which you were born ....

This shows how a woman's individuality is totally ignored by the tradition-bound society. And Nandi very bitterly concludes in her opinion of the opposite sex,

A man's love is no different from an animal's.
He takes what he can get, because he is not the one who has to bear the consequence. It is the injustice of the gods that a woman alone must be fearful.

Unlike Laila's other cousins who eagerly and happily look forward to marriage, Laila protests,

I won't be paired off like an animal.
How could you sit there listening to them talking as if you were a bit of furniture to be sold to the highest bidder? How can you bear the idea of just any man?
Here we see the protests of a woman who wants to be herself, to ignore the dictates of society. Sita, Laila's best friend agrees to marry the man her parents choose, although she is in love with another, and Laila is shocked. But Sita merely answers "... I must end it. Can't you see I must not be free to hope?" (p. 216). When at the age of nineteen, Laila falls in love with Ameer, not of the same social status, Laila is ready to sacrifice her all for an uncertain, insecure future. But her decision arouses strong opposition from the family. Aunt Abida reminds her that -

Some things never change. You must learn that your 'self' is of little importance. It is only through service to others that you can fulfil your duty.

She is not used to fight conventions, to defy people openly. She expresses her mental state to Ameer.

I have no courage, Ameer. I have never done anything I believed in ... I have never been allowed to make decisions; they are always made for me. In the end not only one's actions but one's mind is crippled. I want to cry out, 'You are crushing me, destroying my individuality'.


However, in the conflict between society and the individual, the latter wins. Laila marries Ameer in spite of her family's strong disapproval, 'You have been defiant and disobedient. You have put yourself above your duty to the family' (p. 312) says Aunt Abida to Laila and Laila knows reconciliation is no longer possible between them for Aunt Abida was a part of a way of thinking that Laila had long back rejected. She makes the final choice - of her personal fulfilment as opposed to family loyalty. Here we see the individualist feminist ideal in conflict with the tradition of the patriarchal society.

Laila marries Ameer. However, her triumph is short-lived, for Ameer's untimely death brings her back to the deserted family house. By the end of the novel, Laila marries again, this time to her cousin Asad, who apparently has been waiting for her all his life. It is true, Attia Hosain's heroine finally comes back to what she had walked out of; but Laila had the courage to rebel, to protest against the traditional values and make her own choice - she walked out of the four walls of the genna to marry the man she loved. If she had to return, it was circumstances that brought her back to the ancestral home.
Another social novelist, Kamala Markandaya, portrays Indian society in the economic, political as well as social aspects. Her first novel *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954) is about village life in India. It reflects the stark poverty and its dehumanising effect on people. The story is about Nathan and his family. Rukmini his wife, gives birth to a baby girl, Ira; but her arrival brings tears of sorrow to Rukmini’s eyes:

I turned away, and despite myself the tears came, tears of weakness and disappointments; for what woman wants a girl for her first born?

For, a woman is still considered a burdensome appendage. She is an economic drain to the family; and so her birth is greeted with silence and sorrow, whereas a boy-child arrives to the sound of joyous conch shells.

Discrimination begins at birth. And because the mother herself is the victim and prisoner of the brutal tradition and economic circumstances, she fears the same for her daughter. It is for this reason that every expectant mother prays for a son.

However, Ira grows up in a fairly happy and normal atmosphere; and like all village girl, she agrees with docility when her parents arrange her marriage. But problems
begin when Ira is unable to bear children. She is brought back to her parents' home by her husband - 'she is a barren woman ... I need sons' (p.50). This shows that if women have any worth at all, it is simply because they bear children. It is for this reason that a woman dreads barrenness more than anything else. A woman who cannot bear children forfeits her right in the male-dominated society to remain a wife. She is considered an outcaste and has to bear the pain and humiliation of accepting another woman take her place. If a woman is barren, society sanctions a second marriage for the man. But if a man is impotent, a woman must accept it as her fate, as God's will!

Ira's husband takes a second wife and Ira's fate is sealed. She withdraws into herself completely. She does not talk to anyone, there is a numb hopelessness about her; for she considers herself a failure as a woman. And the fact that her mother, Rukmini is pregnant again, makes things more difficult to bear for Ira; and her mother often finds Ira looking at her resentfully and sometimes with hatred. Rukmini is worried much more than Nathan; for she knows she cannot get Ira remarried without a 'fat dowry, more so because she is 'no longer a virgin and reputedly a barren' (p. 60).

As days pass, we see the gradual deterioration of the villagers because of exploitation by the land-owners in the
feudal system, and also because of the exploitation of the industrial capitalists, a new development in free India, which had touched the villagers also. Nathan and his family, like the others, are soon reduced to starvation. And then comes a day when there is nothing to eat in the house. Every saleable item in the house has been sold for food. Unable to bear the pangs of hunger anymore, Ira resorts to selling the only commodity she is left with, her body. 'I will not hunger anymore', she says defiantly (p. 99) and it is with this money that she feeds the family.

However it is not long before the unexpected happens - Ira is with child; a matter to rejoice surely since she is no longer barren. But there is a difference, for the baby is not her husband's. And when the baby is born, she finds that it is not normal. As the famine worsens, the villagers start starving to death. Ira is the only member in her family who is able to procure one meagre meal a day, for one must live, she says. And Rukmini agrees - one must live even if it is through prostitution!

Here we see Markandeya's heroine, a simple, innocent village girl going against the social code to support her family. She is compelled to sell her body, the only saleable commodity a woman possesses, thus breaking the social norms and asserting her individual choice, not only for herself, but
for her child, her parents and her brothers. Markandaya's heroine thus is pushed out of the accepted social norms. Towards the end of the novel, Ira no longer belongs to the conventional social order. She is out of it. There is no turning back for her, there is no redemption. She accepts her fate. She does not protest nor struggle against the odds in her life, but there seems to be a suppressed anger and bitterness within her.

Markandaya's second novel, *Some Inner Fury* (1955) is about Mira, daughter of a wealthy family brought up in an Indian environment but inculcated with western ideas and ways.

Mother went to play bridge and keep my father company. I went ... to learn to mix with Europeans ... One day I would marry a man ... educated abroad and move as freely in European circles as he did ...  

Mira and her brother, although grown up together, have different sets of rules set down for them. Kitsamy is given ample freedom to move around, go out with girls and generally indulge in whatever gave him pleasure. But Mira's movements are restricted. However, unlike the others, Mira manages to break away completely from her conventional and orthodox background. Inspite of her mother's displeasure,
Mira decides to leave home to go to the city to "... discover at last the gateway to the freedom of the mind ... and of which the spirit is capable" (p. 61).

This decision of the woman to discover the freedom of the mind is important in the Indian social context, where, for a woman, the word 'freedom' is itself unacceptable. Women must always be shackled, physically, mentally and emotionally. Accordingly, Mira's desire to seek freedom of the mind is looked down upon. Her mother fails to understand Mira. But Mira refuses to be fenced in by social conventions. She breaks away from her home and family to grow, to think freely and to find out what she is capable of doing in life. And she realizes with some surprise that "... the refusal to acquiesce is not, after the first time, as formidable as it appears" (p. 75). She finds great pleasure in this new-found freedom! "... of being able to cast my own moulds, of finding my own expressions for feelings which had hardly been evoked till now ... ." (p. 89).

Away from her mother's over-protective concern, her relationship with Kitsamy's friend from Oxford, Richards develops from one of friendship to that of a lover. They decide to marry; but her mother refuses to give her blessings. With Richards, Mira, for a short while lives an unconventional life. She forgets her background and family to live with a man without getting married; but this euphoric state is shortlived.
For Richards is killed in a mob fury and Mira goes back to the life she had left behind and to the ghosts of her memories. She steps out of her cocoon only to step right back in again. There seems to be no way out for her from this way of life, unlike Premala, Ritsamy's wife.

Kitsamy is brought up steeped in western culture, much to his mother's annoyance. Premala, on the other hand, is from an orthodox family, but tries her best to adjust to the ways of her western-educated husband. She learns to wear shorts, to play tennis, go to the club and try to mix around with everyone, although it is an ordeal for her. Their natures are completely opposite; yet Premala forces herself to do everything to please Kitsamy; for, '... I would make a poor wife if I did not' (p. 49). She would look at her husband -

'... full of a bright slavering anticipation
... with that expression of desperate entreaty
you sometimes see on the face of a small
pleading child.'

In this futile effort of the woman to change her mode of life, we do not see any feminist consciousness because the woman does all this not to be herself but to please her husband. But in spite of all her effort, Kitsamy and Premala drift apart. At the end, she dies a tragic death in a fire. Here, Markandaya's
heroin is unable to adjust to a culture alien to hers; she cannot forget her conventional upbringing. Her marriage is a complete failure; and although she remains faithful till the end and still loved her husband in the same slavish attitude, it is Kitsamy who suspects her of having an affair with Govind, her adopted brother.

Both Premala and Mira come from more or less similar backgrounds, but whereas Mira is able to step out of the restrictive and conventional upbringing, Premala is unable to shake herself free of the shackles which bound her to her orthodox home right up to her untimely death. The story, however, ends tragically with Kitsamy dying of a knife wound as well.

Set in an obscure town, Kamala Markandaya's next novel, A Silence of Desire (1960) revolves round Dandekar, a government employee and his wife, Sarojini. Married for fifteen years with three children, Dandekar is pleased with his wife, for -

She was a good wife, Sarojini: good with the children, an excellent cook, an efficient manager of his household, a woman who still gave him pleasure after fifteen years of marriage, less from the warmth of her
response than from her unfailing acquiescence to his demands. 11

She meets his every need with quiet obedience; for it is a rare woman who would dare to question her husband. She listens to his day's activities placidly which suits Dandekar fine, though he himself is quite unconcerned how Sarojini spends her day.

But one day, Dandekar's orderly world collapses and his complacent attitude gives way to mental trauma when, unwittingly, he finds a photograph of a man carefully preserved between the leaves of an exercise book in Sarojini's trunk. He knows the photograph is not of her relatives, nor his. It cannot be her friend, for 'A married woman did not have men friends who were not known to the husbands...' (p.34).

Thus began Dandekar's suspicion on his wife. It is sexual jealousy that drives him mad. It is embedded in his mind that his wife is seeing a lover and unable to question her directly, Dandekar, for the first time begins to wonder what really goes on in his wife's mind. Could it be possible she is seeing another man? Does she love someone other than him? It is not possible, argues Dandekar to himself. Because '... Hindu wives were not like that, they married for life, did not look at another man' (p. 54). But he is also aware
that times are changing and it frightens him. He takes a close look at her and says almost accusingly that she looks well. He feels an uncontrollable rage burning within him but is unable to give vent to it. He watches her movements with suspicion. When he finds out she is lying, he accuses her of infidelity.

A religious Hindu wife, Sarojini has immense belief in faith healing. When she discovers she has a tumour in her womb, she prefers to go to a faith-healer instead of treatment in a hospital where her mother and grandmother had succumbed to this same disease. Knowing her husband's attitude to such spiritual beliefs, she does not confide in him, but goes out quietly on her own during his absence. It is during this period that her husband, too, visits a prostitute. Eventually, Dandekar manages to convince Sarojini to go to the hospital and get her tumour operated successfully and the novel ends with both of them reunited happily.

In Sarojini we see the inherent loneliness of the Indian wife. Dandekar is happy as long as his basic needs are fulfilled. He is used to a certain way of life. It is his wife's duty to see that nothing disturbs him. And when this smooth life is disrupted, Dandekar is bewildered; he is mentally disturbed; and to find solace, temporary though it may be, he visits a prostitute. And yet when he suspects his
wife of having a lover, he rages with jealousy at the thought. In Sarojini we see the complete isolation, the self-negation of the Indian women who are lonely within and hardly exist for themselves. Dandekar loves his wife in his own way, but there is no mental or emotional understanding between them; he takes her for granted. But Sarojini has the strength to stand up alone in her faith, she has a faith and belief of her own which is not shared by her husband. However, eventually, she has to give in to her husband's wishes.

Kamala Markandaya's next novel, Two Virgins (1973) is about two young sisters, Lalitha and Saroja. Set in a small village, the story is narrated through beautiful Lalitha. Her experience reveals what it means to be a woman. It is painful and difficult to confine oneself to the rules set down by society for girls - it is almost always discriminating against women. But because this feminist essence is revealed here through the story of a pretty girl who falls prey to male snares - thus lending to this story a common place nature, we have desisted from analysing it in detail.

S.Y. Krishnaswamy's novel, Kalyani's Husband was published in 1957. With Madras in the mid sixties as its background, the novel is about Kalyani. Born to a religious and orthodox south-Indian couple, Kalyani shows from her tender
age interest in books, much to her old-fashioned mother's distress,

All I want is that she should be married to a good boy from a known family, so that I may see my grandson before I die. 12

Her father, however, encourages his daughter to study and teaches her English as well. She grows up into an independent young woman with her own strong views and opinions, and is 'embarrassingly outspoken' (p.37). Unlike other girls of her age and time, she wants to study, likes wearing white coloured clothes, which is considered insuspicious, and is rebellious in her attitude, especially where marriage is concerned. It comes as no surprise when Kalyani studies medicine to become a doctor, nor when she falls in love with Sekhar. During her time, it was not usual nor accepted for boys and girls to meet one another socially; but with their 'unshackled upbringing', they mix freely, inspite of Kalyani's father's mild protests.

After their marriage, they are blissfully happy. Kalyani, a full-fledged doctor is busy with her career. She is an independent working woman, driving her own car. Modern in her outlook, she even enjoys smoking, 'puffing away like an engine' (p. 149). But at the same time, Kalyani, like all Indian women, has a strong persistence of faith. She regularly
goes to the temple to pray. Kalyani is deeply attached to Sekhar's mother who is widowed early in life. Due to an attack of small-pox Sekhar's mother becomes totally blind. She leads a life of sacrifice and self-denial and considers all her sufferings only a means of drawing close to her Maker.

Sekhar is closest to his mother; yet he is unable to express his love for her. It is a closed and private world of his which he wished to share with nobody, not even his wife. And when Sekhar's mother dies quietly in Banaras where she goes to prepare herself for this final journey, it is Kalyani who weeps like a child. She weeps not only for herself but also for Sekhar. Gradually, as days and weeks merge into months, Sekhar and Kalyani drift apart, each busy with his or her profession. Sekhar often goes out of town for several days; and it hurt and upset her, though she never shows it. A deep loneliness begin to creep within her. They seldom go out anywhere together, not even for their drives in the evening.

And Sekhar for the first time in his married life feels discontent with his 'Little Doctor' as he affectionately calls her -

'I am not sure married women should have a career ... I want her to come out with me
in the evenings, dressed in silk and wearing flowers in her hair, not ... smelling of tincture, of iodine and carbolic soap.¹³

This feeling persists and Sekhar tries to reason it out. After much thought he comes to the conclusion that his wife is too refined for him. No doubt, she is an ideal wife for any man,

... as traditional as Sita, and as modern as an aeroplane ... and she loved him with a devotion that all the poems in the world were inadequate to describe.¹⁴

Yet he is discontent. He wants something 'gross and physical' (p.191). He feels a carnal desire in him for her body and he goes to a prostitute, Baby. He knows he is unfaithful to his wife who has given him no cause. But, he argued, man cannot live at different levels and his sexual demand has to be satisfied by a prostitute; besides, his wife need never know about it. Sekhar decides that an educated wife is rather a disadvantage, he wants someone -

... who did not know how to read and write ... whom he could dominate as he liked, becken with a finger and dismiss by a nod, a purely biological specimen who could exhaust him ... not
the chaste companionship of equals … 15

It is not long before Kalyani gets to hear of his regular visits to the prostitute. But she does not question her husband nor berate him for it. She is not shocked either.

He probably needs her … But … Sekhar loves me. He is not sharing me with anyone in this world. What he gives her is another part of himself in which I have no place … He will come back to me … I am sorry for him … Because in some respects he is not grown up, and has to be mothered … 16

She suffers silently and when her unfaithful husband returns home for dinner in the evenings, she pretends she does not know what is going on. Kalyani does not fight for her rights as a wife — she merely bides her time patiently. And her husband dies of pneumonia without being reformed. In spite of her most loving care as the most faithful and devoted wife, she is unable to save him.

Although Kalyani is educated and modern in her outlook, yet as a wife she is traditional in that she continues to love, respect and obey her husband inspite of his betrayal and his weaknesses. She never protests nor objects even though she experiences anger and sorrow at his breach of faith.
Marriage is often taken as the yardstick of a woman's social success; and yet, it is in married life that one sees the immense cruelty and deep unhappiness. For, Kalyani, inspite of her education and a career, inspite of her economic independence, is a slave to Sekhar's needs. She is a woman of tradition basically, accepting her lot in life, not questioning, not rebelling.

Nayantara Sahgal's first novel *A Time to be Happy* appeared in 1958 followed by *This Time of Morning* (1965) and *Storm in Chandigarh* (1969). But it is in *The Day in Shadow* which was published in 1971 that Nayantara Sahgal deals with a fairly new problem in a man-woman relationship - a problem that is quite common and frequent today. It is about divorce and its effect on woman.

The word divorce is derived from Latin 'divortium' which again is derived from 'dis' which means 'apart' and 'vertere' which means 'to turn'. Divorce is almost a new concept among Indians. Women are asked to put up with all sorts of repressions and suppressions for the family for the children's sake. Divorce is not easily accepted in Indian society, for it means breaking away from the traditional, approved norm - and hence a social stigma. Socially, it is considered a shameful act; and there is no place for them in society. In many cases, their parents too refuse to take
them back. Due to the social stigma, which, however, applies to women alone, many prefer to put up with all kinds of torture rather than walk out on her marriage. Nevertheless, it is a very significant issue in the context of Indian society today. With the spread of education among the fair sex and the emergence of women as individuals in their own right, women have taken the courage to walk out of an unhappy marriage, with the law supporting them.

Here, in the story of *The Day in Shadow*, Simrit married to Som and mother of three children, finds she can no longer continue her married life with him. She is living a life in which she is just a cog in the wheels. It is a husband-centred world. Although on the surface their relationship seems placid enough, there is no intensity, depth or devotion. Even when she is saddled with an unwanted pregnancy, he does not care for her welfare. Simrit, however, is glad about the children's arrival. They all turned out to resemble Som and his family rather than her, and she wonders if -

It was part of the imbalance of her marriage, leaving her unassertive even in reproducing her kind.  

Simrit, sensitive and sentimental, values old things for the memories they are associated with. She looks back after
permanence whereas Som takes a childish delight in newness. Married young, with the children following one after the other in quick succession, Simrit has no time to think what she wants in life. For an educated woman with a career, Simrit, surprisingly never voices her opinion or thoughts; but lets other's ambitions overwhelm her. Her husband decides everything around the house, she has no say in anything, not even about chair-covers, curtain or servants. She had thought these were minor things, nothing to quarrel about; but gradually everything builds up into a frightening situation.

Som, however, is quite unperturbed at Simrit's unhappiness. According to him, life is going on wonderfully well; after all he is financially secure and can buy anything, go anywhere; what more can a wife ask for? That one could want something else beside material comfort is incomprehensible to him. Simrit is no longer able to follow Som's goal and this inability "... seemed to be spreading through her veins, affecting the very womb of her desires, drying up the fount within her" (p. 90). Som is furious when Simrit asks for a divorce. After the divorce Simrit finds herself alone with the sole responsibility of fending for herself and the children. She shifts to a smaller flat where she has to give up all that she loved, order and beauty, and finds her life in chaos along with her emotions. She begins to have doubt if she will be able to manage on her own, so used is she to be instructed in
all matters. Som draws up the final settlement for the divorce to suit his convenience and makes Simrit the helpless, unsuspecting victim. It is an arrangement that saves him tax but extracts the last drop of blood from Simrit - a cold and calculated agreement carefully thought out. Som even puts in a clause which does not permit Simrit to remarry if she wants financial assistance. But Simrit does not complain. She knows she has a profession and can earn; but she is compelled to pay tax on Som's shares.

Simrit and Som lived in different worlds. Simrit, a writer, longed to talk - about books, events, ideas and people which interested her, whereas Som's world was full of action - even violence. Som was rich making modern weapons to replace the outdated mountain guns; and Simrit cannot bear to share that world of violence. After the divorce, people look at Simrit as if divorce was a 'disease that left pock marks' (p. 4). When she goes to parties people ask her what her husband did, and Simrit wonders why - it is odd asking about her husband when she herself is standing there in person; for it is accepted that a man lives in relation to the world, and a woman in relation to a man.

Som, of course, is unaffected by the divorce. He lives in his luxurious flat, amidst all comfort and surrounded by his circle of rich friends. And he is happy and carefree,
unlike Simrit who is viewed as an object of pity. Som even takes away their sixteen year old son, Brij, for further studies in spite of Simrit's weak protests. But Brij in his excitement does not wait to pack his belongings. He is eager to start a new life. Simrit is left physically wracked and emotionally empty.

The novel thus shows how, though the legal basis of marriage has altered and divorce is within easy reach of women, yet it is still very difficult to live down the social stigma and humiliation. Simrit goes through a divorce out of a basic desire to live - to live as a person in her own right, without suppression. But her experiences in society show how difficult it is for a woman to live her life alone. Finally, one day, she meets Raj at a debate in the Parliament and she finds herself deeply impressed by him. Their friendship grows. In course of time, when Raj offers her a proposal of marriage, she does not object. Because she knows Raj will not ignore or neglect her - she will always be a part of him.

The novel thus shows that about the time when it was written, modern education has inculcated in the Indian woman a sense of her own identity. She has a personal desire to live her life fully; it is not just physical fulfilment a woman looks for in a marriage, but she wants to be recognised and accepted as an individual with a capacity to think, feel, and
act for herself. She is willing to walk out of a marriage if her individual rights are not fulfilled.

Jatindra M. Ganguly's *Two Mothers* (1964), is about two women, Lila and Roma. Lila, an only child of aged parents is married to Ramesh and they leave for Tatanagar where Ramesh works. Lila's mother's parting advice to her daughter is to -

'Be happy and make him happy ... Don't bring tears to your eyes. You're going to your own home. The husband's home is woman's only home in the world.'

In other words, her mother wants Lila to be a traditional Indian woman. But from the very beginning Ramesh notices that Lila is withdrawn and cold towards him. One day, unsuspectingly he finds out that his wife was in love with his classmate Biren, who had taught her music before her marriage. Ramesh knows that Biren is a married man, and a womaniser. He comes to meet Lila during Ramesh's absence inspite of her protests and Ramesh is hurt. After days of mental trauma, he decides on a plan. Without revealing the destination Ramesh takes Lila to Kharagpur station where Biren lives and abandons Lila there, Ramesh also leaves with Lila a note telling her to go to Biren, he in this way hopes to find out if she still cared for Biren. Ramesh goes to Puri after this.
Next morning he reads in the papers about a woman committing suicide on the railway tracks. He is sure it is Lila but does not take the trouble to confirm it. He takes shelter with one Gopal babu and his family. Days and months pass by. Gopal babu grows fond of Ramesh and suggests he marry his young daughter Roma and start a new life. Young, romantic, and an aspiring actress, Roma falls in love with Ramesh. Soon after their marriage, a son Robi, is born to them and they decide to leave for Tatanagar. On arrival, they are shocked to find Lila at the door.

When Ramesh abandoned Lila, she went back to Tatanagar full of remorse and guilt. She felt she had wronged and she wanted to hide her shame. Her husband's house provides her the refuge she so desperately needed. She was eager to beg his forgiveness and waited patiently for his return. However, when he does return after a year or so, she is surprised to see him with a wife and baby. But if Lila is surprised, Roma is shocked! Seething with fury she walks off leaving her child. Lila runs after her begging, 'This is your home too. You have him ... I shall only serve you both from a distance' (p. 53). But Roma does not turn back.

Lila starts looking after the child, Robi, as her own. She does not question her husband even once about his actions. She is full of her own guilt; and to overcome this she serves
him with whole hearted devotion. It is Lila who tries to atone for Ramesh's mistakes. She begs him to bring Roma back:

I shall be content to keep off and to just serve you, serve her and her son and do all the domestic work at the household.  

She blames herself for being childless and says it is for the sin of separating Robi and his mother. Ramesh is thus responsible for destroying both Lila and Rama's lives. This time too, he does not bother to find out where Roma is. He merely states that:

... with a little patience she would have got a sympathetic and helpful sister like you besides keeping her husband and son.

He happily picks up the threads of his past life and leads a content and complacent life with Lila and Robi. And when Roma makes her appearance again after six years, he neither questions her nor gives any explanation. He has no qualms about leading a polygamous life, living with two wives at the same time. And when Roma does not get along with Lila, he arranges another house for her where Roma lives with her second child, a daughter. And Ramesh happily shuttles between his two wives. When he eventually dies of typhoid, he is a
fulfilled man - he leaves behind him two devoted, loving wives and two children with Robi being old enough to take care of them. And gradually, as Robi grows up, he becomes attached to his younger sister and his own mother, Roma. For all the love and care she bestowed on Robi, Lila loses him to Roma.

Towards the end of the novel, we find Lila a broken woman. She is left empty, lonely and forsaken. And she accepts her suffering as her lot; not once does she question her rights as a wife. When her husband walked in with a second wife, she accepted it, and tried to accommodate herself in the triangle created by her husband. She was ever ready to slave for him as well as Roma. Lila is one of these characters without a will or mind of her own. She accepts her situation as inevitable. She is the typical conventional pati-vrata (devoted to husband) image of Indian women who never question their husbands or herself but blindly follow their footsteps to fulfil their marriage vows. She believes a wife should surrender herself - personal comfort and her desires. For to be selfless is to be noble. But then it is also to be dead! Indian women are always encouraged to be tolerant and great emphasis is given on the joys of self-sacrifice. Lila has no purpose of her own in society; she is unable to think about her future because she is doing nothing to give herself a real identity in it. She hardly exists for herself. As John
Stuart Mill on *The Subjection of Women* (1869) puts it,

No slave is a slave to the same lengths,
and in so full a sense of the word as a
wife is ... 22

In the women characters of Anita Desai's novel, on
the other hand, there is a struggle to attain harmony within
oneself. In the novels that are discussed here, there is a
gradual shift from the external world to the inner and
personal world of the individual. The focus is on the
portrayal of the state of mind and emotions rather than on the
reflection of the society. The characters try to break free
from the stifling social conventions imposed on their minds.

*Cry the Peacock*, published in 1963, is Maya's story.
Sensitive, emotional and a petted daughter, Maya grows up in
the lap of luxury protected by her doting father. Being mother­
less, she missed the physical and emotional bond of love. Her
father arranges her marriage with Gautama, a prosperous, middle­
aged lawyer, and a knowledgeable friend of his. Their marriage
was grounded more upon their friendship and mutual respect than
upon anything else. But there were no two persons so different
in nature - Maya, introspective and sensitive to every change
around her whereas Gautama was rational, detached, and not at
all emotional or demonstrative in his feelings.
When Maya's pet dog dies, she is inconsolable and is unable to understand Gautama's calm and practical attitude. She tries to analyse her own emotions - 'perhaps childless women do develop fanatic attachments to their pets.' As Maya feels Gautama merely says:

You need a cup of tea, ... showing how little he knew of my misery, or of how to comfort me.
But then he knew nothing that concerned me.

Maya resents the distance between them and feels it is because he is not interested in her thoughts and feelings. Gautama, although kind to his young and sensitive wife, is too rational in his outlook. He is engrossed with his own work. Maya has all the comfort and luxury in her husband's house. But she needs emotional security and spiritual understanding.

The inherent and deep-rooted loneliness and insecurity drives her desperate. Maya and Gautama cannot communicate on a serious level - they cannot go beyond the usual pleasant, solicitous conversations. For what is real and meaningful to Maya is childish and elusive to Gautama, the chattering of a monkey. He never includes her in his interests nor shares his thoughts. If he talks at all, it is merely to unwind his tension. As Maya feels:

In his world there were vast areas in which he would never permit me, and he could not
understand that I could even wish to enter them, foreign as they were to me. On his part, love was meagre.

Gautama does not believe in attachment of any kind. He says man perishes through his own desires and weaknesses; and so he must detach himself from all emotions and attachments. But Maya cannot understand nor accept such logic - she wants to feel, touch, to imagine; all her senses are alive to her surroundings. She cannot detach herself from her senses, to do so is to be dead!

This depression and loneliness brings to her mind the albino astrologer’s prophesy when she was a child - that in the fourth year of her marriage, Maya or her husband would meet with an unnatural death. And instead of reasoning with her, Gautama merely dismisses it all brevily, leaving her alone and cornered by her fears in a private world of her own. She remembers the myth surrounding the peacock’s cry - that they fight before they mate, and ... living they are aware of death. Dying they are in love with life’ (pp.95-96).

She has an almost eerie and sinister premonition of the approaching doom and desperately tries to reach out for a reassuring touch.

... am I gone insane? Father!

Brother! Husband! Who is my Savior?
I am dying, and I am in love with living...

God, let me sleep, forget, rest.

But no. I'll never sleep again. There is no rest anymore - only death waiting.26

This fear turns into reality when one night, as Gautama and Maya walk in the terrace, both in their own very different and private worlds; Maya is admiring the moon when Gautama inadvertently moves in front of her, and Maya, in a sudden frenzy, pushes him over the parapet. 'Gautama is dead, and Maya tries to justify her action,

It had to be one of us, you see, and it was so clear that it was I who was meant to live.

You see to Gautama it didn't really matter.

He didn't care, and I did.27

Maya is sent back to her father's house, but even before they can get psychiatric help, Maya, is a state of mental imbalance, jumps through the window and '... disappeared into the dark quiet' (p. 218).

Maya's unhappiness in related to her sheltered and over-protected childhood. When she grows up she is unable to confront the reality of life and its disappointments. Throughout this novel we see Maya trying to analyse her feelings, recollecting her past in order to find the source of her
present mental and emotional disturbance*. And she finds herself alone and helpless in this search. She reaches out to Gautama for help; but he is too detached and practical to understand Maya's complex emotions. He offers her logic instead of sympathy and understanding. This alienation increases her sense of isolation which eventually leads to her insanity. Maya looks for, not freedom and responsibility of an adult world, but for protection in a world she finds emotionally insecure. Maya's struggle is to resist surrender, surrender to Gautama's way of thinking, of being a rational and detached person. She fights for her basic need to be loved, and understood and accepted.

Anita Desai in this way writes about women who are unusual, untypical, unrepresentative but nevertheless symbolic of the deeper stirrings and frustrations of women's life in general. For she must shatter the mirror that has so long reflected what every woman is supposed to be, and that is, to accommodate herself to men and the spaces they provide, and only by relating to her husband and children could she develop and fulfil her personality - in herself she was nothing! It is not only physical fulfilment a woman wants, but also mental and emotional security.

Another novel by Anita Desai, Voices in the City (1965) is about the corrosive effect of city life on three members of a family - Nirode, Amla and Monisha, in different ways.
All the three characters are rebels in different ways. But all of them are affected by the ugly, physical reality of the city life which is not only a fact but also a symbol – the very ugliness and vulgarity is symbolic of an attitude and of a value that they find difficult to accept. For Amla, the city is a monster, a menace and threat to the integrity and sanity of the individual. Sensitive and temperamental like Nirode and Monisha, she too revolts, but she moves from revolt to conformity. She gets involved with a married man Dharma, who is much elder to her, but she has the courage to break away from him. Images of dirt, squalor, misery and death is evident throughout the novel, from which all three characters are trying to escape.

Monisha, who loves a quiet and lonely life reacts against this loud and noisy city life she is exposed to when she comes as Jiban’s bride to her new ancestral home. The first thing that strikes her is the innumerable pairs of feet she must touch even before she sees their faces. The next thing she notices are the bars at the window which give her a feeling of being closed in, shut off from the world and the people, like a cage of doves. She finds that Jiban’s entire family is obsessed with examinations, pensions, births, marriages, dowry, none of which is of importance to her. Jiban is busy with his work and Monisha is left to adjust with the innumerable members in the joint family, serving food, and
learning the many ways of cooking fish; in short, of being Jiban's wife! For, that is what being a wife is all about, as Monisha finds out. And when Monisha is unable to bear a child, it becomes a current topic in the household - all the sisters-in-law sit down to discuss her womb, ovaries and follaapian tubes just as if they are discussing an inanimate object, and not a woman with emotions:

... they are talking of me, my organs, the reason I cannot have a child ...

all ... laid bare to their scrutiny.29

Monisha is denied any privacy in the house, even the seclusion of her bed-room is defiled. They open her cupboard to count her sari and are shocked to find it stuffed with books - Kafka, Hopkins, Dostoyevsky. She misses her brother and sister, her parents' sprawling burglary in the hills filled with flowers. She hates the crowd in the city, a deceptively quiet crowd, she says to herself. She cannot get along with the rest of the family who chatter so much that they distrust her silence. Her love for music is frowned at. Monisha finds it difficult to merge herself with the typical orthodox Bengali women who always walk five paces behind their husbands. She finds them like doves in a cage, soft, gentle and patient, but caged and bleeding within, slowly but surely, all the time waiting, anticipating death:
... generations of Bengali women hidden behind the barred windows of half-dark rooms, spending centuries in washing clothes, kneading dough and murmuring aloud verses from the Bhagvad-Gita and the Ramayana, in the dim light of sooty lamps. Lives spent in waiting for nothing, waiting on men self-centred and indifferent and hungry and demanding and critical, waiting for death. 

Is this what life is all about? Questions Monisha to herself over and over again. Is this what she is expected to do all her life? She cannot reconcile herself to this hopeless situation. She searches desperately for an alternative but cannot find any, not even religious faith. Her relationship with her husband is filled only with loneliness, for Jiban cannot understand Monisha’s quiet sense of desperation. Monisha is in search of love that is ‘not binding, that is free of rules, obligations, complicity and all stirrings of mind or conscience’ (p.135 ), but she also knows she will never find it. Desperately Monisha searches for a way out of the mental, physical and emotional bondage. And unable to find a solution, she takes the only way out that she can find - she commits suicide – by burning herself to death in the bathroom! She does not have the courage to walk out of a
situation she finds hopeless, nor does she have the determina-
tion or will-power to assert herself and live in her way. She
seems almost apologetic for her existence. She may not be
physically tortured; but mentally and emotionally she is
denied love, understanding and most important to Monisha -
freedom.

Sita's return to Manori in *Where Shall We Go This
Summer?* (1975) is like the withdrawal of Monisha, an act of
rejection. Sita has borne four children with pride and
pleasure; but when she expects the fifth she rages in anger
and fear against her husband, Raman. For, by giving birth to
the child in a violent, painful, destructive world, she would
only be destroying what is secure and whole within her. But
Raman only stares at her with distaste, that she, a woman in
her forties, greying and ageing, should behave this way. Sita
decides to go to Manori to retreat from the violence and
destruction around her, and in search of a miracle, of a way
of preserving this unborn child. She wants to preserve it
from exposing it to the constant threat of danger. She also
wants to find a meaning for her existence. But Raman thinks,
she has simply gone mad.

As an act of defiance, Sita talks provocatively and
even begins smoking in public, scandalising her orthodox 'in-
laws'. She hated their subhuman placidity, their sluggishness,
their obsession with meals; she revolted against their very
lifestyle. In Manori, she wants to experience again the carefree, innocent and pure world of her childhood which she had never outgrown and would try again and again to retreat into whenever faced with violence. When the world grows insufferable to her, she thinks of this magic island as of release, for,

If reality was not to be borne, then
illusion was the only alternative. 31

But Manori does not provide her with the same calm and innocence of childhood. Instead it helps her to discover herself, recognise and accept the reality of life as it is.

The story thus signifies that Sita's act of defiance — her withdrawal is an indication of a need for love, but love that is free and unquestioning; love that transcends the self and makes no claims. But she does not get this kind of love from Raman and his family. When Raman came to Manori towards the end of the holidays, Sita felt happy and relieved. She wanted to be told that he missed her. She wanted to lay down her head and cry, 'My father's dead — look after me' (p. 131). But when she found out that he had come because his daughter called him, she felt betrayed, unloved and uncared for. She realised that she had to accept the fact that there was no escape for her, no world of illusion to retreat into. She has to give birth to her baby; she has to go back to the violent
world she hates so much, and learn to live in it.

Sita really seeks an identity of her own, other than of a wife and mother. She wants to be loved and valued for herself, and which her family does not understand. Her search for a world without pain and violence is considered mad by her husband and children. She feels alienated from her family because of her highly emotional reactions to the world around her, like Maya in Cry, the Peacock. She finds it difficult to accept the values and attitude of the society that does not recognize a woman's independent identity; and thus she withdraws into her own protective shell. Even within the family, she is alone.

Set in the period just after Independence, when the country was going through a political upheaval, another novel by Anita Desai, Clear Light of Day (1980) is about an upper middle class family. It is a psychological adult perception of childhood memories.

Bimla, the eldest of four children, looks back on her childhood days, memories happy and sad; she also broods over her present lonely existence. Bimla, her younger sister Tara and her brothers, Raja and the mentally retarded Baba, spent their childhood amongst themselves. Their parents continual absence from the house, their obsession with cards and clubs, left them at the mercy of the servants. The brightest and the
smartest child, Bimla takes active part in class and in sports. To her, school and lessons are a challenge; and as she grows up, she accepts life as a challenge too. Their mother is distant, their father unapproachable; no one has any time for them, not even the servants who threaten to wallop them if they are troublesome. Their idea of their mother is that of someone who spends long hours before a mirror amongst jars and bottles of creams and perfumes.

The love and affection that they missed at home, they found in their widowed, distant relative, aunt Mira. Widowed and still a virgin at the age of fourteen, aunt Mira slaves in her in-laws' place, doing any work that she could around the house and being grateful for a roof over her head in return. She ages fast and in soon bald, scrawny and myopic-eyed, which perhaps is a blessing; for her male relatives find her too ugly to be used sexually. When they are bored of having her around, she is packed off to look after Bimla and the other children.

The children are fairly young when their mother dies, and their father meets with a car accident. Bimla finds herself alone with her three young sister and brothers and a now ailing aunt Mira who has a weakness for the bottle. She starts working as a teacher and educates Tara and Raja and looks after Baba, who never really grows up, and is blissfully unaware of his surrounding. When Tara falls in love with Bakul, Bimla gets them married. When Raja falls ill, it is Bimla who
nurses him back to health with the family physician Dr. Biswas in attendance.

Being a frequent visitor to the house, Dr. Biswas develops an attachment for Bimla and tries to woo her in his own way. But Bimla shrugs off his advances, for she knows she has no time for the luxury of love and romance in life. She is burdened with responsibility; she will never be free, for there will always be Baba, the baby who will never grow up, and then there will be the weak and half-smile aunt Mira.

Bimla accepts her responsibilities as an inevitable part of her life. She does not think of shirking her duties not even for her own personal happiness. She tries to maintain their family home the way it was - the lawn, the rose-walk and the garden. When Raja announces one day that he would like to live his own life away from 'this hole' and not waste his life just to keep his brother and sister company, Bimla does not protest. She had hopes, of course, that Raja would grow up to shoulder at least part of her responsibility, but she now realizes that they have no need for her. All these years, she has been the centre, a solid secure pillar in their lives. But now each has found his or her separate existence, built a life of their own, away from hers, from the home Bimla had taken so much pain to preserve. She has given them love, the space to grow, spread roots and stand firm and tall today. She is the
soil which contain the past, the present and the future, rich with time. This is the house which is a part of her and contain her as well as her entire family with their varied lives and experiences and she has held on to it fiercely. But if today they all walk away from her, abandon her and the home she preserves for them, it must be because -

her love was imperfect and did not encompass them thoroughly enough, and because it has flaws and inadequacies and did not extend to all equally.\(^{32}\)

It is all clear to her, as clear as the light of day!

At the end of the novel, when her brother and sister leave her, Bimla is

... grey-haired, mud-faced ... a brown fleck in the faded pattern. If you struck her, dust would fly. If you sniffed, she'd make you sneeze. An heirloom, that was all - not valuable, not beautiful, but precious an account of age.\(^{33}\)

And Bimla wonders bitterly, 'Precious - to whom?' (p. 153).

Bimla breaks the conventional social norms when she chooses to remain single. An unmarried woman is generally
regarded as an object of pity, ridicule and family charity; she is also viewed with suspicion, but Bimla overcomes this traditional concept. Educated and professionally engaged, Bimla is financially secure and maintain her individual identity. But she is left lonely. All her sacrifices for her family are not appreciated. She is aware that she is unwanted; others are too busy with their own lives; and she alone is left to look after Baba. But Bimla does not protest. The bitterness she feels within is carefully hidden. The novel ends with Bimla, Baba and aunt Mira alone in their separate worlds; but living together in the same house, each left with her own precious memory to cling to.

We thus see in Anita Desai's novels that the problems in the women characters are more psychological than social and economical. Her educated characters struggle between conformity and rebellion, attachment and detachment. The marital discord between husband and wife is very evident in her novel, as the relationships between Maya and Gautama, Sita and Raman, Monisha and Jiban show. This discord is caused mostly by the inability of the husband, family and society to recognize the independent identity of a woman.

Jai Nimkar's novel, *Temporary Answers* (1974) is about a widow, Vinita. It is a retrospective self analysis of her past life with her husband Megendra while contemplating
on an indecisive future with Abhijit.

The word widow itself is derived from the Latin 'viduus' meaning empty. In the story, recently widowed Vinita is still immersed in sympathy and self-pity. Shutting herself mentally and emotionally against the world, Vinita is faced with uncertainty and indecisiveness. She tries to find solace in a world of her own. An introvert by nature and somewhat unsure of herself, Vinita had always allowed Nagendra to rule her life. She discontinues her study in medicine because she wanted to do justice to her role of a wife. And when he moulds her completely to his way of life, she does not protest outwardly though she resents it.

After Nagendra's death, Vinita meets Vilas, who brings some sort of stability and purpose in her life. He helps her to open a clinic to keep herself busy, and Vinita, with some surprise realises that she is rather looking forward to doing something, and gradually begins to look around her with new-found interest. Gradually she overcomes her self-pity and depression and achieves some degree of independence, enough to move out from her parents' home to live alone. But when Vilas offers a proposal of marriage, she immediately recoils; for she knows, with Vilas she would be taking a walk backward in life, for
He would be the sort of husband who would treat a wife like a fragile thing which requires protection, mother her with the good things in life and be genuinely baffled if she rebelled against playing the role of a household pet.

Vinita does not want to lose her now found spirit, her drive and her independence. She wants to break away from all imposition - she wants space to think, feel and to grow by herself. Without hindrances. At this stage, she meets Abhijit, a writer and a lecturer. From the very beginning, she is attracted to him and is unable to control this emotional weakness. For he is very unlike Nagendra, the contrast in their very natures appealing to her. Abhijit's lack of aggressiveness and his reticence are a reassuring change from Nagendra's extravagant nature. Abhijit accepts her as she is, without making any demands on her, mentally or emotionally and Vinita feels comfortable with him. But he also makes her feel lonely, for 'He had a strength in him, a completeness, which obviated the need for another human being' (p. 64).

Vinita looks for permanence in her relationship with Abhijit. She wants assurance for the future, for all the tomorrows to come, the stable and strong bond of love. But Abhijit can only give her a temporary answer - that he loves
her. Vinita realizes she has to be content with that, she cannot ask for more. It is better to enjoy the present than to worry about uncertain tomorrows. She takes the decision to live with Abhijit openly. Without the sanctity of marriage, each of them pursuing his and her own life.

But a time comes when again they think of marriage. Though Vinita values her freedom, she consents to marry. Just before taking the plunge, however, Abhijit declines, for he too values his freedom and feels he will lose his creative powers when with her. She must understand that a writer needs to be alone to renew himself, he explains and walks out of her flat. After his departure, Vinita feels a vast emptiness engulfing her. But she desperately fights this loneliness and finally evolves as a mature and independent woman, standing alone and strong and with confidence.

Anything less than an equal relationship was not enough... we must stand alone, complete in ourselves, before we could meet in marriage. I could not remain lame, crippled, only half a person and expect him to always lend me support, the illusion of wholeness.

And when Abhijit comes back to her doorstep again, she has her answer ready,
You must go away. You must give me a
real chance to deal with my problems
in my own way.36

Thus, after long emotional batterings, Vinita grows into a
new awareness. She is able to cast aside the traditional
mantle of a widow. She succeeds in creating an emotional,
financial and socially secure place for herself through self-
effort. Thus, from a passive helpless widow, she has emerged
an individual with the freedom to explore, experiment.

This novel also reflects the silent erosion of the
man-woman relationship between Nagendra and Vinita. On
surface their marriage seemed normal: but there were quiet
disturbances which threatened the very concept of marriage,
of respect between individuals and of companionship. Anyway,
we find a very different widow here when compared to Kulk Raj
Anand's Devaki in Morning Face. Jai Nimbkar's novel gives
the impression that a change has taken place over the years
and a widow need no longer remain within the four walls of
her in-laws' home. Nor is she dependent on others for her
survival. Over the year women have revolted against this
suppression and education and awareness have played a vital
part in bringing about this change. Vinita, once she gets
over her depression, soon picks up the threads of life and
creates her own secure position in society as an individual
in her own right. She can even remarry if she so desires, the choice is entirely hers. Thus by the time of the publication of the novel widows are no longer cast away from society; nor are they considered inauspicious in religious functions; they are very much a part of society, living their lives in dignity.

Bharati Mukherjee's *Wife* (1976) is about a typical middle class family, the Das Guptas. Dimple, their daughter, is conventionally docile and submissive, and is of the right age for marriage. Mr. Das Gupta is desperate because Dimple is neither fair nor fat, the ideal requisites of a prospective Bengali bride. In the Indian society of the seventies of this century, women like Dimple continues still to be a commodity. She is considered a property to be transferred from one man (father) to another (husband) and a liability to be looked after. And her value will depend on the accompanying dowry. Dimple too has her dreams of marriage and her concept of marriage is derived from all the romantic novels she reads - of settling down with a neuro-surgeon with an apartment in Chowringhee, visiting the Chinese Beauty Parlours and shopping for nylon saris.

After consulting several advertisements in the papers, and desperate bargaining over the phone, the right man for
Dimple is found by her parents. He is one Amit Kumar Babu, a Consultant Engineer who has applied for immigration to Canada and the U.S. He emerges the right choice for another reason - he has only two dependants, a widowed mother and a college-going brother. Although Dimple is not their first choice, she will do, concedes Amit's mother. Dimple, anyway, has no choice.

After the wedding, the first thing Dimple has to give up is her name - her mother-in-law insists 'Dimple' is too frivolous and un-Bengali; she will henceforth be called Nandini. As she tries to settle down in her husband's small, over-crowded home, Dimple cannot help feeling somewhat cheated, for, according to the magazines and novels, young married couples were supposed to be shopping and decorating 'their' bedroom. After all, the best part of getting married is to be free to express oneself, and not carrying water in buckets, and living with broken taps in bathrooms and spiders behind kitchen doors - all very unromantic. However, reasons Dimple, one must find happiness in keeping her husband happy. So she took to wearing bright-coloured saris, doing up her hair in current fashion and ever gave up eating her favourite green chillies - all to please her husband!

When Dimple gets pregnant, her reaction is one of helpless rage because she had no say or control over their
family or even personal decisions. She rebels against this personal violation by losing her baby — she kicks up a skipping rope and skips her way to abortion!

When Amit and Dimple go to New York, Dimple is exposed to a new kind of fear — fear of an alien country with alien people. Amit goes out everyday job-hunting, returning in the evening, angry, disillusioned and irritable. Dimple is left to amuse-herself. She feels frustrated and wants someone to share her views, voice her desires. Her inadequacies, physical and intellectual, is a constant obsession with her.

Life becomes stifling in the flat with Amit. She finds herself talking with herself. She is unable to shed her inhibitions. Sometimes she feels like taking a drink at parties, but knows that Amit would not approve. For, being a woman, it was up to her to

'... uphold Bengali womanhood, marriage and male pride ... I do not need stimulants, to feel happy in my husband's presence ...'37

Dimple is disillusioned with her husband and her marriage. She had married a handsome and prosperous engineer, not this shabby, misfit, frail man without a job! Marriage has betrayed her. Dimple thinks bitterly. Amit explains her depression as mere culture shock which every Indian wife
experiences in a foreign land. But Dimple's depression really transcends that. The reason is implicit in Amit himself. He cannot satisfy her emotional needs and Dimple is miserable. To use Thoreau's phrase, she is leading a life of 'quiet desperation'. This bitterness, frustration, her agonising struggle to voice her thoughts and share her experiences, her search for an identity culminates in a gruesome act of murder.

Through this chilling, conscious act, Dimple finds expression in self-assertion. The agony of struggling for identity and repeatedly getting stifled, misunderstood, ignored, without any catharsis, leads her to this neurotic deranged thought of murdering her husband. She sneaks up on him and chooses a spot just below the hairline and with a knife

... stabbed the magical circle once; twice, seven times ... until the milk in the bowl of cereal was a pretty pink and the flakes were mushy .... 36

Lonely and unhappy in an alien country, Dimple remains in her closed conventional world. Her final act of protest and defiance culminates in this gruesome act, in an attempt to free herself. Because she is unable to communicate her confusing thoughts, her fears and her agony, Dimple resorts to murder. No doubt her basic needs like a home,
food and all the luxuries one expects in a marriage are fulfilled by her husband, but a woman needs mental and emotional understanding as well. They too want to share their experiences and need assurances of love and security.

Like Maya, Dimple too feels alienated from her husband. Her fears are bottled up within her. Loneliness, lack of emotional and mental stability in a marriage, and a quest for identity is a fairly consistent theme which recurs again and again in the novels of the later half of the twentieth century—the need for a woman's identity, to voice her thoughts, to make her presence felt in the male-dominated society. Marriage is no longer viewed as an eternal bond predestined by the gods. Nor is she willing to perpetuate her marriage at the cost of her self-respect; for she no longer believes in the image of the pati-vrata. And when a situation is unpleasant or the environment stifling, women no longer sulked in dark rooms as a protest like Savitri or Draupadi. But they voice their opinions, demand their rights and walk out in dignity if suppressed, like Ishvani and Simrit. And having come thus far, they must go further, not turn back.
NOTES AND REFERENCES


3. Ibid., p. 38

4. Ibid., p. 227

5. Ibid., p. 29

6. Ibid., p. 252

7. Ibid., p. 265


10. Ibid., p. 62


13. Ibid., p. 171

14. Ibid., p. 191

15. Ibid., p. 192

16. Ibid., pp. 200-201

20. Ibid., p. 58
21. Ibid., p. 60
23. Anita Desai, *Cry, the Peacock* (1963), Orient Paperbacks, Delhi, 1983, p. 10
24. Ibid., pp. 8-9
25. Ibid., p. 104
26. Ibid., p. 98
27. Ibid., pp. 215-216
29. Anita Desai, *Voices in the City* (1965), Orient Paperbacks, Delhi, 1982, p. 113
30. Ibid., p. 120
32. ————, *Clear Light of Day*. Allied Publishers, Delhi, 1980, p. 165
33. Ibid., p. 153

36. Ibid., p. 221


38. Ibid., p. 212