CHAPTER – II

FEMINISM DEFINED – PATRIARCHY AND THE SECOND SEX IN THE INDIAN CONTEXT
II. FEMINISM DEFINED—PATRIARCHY AND THE SECOND SEX IN THE INDIAN CONTEXT

The broad meaning of Feminism is the advocacy of the rights of women. Though there is no single accepted definition, feminism can be defined as "a concept that can encompass both an ideology and a movement for socio-political change based on critical analysis of male privilege and women's subordination within any given society". As it stems from the recognition of male domination, marginalization of women, existence of inequality and sexual discrimination; feminism is necessarily pro-woman. Feminism is committed to representing women, meaning-making and creating a social space for women as the basic features of this movement are "agitation for political and legal rights, equal opportunities, sexual autonomy, and the right of self-determination" and economic freedom. To reinstate woman as an individual not as the 'second sex' i.e. to give emphasis on identity is also what feminism strives for. Condemnation of society's categorization of certain social groups as marginal or 'other' is another feminist project.

To recognize the processes controlling the ways in which women are defined in society and represented misogynistically in literature is of utmost importance in feminist discussion. This is because subversion of patriarchal literary forms is one important feature of feminist literary project. Like post-colonial discourse feminist discourse tends to "seek to reinstate the


marginalized in the face of the dominant". Therefore feminism has been mainly concerned with making women’s life visible and meaningful, their voice heard, their experiences acknowledged, their feelings understood. To bring a change in the patriarchal social relations which damage and incapacitate women psychologically, emotionally and intellectually should be the sole object of feminism. Above all feminist literature must question the modes of structures of domination and assumptions inherent in male canons in order to instill a female tradition in its place.

As already stated feminism has never been a single unified movement but a fusion of various elements and various phases of women’s campaign aiming at advocacy of women’s rights under such labels as suffragette movement, women’s liberation, women’s movement, women’s emancipation and so on. Advocacy of women’s rights is based on two criteria: First, on the basis of similarity (woman is a human being like man and hence must be given equal rights) and second, on the basis of difference (woman is biologically, psychologically, intellectually and emotionally different from man and should be given rights to represent herself). In modern times, feminism insists on “difference” under which category come all the marginalized or oppressed groups sharing the intimate experience of the politics of repression emanating from unequal power relations between the sexes and patriarchal imposition on woman, and the language of the oppressor.

It may be said that in the west feminism (not in the strict sense of a conscious movement) dates back from the 13th century. The New Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought mentions early defenders of women’s

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‘nature’ in medieval Europe for example Jean de Meung (13\textsuperscript{th} c.), Christine de Pisan (14\textsuperscript{th} c.), Marie de Gournay, Aphra Behn and Mary Astel (17\textsuperscript{th} c). However, the beginning of feminism as a conscious movement dates back to the last decade of 18\textsuperscript{th} c. to middle years of 19\textsuperscript{th} c. as during this period advocators of women’s rights such as Mary Wollstonecraft emerged, much influenced by both the French and American revolutions which raised issues related to women’s rights in addition to demanding the rights of universal man.

Mary Wollstonecraft in \textit{A Vindication of the Rights of Women} (1792) argued that the soul was unsexed and that women were human before they were feminine. Urged by her belief in individual progress, she tried to erase the sentimental construction of women (i.e. superior sensitivity, delicacy but lesser reason) that weakened them and rendered them helpless. Issues related to securing legal rights for women in marriage, education, employment etc. were also her main concerns. The suffragette movement (1860-1930) further brought women from different social strata and diverse groups together to fight for a common goal. With women like Dorothy Richardson, Virginia Woolf and Olive Schreiner the movement gained weight as a substantial force making its own way to disturb the existing status-quo. Dorothy Richardson explored female consciousness in her novel \textit{Pilgrimage} and introduced elliptical, fragmentary sentences to reveal the lyrical, hysterical, poetical mind of a woman. Olive Schreiner protested against male values and advocated separate Amazonian Utopias and suffragette sisterhoods. Virginia Woolf emphasized the necessity for a room of one’s own and economic freedom to enable women to live independently in \textit{A Room of One’s Own} (1929).
These women have started questioning gender biases, sexuality, morals, patriarchal institutions like marriage and education. Simone de Beauvoir in her monumental work *The Second Sex* (1949) sought to understand the relegation of woman to the status of a second sex and attacked gender biases and socialization process which made woman inherently weak, passive and shy, and man's definition of woman on the basis of 'lack', of what man is not. Through the socialization process women have been kept controlled, confined to the house under the name of protection. The realization of women’s suppression triggered off female reaction against masculine assumptions about women’s life, experience and emotions. Now women clamoured to reveal their silenced life. This need to voice female perspective becomes a major feminist preoccupation, as it will reveal female subjectivity, experience and identity.

In the 1960's the movement became intensely political as radical protests from various social groups started coming out. Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), which calls for an end to sex discrimination and enforcement of equal rights, Germaine Greer’s *The Female Eunuch* (1970) and Kate Millet’s much debated *Sexual Politics* (1969) brought forth middle class views. Kate Millet argued that ideological indoctrination and economic inequality brought on women’s oppression. She also raised the issue of ‘sexual politics’ i.e. the unequal sex relations where men hold power over women. This inequality is sanctioned by patriarchy to be one of the main devices to perpetuate women’s oppression and this is intrinsically political. Next came Elaine Showalter with *A Literature of Their Own* (1977) in which she tried to bring forgotten women of the past who were eclipsed by male writers, into focus in order to give them a place in the literary history dominated by men. She coined the term ‘gynocritics’ to mean texts written by women with feminine themes, visions, genres, mode of expression and
experience of women to oppose feminine critique. This combats male canons while trying to create a literary space for women writers. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979) also studied forgotten women writers who struggled in isolation that felt like illness, alienation that felt like madness, obscurity that felt like paralysis to overcome the anxiety of authorship that was endemic in their literary subculture.4

They suffered in these ways because there were many obstacles in the path of a woman writer. Some such obstacles may be their sense of guilt (for dedicating their time to intellectual pursuits rather than to family), fear for men’s mockery at their so called pretension to intellectual pursuits and most important of all their sex.

The most radical and theoretical group is French feminism which is deeply influenced by psychoanalysis. They seek to break down conventional male-formulated stereotypes of female sexuality which has been taboo for so long and is now directly associated with poetic productivity for these feminists. Julia Kristeva, Hélène-Cixous and Luce Irigaray are the major proponents of this group. Giving much importance to woman’s body Cixous claims that female imagination is beautiful and infinite and female voice which has been long suppressed by the phallocentric tradition come out with force once woman uncensored herself, throw her guilt off and recover her potentials. She urges women:

“To write. An act which will not only ‘realize’ the decensored relation of woman to her sexuality, to her womanly being, giving her access to her native strength; it will give her back

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her goods, her pleasures, her organs, her immense bodily territories which have been kept under seal, ....” and “An act that will also be marked by women’s seizing the occasion to speak, hence her shattering entry into history, which has always been based on her suppression”.

Luce Irigaray’s *Speculum de l’autre femme* (1974) considered the base of women’s oppression to be the negative constructions of female sexuality, specially Frend’s concept of ‘penis envy’. In her view, women’s writing is fluid because women’s pleasure lies in touch and sensations. Alice Jardine, another radical feminist developed the term ‘Gynesis’ which brought in the recognition of feminine space which put the ‘other’ i.e. ‘woman’ into discourse by exploring textual representations of the feminine in western writing and thought.

These women’s efforts establish the importance for women of having their own space in which to speak and express themselves freely, recovering the neglected writers of the past and put them into history, the ever increasing popularity of this movement for equality etc. to name a few. Whatever these women set out to achieve will be fulfilled as the movement is gaining momentum not only in Western countries but also in developing countries.

Anger, self-doubt, frustration, fear that are the basic features of the psychology of oppression have been the psychology of women under patriarchy. These forces a woman to journey within herself instead of venturing out into the world and in the process she suffers from alienation which finally leads her to exile. These basic truths in any patriarchal society are taken up in feminist writing in order to bring a desirable change in society with a view to give equal rights, liberty, opportunity, status and

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recognition to woman. In the first place, women need to establish strong sustaining friendship among themselves on the basis of interdependence, nurturance and responsibility. It must also be remembered that women's solidarity cannot solely be based on recognition of a common oppression but on a celebration of shared experience as members of the same sex too.

In Indian society women enjoy only second-class citizenship and so the above-mentioned sufferings are also part of women's lives. Above all, sexism is still a threat to women, which results in their victimization. To combat these women should demand to express themselves, to achieve self-determination and realization. When these are put into writing, it becomes a fertile ground for feminist study, as the novels of Anita Desai show with the accredited task of representing women from the vantage point of having shared the same fate as a woman. Anita Desai discards the romantic images of women abundant in male fiction. She asserts that women should no longer live under the shadow of biological essentialism and sexism and to attain this state women must learn to fight against victimization by becoming physically and emotionally strong, by developing the ability to discard fear and guilt in expressing woman-self and exploring individual potentials. The following pages will present an in depth study of women's lives under patriarchal society.

It might well be said that by and large Indian Society has been patriarchal since the male-made power enforcing agents such as tradition, customs, taboos, rituals, value systems, norms, institutions such as family, marriage, religion and even history exercise power by maintaining the centrality of men and by relegating women to the position of 'other'. It is because of the social, political and cultural construction of women as 'other'
that man is seen as "humanity" and woman "as relative to him" in a patriarchal society. Cultural construction of male superiority and female inferiority has divided the world along sexual lines. Thus, says Simone de Beauvoir, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman." 

For the study of the relationship between the sexes, one must keep in mind the process in which any civilization or culture or society arose since it involves the active suppression of women as the 'other' of self, the privileged male. At the root of this suppression is the inequality of power in the intrinsic political relationship between the sexes and this inequality makes women the negative part of the binary opposition. Eventually, woman alone as independent of man doesn’t exist in a patriarchal society. Woman is invisible to the male gaze as she "is not viewed as existing at all except as a negative mirror-image of a man".

For centuries men have treated women as a looking glass only to magnify their image at double size as Virginia Woolf observes: "Women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size". Men construct contrasting or diverse images of women as they fear the 'otherness of woman' such as instituting taboo where they fear some danger. Kate Millet observes:

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Under patriarchy the female did not herself develop the symbols by which she is described. As both, the primitive and the civilized worlds are male worlds, the ideas, which shaped culture – in regard to the female, were also of male design. The image of women as we know it is an image enacted by men and fashioned to suit their needs. These needs spring from a fear of the "otherness of woman."  

It is therefore clear that men ascribe their own meanings to the power-enforcing agents or interpret these to their own advantage, thus producing female repression, or silencing women almost to the point of alienation from the privileged class. Women are also absent from public domain because in a patriarchal society they are defined or valued primarily through domestic or filial relations to man as daughter, sister, wife and mother, which keep them confined to private spheres of domestic life. At every level, woman's loss is man's gain: "absent as they were from public life, woman functioned as a screen on which any male fantasy could be projected."  

However, man gives woman an integral place in the family and society, too, as she is needed to satisfy his desires and to continue his lineage. Women are also given roles and virtues such as passivity, chastity, shyness, timidity, purity, patience, selfless, sacrificing, self-denying etc. only to marginalize them and keep them in a fixed position from where raising a voice of protest against those in power is impossible. Their desire remains hidden, and they remain mute for fear of authority leaping on them. Mary Jacobus' view may be mentioned here: "The prison of sensibility is created  

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by patriarchy to contain women; thus they experience desire without Law, Language without power".¹²

It is not because women are inferior to men or passive but because of these patriarchal constraints that women’s inner turmoils of anger, fear, remorse, guilt, anxiety, unfulfilled longings and failure remain unvoiced. Thus, women become dumb and muted subjects, victimized, exploited, trapped, repressed, dominated and marginalized; internalizing their servile life, taking up the position of dependency. Biological sex distinctions are one of the forms of patriarchal oppression as it is associated with socially and culturally established gender characteristics of masculinity and femininity. Imposition of certain social or cultural standards of femininity on women is to make them believe the constructions to be true or natural. Thus female nature and essentialism are attached to the female body by patriarchy and its sexism in order to make women suffer sexually, socially, psychologically, mentally and economically. Biologism has also played a sinister role in making women believe that their suffering is due to their sex. These forms of oppression ensure women’s confinement and domestication at home which further leads them to a life bound by duties, responsibilities and expectations in order to fulfill men’s wishes in their intimate relationships. In this context, what Ann Foreman remarks may be cited:

Man exists in the social world. For the woman, however her place is within the home... for woman there is no relief. For these intimate relations are the very ones that are the essential structures of her oppression.¹³


Women's experience historically has been defined almost entirely as those relations where they serve the needs of others instead of attending to their own needs. Social conditioning and cultural expectations about gender identity form individual traits and temperament, which encourage a boy to develop aggressive impulses, to move beyond domestic confines, to gain experience, exposure, friendship etc. and teach a girl to thwart her own impulses, to be seen but not heard as the honour of a family depends upon her modest behaviour. So aggressiveness becomes male whereas passivity, powerlessness, insecurity become female in a patriarchal society. Under patriarchy women become voiceless since they are either unheard or termed insane; they speak outside the patriarchal-created order of things and this evasion creates for them a second class position in society, which in turn generates things affecting women's psychology. Patricia Waugh agrees with psychologists L. Eichenbaum and S. Orbach who point out:

... women's second class position in patriarchy is reflected in their psychology: lack of confidence, powerlessness, overdependence, insecurity, leading to competitiveness with other women, self- condemnation, and an inability to feel whole.\(^{14}\)

There is no wonder, then, that because of oppression of women for ages women internalize their suffering so much so that they, in turn, oppress each other, for example mothers-in-law criticize daughters-in-law or mothers ask daughters to learn to be patient and selfless thereby making them do all the household chores without a fuss. Patriarchal social relations damage women psychologically and emotionally from birth onwards and they are thus deprived of their rightful claims. Girls are warned constantly by parents of vulnerability and the risk of running into problems if they go out alone or

mix with boys on a date. Women are hence made morally vulnerable and susceptible. In other words, they are bound by shackles, physical, moral, psychological and emotional, no matter where they are born, live, walk. Whereas the same is not the case with the boys. Sexual discrimination or gender divide is socially sanctioned in male-centred societies. This makes boys more assertive, more confident guided by self-esteem whereas girls are more ponderous and repressive, curving their instincts for fear of violating the taboos society has imposed on them.

Female sexuality is located in male-made world full of taboos that deny the expression of female passion, thereby preventing her from speaking the truth about her life, experiences and desire. This patriarchal interference with female sexuality makes women feel their passion/desire as dangerous, which is why they live an unfulfilled and frustrated life. In man’s mind woman’s body has no other reference except to being a sexual object and so she is taught to be ashamed of her body and its desires. The fact that she is known as “the sex” means that she appears essentially as a sexual object to man. Female narcissism develops in the long run due to social identification of a woman with her body by which she starts looking at her own self as in terms of body itself – woman’s absorption of the cultural assumption about her sexual body. A female body in a patriarchal society from a masculine angle, is only “... a resistance to be broken through, whereas in penetrating it the male finds self fulfillment in activity”.15

Apart from the treatment of woman as a sexual body, woman remains invisible to man, resulting in man’s inability to see woman as a whole identity. Patriarchy’s assertion of male domination over female body is well expressed where the man, family and society desire a male child in

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15 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 53
preference to a female child. This tendency is prevalent in all the patriarchal societies, whether in Asia or Africa. Importance is attached to a male child who will be one to continue and retain the family line; hence he is central to the married life, to the family, society and culture since all these are male-oriented. To be a woman is to lose human dignity, be part of darkness of the margin. The distinction between the sexes speaks volumes of sexual oppression and woman’s suffering, deprivation of privileges, rights, equality and equal treatment. All this is the breeding ground of feminism and feminist writing, and any feminist writer cannot overlook such related issues. Women’s loss of social, political and economic self-determination is at the root of our study here as well.

Coming to the Indian context, R.K. Narayan gives the true picture of Indian womanhood under patriarchy in the following words:

Man assigned her a secondary place and kept her there with such subtlety and cunning that she herself began to lose all notion of her independence, her individuality, stature and strength.16

It’s true that since childhood culture, tradition and society have implanted various forms of imposition on women’s mind so much so that they become second nature to women, and breaking with them seems unnatural or unthinkable. Culture, religion, myths and legends claim to praise and value womanly qualities by idealizing and glorifying her as a compliant angel, a symbol of truth, purity and beauty, or she is censured as an evil woman. But these actually mask the actual relegation of woman to a secondary position as these images deny her personhood. Folklore, fairy tales and oral tradition (ballads, riddles, proverbs, songs, tales, sayings etc.) yet yield other beliefs and show that the best thing that can happen to a girl is

to fall in love, get married and have children. Society, thus, forces women into accepting the seclusion of a helpless life, fenced in on all sides. Even in Indian art, painting and sculpture, purusha-spirit, the highest form of divine beauty is symbolized by male figure, and female divinity is only a counterpart of the male figure.

Thus, the Indian mythical mode does not provide woman with a strategy to liberate her from male power politics, but it shows examples of women conforming to male politics and views. Social organizations and institutions reassert these beliefs by instilling fear in the women’s mind. They are always reminded of the consequences of going against social modes. So, in order to control them women are confined within a ‘Lakshman rekha’\(^{17}\) defiance of which brings them disaster. It is not surprising then to note that the Upanishads, the great epics, the Vedas that depict woman as meek, submissive and virtuous are male-written texts. This fear that has been instilled in the woman’s mind has become interiorised and thus woman plays roles for the perpetuation of systems of domination unintentionally. Above all women’s life and experience in themselves are hardly mentioned in the great books as they deal with men’s life and experience. Carolyne Larrington maintains:

women’s problems in general feature little in the main line of the epic, which by and large is not concerned with women’s feelings except where they have repercussions on the male-dominated storyline.\(^{18}\)

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\(^{17}\) Literally it means a circular line drawn by Lakshman around Sita in the epic Ramayana which forbids her to cross, the violation of which brings only disaster to Sita as she is abducted by Ravana, the demon king. It is used to warn women by instilling fear in their mind not to venture out. It means women’s imprisoned life, confinement inside and lack of security/safety outside.

When woman is represented in fiction as reflecting man’s social views, she may fall into one of the two rigid categorizations, i.e. the good/virgin/angel woman or the evil/monster woman. Women come under the first group when they accept men’s rule and control thereby conforming to men’s constructed images of femininity, i.e. passivity, docility, selflessness etc. When women refuse to conform to the crippling definitions of feminine identity, which is sexual at the root, and again when they refuse to be selfless, by acting or speaking, based on their own intuitive mind, they represent darkness and chaos for men. The second group is feared by men since they have a story to tell and they do not follow men’s assumptions/constructions. The result is that they become the distorted images of womanhood in culture/scripture/fiction, the embodiments of evil such as seductress Eve, temptress Pandora, giantess Circe, the serpent woman Medusa, the whore of Babylon, the blood-thirsty Kali etc. Apparently in the first group women of angelic quality such as Virgin Mary, the Mother of Gods and Sati-Savitri emerge.

However, men fail to realize that women cannot identify themselves with either of these widely different images and so they feel deeply ambivalent about their own identity. Hence the cultural perception and construction of femininity are responsible for women feeling ambivalent. A woman is at once the source of life and the power of darkness, Virgin Mary and Eve, which means that a woman in man’s view is not whole, not possessing a fixed identity. Female identity is but a social construct, a culturally variable one at that. K.K. Ruthven’s opinion is worth mentioning here:

"Woman is not an essence but a construct in the domain of patriarchal culture, a dispersed subject, historically variable,"
socially feminised and a site on which masculine meanings get spoken and masculine desires enacted.\textsuperscript{19}

Hence, society and culture develop abounding with such images women cannot identify with, which create a discrepancy between the cultural assumptions of femininity and women's own perception of their self. This discrepancy becomes the most crucial problem faced by a woman in all spheres of life, when she tries to express her own experience in her writing—woman writing in her search for a space of her own, a life of her own, independent of man. Needless to say, woman's story is also a long story of, "a cultural bondage, a legacy of pain and submission",\textsuperscript{20} to borrow Elaine Showalters terms.

The view of women as evil is borne out by many scriptural texts that depict women as false and full of passion. In the Pagan tradition, it is Pandora who is blamed for bringing all the evils by opening the box. In the Christian tradition, it is Eve who is blamed for bringing humanity's fall, loss of innocence and all the misery. In her vulnerability and gullibility in believing flattery even by a snake, Eve lets evil enter her mind. In the Indian tradition, even the fairy Apsaras are blamed for seducing holy men and spoiling their sacrifices totally ignoring the fact that it is gods' design to use them as weapons to destroy others.

In culture too woman is not treated as "whole" but an "incidental" being. In the Bible, Eve is the creation of "a supernumerary bone" of Adam. In Indian culture woman is complete only in uniting to man and she is not accepted as an "autonomous being". Hence a critic observes:


“... her dislocated, shadowy, fractured or falsified identity is a text on which are inscribed all the visible/invisible traces of domination, vilification and injustice since the dawn of male-centric civilization.21

In Indian male written texts, women are culturally represented as lacking in ability for true appreciation, balance of mind, lack of reason and so they often fall a prey to external appearances easily. In the epic, the Ramayana, Rama banishes Sita to a hermitage since people suspect her fidelity. It shows that social order and morality come first before individual wishes and happiness. As a true traditional oriented woman Sita never utters a single word against her husband in self-defence. Thus women have been represented in culture as silence, the muted subjects outside the center of activities. The famous disrobing scene in the Mahabharata of Draupadi in the presence of her five husbands who do nothing to save her honour shows subjection of women to inhuman oppression from time immemorial. Damayanti of the Nala-Damayanti legend, Shakuntala in Kalidasa’s Abhigyana shakuntalam are examples of helpless and abandoned women by their own husbands. As asked by the sage Kanva, Shakuntala in Abhigyana shakuntalam then pregnant and helpless, goes to king Dushyanta, who refuses to recognize her and insults her publicly. When the poor girl starts crying the disciples of Kanva taunt her thus, “O Wanton Woman! Do you resort to freedom?”22 One can visualize the plight of Shakuntala at that moment when she is forced to leave the court; she is neither owned by the hermitage nor the palace. Avadesh Kumar Singh maintains: “The masculinist structures that reign in both the places demand mute acceptance


of the rejection. She cannot even cry. Her crying is construed as her rebellion. Even her tears are intolerable, for they scare man.\textsuperscript{23} When she tries to express her sorrow it is taken as her rebellion and so she is ranked as 'wanton'.

Religion, the main pillar of life, in its own name sanctions exploitation of women in a taboo-ridden world. Although it cannot be stated actually when victimization of women began, it can, however, be said that it has been there since the dawn of civilization. She is the object, not the doer but to be acted upon, no more than a chattel. It is said that in Vedic times, women enjoyed much freedom comparatively and were treated as equals to men in religious matters. Yet, no women officiated or presided over a ceremony, religious or civil. At the close of Rig Veda many evil customs crept in, many restrictions started imposing on women's activities. During the Brahmanical period, women were placed on a par with mere passion like dice, drink and considered a major evil in society, no more allowed to read holy scriptures or participate in rituals. Gone are the days when women like Gargi participated in philosophical and metaphysical discussions with sages. They now have to be guarded to preserve the purity of the offspring. The Brahmins, being learned, interpreted holy texts according to their own whims and fancies much to the detriment of women's private lives.

The idea of ownership, i.e. woman as an object equal to goods or animals, enters with the coming into existence of ownership of land/property. But she herself owns nothing and

\[\ldots\text{ because she owns nothing, woman does not enjoy the dignity of being a person; she herself forms a part of the patrimony of a man: first of her father, then of her husband.}\textsuperscript{24}\]

\textsuperscript{23} \textit{Ibid.}, 65.

\textsuperscript{24} Simone de Beauvoir, \textit{Ibid.}, 114.
The same view is expressed by L.D. Barnett here as women "did not rank high in the eyes of the law which laid down as a principle that a woman is for all her life in tutelage, first to her father, then to her husband and lastly to her son."25 If the wife is barren or fails to bear a male child, the husband can get married again which further leads to women's loss of political and economic freedom. Only man has the right to divorce his wife if she becomes unchaste and she is punished either by beating her or by expelling her. Brides were always expected to be virgins no matter how many concubines man enjoyed. Thus biological determination embedded in any relationship between the sexes, is a base of discrimination, of exploitation of women and of prohibiting full expression of her hidden potentials.

These facts have revealed some aspects of man and woman positions in culture and society. In such a society where polygamy is openly in practice there is suppression of women by sexism that perpetuates oppression and sexual victimization of women by men; polygamy may further be interpreted as sexual denial to women. In the Laws of Manu, it is written:

Though destitute of virtue or seeking pleasure elsewhere, or devoid of good qualities, (yet) a husband must be constantly worshipped as a God by a faithful wife.26

The mode of marriages recognized by Hindu laws in ancient times such as brides taken by captive, by purchase, by exchanging gifts, show that in a patriarchal society women are considered as equals to animals or goods and that marriage is synonymous with some form of oppression. Oppression in


the form of rituals such as dehumanizing acts of defloration continue where female body is sexually exploited in humiliating and unhygienic conditions. Old-aged virgins are branded as witches, to be abhorred and feared equally. If married women become the roles they play – the cook-cum-cleaner-cum-washerwoman-cum-servant-cum-reproductive machine, widowed women suffer most since they must observe fasts, eat only once a day, must live a life of rigorous austerity and must not wear colourful dresses or jewellery and sometimes must shave their hair off. Women whether married or virgin or widowed have to control their thoughts, emotions, speeches and action. Therefore, “Condemned to play the part of the other, woman was also condemned to hold only uncertain power: slave or idol, it was never she who chose her lot” and, “woman’s place in society is always that which man assign to her; at no time has she ever imposed her own law.”

The view of women as submissive, weak, meek, passive means that they are not taken as material subjects of their own history (the subaltern cannot speak and has no voice or history as Spivak observes), but only in terms of their object status. The prevailing power relations suggest that dominant cultural arrangements are results of biology, i.e. intrinsic and not constructions of a male-centred society and this is what feminist writers try to deconstruct. As a woman writer, Anita Desai is deeply aware of the ambivalence of women’s position in Indian male-centred society and her women characters suffer at the hands of such a society, and are mostly defeated by forces outside their control.

The modern women’s plight under patriarchy is aptly expressed by Shobha Bhagwat in her poem ‘Husbands’ quoted below:

This woman has a job 
so her husband is unhappy 
this one sits at home 
so her husband is upset 
this one is very thin 
so her husband is angry 
this one is very plump 
so her husband snaps at her 
this one is always well dressed 
so her husbands wonders for whom? 
this one is always shabby 
so her husband says, ‘she’s dumb’. 

So, woman is at fault, to be blamed for anything and everything. The failure or success of a marriage depends upon the woman so she is either to be blamed or praised. She is placed, on the one hand, at the center, on the pedestal as an object worthy of worship i.e. romantically imprisoned. In return she must surrender her autonomy, this is implied. On the other hand, she is placed on the periphery/margin as bitch, temptress, and seductress therefore to be destroyed or won over. All the same, whether bestower or destroyer, women have led a dubious and victimized life. Both these images keep out women of the mainstream and deny them personhood. The first distances her as an object of awe and fear and the second is an attempt to control her and confine her within male-governed and male-defined social structure. So to be a woman is to be the bitter, not the better half, the changeable and untrustworthy in the eyes of man. She is the subaltern sex object for man and nothing else and nothing more; her life is denied to her since she is not treated as an identity but either as a supplement or a threat to man.

Women’s condition within and without marriage and family has improved considerably over the years but one basic feature remains the same

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i.e. woman must first attend to her domestic/familial duties and responsibilities after fulfilling which she can assert herself as an individual. She must first find 'proper moorings' in asserting herself because society still maintains its sexist view i.e. true happiness for women is based on true womanhood that is female subordination masked as true femininity. The emergence of women writing has totally changed the representation of women in fiction since women's fluid nature is now taken to be a source of poetic creativity rather than believing it to be untrustworthy. Woman as an autonomous body having a separate identity and asserting her rights is the new creation of women writers. The century old belief of women’s ‘penis envy’ is challenged arguing that if women suffer from inferiority complex it is not due to lack of a penis but rather

... women’s total situation if the little girl feels penis envy it is only as the symbol of privileges enjoyed by boys. The place the father holds in the family, the universal predominance of males, her own education – everything confirms her in her belief in masculine superiority.²⁹

It is society that has instilled in the little girls’ mind the notion of masculine superiority and as she grows up she learns to accept male view that women’s role, as Elaine Showalter observes in regard to Susan Henchard in *The Mayor Of Casterbridge*:

... is a passive one; severely constrained by her womanhood, and further burdened by her child, there is no way that she can wrest a second chance out of life. She cannot master events, but only accommodate herself to them.³⁰

²⁹ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 74.

³⁰ Elaine Showalter, “Towards A Feminist Poetics” 27. Thomas Hardy’s *The Mayor of Casterbridge* has a scene where the husband in a drunken stupor sells his wife along with his daughter to a stranger at a country fair in public.
Post independence male writing in India depicts women in their passive roles since hardly any genuine attempts have been made to present women’s inner conflicts from the point of view of men. Most endings show that rebellion results in unhappiness whereas patience and acceptance pay well. Citing R.K. Narayan’s *The Dark Room*, Savitri in spite of her struggle and defiance in leaving her husband Ramani, returns to her unrepented husband. Women in male-created work exist just to fulfill male wishes and do not come out as they choose themselves to act or behave as independent humans. They are patterned out of social and cultural moulds created by man with a design to oppress woman perpetually. R.K. Narayan does not advance the theme of women’s emancipation to a decisive resolution because in a society where the orthodox tradition still hold considerable influence over people’s lives, women’s predicament remains the same. Though he gives Savitri a voice, she doesn’t come out as one with a separate individual identity. Feminists would make Savitri use her freedom to her advantage but here the novelist makes Savitri ill use it and hence let her go from one institution of male oppression to another i.e. from Ramani’s house to the temple. The Dark Room hence presents R.K. Narayan’s awareness of women’s predicament in society but does not provide answers to their problems. Savitri’s rejection and leaving of her husband’s house is defeatist as her return to her unrepented husband. Having to return to the same situation after rebelling indicates that she has a long way to go before she can survive on her own by equipping herself sufficiently. In the same novel of Narayan, the dark room inside the house becomes the only answer to Savitri’s predicament. When she expresses her view about their son’s education, Ramani shuts her mouth by saying: “Go and do any work you like in the kitchen but leave the training of a grown-up boy to me. Mind your own business…. It is none of a woman’s business.”

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Women's subjection to male chauvinism, middle or lower class men's view of women's lack of intellect or choice, men's refusal to give decision making power to women are endemic both in literature and in culture in so far as India is concerned. Narayan gives vent to this unrestrained. Women's helpless withdrawal into self is voiced here: "What possession can a woman call her own except her body? Everything else that she has is her father's, her husband's or her sons". Even if Savitri is aware that her body is her own, she finds that it is only the source of desire and site of oppression in male view. She undergoes mental, psychological, social, sexual and physical suffering from which escape seems still a far cry. Silence, self-exile, claustrophobia, schizophrenia are some of the zones where she finds her refuge. Exasperated she cries out: "I'm a human being... you men will never grant that."

This is the universal cry of women, which is brought out in women writing more prominently in trying to make women aware of their own plight. Feminism or Feminist movement is against all forms of women's oppression by patriarchy. The bases for feminist agenda center around two things: similarity and dissimilarity, both of which speak of women as the human subject. Woman like man is a human-subject, hence she should be treated on the basis of similarity, equality, equal treatment, equal opportunity, sexual equality, and so on. Then woman is dissimilar to man, biologically, as in terms of roles and positions, hence she needs equal treatment, equal justice. First, she should be given her due, restored her lost opportunities.


To cite another work by a male writer, Tagore’s *Binodini* which is about Binodini, a beautiful, intelligent and youthful lady, but without any dowry she is married off to three sickly old men who die one after another. Realising her youth, beauty and intellect she rebels and leaves home but finally returns to the society by accepting its limitations and impositions. Thus woman is interpreted as darkness. Her liberation from the shackles imposed by the society is very urgent. In the above referred novels by male writers women’s liberation, individual identity and emancipation are not realized even if they have raised several issues for the betterment of women’s condition in the society. The new woman does not come out here.

The entry of women writers in the post 50’s Indian Literary scenario embarks upon a voyage towards women’s self-realisation and emancipation economically, socially, culturally, politically and psychologically. They start representing emancipated women in fiction but their textual production is not necessarily accompanied by a specific female literary canon thereby their writing seems to have taken place within the male literary tradition. As for instance, in Rama Mehta’s *Inside the Haveli*, the heroine Geeta is shown as an educated and liberated woman who brings slow changes inside the Haveli yet her mother-in-law feels: “Marriage is the only security for women” and in more or less the same way Pari expresses “it would be an intolerable disgrace to have a daughter-in-law earning a wage”.

These are the views of the older generation but the newer generation is also not entirely free from this kind of conventional orthodoxy. Women’s writing however, is ironic and satiric. When the novelist expresses a stiff opposition

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to the income earning daughter-in-law, it stresses the need to change the traditional role and position of women in the family as economically dependent. Feminists are concerned with women’s lack of independent decision. After marriage a woman is to make compromise with her husband. Indira Nityanandam observes in this context:

Indian women face a painful choice whether to use their mind and education as they deem fit or to surrender themselves to the new family they enter with marriage.36

Facing this kind of problem Monisha, one of Anita Desai’s women character looses self-identity and confidence.

To cite another example, in Shashi Deshpande’s *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, the heroine Smita is an educated and liberated woman, nevertheless she suffers at the hands of her hypocritical and chauvinistic husband. She cannot even choose her own friends after marriage quite independently since under patriarchy, the husband’s friends become the wife’s too. She is worried about whether her husband would like her friends or not. The novelist stresses the true picture of woman’s life through Nalu, a friend of Smita who tells her: “There is always time to do all the things ‘he’ wants to do but never anytime for doing the things you want to do.”37

A feminist writer seeks to reject this kind of life lived for others: Patriarchal society wants to keep woman in her socially and culturally given place by reminding that her sex is never complete, never an independent


entity. As a result she has to remain a dependent, unable to stand on her own footing; unless she belongs to one – a man. A mother, a sister, a daughter, a wife or any woman for that matter is ineluctably bound to that culturally defined category of woman, an appendage of man. How patriarchy tries to perpetuate women’s suffering is demonstrated by Anita Desai in her novels, and this will be discussed in the following pages.

Exploring women’s mind and problems in patriarchy is the aim of women writing as resulting from women’s reaction against centuries of their oppression. Anita Desai as a woman writer represents women as a marginalized sexual class against patriarchy’s determinism, sexism and sexual politics. In her novels, she reveals the persistent rivalry between marriage and self-fulfillment in a woman’s life. Most of her women wish to rebel against savagery and utter lack of understanding of female feelings and longings by men. This has done extensive damage to women who suffer an inner pain, almost a hell within. As for instance, Sita in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* takes refuge in wild fantasy, i.e. to keep her baby unborn safely contained inside her when reality becomes too unbearable, meaningless and empty, bound by the roles and duties of a wife and mother in a dull, monotonous and routine-ridden life of sacrifices and compromises. Nanda Kaul in *Fire On The Mountain* wishes for no contact or communication with the outside world as she is tired of duties and responsibilities. Having no time for individual self-fulfillment she feels all her emotions aspirations and instincts stifled and becomes a cold and proud woman in the eyes of the world.

The desire to know who they are boils inside them and when it comes out, it takes the form of a quest for identity, for a fuller understanding of life. The result is, though, often disastrous. Monisha in *Voices in the City* sets
herself on fire, unable to continue her hopeless existence, and to show that even if she cannot shape her identity she can at least shape her destiny. Maya in *Cry, The Peacock* also does away with her husband in order to escape the patriarchal male-created space and find a space of her own.

Some of the important characteristics of the post independence women writing are the deconstruction and the dismantling of patriarchal cultures and myths. The novelist, aware of women’s plight, depicts women as resisting and challenging the culturally defined concept of woman, if not always outwardly. The values imposed by the hegemony of patriarchy are so rigid in Indian society that women, specially her sensitive women take extreme steps/measures. Most of Anita Desai’s women are victims of patriarchal brought up, which makes them too immature, too ill-equipped and too insecure to face harsh realities of life. Maya in Anita Desai’s first novel *Cry, the Peacock* leads a protected, pampered, cocooned and fairy tale like life under her doting father’s care. Her background and brought up, instead of making her self-assured, independent and practical, makes her timid, insecure and helpless i.e. the clinging type of woman. Thus she cannot take any decision of her own in her life and when any tension crops up she turns to either her father or husband: “Father! Brother! Husband! Who is my saviour? I am in need of one”(98). This dependence syndrome again makes her suppress whatever spirit of defiance or sense of independence she has, and that renders her unable to raise questions or choose her own way of life. Thus, instead of giving her a healthy mind and emotional nourishment by her patriarchal brought up (in the absence of a mother figure) she suppresses all her individual ambitions, feelings, thoughts and instincts for fear of bitter consequences (her father has already disowned her brother Arjuna for

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Anita Desai, *Cry, The Peacock* (Delhi: Orient, 1980). The same edition has been used for future quotations and references.
rebelling against his wishes). This also makes her anxious, doubtful and her mind is filled with unreasonable fears.

The fetters of Brahmanical orthodoxy have bound Maya mind into the folds of superstition so much so that she cannot escape from the haunting fear of death prophesied by an astrologer, a typical product of patriarchal society. This fear finally destroys her mental equilibrium, maddening her to kill her husband Gautam as in a fit. The difference in brought up between a son and a daughter is exposed by the novelist when Rai Sahib is concerned with his son’s education, social status and grooming while he neglects Maya’s. He does not even bother to teach her the ways of the world. Arjuna being a male could let himself loose from the shackles of patriarchal society whereas Maya’s womanhood becomes an insurmountable barrier to her individual growth and development of a separate identity.

Maya’s marriage to Gautam, temperamentally the most unsuitable person because of his skeptical mind, detached nature and routine-ridden busy world of laws, serves her father’s interest rather than her own. This fact reveals that in a patriarchal society a woman’s wishes or choice are not taken into account especially at the most crucial moments when important decisions about her life are to be made. Maya’s mental, psychological and emotional sufferings in her marriage are due to incompatibility caused by temperamental difference, absence of love, understanding, concern, communication, trust, closeness or strong emotional ties. This increases when Gautam fails to fulfill his young wife’s intuitive demands and expectations as he is a cold, unromantic, impotent and a snow-broth husband.

As a woman writer, Anita Desai “condemns the traditional marriage institution in Indian society that allows a man to marry a woman without
love and understanding between them”. The sufferings of women within patriarchal society increase after marriage since it is an institution that exploits women socially, sexually, psychologically, emotionally and physically, keeping them chained to the husband’s different lifestyle and ways of life. Women live and “suffer in a meticulous world dominated by men, who, in the guise of father, brother or husband, present a constant threat to their integrity and intuition.” The exclusion of Maya from familial discussions, from exclusive male gatherings, from Gautam’s private world of worries and public life of lawsuits by ignoring her while she has nothing to do, make her suffer from alienation and boredom. And having been taught since childhood to keep her thoughts and emotions to herself most of the time, she cannot voice her impulses openly to Gautam just as she could not voice to her father. This makes her mind a breeding ground for guilt, remorse, anxiety, suspicion, fear and abnormality. The same is the case with a number of women characters in most of Anita Desai’s novels. Women also become victims of psychic annihilation when they are treated not as individuals in their own right but treated indifferently or reduced to the status of an object for the use and pleasure of others.

As N.D.R. Chandra expresses: “In India, girls are taught to keep their problems within themselves... such secrecy breeds many problems and diseases, including mental and psychological imbalances”. Hence women

39 M. Mani Meitei, “Feminism and Anita Desai’s Cry, The Peacock and Where Shall We Go This Summer?” P.M. Nayak and S.P. Swain, eds. Feminism and Indian English Fiction (Bareilly: Prakash, 1996), 45.

40 Bidulata Choudhary, Women And Society In the Novels of Anita Desai (New Delhi: Creative, 1995), 54.

rarely express their mind and this has made men believe women to have no mind of their own. All the major decisions are taken by man as a woman is still not thought capable of making her own choice and decisions. The desire in men to dominate women in action and thought becomes a disease that makes men chauvinistic in a patriarchal society. Gautam tells Maya when she joins in his arguments by giving her point of view: "Really it is quite impossible to talk to a woman." (124) He also blames his sister Nila for "being too bossy and self-willed and bullying," (162) when she decides to divorce her unworthy husband whom she calls a rat; and refuses to help her. All this reveals the vanity of male sex, a typical product of patriarchy. For men, women who wish to express their inner selves or who have a will of their own are unwomanly and therefore either to be blamed or ignored. Women's individual self-esteem, independent choice, individual will and feelings are rejected due to patriarchal power politics. In other words, they are denied self-determination due to sexism of patriarchy. Maya cries: "our marriage was based upon a nobility forced upon us from outside, and therefore, neither true nor lasting." (45)

This denial of self-determination and individual choice is to treat women as second class citizens. Here it will be pertinent to recall Sunaina Singh:

By and large the reaction of a woman to a threat or loss in the prevalent cultural context is depression, whereas a man's is aggression. Her basic powerlessness is obviously the result of patriarchal setting than her own predisposition. Severe depression combined with the feeling of helplessness can result in madness.42

Depression becomes inevitable when women are as eager and questioning and are unable to reconcile themselves to their lot as Anita Desai’s women are.

Moreover, the expectations from a woman in her different roles of mother, wife and daughter by the patriarchal culture and its assumptions curve her individual freedom of mind and action psychologically. Freedom from such demanding restrictions is the need of the moment as the novelist emphasizes all through her novels. Her minor characters are also victims of either joint family system or strict patriarchal morality and double standard. Laila, a friend of Maya sacrifices her life and severes her ties with her parents to marry a consumptive patient who in turn makes fun of her as her parents have discarded her. Another friend, Pom suffers from suffocative scrutiny of her mother-in-law which gives her hardly any space or freedom for self-fulfillment. She complains to Maya:

To live here like two mice in one small room, not daring to creep out, for fear they’ll pounce on you, ask you where you’re going, when you’ll be back.... (61)

The cabaret dancers whom Gautam and Maya have seen are also victims of patriarchy for they are sexually and psychologically exploited, reducing them to mindless, emotionless, identityless playthings. They are condemned for using their body to entice men, but it is men who use them. Anita Desai exposes this double standard of male attitude and morality of the patriarchal society.

The next novel, *Voices in the City* shows women who are trampled upon in a patriarchal society. The central character, Monisha’s life is severely stifled in her husband’s home that is rooted in joint family structure.

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Anita Desai, *Voices in the City* (Delhi: Orient, 1989). The same edition has been used for future quotations and references.
All her spontaneous instincts, longings and aspirations are stunted in an atmosphere where there is complete inhuman lack of privacy under constant observation and prying eye by the mother-in-law and other family members. They all look at women's intellect disapprovingly and derisively as is shown in their reaction to Monisha's drawer, which is filled with books of great writers like Dostoevsky, Hopkins and Kafka instead of saris and jewellery. The dominant patriarchal ideology assumes that artistic creativity is a gift made available only to men hence is fundamentally a male quality, and, thus, views women as unintelligent and untalented. This ideology also treats women most opprobriously and demands that women be selfless, with such negative attributes as passivity and docility being put to the fore for women to be extolled as women. Anything that deviates from the expected norms or expectations in women is unnatural/unfeminine. Shantha Krishnaswamy is right in observing that in a patriarchal society:

Intellectuality in women is deemed as a direct betrayal of their fundamental feminine nature. If a woman like Monisha yields to cold, unproductive thinking, she is considered unnatural; if she protests against her ordained lot, she is labelled neurotic and masculinised.44

The only form of intellectual exercise Monisha can enjoy is reading of her philosophical books to soothe her anxiety-ridden mind, in the rare moments snatched in between household chores and duties of cooking, of serving elders and attending to her mother's-in-law needs. Women's career is also not taken seriously by men. Mr Basu, one of the minor characters in the novel makes fun of his wife's career even before others at a party – 'of this whim of hers of having a career' (164), by drawing Amla's attention.

Under patriarchy a girl is colonized at home; and marriage adds another burden making her twice colonized, depriving her of individual identity and freedom. A sensitive, introvert, vulnerable woman like Monisha neither is able to accept the social set up nor is able to muster up courage to fight against it openly. Monisha's suffering increases due to Jiban's lack of emotional attachment, absence of understanding and love, contact, communion, trust, support and attention. Thus their relationship ends in a fiasco. The overall subordinate and dependent position of women, in general, who walk behind their husbands, always dressed in colourless clothes that reflect their hopeless life of subservience also throws Monisha into a depressing gloom. The tendency of suppression of women's potential by sexism and the positioning of women under patriarchy to the status of the 'other' make Monisha undergo mental dilemma and psychological trauma. This is because their unique individual tastes and inclinations are not recognized and they are not given personal/individual time and space for their own happiness. Indian women place themselves in bondage to men to whom they look as saviours as they have been taught since childhood to serve others rather than attend to their own needs. Aunt Lila speaks this out: “Women place themselves in bondage to men whether in marriage or out. All their joy and ambition is channeled that way, while they go parched themselves” (221). The aim of feminist writing as seen in Anita Desai is to make men realize the need to respect women's sacrificial spirit, their wishes and their individual identity. The novelist advocates women to free themselves from dependence syndrome and to live a life of their own. She also suggests that one must find one's own way to freedom from a servile life if men do not grant that.

The romanticization and mythologization of motherhood by patriarchal culture are used as a means of oppression of childless women.
Therefore Monisha’s barrenness has a negative impact on her very existence. The psychological coercion (created within her by the social relations she has to maintain) makes her view herself as an incomplete woman due to her barrenness. This coercion when combined with her psychological sufferings due to the family’s accusation of her of stealing money from her own husband (while she used the money to pay the hospital bills of her brother) and their open talk about her barrenness significantly changes her life making her withdraw to herself. The realization that she must accept her insignificance if she has to live in a patriarchal society changes her completely from an uncaring and carefree person to one with an “eerie unreality”. Being unable to find a niche for herself to rest her battered soul, she becomes hopelessly silent (making others to distrust her).

Women’s economic dependence and the resultant problems are clearly indicated when she is accused of theft while her husband takes sides with the accusers. Under the circumstances, she now realizes that in spite of her intellect, sensibility and artistic mind, she is to lead a life of boredom waiting for death:

Lives spent in waiting for nothing, waiting on men self-centred and indifferent and hungry and demanding and critical, waiting for death and dying misunderstood, always behind bars....

(120).

But she will not passively wait for death and act herself by choosing her own death as a better option to mean existence even if she cannot live a life of her own. Amla painfully reacts to Monisha’s suicide which makes her realize that “the parameters of the choice for a woman are almost always
predetermined.” To counter patriarchal society Monisha advises Amla to ‘always go in the opposite direction’ so that she can save herself from the social demands and expectations that curve women’s freedom, stifle aspirations and reduce them to a vacuum. All these culminate in women’s silence, marginalization and claustrophobia. Anita Desai as a woman writer portrays numerous facets of woman’s experience emphasizing the marginalization, insecurity and segregation experienced by women in a rigid patriarchal culture.

Monisha is also a victim of parental dominance since her father marries her off with the full knowledge that Jiban and his family are not suitable to Monisha’s tastes and inclinations. This forfeits her right to take her own decisions. Moreover, like Maya, Monisha

... has not been adequately prepared, by birth and early training, to face the complexities of the world dominated by outdated social mores fostered by male chauvinism.\(^46\)

Monisha’s mother has also suffered at the hands of her bitter and drunkard husband and it is only after his death that she can live her life to the brim. Yet her own son Nirode suspects her of having an affair blaming her for being unfaithful to his dead father. This is typical male attitude. Dharma, another male patriarchal figure, in spite of all his seemingly modern views cannot tolerate his daughter’s act of choosing her own mate. So he disowns her totally ignoring his wife’s sentiments and daughters right to choice. He

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\(^45\) Chandrani Biswas, “The Unspoken Ordeal: Anita Desai’s Female Protagonists” Surya Nath Pandey, ed. Contemporary Indian Women Writers In English: A Feminist Perspective (New Delhi: Atlantic, 1999), 31

also uses Amla for something in her that needs to give him inspiration in his art, keeping the emotionally involved Amla ignored.

Life for a woman in a male-centred patriarchal society of rigid codes and morals is, as Monisha finds, a waste, a barren waste:

What a waste, what a waste, it has been, this life enclosed in a locked container, merely as an observer, and so imperfect, so handicapped an observer at that. (239-40)

In order to escape this waste, Monisha commits suicide when she fails to find an alternative existence, a life of her own. She may have broken the shackles of meekness and docility but has failed to find a ground firm enough to stand by herself like her sister Amla. Hence she is destroyed by forces beyond her control.

The rigid patriarchal societal norms have drained Sita, the heroine of Where Shall We Go This summer? of her normalcy, instinctivity, creativity, and thus she appears crazy to her husband and children. She may have rebelled against her husband’s wishes and social conventions in going to Manori in the advanced stage of pregnancy to ask for the miracle of keeping her baby unborn, yet she comes back to the mainland. The roles, duties and restrictions imposed on her in her married life as a wife and mother have maimed her and they have made her thought and action schizophrenic. But still unable to change anything, she passively waits for something to deliver herself from daily boredom and frustration.

Men in patriarchy feel that having provided women social status (for marriage ensures that) and economic dependency, their duties are over since in their down to earth, practical minded world of order as opposed to

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47 Anita Desai, Where Shall We Go This Summer? (Delhi: Vision, 1982). The same edition has been used for future quotations and references.
women's emotionally and psychologically disturbed world; there is no place for romance and private world of emotion and intuition. Therefore, an emotional vacuum is created in the highly sensitive and disturbed life of Sita, whose silence and restlessness stare like tragedy in her face. As a woman, a wife and mother she feels she has nothing left for herself: "She had placed herself in bondage to Raman and the children, she had channelled all her ambition and energy their way while she went parched herself".

And any diversion from the projected path of a married woman, any idea of defiance or attempt to break away from societal constraints, is enough for the society to brand the woman as abnormal. Men's view of self-importance is fully expressed by Moses, the caretaker of Sita's father's island house, who, seeing Sita come with her two children only, assumes that there must be rifts and dissensions in the family "... since there was no father to hold them together and lead them in obedience, nor even a husband" (20). So in men's view the absence of a male figure makes disorder enter, revealing cracks within. Sita's inability to adjust to her married life is brought on by her brought up like Maya's in which much was excluded and ignored and in which the presence of the nurturing mother was absent. The violence that has been gathering inside her over the years due to hopelessness, frustration, boredom and anger in her married life erupt in the form of her defiance of the male values represented by Raman. This act also is a rebellion against the current notions of womanhood as a sexual object and procreative machine but the male world considers it to be an act of abnormality.

The normal woman is known by her subservience and compliance, and any deviation from this automatically renders her abnormal. This kind of abnormality and insanity in women

48 Shantha Krishnaswamy, The Woman in Indian Fiction in English, 264.
is traced undoubtedly to the result of oppression in a male-dominated society.\textsuperscript{49}

This projection of mad women in female-authored texts can be a way of revising the patriarchal definition of women through anger, rebellion and refusal to conform to the values and norms created, developed and designed by men. It can also be a way of coming to terms with "... their own uniquely female feelings of fragmentation, their own keen sense of the discrepancies between what they are and what they are supposed to be."\textsuperscript{50}

These discrepancies suffered by women between what they really are and what they are expected by the society to be, continue to be the main problems for Desai's married woman.

Nanda Kaul in \textit{Fire On The Mountain}\textsuperscript{51} performs her duties of both a wife and mother without showing any grudge outwardly even if she feels tied down and suffocated by a life of excesses – excess of children, of guests, of duties and of responsibilities. Because patriarchal society values woman only in her roles as it has shaped and moulded to be and not in her unique individual status, she cannot free herself from these exacting nature of various roles she has and ought to perform. She withers inside emotionally and psychologically because she has to hide her anger in silence (for having used her energy, time, potential and emotion by both her husband and children) for the neglect and lack of understanding of her sensitive nature and above all the humiliation and pain she suffers due to her husband's extra-marital affair.

\textsuperscript{49} Sunaina Singh, \textit{Indian Literature Today}, 212.


\textsuperscript{51} Anita Desai, \textit{Fire On the Mountain} (London: Vintage, 1999). The same edition has been used for future quotations and references.
Nanda bears her husband’s deliberate insult to her dignity, womanly pride and individuality as a result of his affair because patriarchy expects woman to make all the compromises and sacrifices. Moreover, the most pressure-exerting relationship between a man and a woman is that of marriage where even the woman’s name is merged into the man’s, where all her dreams, ambitions, emotions are channelled into his way, which indicates most clearly that woman lives for others. Her ironic bow to duty while her heart bleeds inside is a common feature in Indian patriarchal society. Banerjee shares the same view:

This strange notion of martyr-like self sacrifice to gratify the whims of father, husband, son and brother dominates the women, specially the Indian women at every step.\(^{52}\)

However, Nanda’s sacrifice differs from other women in as much as she embraces silence and loneliness, as an armour against further betrayals. Anita Desai further makes use of silence and solitude as a way of escape from woman’s affiliation as being a sexual object to her husband. The only form of satisfaction Nanda enjoys in her married life is the practice of one hour’s silence even if she is aware of every movement, every sound disturbing her peace-seeking mind. It is the only form of self-assertion she can enjoy, however limited it is, since, through it, she makes others specially her husband aware of her existence, independent of his wishes and commands.

A life of social graces and obligations (hosting parties always dressed in silk and looking after the guests among whom is the other woman) has also destroyed her inner self. Social elegance is a bondage that shields

her grievances. Her husband's social standing demands that she ought to appear even if it has not charm. But, men fail to realize that women are as ever pushed into a world of void and nothingness gathering a string of expanding expectations. Thus, a woman lives for others and not for herself. Anita Desai makes us aware of this loathsome life of woman. There is no wonder that marriage becomes a tool for destroying women's emotional and psychological life. Having suffered in her married life, Nanda becomes "a recluse out of vengeance for a long life of duty and obligation, ... and has arrived at this condition by a long route of rejection and sacrifice" (78). Too intense to be borne but too painful to be ignored, Nanda Kaul tries in vain to escape from her past life in her old age, becoming a lonely outcaste. Her identity of a seemingly independent woman in her old age becomes a poor camouflage, in trying to escape unhurt from her traditional enacting of roles of an unloved wife and uncared mother.

Ila Das, Nanda's childhood friend is a fine example of patriarchy's brutal revenge upon women who dares question its authority. She lives a frugal life, a life with very few opportunities as such. And as girls she and her sister, ever since their childhood have been badly discriminated against; their education just the opposite of what their brothers have got. They are foreign educated but turn out to be swindlers wasting their father's fortune and making their sisters sell every single possession to clear their debts. She laments: "Isn't it absurd, how helpless our upbringing made us .... Left us helpless, positively handicapped" (127). Thus, Anita Desai exposes the lopsidedness of a patriarchal society in depriving women of their economic and property rights, which are preserved/reserved for the sons in a male dominated traditional society:
"The family fortune, divided amongst those drunken, dissolute sons as in a story, and not a penny of it to either to the two clever, thrifty, hard-working daughters" (127).

The novelist exposes this kind of social set up where discrimination based on sexual difference is the current mode denying women's fundamental right to life and happiness. Having suffered at the hands of inhuman patriarchy, Ila in her old age tries to bring some changes in the social set up, to teach women the need for education, economic independence and emancipation, to prepare women for the outside world. But such a society entrenched with thick patriarchal bias that seeks to remove the remover of social evils, like child marriage, tramples upon her to be mercilessly raped and murdered. In what such a man as Preet Singh has done one can witness one of the cruelties patriarchy has perpetuated against women all these years. Ila Das's death speaks volumes of women suffering and of sexual violence man commit as a revenge against helpless women who choose the right path. It is a pity that she is targeted remorselessly. The following opinion sides with the novelist's view:

It was the only successful revenge that Preet Singh could inflict on Ila who had interfered in the matter of his seven year old daughter's marriage to an old man. He worked to humiliate Ila for the injury she had caused to his male ego.53

In her experience as a social welfare officer, she comes across many women who are willing to listen to her advice for new ways of life, but the men are not so, since it'll mean that women's freedom of thought and action have been given recognition and the same may ultimately lead to lessening of respect and fear due to man as a figure of authority. Ila tells Nanda: "In

the end, the women listen to them, if not to the priest, then definitely to their husbands” (129). So every time the whole thing goes back to square one. Man asserts his domination over woman. Thus all her endeavours are a waste, being devoid of any positive result. Preet Singh’s rape of Ila also indicates that a father has complete authority over the daughter’s life, past, present and, therefore, future. Look at Raka. Her timidity, introverted nature and destructive tract also come out as a result of her brought up where her tyrannical father used to beat her helpless mother, and the family atmosphere, the bullying father, instilled in her fear of insecurity and distrustfulness in her relationship with others.

Sarah in *Bye-Bye Blackbird*, a foreigner though having married to an Indian suffers just like Maya from neglect and a sense of exclusion from her husband Adit’s friend circle as if she is not intelligent enough to participate. Breaking all her previous ties with her family and friends in order to strengthen her ties with Adit, Sarah undergoes mental suffering specially when adjustment to an alien culture is expected. By cooking Indian food, listening to Indian music she lets herself to be moulded according to Adit’s tastes since she becomes aware of the threats by society to feminine identity and incompatible sex roles inflicted upon her in Indian male-centred society. But in becoming meek and submissive she loses all her natural and spontaneous feelings.

Annihilation of self that marriage invokes for a woman is revealed when the most important decision about her life i.e. leaving her own country in following her husband, that also when she is pregnant, is taken by Adit without asking her. He decides, “My son will be born in India” (204). It has to be a son, never a daughter that a man expects because girls since

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54 Anita Desai, *Bye-Bye Blackbird* (Delhi: Orient, 1985). The same edition has been used for further quotations and references.
childhood/birth are considered to be worthless, as they cannot continue the
father’s lineage. Therefore “In seeking his own self, Adit is totally unaware
of the loss of self that his decision implies for Sarah”.55

Here, the novelist has pointed out such lack of human consideration of
the feelings of others — the one sidedness of male chauvinism that takes
women for a ride. It is Sarah by virtue of being a woman who makes all the
sacrifices, trying to maintain a semblance of order when Adit undergoes a
sea-change, in spite of all her personal problems of being pregnant, of
uncertainty of her future etc. It implies that once married a woman is
expected to eschew all her personal ambitions and goals since she must try to
find her fulfillment within the family, not outside. Leaving her job, her
country, her people in order to give happiness to Adit, she sacrifices while
Adit enjoys his authority:

Sitting in her office, she had been trying to soothe this rocking-
horse child, lull it to stillness, and to adjust to Adit’s decision,
still unaccustomed. She was trying to fit herself and her baby
into the pattern Adit had now arbitrarily laid before her. (206)

Thus the history of mankind is the history of man, woman having been kept
unseen, unheard and marginalised.

The difference in nurture, the sexual discrimination between boys and
girls since birth is again emphasized as a bitter truth of patriarchal society in
Clear Light of Day.56 The heroine Bimla and her sister Tara envy the
liberties boys enjoy — to puff cigarettes, fly kites, go cycling even in night
singing songs and above all to wear trouser that give full freedom for

56 Anita Desai, Clear Light of Day (New Delhi: Allied, 1980). The same
edition has been used for further quotations and references.
movement. All these make them free, free to act and think. Yet, at the same
time girls are taught to obey what is dictated to them, not to strive for
achievement and freedom. Small wonder, Bim envys the place Raja holds in
the family and therefore in society. Her father decides which college Raja
will join when he bothers least for the girls. As a girl brought up in an
atmosphere of neglect and highly genderized society, Bim becomes aware of
the incompatible sex roles inflicted upon women, of the determinants and of
threats to feminine identity and destiny. Girls/women always live in a
constricted life making them feel jealous of boys’/men’s advantages over
them. This is actually what Freud calls ‘penis envy’ – not actually the male
genitals but the social and cultural superiority and positions men enjoy.

Besides, children are worst affected by the neglect of the parents
especially in the case of *Clear Light of Day* where the father and the mother
carry on their hankering after each other. They care for each other and for
clubs and cards more than they do for their children, affecting the children
more than they (parents) realize to such an extent that the children suffer
from a sense of insecurity, timidity and distrust of any relationship. Anita
Desai as a woman writer condemns this kind of brought up which
incapacitates children, specially the female child in the novel. Bim feels
angry at her father for his neglect: “For all father cared, I could have grown
up illiterate and – and cooked for my liying—or swept. So I had to teach
myself history, and teach myself to teach”. (155). The father’s neglect of the
daughter’s education, future and aspirations while he is concerned about the
son’s career, education and future is a typical male attitude. By criticising it
the novelist stresses the need for women’s education, proper training for
future to make a mark upon society. Her anger against Raja for shirking his
responsibilities (like her father) is also her anger against the male world so
neglectful of women such as Indian patriarchal society.
Patriarchal society's rigid norms find it hard to accept women's emancipatory ideas of freedom and knowledge as they challenge masculine traits by masquerading the masculine traits themselves. Thus challenge is thrown not by contrast but by ambivalence. This is exactly what the ambitious and liberated woman, Bim does in the novel. Feminine striving for achievement is seen as mercenary in the traditional Hindu society: "The Hindu social code sees external ambition in women as detrimental and unnatural."\(^57\) That is why girls are never encouraged to venture outside home, to interact with unknown people in the world outside, and in order to make them content in accepting the already male made paths, they are taught to accept life and not to question it.

Tara, Bim's younger sister, a timid and shy person becomes in her married life a puppet' in the hands of her domineering and patronizing husband who crushes all her individuality to the extent that she cannot even pick up a green gauva for fear of his condescending comments on her uncultured behaviour (only from his point of view). Even if she has no desire to see Bakul's relatives, he forces her into accepting his proposal: '...Of course you will come.... There's no question about it' (11). She feels that following his every whim has been such an enormous strain that it has drained her of her strength, energy and spontaneity. Male chauvinism and sexual politics of patriarchy thus see woman as an object to be moulded according to man's wishes.

Bim's aunt Mira Masi is the worst sufferer within patriarchy as she is a widow living a reduced state of being and is blamed for her husband's death. The husband's family feel that:

She should be made to pay for her guilt. Guiltly, she scrubbed and washed and cooked for them. At night she massaged her mother-in-laws leg's and nursed wakeful babies.... (108).

Other minor characters such as the Mishra sisters provide another example of suffering women under patriarchy. Having been forced into early marriage without any experience or preparation for future, they have been abandoned by their husbands. Hopeless as they are they come to their parents' home where they teach singing and dancing to earn their living. Their old father is one who understands the painful life of Bim as comparable to his own daughters. He openly says: "You work too hard, you don't know how to enjoy life. You and my two girls are too alike - you work and let the brothers enjoy." (32) The novelist advocates a change in men's attitude and behaviour towards women to make the society free of taboos and inequality.

Anita Desai's other novels such as *In Custody, Baumgartner's Bombay* and *Journey To Ithaca* in which the protagonists are men are not discussed in detail in this chapter. In these novels the point of focus has shifted from women under patriarchy to other issues such as man's search for self, struggle for existence and the call, spiritual or religious towards true awakening of the soul etc. However, in them one hears the unfailing voice of Anita Desai as a feminist writer. Therefore one must not forget them entirely. Sarla in *In Custody* is married to Deven selected by his mother as a suitable bride on account of her homely and "penny pinching" qualities:

They had observed her for years and found her suitable in every way: plain, penny-pinching and congenitally pessimistic, what they had not suspected was that Sarla, as a girl and a new bride, had aspirations, too; they had not understood because within the grim boundaries of their own penurious lives they had never entertained anything so abstract. (67)
Marriages such as this where outside forces rather than individual choice rule, are bound to fail as the novelist has already shown in *Cry, the Peacock* and *Voices in the City*. Belonging to an economically backward family she has value only as a commodity in the marriage market, not considered as a person having a separate identity in a patriarchal society. Her dreams do not materialise in her marriage due to economic hardships and due to Deven’s overbearing and cold nature which make her undergo mental suffering. And when she shows her discontentment with accusative looks Deven would hurl away dishes that had not been cooked to his liking, bawl uncontrollably if meals were not ready when he wanted them or the laundry not done or a button missing or their small son noisy or unwashed… (68)

To blame her for every single thing, to cut short her arguments – these are typical male ways. So her only form of protest remains sulking, and her refusal to talk to him is also another form of protest, for protest becomes a victim’s response since her mind has been shaped by a culture that only teaches woman to be much submissive as to surrender her body, mind and feelings.

Lotte in *Baumgartner’s Bombay*[^58] is driven out of the house, bought by her lover Kanti, after his death by his sons whom she has cared for. This makes her homeless and feels emotionally insecure making her cling on to life to keep herself afloat. In a sexist society without a man she has no existence and in order to live she has to choose or compromise so that she can breathe “in a society split by the gender difference, where men are centralised marginalizing women to the zone of non-existence”.[^59]


Sophie in *Journey to Ithaca*\(^6^0\) though a foreigner cannot escape from the shackles of patriarchal society. In Matteo’s pursuit of the supreme vision, like a typical male, he neglects Sophie’s needs making her emotionally insecure and giving her no fulfillment. Uncaring about her vulnerable state of being in the first-stages of pregnancy with its morning sickness, exhaustion etc., he roams from Ashram to Ashram on foot making her follow him. He only needs her for physical satisfaction. Thus the picture of victimized women in a society ruled by sexism is found in all the novels of Anita Desai.

Coming to her latest novel, *Fasting, Feasting*,\(^6^1\) the novelist shows both mother and daughter being moulded by a patriarchal father figure to suit his interests. Uma’s education is stopped in order to make her look after her baby brother since an ayah is not enough for a boy, as he needs “proper attention”. The discrimination since birth based on sexual difference can be found in every decision the father takes. The son is sent abroad for higher studies while the girls are kept at home, made to run errands like a maid. Uma became aware of the disadvantages of being ‘a female’ first at home—made aware by her own mother, then there are the biological changes which trap her as she grows up and of which she is aware – made aware by the society. Even the mother cannot terminate her unwanted pregnancy since the father, the head of the family expects a son. Sexism places first priority over a male child, neglecting girls, their privileges, rights which for the novelist cannot escape her deep concern. She exposes this facade of patriarchal society. Anita Desai sarcastically informs us: “He had not only made her his wife, he had made her the mother of his son, what honour, what status.” (31) The mother seldom reveals her personal wishes and fancies in the


father's presence, but enjoys them only in his absence. A woman can never be her own self, can never reveal her true nature and potential in a patriarchal society because of its taboos, impositions and biases.

Having cost two dowries with no husband to present, as she has been ditched by both, Uma's parents have stopped caring about her as an individual, but now they use her. There is a forever no to anything she wants – she cannot make her own friends or go out or make calls. The mother who has suffered at the hands of the same culture helps in the oppression of her own daughter because it has been instilled in her mind that women's life should be a life of subjugation. Moreover an unmarried daughter has no place in the family as well as in society. Uma's economic dependency further adds to her problem as Kate Millet says about women ‘... economic dependency is but another sign of her bondage to a system whose coercive agents are actual as well as mythical'.

Thus Uma cannot live a life of and on her own, she is not given either time or money or guidance to pursue her own dreams and every step of her life has to be approved by the parents. Sudhir Kakar's view is worth mentioning in this context:

Internalisation of low self esteem also presupposes that girls and women have no sphere of their own, no independent livelihood and activity, no area of family and community responsibility and dominance, no living space apart from that of men, within which to create and manifest those aspects of feminine identity that derive from intimacy or collaboration with other women.

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Uma is an example of those women who are born and married at the kitchen and dies there within the confines of four walls. Through her sensitive women’s suffering within patriarchy, Anita Desai reveals that:

"The position of women in patriarchy is such that they are expected to be passive, to suffer and to be sexual objects, it is unquestionable that they are with varying degrees of success, socialized into such roles".  

Thus, some of Anita Desai’s women rebel against the male made patriarchal norms not by advocating drastic social, political or economic changes but by trying to live a life of their own where they can realise their full potentials. They may not always succeed in their efforts but the fact of having thought of protesting is as equally valuable as achieving victory. What the novelist would like to stress in her novels is that man should acknowledge women’s silent protests and through which the attitude towards sex, marriage, family and society can be changed in order that women live a life of their own. The sexist view that a woman cannot be a wife and a mother without surrendering her identity needs to be challenged and reviewed, and the need to see woman as a whole, not as culturally variable construct is and ought to be recognised.

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Kate Millet, *Sexual Politics*, 144.