CHAPTER-VI
THE FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE OF KAMALA DAS, SHASHI DESHPANDE, ANITA DESAI, AND ARUNDHATI ROY:
A COMPARATIVE STUDY

6.1. Introduction

A woman’s journey of discovery of her ‘self’ makes her overcome various hurdles. She has to bypass numerous codes that man has formulated to safeguard his position and supremacy in the society. The first to come in the way are arbitrary rules of familial respectability that expect her to act according to the whims and fancies of her family members. This makes her a puppet in their hands. Any denial, even the most courteous one, on the part of a woman and demand for her desired status, are enough to term her in disrespectful veins. She is labelled as ‘disobedient’, ‘unfaithful’, ‘shameless’ and so on. She is taken as a black spot on the family and the society starts doubting her integrity. But despite these impediments, her inherent undying spirit provides her the courage to break the cocoon of patriarchy and other social taboos.

Several contemporary women writers have dealt with issues pertaining to the emancipation of women. Some of them such as Manju Kapoor, Bapsi Sidhwa, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, etc., to name a few, have presented the new images of women, who raise their voice against the ill treatment and injustice meted out to them since ages. With the aspiration of becoming independent and self reliant, they have been crossing the boundaries of their houses that have confined their very existence. They are very boldly rejecting patriarchal notions and subordination, demanding equal status and autonomy, not only in words but in actions. S. Prasanna Sree aptly remarks, “It is a struggle against the hardships, neglect and dual moral standards to which women are subjected. The new woman’s demand for her rightful place, recognition and respect due to her is prompted by an inner urge to make her existence a meaningful one.” (32)
The typical Indian women of traditional families feel reticent to raise their voice against the male dominated society. This is due to their inferiority complex that they have developed because of their strict adherence to and rigid code of conduct forced upon them by the age long patriarchy. Ironical it may be, but the rigorousness of the very patriarchy has made women raise their voice against the unjust practices inherent therein. Women are now very vocal in challenging the stale norms that suffocate not only their own health, but of the whole society at large.

The literature has been variously presenting this changing perception of women. No doubt, the generalized image of woman, as reflected in literature, is one of fairer sex-sometimes playing the role of the guardian angel taking the male protagonist to pinnacle of glory and sometimes becoming the scheming devil pronouncing the doom for the hero. However, many women centric literary works have begun to be written of late. During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, a large number of writers, poets, and novelists focused on women protagonists expressing their desires and ambitions and on the real issues pertaining to them. The novels in particular, reveal the psychological suffering of educated women resulting from their deep sense of inhibitions and inferiority complex developed throughout the ages. These writers portray the image of the new woman aspiring to be emancipated and liberated.

The advent of the 20th century witnessed a change in the status and spirit of women. In post-independence India, with several forces of change at work, the image of womanhood underwent further transformation. The spread of education inculcated a sense of individuality among women and made them conscious of their rights. The advent of women writers gave a first hand and more authentic portrayal of womanhood. The writers not only presented the traditional woman but also the emerging new woman, who refused to lead a passive married life. By articulating their felings and emotions, women have explored those facets of life which remained unacknowledged by the society.

In a traditional patriarchal set up, unfair treatment of woman is a regular phenomenon. The age long patriarchal conditioning has affected men and women alike. It is an
interesting fact that the exploitation of a woman begins within her family. Gradually, groups, institutions, and the whole society joins hands in oppressing and humiliating her and assigning her secondary position in various social hierarchies. Most of the women suffer their plight silently. Only a few take courage to speak against this injustice. Some even resort to rebellion (whether openly or secretly), and refuse to give up their deep carnal desires. The tussle between a woman’s longing for individuality and the restrictions imposed on them by the society has been a favourite topic on which women writers have been pondering over since the inception of women’s writings. They have been challenging societal and institutional restrictions that put thorns in the path of women and ultimately curtail their liberty. Women writings in India, in fact, constitute the pouring of heart of some rebellious women, who have been giving expression to similarly rebellious women of the society. Be it her academic pursuit or her marriage, she never hesitates in breaking her silence and strives hard to transcend her given identity. Here Jyoti Singh’s remark seems quite appropriate: “Rebellion rises within the form of conflict and often gives rise to feelings of worthlessness, low self-esteem, non-involvement, decompression and passivity but the female heroes learn to counter it and get over the feelings of worthlessness.” (160)

6.2. Kamala Das

Kamala Das is one such rebellious writer, who has been giving voice to the subdued identity and suppressed desires of women. A robust feminist poet, she is known for her frankness and straight forwardness. She is a confessional poet, who is bold enough to give vent to her powerful emotions. Her writings question the male domination over the female world. She is one such poet, who celebrates femininity, especially woman’s body and her sexuality. Her unconventional portrayal of certain controversial issues that hitherto have been taken as a taboo in society, makes her a feminist of the most radical kind. Her major works such as My Story, Alphabet of Lust, A Doll for the Child Prostitute, etc. reveal a woman’s painful experiences in a male dominated society. The openness and honesty, with which she projects her feminist vision, rattles many conservative minds.
Kamala Das’ failure to find the fulfilment in her marriage, something every woman craves for, resulted in her unending frustration and disillusionment. This bitter experience is openly expressed in *My Story*, her famous autobiography, wherein she writes:

Society can well ask me how I could become what I become, although born to parents as high principled as mine were. Ask the authors dead and alive who communicated with me and gave me the courage to be myself. (152-153)

Thus, for her, feminism is a kind of resistance against the system of patriarchy. Her opposition with the putrid social system got formalized in the form of poetry.

She gives a powerful voice to the emotions of a suppressed woman. She has an inner urge to be even with the male world. In spite of the societal and family pressures on her to conform to the established feminine role:

Dress in sarees, be girl,
Be wife, they said. Be embroiderer, be cook,
Be a quarreller with servants. Fit in. on,
Belong, cried the categorizers. Don’t sit
On wall or peep in through our laced- dropped windows.
Be Amy, or be kamala. Or, better
Still, be Madhvikutty. It is time to
Choose a name, a role………. (An Introduction 33-40)

Das longs to come out of the shackles of power hungry males and her experiences are universal i.e. all women undergo the same experience as Kamala Das:

I met a man, loved him call
Him not by any name, he is every man
Who wants a woman, just I am an every
Woman who seeks love. In him.........the hungry haste
Of rivers in me.......the ocean’s tireless waiting.

(Kamala Das strongly protests against the male dominated world and advocates for a just and favourable environment for women. She yearns for a society in which women have an identity of their own, a totally different one from their male counterparts. The society is not generous enough to give women their justifiable rights. Thus the women have to fight back and enable themselves to establish their identity. “Kamala Das embodies women emerging from the state of subjugation and bondage, and seeking to establish their identity and the self. The inner world of Kamala Das has not remained her personal demesne, it has acquired profound symbolic significance for all bruised and battered womankind. Her expression of love-feeling is not mere a show of a nymphomaniac but a strong desire to reformulate the social fabric woven by the patriarchs.” (Bhatnagar 7) She strongly protests against the restrictions of married life, domesticity, male domination, artificial comfort, and the hunger of love and lust. Indian women feel stuffy in a pattern set for them by men and long to break it so as to establish their own personal identity. When wifely duties throttle their freedom and when they are compelled to bear the suffering of boredom and loneliness, they crave to see a world outside. Das’ violent refusal to mould herself into a passive woman makes her a rebel.

Kamala Das’ poetry is replete with broad social concerns forcing her to assert her identity. In order to do so, she faces two problems - first, she has to have a woman’s language:

The language I speak
Becomes mine, its distortions, its queerness
All mine, mine alone. It is half English, half
Indian, funny perhaps, but it is honest,
It is as human as I am human…..

(An Introduction 10-14)
And second, to disclose the experiences of female which are considered odd by males:

Then….I wore a shirt and my
Brother’s trousers, cut my hair short and ignored
My womanliness. 

(An Introduction 31-33)

Kamala Das is often considered a confessional writer, as she sheds all inhibitions and openly flouts all the restrictions imposed by the society and writes about subjects which are considered taboo for a woman. She speaks about sexual desire, sexual acts, extramarital relations, description of private body parts, etc. She is also confessional in the sense that she makes her female fellow beings aware of their latent sexual desires and their dissatisfaction in their sex lives, which they easily try to suppress owing to fear of societal censure.

Kamala Das did not experience fulfilment either as a child or as a married woman. Her parents had their own interests to pursue and could spare very little time for the children. Her married life was no better; her husband was an utter failure in providing the kind of a romantic life that Das had always dreamt of. He was always busy with his official work (like her father). Even in their most intimate moments, his attitude was no different. She also doubted his sincerity towards her as he had relationships with many women, and even with a young man. Thus she was quite disillusioned and frustrated. She tried hard to fit in well to the role of a typical Indian wife, busying herself with domestic work. But the attempt was a complete failure. Utter frustration and disillusionment make her pine to escape from the chores of house keeping. She develops a strong desire to free herself from the bondage of a conventional wife and pursue a kind of life, where she would be able to have her own individuality and identity.

The insensitive attitude of her husband also shaped her attitude towards sex and love. She finds sex without love, a dreary and boring affair. Therefore, she confesses that she could not develop intimate relations with her husband in the initial days of her marriage and
thus surrendered herself to him completely. The dissatisfaction and disappointments led her even to the extent of attempting suicide. She also underwent a phase of nervous breakdown because of the miserable attitude of her husband. But, while undergoing treatment for her severe depression, she realized her husband’s affection for her. He tended to her affectionately, took her for a walk, washed her, dressed her up, etc. This led her to surrender herself whole heartedly to him. After this surrender, a spiritual attitude began to surface itself. She initiates a quest for love that transcends the body like the love between Radha and Krishna. In the course of her quest for love, she formed close relationships with many men. Though she had had such alliances other than her husband, she states very frankly that her husband meant someone very special for her and that she had no wish to leave him. In this regard, Das’ remark to her Italian pen-friend Carlo in My Story seems quite appropriate: “we can probably have a love affair. . . I am not the divorcing kind . . .” (121) Thus, Kamala Das is a traditional woman who cannot break away from being so.

The poem “The Dance of Eunuchs” expresses the disappointment faced by a woman at her failure in receiving love and her frustration at being betrayed in love. The poem is symbolic of the emotional vacuum in her arising out of the frustration resulting from her husband’s attitude towards her. The ‘vacant ecstasy’ in which the eunuchs ‘wailed and withered’ signify the same emotional vacuum that she experienced within her. All the symbols and images used in the poem like “lovers dying” and “children left unborn” are symbolic of the emptiness in her caused due to her inability to assert her womanhood. In this regard, she is also like the eunuchs. The convulsed dance of the eunuchs is equated to her agitated mental state. Poems like “The Freaks”, “In Love”, etc. also speak of her frustration in sexual experience where love stoops to the level of mere “skincommunicated thing”. (In Love) The later poems of Kamala Das take into account the same theme of betrayal in love and frustration that ensues. Like the image of the sun and its scorching heat in varied dimensions in her earlier poems, most of the later poems carry the image of the sea and its different shades and moods differing according to the varying intensity of her emotion. In the poem “The Descendants”, she says, “we were the yielder/yielding ourselves to everything” This yielding suggests the poet’s attitude of
succumbing to the will of destiny and to the ways of the world as she is aware that nothing can be done to bring in any change. In almost all her later poems, there is a sense of loss and despair and a feeling of defeat and decay.

Though Das has written poems about disillusionment in marriages, in her later poems, she presents the idea that she is essentially a family woman, who is mature enough to realize that all marriages do not end in court rooms owing to frustration and disillusionment. She presents the charms of married life that make it beautiful and worth entering into in poems like “In Love” and “Larger Than Life was He”.

Kamala Das, in search of true love, experiences only the sexual gratification, which exacerbates her desire for true love. This is further reflected in the poem “In Love”. The ‘unending lust’ unites the lovers for the time being, but Das is unhappy when this binding is reduced to just a ‘skin communicated thing’, failing to provide any kind of happiness.

The poem “Large Than Life was He”, recalls how much Das missed her husband after having lost him forever despite the fact that she considered themselves to be a “mismatched pair.” But there was always some kind of liberty each had given to the other to exploit and be exploited, which they seemed to have enjoyed. She feels that she could have been as much a devoted wife to him as Sita was to Rama but never got a chance to do so. This was because he was always too busy to give her time; too busy even to notice the sons growing. Nevertheless, he was their beloved father. She states that she could never remember him having ever taken her to a film, a play, or a concert, or even having shared any light moments. In spite of all these, she missed him terribly. He was “larger than life to her” as she realizes the warmth and the protection provided by the “insulation of his care.”

There are a number of Das’ poems that reveal her protest against all kinds of supremacy and violence. The poem “The Old Play House” expresses the poet’s protest against female subjugation and male domination. She detests the way a woman is suppressed by
making them perform only conventional roles and not letting them to rise above that. She aptly remarks:

I was taught to break saccharine into your tea and
To offer at the right moment the vitamins. Cowering
Beneath your monstrous ego I ate the magic loaf and
Became a dwarf. I lost my will and reason.... (13-16)

Kamala Das is able to distinguish clearly between love and lust. She does not favour free love:

When I asked for love, not knowing what else to ask
For, he drew a youth of sixteen into the
Bedroom and closed the door. He did not beat me
My sad woman body felt so beaten. (An Introduction 27-30)

indicating her unfulfilled desire for love.

Kamala Das did not have any remorse for what she wrote, or what she did. In an article, “I have lived beautifully”, she admits: “I often walked with young men along the sea flaunting my unconventionality.” (41) She overtly demanded in “Why not have more than one Husband?”, “the return of a social order that allowed woman to have more than one husband if she so desired.” (35)

Das’ contempt for man gets more severe in her poem “The Freaks”, wherein love is reduced to lust; the poetess was left with no choice but to undergo the suffering that ensued. The poem presents Das’ despair and the suffering faced by a woman. She brings to fore a woman’s longing for true love and rebels against the brutality of her husband but gets ensnared into male ego. She is bold enough to express her feminine sensibility and fight back against the system. She reflects her awareness towards the need for love, security, and liberty. She identifies her right to even sexual fulfilment and psychological
security. Thus, Das not only rebels against the male domination but also against the demands of a joint family. She misses mutual understanding with love and respect. She feels emotional sterility, barrenness, and meaningless of life.

The poems “Jaisurya” and “Afterwards” investigate familial love and effectively communicate the notion of feminism. The former describes the pain and suffering at the delivery of the child. In this poem, the name of the child has been decided even before he is born - an indication of the mother’s irresistible love for the unseen child. The use of the adjective “proud” before Jaisurya imparts an identity to the child and is like putting a crown on the child’s head. She admires the child and forgets her own pains of child bearing. The poem “Afterwards” shows the poet’s concern for the child’s future, and laments at the very thought of his suffering.

The poetry of Kamala Das is replete with private suffering and humiliations - the stock themes of confessional poetry. Indian critics find the voice of the new modern Indian woman in the poetry of Das without comprehending the fact that she is never a mouthpiece for any woman but herself. Her honest admissions of private life and intrepid treatment of female sexuality do not have anything special about them and are perfectly in tune with the themes and nature of confessional poetry. Das’ frequent references to her Nair heritage, and of confessional Dravidian skin are her desperate attempts to characterize her identity.

Kamala Das’ concern with herself as a sufferer, is clearly exhibited in her famous autobiography, My Story, wherein sexual humiliation is a fundamental experience. She says: “In the orbit of illicit sex, there seemed to be only crudeness and violence.” (25) “The Old Play House” demonstrates a slight deviation from the same theme:

You dribbled spittle into my mouth, you poured
Yourself into every nook and cranny, you embalmed
My poor lust with your better –sweet juices.  (10-12)
Thus, there is a nostalgic longing for a past in her works - a past when she enjoyed the comforts of a matriarchal joint family. But this longing does not deter her from accepting change or considering modern outlook as inessential. To her, change is necessary so as to bring a progressive attitude in people. But this should not be brought forth at the expense of tradition. She also does not favour change disregarding all feminine qualities in women.

6.3. Shashi Deshpande

Till the 1960s, independent India witnessed varied phases of women writing. Their works talked about the power and supremacy of male along with patience, suffering, and subjugation of women. Around the 1970s, a drastic change could be noticed in the writings of these women. They started giving their womanly experiences and femininity a literary bent. The place of afflicted and compliant models was taken up by ‘new woman’. According to Seshadri, “The new woman is assertive and self-willed, searching to discover her true self. In these years, a class oriented fiction emerged: the woman, who still suffers, but not in silence as she used to be.” (12) The change can be attributed to the appearance of numerous highly talented female writers towards the conclusion of 19th century. They discuss Indian women, their predicaments, and conflicts against the background of contemporary India. Thus these women writers have been placed in an affable position with the changing contexts.

Toru Dutt, Krupabai Sathianathan, Cornelia Sorabji, Iqbal Iunnisa, Kamala Markandeya, Ruth Prawar Jhabavala, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Nayantara Sehgal, Kamala Das, Geeta Mehta, Shobha De, Arundathi Roy, etc. are concerned mainly with the psychological crises in the lives of Indian women, who are subjected to physical and psychological torture in a male dominated society. These novelists have skillfully projected the tormented minds of the suffering women. Their portrayal of women characters in the novels bears authenticity to their feminist perspective. The women novelists focus on the existential predicament and travails of the submissive women in a male dominated society, which are governed by rigid traditions and restrictions. These
writers go deep into the inner mind of the subdued women by virtue of their feminine sensibility and psychological insight and bring them into light. The fiction of contemporary women poses a challenge to master narratives since it highlights the “differences that make a difference” to women in dominant masculine culture. It is also significant that women writers have not simply been confined to the private realm but have moved beyond it. It provides insight, a wealth of understanding, reservoir of meaning, and basis of discussion. The world is being seen in a new dimension through the eyes of women writers.

Shashi Deshpande identifies herself with women, and thus her protagonists are women. She examines the childhood of her female characters and reveals that the childhood experiences play a significant role in shaping the adult lives. According to her, the childhood experiences are long lasting and they influence the development of a healthy personality. But, if an individual has a “deprived childhood”, it equips him/her with the power to fight and survive till the end. This is the fate of Deshpande’s female protagonists. Asha Susan Jacob reveals the “voice of the silenced” in Shashi Despande’s novels concluding that “all the marriages are marked by silence” (151) and in the evolution of their character, their “decision to break the silence is the first sign of liberation . . . . From a state of passive acceptance they move to active assertion. They refuse to yield to societal pressures and by creating space within the matrix, the protagonists of Deshpande succeed in establishing their identity by expressing themselves.” (164)

An ambivalent image of women is basically presented in Indian writing in English. Sometimes she is represented as submissive, passive, and subservient such as Sita or Draupadi, while at other times, she is depicted as defying and unruly, wayward and self assertive. The women are now no longer regulated and controlled to satisfy their sexual desires. Shobha De, Arundhati Roy, Uma Vasudev, Kamala Das, etc. have dealt with such type of women protagonists in their works.
All the novels of Shashi Deshpande show that the female protagonists are entwined in various intricacies of marital relationships. They are continuously striving to effectively resolve the maze of their lives. Sarita, the female protagonist in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* is a career oriented woman, who has the courage to fight the mental battle to secure her own identity and space beyond the constraints of a painfully oppressing marital relationship. *The Binding Vine* deals with the issue of rape to emphasize the torture of women and sexual exploitation both inside and outside. The physical torture leaves a gaping psychic that could be healed with women’s understanding of women’s miseries. Thus, Deshpande’s women do not yield to patriarchal tortures instead they are able to analyze the nature of their suffering so as to come to a decision about their lives. They do not end up pathetically like the Mayas, Monishas, and Anamikas; rather they emerge as survivors with the willingness to redesign their lives. In an interview to Vanamala Viswanatha, Shashi Deshpande states that her women characters “take their own ways. I have heard people saying we should have strong women characters. But my writing has to do with women as they are. Most of the women I have known are like that-their decisions are made for them. Due to being over protected, they are people who think one way and do another.” (Vanamala Vishwanath interview with Shashi Deshpande, ‘A woman’s world…. All the way!’, ‘literature Alive’ 1(3) (1987): 9.)

The novels of Shashi Deshpande present a matter of fact and a sanguine representation of the educated middle class Indian women, who are engaged in the intricate and difficult social and psychological problem of defining an authentic self. Her first novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors* is anti matriarchal, wherein the protagonist Saru, is discriminated against by her mother, who values her son Dhruva more than her daughter. Badly affected by this discrimination, Saru longs to assert and affirm her feminine sensibility by means of marriage. Therefore, she goes against the wishes of her parents and gets married to Manu, to secure the love which she could not get in her parental home. But unfortunately, Manu’s male ego asserts itself through sexual assaults on Saru in the night, who bears this suffering silently. Saru wants to leave her profession but Manu doesn’t allow her because he feels it will affect the family budget. She is left like a forsaken and deserted child, severely constrained by her womanhood, and further burdened by her
family responsibilities. There is no way that she can wrest a second chance of life. She cannot control events but only acclimatize herself to them.

Deshpande’s award winning novel *That Long Silence* shows the protagonist Jaya’s pursuit for an authentic selfhood and it finds an artistic expression through her rebellion against the patriarchal society. Jaya leads a happy life as a housewife with two children till her husband is arrested and suspended from his service owing to his corrupt practices. This leads to shattering of her faith upon her husband and is compelled to practice the dullness and boredom of woman’s life and so she subjects herself to a long silence. Shashi Deshpande explores Jaya’s public and private realms of experience. Herein, one is exposed to the life of the sense along with the angst ridden feelings of the protagonist Jaya, who is a housewife and an unsuccessful writer. She is determined to assert her individuality by breaking that long silence, and writing down all that she had suppressed in her seventeen years’ silence.

In *Roots and Shadows*, Indu struggles for her release from the clutches of the tradition and the tradition bound institution of marriage. She is in search of an autonomous self. The feminist approach lies in Indu’s exploration of herself. It also moves beyond feminist boundaries into a realization of the predicament of human existence.

*The Binding Vine* describes the protagonist Urmila’s regaining her calm after the sudden death of her infant daughter. Her involvement with Kalpana, a young victim of rape, is to make people realize the humiliation that is heaped upon a rape victim by a man. It is only the victim, who is aware of the shattering physical and psychological effects. Urmila is a characteristic feminine voice, who struggles hard through the gloom of her existence, not letting herself suppressed but rebelling, trying to sort out her life. In her, one can hear the conscious raising voice of the determined self affirmation in itself.

Thus, Deshpande is trying to clarify that women have to fight their own battles through the protagonist’s conscious raising voice, struggling to affirm her femininity. Deshpande gets to the root of existence and expresses a kind of female subjectivity that fails to
reconcile and identify herself with a patriarchal setup. Her female protagonists become her mouthpieces, and convey that marital polarization restrains human potential and happiness of an individual.

6.4. Anita Desai

Anita Desai, the foremost Indian novelist of the post-independence era, is interested in the psychic life of her characters. She makes an attempt to reach the world of mind and pricks into the soul of the characters especially women. She, very artistically, unveils the real self of a woman which is hidden beneath the surface. Being a strong feminist writer and with her delicate feminine sensibilities, her two fold heritage has a strong impact on her writings both at the stylistic and thematic level. Desai, being a woman, comprehends the feminine sensitivity and the flimsy heart of a woman. She represents the diverse faces of feminine psyche, revealing thereby a consciousness of several deeper forces, most of which are submerged and make up the truth. She describes the image of a suffering woman, who is engaged with her inner world, her sulking frustration and the raging storm inside her: the existential predicament of a woman in a male chauvinistic society. She makes an appeal for a better way of life for women through such characters. The central characters in her novels are Indians, and she swaps between male-centered and female-centered narrative.

The first novel of Anita Desai, *Cry, the Peacock*, deals with the protagonist Maya’s psychological problems. Maya, a very sensitive woman, aspires to live and to love. She decides to tie the nuptial knot with Gautama - a person much older than her. But she is unhappy and unsatisfied with Gautama’s rationalistic approach towards life. She starts feeling alienated with his negation and denial. She is also haunted by the prediction of albino astrologer, who creates a fear psychosis in her mind. When astrologer tells the prophesy that one of the couple (Maya and Gautam) would die in the fourth year of their marriage, Maya gets shocked. The idea of death becomes obsession in her mind. When she informs her husband of the prophesy, he ignores it and hints like Buddha that one
must be prepared for any eventuality. She enrages at his callous attitude towards the prophesy. She takes Gautama to the terrace and throws him to his death.

   And then Gautama made a mistake - his last, decisive one. In talking, gesturing, he moved in front of me ... “Gautama”. I screamed in fury, and thrust out my arms towards him, out at him, into him and past him, saw him fall. Then, pass through an immensity of air, down to the very bottom. (208).

Unable to bear all this, she kills both her husband and herself. Thus in the novels of Anita Desai, a woman is an introvert, and she hastens the fate to devour her rather than to allow it to take its own course.

The novel Where Shall We Go This Summer? propagates the truth of a woman’s suffering and the misery to be a part of society having her own identity. Desai beautifully portrays the marriages in India and the complexities associated with them. The main focus of the novel is self revelation, and it describes the mental and emotional struggle in the life of Indian women.

Voices in the City, another novel of Anita Desai, deals with an intelligent girl Monisha, who is deprived of freedom just like Maya. Like Maya, she longs for freedom and desires to assert her individuality. As a result, she is confronted with the antagonistic attitude of her mother-in-law, her husband, and her own father.

Anita Desai contrasts the ways of the West with those of the East in Fasting, Feasting, where socio-spiritual awareness results in lasting ecstasy. She gives a new dimension to the Indian novel by laying emphasis on inner reality. She delves deep into the inner world of her protagonists and exhibits the presence of the deeper forces responsible for creating the feminine sensibility. Desai also conceptualizes that feminism is never static; on the contrary, it depends, to a great extent, on the regional and socio-cultural background along with the traditions. She firmly states that the body-psyche relationship is co-dependent and complimentary in nature.
While a man is known for thoughts, action, achievement and fame and for his sacrifice of his pleasures for power and fame, a woman is well known for her feelings, moods, thought and experience. In an interview with Atma Ram, Anita Desai states that, “whereas a man is concerned with action, experience, and achievement; a woman writer is more concerned with thought, emotion, and sensation… feminine sensibilities.” (96)

Thus, Desai broadly and effectively deals with the themes of alienation, marital discord, disharmony, seclusion, existentialism, quest for identity, rectitude, and feminization of ageing. Her characters can be classified in two distinctive groups - those who fail to adjust to the harsh realities of life and those who compromise. Like Virginia Woolf and James Joyce, Desai’s themes too, deal with human nature and human relationship.

*Fire on the Mountain* also depicts the emotional world of ageing Indian women. Nanda Kaul, the protagonist, is unhappy with the advent of psychologically ill and unsociable Raka, her great granddaughter. She aspires to lead an isolated and alienated life after the death of her Vice-Chancellor husband and after being deceived by her husband, who was in a relationship with a teacher all his life. Thus she had a hectic and disturbed life. Nanda Kaul had desired privacy throughout her life and finally, when she got it in the hills of Kasauli, she didn’t want anyone intruding in her life. Rakha, aged about 12, is an enfant terrible for she is reserved by nature and does show the signs of adult. “To Nanda Kaul she was still an intruder, an outsider, a mosquito flown up from the plains to tease and worry.” (40) Both Nanda Kaul and Rakha prove that they are sick at soul; one is sick to carry the predicament and the absurdity of human existence though the writer maintains that they both are victims of their own and known reasons. “If Nanda Kaul was a recluse out of vengeance for a long life of duty and obligation, her great - granddaughter was a recluse by nature, by instinct. She had not arrived at this condition by a long route of rejection and sacrifice - she was born to it, simply.” (48)

Another character Ila Das, with a view to stop a child marriage for financial gains, ends up in rape and death by the father of child bride, so as to prove that women are the
weaker section of society, and the male dominates the woman. Nanda Kaul receives a mortal blow with the sudden and sad death of Ila Das.

The significance of the title *Fire on the Mountain* lies in the fact that unless the world is destroyed, woman cannot enjoy innocence, happiness, love, and peace with a sense of divinity. Thus the representation of women in the society, their perception of the socio-cultural reality, and their personal relationships help them to organize and shape themselves. The beginning of the 20th century saw the surfacing of novels with diverse viewpoints on the attitudes towards the imposition of traditions, a study of the family structure, re-interpretation of mythology, woman’s position in a patriarchal set up and the caste system. The early writers depicted a woman in a traditional way such as Savitri or Sita, but the modern writers represent an entirely new woman, who is bold enough to shun a passive married life.

V. Ramesh in one of his article studies Sita’s character as “The Paradoxical Psyche of an Archetypal Indian Woman” in Anita Desai’s novel *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* Herein, he concludes that “Anita Desai undeniably divulges a commendable grasp of the quandary and dilemmas of woman and portrays her own vision of a variegated facet of woman in modern India and her fully stimulated feminine sensibility” (48). Latha R. Nair investigates Desai’s novels with a view to clarify “Locale as an Extension of the Self” and finds that “the locale or milieu becomes a commanding centre” in her novels. Her characters “are definitely apart (sic) [a part] of the locale, which reflects, expands and transforms their identity. It is not possible to free ourselves from this milieu which is an integral part of our psychological milieu” (9). Sr. Sophy Pereppadan digs deep into Desai’s novel *Fire on the Mountain* to trace her “alienation” and affirms that “Her desire ‘to be alone’ finds expression in her love for nothingness—an expression of nihilism. This is in some sense a ‘death-wish,’ which enjoys the devastation of the live world. She satisfies her longing for aloofness by annihilating everything existing . . .” (36).
6.5. Arundhati Roy

The sense of a woman’s marginal but invested position within a male chauvinistic society leads her to thematic and stylistic experimentations and innovations, so as to make herself heard. Arundhati Roy’s thrust is on the absurdities and injustices of social and domestic life. In her award winning novel *The God of Small Things*, she poignantly attacks the double standards of the society that the female sex is to be protected and kept away from power while the male runs the world irrespective of its behaviour. Her vehement attacks on the asymmetrical values of the patriarchal society are exemplified by intense humour, irony, and sarcasm. Almost all the male characters in the novel display chauvinistic tendencies in varying degrees. Male aggression is quite obvious in a laughter evoking scene, which describes the loyalty of Mammachi: (In the photograph) “She looked in the direction that her husband looked (while) with her heart she looked away (30).” Pappachi, the “Imperial Entomologist”, is “Charming and urban with visitors…. donated money to orphanages and leprosy clinics…… worked hard on his public profile as a sophisticated, generous, moral man. But alone with his wife and children he turned into a monstrous, suspicious bully, with a streak of vicious cunning.” (51) In addition, in “the photograph that lent an underlying chill to the warm room in which it hung”, “he was making an effort to be civil to the photographer while plotting to murder his wife. He had a little fleshy knob on the centre of his upper lip that dropped down over his lower lip in a sort of effeminate pout… He wore Khaki Jodhpurs though he had never ridden a horse in his life” (51). Herein, Roy beautifully amalgamates the scary aspects of Pappachi’s personality with carefully chosen irrationalities and incongruities with a view to form a delicate and impactful caricature.

The novelist portrays the absurd and priggish Chacko, ‘the Rhodes Scholar’ with “his Oxford Moods” in a slightly different manner. Pampered by a doting mother, this “prime ministerial material” (57) comes to Ayemenem “with his Balliol Oar and his Pickle Baron Dreams.” (57) But unfortunately, for lack of managerial skills, his profitable business enterprise is destroyed thereby reducing the resources of the family. Arundhati Roy highly exaggerates Chacko’s intellectual superiority and manly pride when she says: “Chacko’s room was stacked from floor to ceiling with books. He had read them all and
quoted long passages from them for no apparent reason. Or at least none that anyone else could fathom.” (38) She also lays stress on the absurdity of Chacko’s idealism. He himself lacks historical perspective but when it comes to preaching the confused twins of Ammu, he speaks at length about “The War of Dreams” which he himself lacks. His self professed Marxist learnings are a growth of his impractical idealism, which he uses to flirt with and exploit the poor labourers of his factory. He is “an Oxford avatar of the old-Zamindar mentality- a landlord forcing his attention on women who depended on him for their livelihood.” (65) The image of a “Male Chauvinist Pig” gets concretized when Chacko tells Ammu, his divorced, defenseless sister: “What’s yours is mine and what’s mine is also mine.” (57) Skillfully delivered irony like these, along with the absurdity enable Roy to depict the illogicalities and double standards of patriarchy. She skillfully turns male aggression into relief by sprinkling sarcastic humour. She obliterates sentimentality from the novel by looking objectively at situations, which produce righteous anger. An instance of disgust and comedy at the same time, is reflected when Ammu’s father-in-law drives off, in the new Fiat which he himself had gifted to the young couple, carrying “all the jewellery and most of the other presents that they had been given.” (39) At another point, after their night trip into the sacred realm of puranas and epics which must purify them off baser impulses, “The Kathakali man took off their make-up and went home to beat their wives” (236) thereby suggesting that oppressing women is a regular phenomenon in all sections of society, be it rich or poor.

Roy also describes the apparently exaggerated yet actual predicament of the untouchables, who had to crawl backwards with a broom, sweeping away their footprints during the pre-colonial days, in order to prevent the upper castes from tainting themselves by inadvertently stepping into their footprints. She uses irony, acrimony, and silent protest to represent the social exclusion mentioned in the above lines and this probably brings together the subaltern male Velutha and Ammu, the subordinated female, both sufferers of the same prevailing power structure. This surreptitious relationship between Ammu, a sex hungry female and Velutha, a virile male, goes beyond eroticism due to the subtly operative humour.
The male smugness, arising from the overestimation of female expectations, gets crushed when marriage as an anchorage becomes deromanticised. Ammu’s marriage to a Bengali, after a period of courtship lasting five days, best demonstrates this: “Ammu didn’t pretend to be in love with him. She just weighed the odds and accepted. She thought that anything, anyone at all, would be better than returning to Ayemenem.” (39) The same effect is once again achieved with notable verbal economy and sharpness while describing Rahel’s marriage: “Rahel drifted into marriage like a passenger drifts towards an unoccupied chair in an airport lounge with a sitting down sense. She returned with him to Boston.” (18)

Arundhati Roy is bold enough to break the male imposed taboos. One significant instance of this is the mocking of the male anatomy, especially the genitals. In an amusingly comical scene, she pricks the male ego by satirizing comrade K.N.M.Pillai for his inappropriate dress habit which makes him prefer “a graying Aertex Vest, his balts silhouetted against his soft white murder.” (14) In addition to this, the breasts of Baby Kochamma, “Melons in a Blouse” (95), “pissing in front of everyone” (95) in the public urinal of Abhilash Talkies (95–96), the incest between Rahel and Estha (92–93), the Orange drink Lemon drink Man “handing Estha his penis through his soft white muslin dhoti” (103) for free orange drink (102–105), Inspector Thomas Mathew tapping Ammu’s breasts with his baton, “As though he was choosing mangoes from a basket”, (8) etc. express the wild fury of a feminist. Roy’s condemnation of male dominated tradition of writing is implied in her lewd details that she has documented quite intensely in the novel.

Roy is not making an attempt to mock the male anatomy but the norm: the belief that viewing the genitals of the opposite sex is an immediate turn on for the woman as it is for the man. The spiteful edge of Roy’s humour uncovers male insensitivity in The God of Small Things. It becomes awfully preposterous when Ammu recalls the day of her wedding and realized “that the slightly feverish glitter in her bedroom’s eye had not been love, or even excitement at the prospect of carnal bliss, but approximately eight large pegs of whisky. Straight. Neat.” (39) Later on, when the husband accepts Mr. Hollick’s
Arundhati Roy occasionally employs situational female humour to convey her point in an effective way. The non-subjugation to patriarchy is a characteristic of feminist humour; though female humour may deride a person or a system from the point of acceptance. For example, it is quite clear that Mammachi, never complained about Pappachi; on the contrary, she accepted bad marriage as a norm. She is a typical Indian ensnared female, who considers her husband as the inevitable tyrant. Since she lacks the power to bring in change, she does not express her resentment. She tries to maintain the decorum even after Pappachi’s death: “At Pappachi’s funeral, Mammachi cried and her contact lenses sled around in her eyes…. Mammachi was crying more because she was used to him than because she loved him.” (50) Thus the differences between the realities of women’s lives and the images of women promoted by culture are clearly revealed.

A unique feature of Roy is that she empowers and strengthens a tradition that has the capacity to confront social and political issues from vantage point which is completely feminine in character. Chacko considers Margaret Kochamma as his “trophy wife”, thereby treating her as an object and creating the image that women are inferior to men. In contrast to this, Margaret Kochamma is viewed as unamazing woman that Chacko is proud to have been married to. She corrects him when she said, “ex-wife Chacko”. Chacko’s sister, Ammu acts against the feminist views. She informs her children that they do not need a Baba because she acts as both a mother and a father. Thus Ammu considers herself equal to men.

In Arundhati Roy’s novel, the heroine suffers from a very early age and the suffering continues till she dies. Ammu could not continue her education because her father thought that college education was an unnecessary expenditure for a girl. She did have dreams about marriage but all her hopes were dashed to the ground when she got to know that her parents could not raise a suitable dowry for her. So she marries a person of her
choice only to get rid of her parents but unfortunately, the marriage also proves to be a complete failure. She divorces her husband to protect her self respect and returns unwelcomed to Ayemenem. There, she is limited to the front and back verandah of the house and is attracted towards Velutha, the well built parvan carpenter. Her relationship is soon revealed by Velutha’s father, Vellya Paapen. As a result, Ammu is locked in a room and Velutha is killed for the drowning of Sophie Mol. Ammu also dies in a grimy room in Alleppey, where she had gone for a job interview. Ammu’s suffering does not end with her death. The Church refused to bury Ammu. So Chacko had to take the body wrapped in a dirty bed sheet to the electric crematorium. Finally, she was assigned a Receipt No. Q 498673, which permitted Rahel and Chacko to collect the remains of Ammu. Ammu, thus, becomes a victim of patriarchy. Her story is more than a misfortune.

Roy succeeds in bringing the plight of women to the limelight by putting forth the idea, that though women comprise half of the human population, they are not treated at par with men despite the fact that every woman strives for the development of her husband, children, and her family. This holds true not only for the Indian women in particular but women all over the world. Here Simone de Beauvoir aptly remarks: “A free and autonomous being like all creatures, a woman finds herself living in a world where men compel her to assume the status of other.” (446) Premlatha Dinakarlal in his article “Subaltern Voices in The God of Small Things” suggests: “Indian government must work to remove traditional practices that subordinate women . . . to establish gender justice and ensure dignity and self-respect to which women are entitled.” (185) K. Nirmala in “A Layman’s Study in Psychology in The God of Small Things” remarks: “Arundhati Roy’s exceptional ability to get into the disturbed psyche of the different personae is indeed commendable . . . . The psychology of the characters reveals an unusual mental make-up that motivates their behaviour in times of stress.” (187)

It is obvious that Roy presents two types of women in her novel: one who is set out to break the patriarchal norms and lead life in her own way e.g. Ammu and second, Mammachi, who follows her husband’s footsteps and unconditionally accepts everything
he said or did because it was sanctioned by the society. She believes that a good woman should live with her husband in all circumstances; a divorced woman is regarded as non virtuous. Through the character of Ammu, Arundhati Roy makes an attempt to show that a woman plays a key role in the family and if the woman is disturbed in any way, the entire family suffers and can disintegrate into nothingness. But unfortunately, the female sex is altogether neglected in our society. This is exactly what happens to Ammu and subsequently to her children, who had the inopportune descent from broken families and in turn lead a distressed and disintegrated life. In this regard, Simone de Beauvoir’s remarks in her famous work *The Second Sex* seems quite appropriate: “woman has always been man’s dependent, if not his slave; the two sexes have never shared the world in equality.” (20) As far as the married women are concerned, Beauvior states, “Marriage is the destiny traditionally offered to women by society.” “One is not born’ but rather becomes, a woman.” (445)

Roy has made the representation of the subaltern woman more varied, merely by presenting the various portraits of women, who in spite of their oppression and marginalization, are not without agency or responsibility. The woman, who most clearly rejects the intricate system of oppression in the story, Ammu, is punished severely by her mother and aunt. But as one of the main characters in Roy’s novel, Ammu represents people who actually dare to do ‘the unthinkable’, to cross the very line that upholds the system of difference that casteism inherently maintains. She represents all those who have suffered due to transgressions against the ‘love laws’ and gender specific expectations imposed upon them, sometimes even by paying with their own lives. The novel itself has given the fictional Ammu and Velutha, representations of thousands of cross caste relationships in the real India, a voice that resonates all over the world.

Thus, Arundhati Roy beautifully presents the duress faced by women in the male chauvinistic society. She makes a clear distinction between feminist commitment and post colonial theory, stating that in colonial regimes women were doubly colonized: first as objects of racist, abusive conduct of the colonizers and secondly, by conventional sexist role models, who assigned subaltern positions to women not only in their own
family but also in the local community. Though decolonization of nations has taken place, the position of women as marginal figures in terms of power and hegemony and as members of a dependent, impoverished society, remains unchanged. They are subjugated, oppressed, and appropriated in both the colonial as well as post-colonial processes. Through *The God of Small Things*, Roy focuses on some important aspects of life such as how love is related to sadness and how one’s childhood experiences affect one’s perceptions and the entire life. The novel also describes the continuous struggle of women against their inexorable exploitation, which they undergo because of the patriarchal society. Her female characters are torn between the margins set by society and modern free zones.

To conclude, *The God of Small Things* describes different social conditions of men and women in the orthodox Indian society. Through the novel, Roy has made a revolutionary attempt to open the eyes of Indian community towards the insensitivity and coldness of men in treating women as soulless beings, as objects. This creates great imbalance in society resulting in bleakness and drabness not only in the lives of adults but also children. The end product is a paralyzed society incapable and reluctant to grow. Roy, being an optimistic writer, avers that a woman too, is a living being not an adjunct to man. She is a free being, who has the capacity to carve a niche for herself.

### 6.6. Comparison

Kamala Das brings in great variety into the feminine and feminist poetry while Anita Desai depicts the frustration, sensibility, and the inner world of a woman in her fiction. The characters of Anita Desai strive hard to strike a balance between their inner and outer world and her women characters strongly long for love, liberation and embrace psychological and mental pressures and even death in the process.

Novelists like Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, and Arundhati Roy depict the huge change in the image of Indian women in their writings. Anita Desai had a simple middle class upbringing with a German angle to it (her mother, Toni Nime, being a German). That
may probably be the reason for convergence of sorts in her writing. Kamala Das had her feet fixed firmly on the ground and could get to the brass stacks in no time. She used to work on the kitchen table, where she would chop the vegetables, get the table cleaned, and then start typing. Though this timetable affected her health, it did provide her ample time to manage her house as well as a woman’s idea of a pre requisite for a job.

The women of all the above writers taken up for research viz. Kamala Das, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, and Arundhati Roy are real flesh and blood protagonists, who frighten the onlookers with their relationships to their surroundings, their society, their men, their families, their children, their mental make ups and themselves. They are recognized for their originality, versatility, and the original flavour of the soil that they brought to their work. These writers have wrestled with intricate issues like sensuality, subjugation, and servility and dealt with them with a sense of balance, never disrespecting our Indian traditions. Kamala Das gets into the detailed intimate descriptions, which require tremendous courage to express it in writing and exhibit it to the entire world. Arundhati Roy uses realism as the main theme of her novels. She is known for her bold views as reflected in her novel.

Both Anita Desai and Shashi Deshpande deal with the issues and concerns faced by the middle class women in the male dominated world as the main theme of their works. They project the isolation and identity crisis of their female characters in a male dominated set up. They have visualized the spirit of Indian culture and its traditional values. Their works are thoroughly enjoyed by the people as they discuss the whole world of women with startling frankness. The works of Anita Desai such as Where Shall We Go This Summer? and Voices in the City describe the intricacies in a man-woman relationship. She investigates the psychological aspects of the main protagonists and skillfully captures the spirit of the Indian culture and its traditional values. Deshpande’s The Dark Holds No Terrors and Desai’s Where Shall We Go This Summer? fathom the depths of female psyche through Sarita and Sita respectively. The two novels depict the reality of incompleteness and represent the inner conflict and the evolving self knowledge as they tend to get away from their narrow communities. They need to search within themselves
the strength to be liberated while living within the traditional framework. In contrast to the female protagonists of Shashi Deshpande (as in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* or *The Binding Vine*), the female characters of Anita Desai are actually a generation behind.

In the novels of Anita Desai, action is subordinated to psychology. The novels revolve around the spiritual and mental developments of the protagonists and the main themes include marital disharmony and self alienation. The novel *Cry, The Peacock*, describes the reasons and consequences of alienation in the relationship between Gautama and Maya. Maya’s neurotic behaviour is due to her intense alienation. Both husband and wife have different attitudes towards life. This attitude alienates them from each other and brings about a disastrous end to their lives. Desai’s work is a haunting exploration of the psychic self. Her female characters are generally neurotic; they are highly sensitive but sequestered in a world of dream and imagination and alienated from their surroundings due to their unwillingness to adjust to reality. Her characters build a large spectrum and are individuals having multi dimensional facets. They usually keep themselves away from others and resist the demands of the society and turn out to be rebels.

Anita Desai is an expert in creating contrasting characters to highlight the main character. In an interview with Yashodhara Dalmia, she says:

> I am interested in characters who are not average but have retreated, or have been driven into some extremity of despair and to turn against, or made a stand against the general current. It is easy to flow with the current. It makes no demands, it cost no efforts, but those who cannot follow it, whose heart cries out, ‘the great no’ who fight the current and struggle against it, they know what the demands are and what it costs to meet them. (Dalmia, Yashodhara. “An Interview with Anita Desai”. The Times of India, April 29, 1979.13.)

Anita Desai has a keen interest in analysis and portrayal of human relationship and skillfully delineates the psyche of her protagonists through the interaction of the
characters emotionally related on the basis of kinship. With a fine art of characterization, she succeeds in focusing on the inner climate, the climate of sensibility of her characters. Maya the protagonist, suffers from a sense of isolation that is not merely physical but also psychic. She has portrayed the personality traits and attitudes of the characters to determine the mental and emotional effects of their isolation.

While Shashi Deshpande and Anita Desai take into account the theme of crisis of identity, Arundhati Roy asserts her rights of being a woman. The impassioned search for identity and the burning desire for freedom of space demand a heavy price. In her novel, women humour men, deceive their own selves, learn to live without them, love them, reject them, hate them. But in all their actions, they have to take cognizance of their sex even when they have to choose asexual roles. Deshpande’s women characters try to design their own fate. Her women, though disturbed, are a heroic feminine psyche in the new ethos. They are determined to face the world at any cost.

Deshpande interrogates the restrictions imposed by marriage and the control it gives to men. The novel Small Remedies gives a new angle to the notion of freedom even when the fears may be similar. Liberty is viewed in terms of working out the areas of privacy, recognition of sexuality, and defying the impositions laid down by the conventional society.

In Small Remedies, Madhu, a lonely daughter, a vulnerable mother and wife, is confronted with the trauma of the death of her only son Adit. She sets out on a journey - all alone so as to come to terms with her great loss. Her healing begins the moment she comes across the lives of two other women - Savitribai Indorekar, a star singer of the Gwalior gharana and her aunt, Leela, with whom she had spent her youth and adulthood. Both the women are bold enough in their own ways. The former became famous not only through her music but also through the way she lived her life.

Thus, trapped in a socio-cultural milieu women suffer inwardly in the works of both Shashi Deshpande and Anita Desai. Marriages fail due to lack of understanding between
man and woman. Shashi Deshpande has a different picture of women as compared to that of Anita Desai. Her female protagonists are presented as self-assertive and self-confident; as women with a new impulse and renewed sensibility. Anita Desai provides a new dimension to the Indian fiction in English. Her novels describe a shift from the objective to the subjective and from the communal to the personal. Desai employs a thematic approach and explores the feminine sensibility.