CHAPTER-IV
ANITA DESAI: HER WOMEN AND ECOLOGY

4.1. Introduction

In the Indian patriarchal setup, male dominance has often given women a secondary status and has left them vulnerable. A study of Indian history and society points at the existence of many hateful practices like child marriage, polygamy, dowry system, enforced widowhood etc. that greatly undermine a woman’s existence as human being. With the passage of time and emergence of democratic set up, most of these practices have been discouraged and many of them have been prohibited as per the law of the land. However, these still remain ingrained in the collective consciousness of society, taking a heavy toll on the mental and physical health of the women and the society at large. The traditional wisdom of the land sees women in the light of the famous lines of the national poet Maithili Sharan Gupta as one “without any power (abla)” with ‘milk of motherhood in her bosom and tears in her eyes.’ Even the eminent philosopher Swami Vivekananda has defined women in his “Women in India” as:

The ideal of womanhood in India is motherhood- that marvellous, unselfish, all suffering, ever forgiving mother. The wife walks behind, the shadow.

(Vivekananda, Swami ‘Women of India’ Reports in American Newspapers, (Detroit Free Press, March 25, 1894) Vol.III.)

Indian women are exposed to all kinds of adversities including societal, religious, sexual by the masculine power of the society, so that they can never use their reason and always ‘walk behind’ and remain ‘the shadow’ of their male counterparts. The women’s writings in India have been striving hard to bring women out of this stigma. Emphasizing the need of individuality in a hostile society, it has opened a new concept of Indian womanhood. It beautifully highlights the changing concept of women’s subjectivity by presenting the transformation of the traditional Indian subjugated female self into the struggling modern
women for the sake of maintaining their self identity. Anita Desai is one such Indian writer, whose works revolve around the inner conflict of her female protagonists and their predicament of maintaining self identity as an individual, along with the role played by nature and ecology in making their quest successful.

Anita Desai is basically concerned with the way ideological and legendary descriptions of Indian women screw up, and form the figure of motherhood and maternity prescriptive in the framework of her novels and also in the Indian society. Characters like Sita and the Mother Goddess restrict Indian women in two precise ways - they entail that every woman should be a mother and at the same time, be an ideal, which no woman can attain. The literary critic Geetanjali Chanda, in “Mapping Motherhood: The Fiction of Anita Desai,” observes that Anita Desai often “weaves the traditional duality of the mother as creator and destroyer and embeds the text in an Indian reality where actual mothers are often ignored or ill-treated; whereas in folklore, myth and nation building the idea of motherhood is venerated and iconic mothers are worshipped.” (75) Another critic Radha Chakravarty agrees with her and further adds that “in India, women’s self-worth and value are usually dependent on their reproductive functions. This valorization of motherhood has its own built-in paradoxes: maternity is associated with a capacity for voluntary self-sacrifice which entitles the mother to her quasi-divine status.” (77)

The present chapter focuses on the behavior of Desai’s women in adverse circumstances. Do the female characters act rationally and break the four walls of the boundary created by the society or do they suffer as it is because they are destined to do so by virtue of their nature? The chapter lays stress on the emotional crisis of the protagonists, who live in a chaotic society and delves deep to find out the factors responsible for such despair.

4.2. Portrayal of Women Characters

A major chunk of Desai’s works revolve around the turmoil in the minds of female protagonists so as to maintain their individuality and self identity. She lays stress on nature in her works. Nature for her is both the physical environment and the instinctive
nature of man, affecting and getting affected by each other. For her, nature reverberates in the mind and behaviour of man. She clearly portrays how modern civilization is slowly going far from nature forgetting the natural human qualities like love and sympathy. All this constitutes the ecology of her works. Desai, in her *Where Shall We Go This Summer*, while highlighting the protagonist Sita’s deep psychological involvement with nature and ecology also presents the violence, the boredom, and monotony with which the modern city life is enveloped. She has successfully portrayed the effect of existential problems on a sensitive mind like Sita’s that intends to grab tightly the closeness and magic of nature-the identity of a female soul in a cruel world. The modern civilization, being exiled from nature, forces her to be unwilling to give birth to her fifth child and makes her search for the magic of nature by taking shelter in Manori island with her two other children. Sita struggles to break herself free from the burden and the problems of contemporary humdrum existence and sets out in search of a complete female identity. In her journey of the quest for self, she goes through a metamorphosis and becomes acquainted with the truth about her identity. Ecology helps in her journey towards self realization. By reconnecting herself with nature and ecology, Sita reclaims her individuality and re-establishes it.

Most of Desai’s characters like Nanda Kaul in *Fire on the Mountain*, Sophie in *Journey to Ithaca*, and Sita in *Where Shall We Go This Summer*, in order to pacify their inner turmoil aroused by the question of their individual existence, reconnect themselves with ecology and nature and assert their identity. For Nanda Kaul, the place Carignano in Kasauli is ideal; for Sophie, it is India; and for Sita, it is the Manori island. Besides providing refuge from the routine modern world of technology, Ecology also guides them in securing their identity as an individual not only in the hollow pretentious society to which they belong to, but also in their ignorant families. Ecology also enables them to listen to their inner voice, which remains unheard in the noisy, polluted, corrupted environment of city life.

*Cry, the Peacock*, the first novel of Anita Desai, reveals the mood swings, detachment, and abnormal behaviour of the protagonist - Maya. It is a grim novel filled with the
gruesome fright that culminates into madness and finally, suicide of the heroine. The main reason for this is entrapment in a loveless, arranged marriage with Gautama, a misogynistic lawyer much older to her. The novel points at the problems of communication in an incompatible union. Dangling along the influence of the West on the one side, and traditional tensions between religious and domestic interaction on the other, the novel presents a desperate yearning for freedom. It brings to fore the fears, insecurity, loneliness, and sufferings of Indian women and also tries to probe the reasons for these. It is noticed that the main cause of marital discord and loneliness of Indian women lie in age difference, disparity in maturity levels, Indian philosophy of detachment, and communication gap between the two partners. In addition to this, the very mindset of Indian women that they should be meek, docile, submissive, etc. adds to their vacuity. Maya shares a very affectionate relationship with her father and is pained to leave her home after marriage. However, she has not had all fruits of childhood. The premature death of her mother hovers over her psyche, thus creating a type problem upbringing. Such circumstances make her detached from the outside world. Thus she says:

………………my childhood was one in which much was excluded, which grew steadily more restricted, unnatural even, and in which I lived as a toy princess in a toy world. But it was pretty one. (78)

The expectations she had from marriage are not fulfilled, and as a result, she becomes fuzzy. She finds Gautama, as a man in whom “understanding was scant, love was meager.” (89) With the passage of time, her restlessness increases; and she broods over her barrenness at heart.

………I had yearned for the contact that goes deeper than flesh- that of thought and longed to transmit to him the laughter that gurgled up in my throat as I saw a goat nuzzle, secretly, a basket of sliced melons in the bazaar while the vendor’s back was turned, or the profound thrill that lit a bonfire in the pit of my stomach- when I saw the sun unfurl like a rose in the west, the west and farther west…..But
those were the times when I admitted to the loneliness of the Human soul, and I would keep silent. (90)

Maya is portrayed as an extremely sensitive character. She represents a woman, who refuses to accept the patriarchal domination. Though she lives in the male’s world, she refuses to identify herself to it, and revolts in her own ways. She takes an escapist route and becomes a “nature’s child”, wherein she tries to seek solace in the natural landscapes and gardens. The emptiness at her heart is filled by birds and animals, a space that humans fail to fill in Maya’s life. Maya is quite different from the typical Indian women. She rebels against the idea of “ideal housewife”. However, her total economic dependence on her husband makes her feel rather insecure and powerless because she sees herself ineffective to her “protector’s” eyes. Thus she turns into a rebel. She becomes a ‘new woman’ defying various precincts and practices of patriarchy. Her image represents a strong contrast to the Adarsh Bhartiya Nari, an ideal woman of Indian conception. She tries to find out a new vista for a woman’s world- a space where she is at parity with men. Despite the fact that Maya’s world is filled with attachments, pleasure of affluence, of the smell and beauty of her garden’s flowers, she feels vacuity, meaninglessness, and a lack of belongingness. Though she fears solitude, she refuses to open up to the world for fear of being not understood as an independent existential being. Therefore, she generates a private space for herself that is filled with the colours of flower. The indifference of her husband Gautama is the immediate reason of Maya’s discovery of her new world. As she muses on:

Grey, grey, all was grey for Gautama, who lived so narrowly, so shallowly. And I felt sorry, infinitely sorry for him, for his slow, harmless, guideless being who walked the fresh grass and did not know he touched it. (196-197)

Similarly, in Where Shall We Go This Summer? Anita Desai depicts the inner–outer world of the leading character Sita. It is the story of “boredom, horror and glory” of the sensitive woman, quite fatigued of her life. Sita, a non-conformist young wife, strongly wishes to abandon her seemingly comfortable middle class existence of boredom and
hypocrisy and at the same time, realizes that the bonds that tie her to it cannot be broken easily. She is a highly intellectualized freedom loving person - very emotional and sensitive. She finds it very difficult to adjust herself to the patriarchal culture. She feels asphyxiated due to the “vegetarian complacence”, the “stolidity”, “insularity” (49) and unimaginative way of life of the people around her. Consequently, her life becomes dull and boring. She finds it difficult to live with her husband in, “their age rotted flat” (48) which is marked by “sub-human placidity, calmness and sluggishness” (48) and feels that “their sub humanity might swamp her.” (48) In order to get rid of her seclusion and to preserve her individuality, she behaves in a despicable manner by smoking openly. She, along with her husband and children, move to a small flat but she doesn't find life any better as she has to attend to people whose “insularity and complacence as well as the aggression and violence of others” (33) serves as “affronts upon her tiring nerves.” (33) Raman’s deep involvement in his business and her children’s independence add to her isolation and thereby, marital disharmony increases substantially. To establish her existence as an independent existential being, she curves a niche for herself by escaping to Manori. According to S. Indira, “her life in the city is depicted mainly through the images of violence and her life on the island is teemed with images of sea, sunshine, colour and flowers.” (70) Her life on two different places-life in the city and life on the island- may thus be interpreted from a feminist point of view as her quandary under two kinds of patriarchy: her life in the city represents her misery in Indian patriarchal capitalist society, while her life on the island, seems to indicate her plight in traditional form of Indian patriarchy.

According to N.R. Gopal “the island for her was like a Prospero’s enchanted island in _The Tempest_. She is so much under control of her childhood memories that even after being grown up and having borne many children, she is not able to free herself” (81). Sita starts considering herself as the Duchess of Manori after the death of her father; she cannot forget the magic of the island, which can rescue her from her mental and physical trauma.
When she finds herself pregnant with her fifth child, she is unhappy. She is apprehensive of her unborn child losing its innocence in this world, where only “food, sex and money” matter. Her escape to Manori provides her some kind of solace:

…she was on the island, in order to achieve the miracle of not giving birth, Wasn’t this Manori, the island of miracles….She had four children with pride, with pleasure-sensual, emotional, Freudian, every kind of pleasure-with all the placid serenity that supposedly goes with pregnancy and parturition. (31-32)

She comes to Manori to achieve the miracle of keeping her baby unborn. Her morbid fear of the people in the city as well as her emotional alienation from her husband lead her to the island. She considers the world brutal and full of wickedness, that’s why she does not want to give birth to her baby. Her initial enthusiasm about the island (as one of working miracles on her) slowly diminishes. Unlike typical Indian woman, Sita fights back - both within and outside her being and tries to triumph over the chaos and suffering of her rather unusual existence. Her children, accustomed to the comfortable lifestyle of the city, could not adjust to the life on the island. They accuse her of spoiling their lives on this island of madness and want to escape from that island to their “beloved” city. So, her daughter, without the knowledge of Sita, writes a letter to Raman to come and take them home. When Raman arrives, Sita is reluctant to leave the island; after much conflict, she returns with him to Bombay to live with her family. Her expectation of a miracle in the island does not happen, and she joins her family in the city.

Sita’s image is one of those stimulating women, who do not fit well in the roles of a conventional woman. She suffers because of her over-sensitivity that makes her unsuitable to get adapted to traditional circumstances. The harsh, matter of fact life of cities has no charm for her. Her simple, carefree life in the countryside before marriage (under the protection of her father), had cast a deep spell on her and she finds herself like a captive amidst the dry quandary of urban life. After getting separated from her father and her place, she feels the void and expects more love and care from her husband. Raman, who is pragmatic in his approach fails to understand her. Sita accuses him of
being practical and insensitive. She finds Raman’s reflection in her kids and hates them equally.

Raman tries to patch up by telling her about the “contraries” in life and people’s ability to bear them. He says, “other people put up with it – it’s not so – so insufferable.” (143) But she lacks the wisdom, practical knowledge, and courage which make others believe that “life must be continued, and all its business…why can’t you? Perhaps one should be grateful if life is only a matter of disappointment, not disaster.” (143) Sita always prefers to live alone with her husband away from his friends and relatives. She could never tolerate Raman’s friends visiting them for she feels “appalled” and “frightened” by the guests. She uses harsh words about her guests and calls them “pariahs”. Raman is an ordinary husband, who like any other man has great care for his family. He has great love for his wife and therefore, is reluctant to send her to Manori. When she wants to escape to Manori, Raman says, “you must stay where there is a doctor, a Hospital, and a telephone. You can’t go to the island in the middle of the monsoon. You can’t have a baby there.” (33)

Such attitude of Sita is very much the product of her inadequate and troubled childhood. She is a motherless child, who had experienced partiality, neglect, indifference from her very childhood. Sita’s father had no time for his children. It was Rekha, Sita’s sister, who was close to his heart. Sita’s childhood, for the most part, is overshadowed by this more favoured sister. Because of this biased attitude of her father, she has reached such a mental state, where she often has a doubt about her relationship with Rekha, for there is no resemblance between the two sisters.

The suppressed emotions of her childhood are responsible for her perturbed mental state in the present. Her uneasy childhood deprived of the love and care from her mother, the indifference of her father and her alienation from her sister - all bring about many psychological complications in her. Her unceremonious married life, with totally opposite Raman, falls heavily on her. She is torn apart by what she considers the betrayal of her
husband and his family as well as the indifference of her children and other acquaintances.

It is much later that she comes to the realization about the real state of affairs. Wisdom dawns on her and she returns to reality. She even begins to feel bad about what she has done. When Raman prepares to leave Manori, she mends her ways and decides to return to Bombay with him. The novelist images this ‘homecoming’ of Sita as a typical Indian woman following the footprints of her husband. “She lowers her head and searched out his footprints so that she could place her feet in them, as a kind of game to make walking back easier and so her footprints, mingled with his.” (150)

The ‘homecoming’ of Sita cannot be termed as her surrender of self and individuality to her husband. It is a journey towards self discovery and her realization of wider truths of the existence. After returning to Bombay, the magic and charm of the island vanishes. The memory of it only brings unrest and uneasiness rather than silence and peace. She realizes that life in Bombay is the reality. Her escape to the island was only a temporary escape - only a notion of Utopia. Thus it cannot be real. It very much represents a stage world - a world which collapses on close contact. Sita comprehends that illusion and reality are the two sides of life and are inseparable. “Of course if one is alive in this world, one cannot survive without compromise, drawing the lines means certain death and in the end, Sita opts for life – with compromise.”(21) Unlike Maya in Cry, the Peacock, Sita neither commits suicide nor kills anyone but she simply makes adjustments with her environment. This is relevant to all societies and all times, as an individual has to adjust and adapt himself/ herself according to the situations for the good of both the individual and society. This adjustment must not be at the cost of suppression of the individuality altogether. But it is up to the individual to come at a goodly adjustable point. This is the real learning- the wisdom that he/ she has gained after traversing through the stormy path of life. As Hariom Prasad has pointed out, “Sita comes to accept the prosaic nature of life which runs through difficult human situations in different ways. In the end, she finds the courage to face life, with all its ups and downs.” (119) Unlike many other novels of Anita Desai, this novel ends on a positive note. Sita does not
commit something violent and abrupt like many of her hindered sisters in other works of Anita Desai. She makes adjustments and reconciles herself to her fate. She strikes a perfect balance between her inner self and the outer world. Unlike Maya, her alienation is not temperamental or environmental.

*Clear Light of Day* is the story of the Indian Das family, whose members are no longer all together. Bimla (Bim) is an unmarried history teacher, who has never left her home and family. She is entrusted with the responsibility of taking care of her autistic brother, Baba. Tara, her younger sister, is married to Bakul and has children. She comes back to visit her family in Old Delhi with her husband, who is India’s ambassador to America. The story moves from the characters’ adulthood to their adolescence and then to their childhood. The childhood has its own fancy. When they were children, the siblings Bim and Raja, often used to ridicule Tara’s desire to become a mother. They laughed at Tara and wanted to become a heroine and hero respectively.

Raja is now living in Hyderabad with his family. The family has various issues including whether or not to attend Raja’s daughter’s wedding in Hyderabad. In the final part, the significant climactic point is arrived when Bim blasts Baba and finally, concludes that familial love can mask all wrongs. This point very well explains the ways that women generally get conditioned in this strictly patriarchal world. Bim is the sole bread earner of her family. She is economically dominant and also the protector of the other members of the family - the very role a man as head of the family is supposed to perform traditionally. But her ever conditioned mind is preoccupied with the feminine concept of sacrifice for the sake of other members of the family. The idea of being a life giver or a nurturer is deeply ingrained in her. It is what she inherited from Mira Masi, the woman who took care of the children after their mother’s death. Mira later becomes an alcoholic and when she loses her independence and needs care, Bim is there to take over the role of the mother. It is thus quite obvious that woman’s image as a mother (the force that give birth to new lives and also takes care of them) cannot be totally erased from a woman’s mind. Characters may change to take over this role, but the sequence goes on. The same happens with Das family.
A mother’s pride of bringing new life is conditioned by her willingness to sacrifice in the interest of the new born. However, in case of a man, this is turned into his arrogance and his characteristic male chauvinism. Bakul’s claims to be the person who gave Tara a new and better life, makes him even a more dominant man who is ever ready to dictate his terms on his female counterpart. This is a characteristic feature of the Indian patriarchal system. It implies that a woman does not have an identity without her husband’s authorization. An interesting feature of Anita Desai’s feminist sensibility is that she relates male chauvinism to colonial arrogance. As age long dominance of men have convinced women of their superiority, the 200 years of British rule in India has affirmed their excellence to the Indian minds. Bakul’s attitude towards Tara reveals the colonial mindset that still exists and is often revealed in people’s everyday conversations. Bakul humiliates Tara pointing at her unrefined manners. The ways and manners of the west are far superior to the modest lifestyle Tara is accustomed to lead in India. So Tara’s voice is doubly silenced—by her husband as well as by the colonial power that still perpetuates in several ways. Desai, to her credit, does not allow her women to surrender altogether before the men folk. Her women are bold enough to confront the situation and strive hard to break the conventions. Still they have to reconcile to the reality and make adjustments with the environment. Though they succeed, to some extent, in charting their way out as female subjects in a colonial and patriarchal system, their voice would not be heard and they would, at some point, be silenced by the system.

The novel *Fasting, Feasting* brings to fore the deplorable condition of women in India. Desai employs the Hindu imagery of sun/fire to represent the patriarchal power and water represents recognition of women’s condition and a possible way to liberation. Uma, the main character of the novel, achieves recognition of her identity to some extent. Further, a parallel pilgrimage of Arun, is analyzed through his recognition of the suffering of his own sister Uma as well as women/girls residing in America. He realizes that it is only through the union of both male and female recognition and effort that a woman can be liberated from patriarchal oppression. The words “fasting” and “feasting” represent the two parts of the novel respectively: the first is situated in India (the country of “fasting”
wherein people fast for religious purposes and also, to an unwilling fast of the several poor people); the second in the United States (the country where people feast i.e. there is abundance). Uma fasts the most especially because she is denied access to education and the free development of personality. As she becomes aware of her own hunger and increased suffering, her sensitivity to the other characters’ “feasting” on freedom, power, and education also increases. Her feelings are completely ignored within the family circle. It is only Arun, the main protagonist of the second part, who becomes aware of her suffering, as he himself is forced to feast in terms of education merely because of his gender; he must receive “the best” in all respects, whether he desires it or not.

The “orange ceremony” in the novel beautifully supports the hierarchy. The father “patriarch on the top of the hierarchy pyramid,” enjoys the status of a king and does not even have to utter a word. The mother, being a well trained instrument of his power, strengthens this power by performing a ritual:

She taps Uma on the elbow. ‘Orange,’ she instructs her. She picks out the largest orange in the bowl and hands it to Mama who peels it in strips, then divides it into separate segments. Each segment is then peeled and freed of pips and threads till only the perfect globules of juice are left and then passed, one by one to the edge of Papa's plate... Mama sits back. The ceremony is over. She has performed it. Everyone is satisfied. (23, 24)

Thus only the male is feasting on power as represented by the orange ceremony; females don’t have any access to the orange. The mother becomes a part of the patriarchal structure. Similarly, in a far off place an analogical introductory ritual is going on - an American patriarch presiding over the ceremony. In a scorching hot American summer, the preparation of a barbecue is described openly in religious terms. The members of the congregation, Mrs Patton, the “minister's” wife and Arun, do not eat the sacrificial meat but they become a party to the ceremonial presentation of it; Uma, Melanie-her American counterpart, and other girls and women then find themselves in the oppressive environment of fire and sun, where it is difficult to survive. Uma stays unmarried since
she is not found attractive either by her family or by any of the possible suitors and husbands to be. At school, she fails almost all the exams; grown up she is often reprimanded for being childish, slow and “always sleeping.” (101).

Uma’s ordeal begins in her early teens when her brother, Arun, is born. Mama takes great pride in having fulfilled her life role by giving birth to a son; Papa is proud to be able to produce, a male offspring and lets Mama into the realm of patriarchal structures, although only as an instrument. Then Uma is not allowed to continue her education. But she, although not a good student, is an eager one and zealously resists her parents’ decision. The parents feel that “there is no need” to waste money on girl’s education. Consequently, Uma longs to escape but she is directionless. She is gradually brought into the inner world of Hindu tales and legends by Mira Masi.

An ardent worshipper of Shiva, Mira Masi’s stories reveal the dual nature of the woman's fate: death of a victim after having been abandoned by her husband; the other is a poetess, independent, struggling for recognition; in the meantime, she is considered a madwoman. With Mira Masi, Uma feels that she is “admitted into some sanctuary that had been previously closed to her.”(42) The nuns at St. Mary’s had not admitted her into their chapel, where she had always wanted to go. Now “she was counted in, a member, although of what, she could not say.” (43) Uma realizes that it is essential to find a different reality than that outlined by her parents. She feels a sense of security in the company of Mira Masi as she receives some attention and recognition as a human being. The inner world of contemplation of existence is open to her. Mira Masi exposes her to the inner structures of her culture so as to enable her to understand how they work. While Mira Masi carries on her worship duties, Uma wanders around, and realizes the two forces pulling in different directions - the power of patriarchal education and tradition and the desire to get rid of it. She sees a river there but cannot approach it during the day because the sand is burning from the sun. But towards the evenings, Uma can stroll along the river and ascertain that she cannot turn to Mira Masi any more for guidance.
Uma remains unmarried; she undergoes a long and arduous journey through this suntrap of the valley of marriage arrangements. Inside the realm of patriarchy, the beatific features of Anamika become more expressive in contrast to the other two girls. Anamika thus becomes a model and consequently, her fate is carried on to its extreme; to remain a pativrata, a woman has to go as far as her own destruction. After twenty five years of abusive treatment and enclosure in the house of her husband, she literally goes through fire (she is burned to death by her husband and mother-in-law). While Anamika is married off easily and rapidly, all efforts to marry the monster girl Uma come to a halt. Uma is not found beautiful by any of her suitors as if to show that the patriarchal order cannot support the “monstrosity” of “ugliness” in women. Because of her unmarried status, she becomes an outcast since marriage is considered a sacrament in Hindu custom. In the case of Uma, it signifies that she is, for one thing, suffering from an eye disease and for another, prevented to go and see an ophthalmologist for the eyes are a primary means of getting to reading, knowing, studying, getting out of the bonds of ignorance. That same dark corner of Uma's inner being is occupied by the thoughts about a job, “a career”. The offer of a job is finally made and the last necessary relevant explanations are furnished to Uma but despite her overflowing eagerness to accept the job, she surrenders to the refusal of her parents. While participating in the funeral ceremonies of Anamika, her married alter ego, she feels as if she too has gone through fire and is enslaved by the rules of patriarchy.

The second part of the novel highlights Arun and his pilgrimage “to the other side”. There is more relativization there. In America, a country of abundance, there is not only feasting but also fasting; the mother supplies the household with tons of food but she herself does not know what to eat and nobody cares. Her daughter Melanie suffers from bulimia, the emblematic disease of young women neglected emotionally; seemingly, she is feasting on peanuts and candy bars, which, in reality, brings about starvation (fasting). Though receiving a first-class education, Arun himself is starving because he finds it difficult to adapt to the American “diet” and the American culture. Melanie and her mother's condition is not sufficiently systematic to constitute as detailed a journey as is that of Uma because it is conveyed and perceived by Arun. Arun has to undertake a
journey analogous to that of Uma—a journey towards recognition but this recognition is and at the same time, is not the same as that of Uma. It is the same because in both the cases, it leads to the recognition of the unfavourable conditions of women. The recognition cannot be exactly the same because Uma is affected directly as she is exposed to the mortifying effects of patriarchy. Arun’s pilgrimage approaches its apex when he becomes cognizant of Melanie's suffering and its cause. Arun sees a resemblance: a resemblance to the contorted face of an enraged sister, who failing to express her outrage against neglect, against misunderstanding, against inattention to her unique and singular being and its hungers, merely spits and froths in ineffectual protest. Nevertheless, neither he nor Mrs. Patton, herself a victim incapable of resisting the paralysing effects of the beams of patriarchal sun, are capable of doing anything for Melanie until the three of them escape temporarily the oppressive heat of the family's males’ presence. Enlightenment and discovery finally start to work for Melanie's benefit. Arun, though well aware of the actual state of affairs, acknowledges the necessity to act but feels “paralysed”. On the other hand, Arun’s presence seems compulsory for Mrs. Patton to find out the destructive consequences of Melanie’s condition.

Thus western feminism follows the notion of “self”, which is in relation to “individualism” but in the Indian society, an individual is considered a part of the society. Anita Desai, in her fiction, searches out the causes of marital discord by presenting it from women’s sensibility. Her fiction focuses on the struggles of middle class and anglicized women who try to come out of social limitations imposed upon them by the society. This endeavour leads to their alienation from the family and society.

4.3. Quest for Identity

The roles of men and women were clearly defined in the ancient times. Subjects such as social, political, and economic were the domain of men, and women learnt early in life not to intrude, “there is a tradition, perhaps not only in India, that women should not be worried, that the best way to ensure this is to keep them as far as possible in ignorance.” (Markandaya 117) Women were confined to “unproductive labour” i.e. doing household
chores and rearing up children. It was only in the twentieth century, when several women writers started dealing with the cause of women. By bringing to fore the pathetic condition of their women, these writers, in fact, try to give liberty to women. A prick into the mystical crusts of the mind of Anita Desai’s heroines exhibits the cosmic emptiness, continual isolation, and an abysmal desolation from which they suffer. Desai’s women characters are not ideally humble and docile but defiant by nature and indifferent to patriarchy. They flip the idea that women should be confined to the “four-walls” of the house and their primary duty is towards their family. They silently rebel and take recourse to nature – a world of their own, a world where they can affirm their independence, feminity, and womanliness unobstructed by familial bonds.

The female protagonists of Desai are quite docile and tolerant but they loathe to compromise with their identity. Being unable to strike a balance between the external world and their inner self, they suffer from intense isolation. Many of her novels depict the mental agony of her middle class women. Being a woman, Anita Desai succeeds in giving a literary expression to her feminity as well as her personal experiences. This transformation is reflected in her fervent search for identity, which leads to self exploration. The impassioned pursuit emboldens a woman and refrains her from the restraining stereotypes of the patriarchal society.

The existential predicament of an individual is beautifully represented in Desai’s novels through the incompatibility between the husbands and wives. She uses stream of consciousness technique to highlight the silent suffering and the helplessness of thousands of married women. Desai investigates the emotional world of women, with a deep understanding of psychology and feminine sensibility. The novel, Where Shall We Go This Summer?, reveals the extraordinary inner life of Sita. In the first part of the novel, the instant past of Sita is depicted. She feels bored and isolated as the members of her family are busy in their own lives. She cannot lead the normal life of a child as she is motherless, and her father spent most of the time in jail (being a political celebrity). So Sita is left with no choice and spends time on the island sometimes alone and sometimes with Jivan, her brother, playing with mud and clay. After her father’s death, she leaves
Manori accompanied by her father’s friend Deedar and his son Raman. She leaves Manori, “longing for the same, the routine ridden mainland as for a rest Sanatorium.” (72) A little while later, she ties the nuptial knot with Raman. Though she has four children from him, she is quite grossly discontented. On her fifth pregnancy, she decides not to give birth to the child. Therefore, accompanied by Maneka and Karan (daughter and son), she escapes to Manori, the island of miracles. Though she relishes the peaceful life at the island, her children get fed up with it. Her daughter Menaka, writes a letter to Raman requesting him to take her back. Sita, at first, is unwilling to go as she finds it difficult to make compromises with Raman but finally, after much thought, accompanies him to Bombay.

Sita’s problem is a result of her frequent comparison of her sweet past with the present, which is full of tensions. She desires to be cuddled by Raman. Sita realizes that her existence carries no meaning owing to the indifferent attitude of Raman. That is why she wants to leave her husband. She rejects her existence in the male chauvinistic society, which binds her to her family. She completely surrenders her independence and freedom and exhibits an internal fury, which makes us think about the problem of life. This problem is beautifully expressed in the following lines:

On the boredom and loneliness experienced by married women when they feel ignored and unwanted. It is a crucial period when one feels a dilemma of existence. The children grow up and become independent while husbands are increasingly busy with their routine. (112)

Sita’s escape to Manori, in fact, is a voyage from the restrictions of conventional womanhood. She feels that the patriarchal society, in which she dwells, cripples women. “She saw the island as a piece of magic, a magic mirror—it was so bright so brilliant to her eyes after the tensions and shadows of childhood. It took her sometime to notice that this magic too, cast shadows.” (63) Sita’s being motherless child, makes her a victim of father fixation. Her father fixation comes to a halt the moment she comprehends that it was because of her father, she lost her mother. “She had to struggle to free herself from
the chain or she might have spent her life in cold meshes, regarding the enigma of her father, slave to his undefined magic.” (87-88)

The severity of Sita’s conflict with Raman makes her want to leave for Manori. Sita levels undue accusations at him. Thus Raman bursts into an outrage: “You have four children. You have lived comfortably, always in my house. You’ve not had worries. Yet your happiness memory is not of your children or your home but of strangers, seen for a moment, some lovers in a park. Not even of your own children.” (147)

When Raman comes to Manori on the behest of Maneka - his daughter, he realises his mistake and expresses his readiness to change himself. He goes to the extent of giving up his factory even as is evident from the following lines: “It wouldn’t be bad to give up the factory and come to live here. Do some farming. I’d like that.”(151) This leads to the end of battle between the duo; Sita agrees to return to Bombay and give birth to her fifth child. Thus, through the character of Sita, Anita Desai categorically discusses the ‘unpleasant compromises’ that women have to make in the patriarchal system. Since Desai’s female characters fail to find any kind of support, they return to their husbands and readily accept their passive roles.

The customs and traditions of the orthodox Indian society do not leave any ground for the growth of a woman. Right from her childhood till her death, a number of restrictions are imposed on her being - father in the childhood, husband in the youth, and son in the old age. The frantic search for self enables them to openly reject these customs and traditions and lead a life of self respect and dignity.

In *Fire on the Mountain*, Nanda Kaul - a widowed great grandmother, embittered by her role as a wife and mother, moves to Kausali to lead an independent life. She “had suffered through the nimiety, the disorder, the fluctuating and unpredictable excess. She had been so glad when it was over. She had been glad to leave it all behind, in the plains, like a great, heavy, difficult book that she had read through and was not required to read again.” (32) Nanda’s solitary life gets suddenly disrupted with the appearance of her great
grand daughter, Raka, who has been sent to her at Kausali owing to her mother’s illness and subsequent inability to take care of her.

It was against the old lady’s policy to question her [Asha, her daughter] but it annoyed her that she should once again be drawn into a position where it was necessary for her to take an interest in another’s activities and be responsible for their effect and outcome. When would she be done? (50-51).

For years, Nanda Kaul tried to be like the mythical Hindu Goddesses, particularly Sita or Draupadi, but unfortunately, that did not bring her any fulfilment; in fact, it eventually led her to relinquish that life. In due course of time, Nanda begins to get fascinated by Raka. She tell her, “Raka, you really are a great-grandchild of mine, aren’t you? You are more like me than any of my children or grandchildren. You are exactly like me, Raka.” (71) Although she sees the connection between herself and Raka and notices that Raka needs to be nurtured and loved by her, she does not fulfill the obligation. For her, it seems that removing one’s self from any caretaking situation was easier than actually having a child around and refusing to care for it and she laments her inability to help. She tries telling Raka elaborate fairy tales in order to make her happy, but then realizes the irony since she herself was told fairy tales and in the end, found them to be empty and fake. Indeed, the narrator declares that Nanda bitterly cursed her failure to comfort children, her inability to place herself in another’s position and act accordingly. “Fantasy and fairy tales had their place in life, she knew it so well. Why then did she not tell the child the truth? Who wanted truth? Who could stand it? Nobody. Not even herself. So how could Raka?” (97)

At the end of the novel, Nanda realizes that the solace and peace she sought at Carignano was actually as false as the fairy tales. She tells Raka about her past. The only reason Nanda is able to live a comfortable life in her new dwelling is because she has erased her past instead of coming to terms with it. She remembers Miss David, the woman whom her husband truly loved instead of her, and how their affair affected her relationship with her husband. She also remembers her real past, not the one she has woven to tell Raka
nor the one she imagines for herself. This final confrontation with the truth of her situation renders her heroic. “The peace that she thought she has finally attained was on fire.” (61) In the end, although Nanda sought to escape her existence as a wife and mother, she did not find fulfilment; completely rejecting all caring behaviour or when she left Raka alone, in dire need of love and mothering. Tara is a woman who, like her grandmother, assumed a subservient role to her husband. She is not only unfulfilled by her nurturing roles as a wife and mother but is also, abused by her husband. Tara is badly treated by her husband, but it is always the woman who has to yield. A woman often becomes woman’s enemy. Asha attributed Tara’s domestic misfortune to her inability to understand men and also her inability to be a “successful diplomat’s wife.” This not only reiterates the treatment women such as Tara sometimes receive from other women but also what expectations Indian society puts on women in abusive situations. Like Sita, Tara is expected to handle whatever comes her way with quiet submissiveness, even if it means abuse to both herself and her child. Nanda Kaul is also aware of all this and she wonders what will happen to Tara after she is deceased and even thinks of leaving Kausali to her: “perhaps she [Nanda] should leave the house to Tara who needed shelter, a cave to crawl into and die.” (113) Raka is just another casualty of Tara’s traumatic relationship with Raka’s father and it is obvious through her reclusive behaviour and refusal to get close to any human being that she has been profoundly damaged by her home environment. She reflects on what she remembers about home and thinks of her father:

home from a party, stumbling and crashing through the curtains of night, his mouth opening to let out a flood of rotten stench, beating at her mother with hammers and fists of abuse – harsh, filthy abuse that made Raka cower under her bedclothes and wet the mattress in fright, feeling the stream of urine warm and weakening between her legs like a stream of blood, and her mother lay down on the floor and shut her eyes and wept. Under her feet, in the dark, Raka felt that flat, wet jelly of her mother’s being squelching and quivering, so that she didn’t know where to put her feet and wept as she tried to get free of it. (79)
Thus Raka is severely affected by the environment at her home. Though Nanda visualizes this, she is reluctant to get involved. As a result, Raka wanders about the deserted landscape with a view to escape. She sets the entire forest on fire, and screams in order to seek that very attention, which she has been deprived of throughout her life. According to R.S. Sharma, the closing of the novel is “expressive of Raka’s resolve to destroy a world where a woman cannot hope to be happy without being unnatural.” This categorically supports Raka’s destructive act.

Thus Desai’s women characters are either liberated or have a burning desire to be liberated; they quietly whimper due to the intense pressure heaped upon them by patriarchy. She throws an open challenge to the prevailing customs and traditions of the Indian society. The female characters strive hard to search their identity; they rebel in their own ways either by indulging in self-destruction or taking recourse to nature. They do not opt for explicit moves aimed at self-liberation as seen in the works of shobha De or Tasleema Nasreen or Arundhati Roy. They keep their traditional position alive despite their various reactions to the patriarchal system.

4.4. Feminist Perspectives on Anita Desai

The novels of Anita Desai show a marked progression in the intuitive understanding of the status of women in the society. Her novels such as Cry, the Peacock, Voices in the City, Where Shall We Go this Summer?, and Fasting, Feasting investigate the gender issues from the Indian socio-historical angle. While the first three novels depict women’s depression arising out of their inability to tackle their family situations, the last novel brings to light the issues pertaining to education of women and their desire to be self-sufficient and lead a meaningful existence. Though Desai basically dealt with women, who had the privilege of receiving education, unfortunately these qualifications and degrees did not propel them to create a space for themselves in the outer world. In Cry, the Peacock, the protagonist Maya is pushed beyond endurance due to her husband’s helplessness to relate to her. In Voices in the City, Monisha has to cope up not only with the insensitivity of her husband but also the asphyxiating authority of her in-laws. As a
result, Maya becomes insane and Monisha opts for death as a means of escape – quite typical in Indian middle class households. Maya’s is a nuclear family comprising only her husband while Monisha’s is a joint one. Both Maya and Monisha are deprived of love and affection. Neither of them tries to find out useful options for their survival. They fail to think of being economically independent, which brings a sense of autonomy and self worth with it. Both exist as tortured souls. Lal (1995) studies the patriarchal forces which explore the situation of Indian women. She examines the three stages of Indian feminism which moves from “interior space” to “doorway poise” to “exterior adjuncts”. Desai’s *Cry, the Peacock* and *Voices in the City* are expressive of “interior space”. While the “interior space” is reflected in the gratifying role of a daughter-in-law, wife, and mother in the late nineteenth century, it could be the agonizing isolation of Maya and Monisha in the twentieth century. Anita Desai’s *Cry, the Peacock*, is thus a magnified vision of the pain of an Indian wife who longs for nothing but love and affection from her husband.

In the context of the second novel, Monisha is projected as a wife in a North Calcutta joint family household. For any reader, who has the exposure to the city’s culture, such specification has definite implications. South Calcutta is modern and has a liberal lifestyle compared to North Calcutta, which is more representative of the Victorian ‘Babu Culture’. With the passage of time and owing to economic pressures, the glamour of the aristocracy or the Zamidari Babu culture has lost its sheen, the vanity remains. A woman’s incarceration as the ‘bahu’ (daughter-in-law) of the house is considered aristocratic and related to the values of the high middle class society. The education of a woman loses its worth, and in the case of Monisha, it begins and ends with *The Gita*. The ‘detachment’ philosophy of the text determines the patriarchal values of the culture in both the novels. Maya’s sensitive mind refuses to accept her husband’s blind observance to the detachment philosophy and Monisha tries to wrestle with it till her last breath. The two women end up as hysterics in their claustrophobic limits and become a study of ‘neuroses’ in middle class Indian households.

Desai’s female protagonists do not even consider choices. Even if they do, they do so to ultimately submit to the forces of patriarchy. Sita in *Where Shall We Go this Summer?*
moves ahead of the “interior space” to the “exterior adjunct” to move back to the “interior space” once again. The transitional phase makes her a hysteric. Sita has to choose between her husband’s home and her father’s abode. She can survive only when she puts her troubled self to rest. Just as the mythological Sita embraces the mother earth to seek shelter in the realms of darkness, in the similar way, Sita in Desai’s novel, gulps her semiotic desires to determine her subjectivity through compromise. It is perhaps in *Fasting, Feasting*, that Anita Desai takes up the issue of women in Indian conditions with a broader perspective; yet her narrative here once again flows from the patriarchal gaze.

Anita Desai takes up the issue of marriage, dowry, and education in *Fasting, Feasting* as realized in the Indian patriarchal system. She beautifully presents the values and beliefs existing in the society with a view to question them. She also addresses the conditions that determine the ‘other’ in Indian society. The title of the novel *Fasting, Feasting* is ironical and has dual implications: the birth of a son is always to be feasted upon whereas a daughter’s birth spells gloom since she is to be married off with a dowry and educated to qualify as a desirable bride to a prospective groom. Thus the birth of a daughter only adds to the compelling expenditure in a family. Such are the connotations of ‘fasting’. The novel revolves around three main characters- Uma, Aruna, and Anamika. The writer tries to establish that while Uma is simple and stupid, Anamika is pretty and clever, but still it is simplicity that escapes misfortune. Uma makes frustrated efforts at education while Anamika, though good in academics, is left with no choice but to marry as per the wishes of her parents. Her selection letter to Oxford University is preserved carefully to be shown to the prospective grooms. Finally, the efforts of her parents bear fruit and Anamika is married off in a joint family household thereby putting an end to her story. Anamika’s relatives are not able to see her again since her in-laws do not like her to visit them. It’s only through the hearsay reports that one gets to learn of Anamika’s creepy existence in her husband’s family and finally, her horrifying death. Desai does not present the mental condition and excruciating life of Anamika in vivid detail rather her predicament is divulged to the reader as a stranger, just as another newspaper clipping about a wife ‘burnt to death’. Anamika is beaten by her mother-in-law while her husband is a silent spectator of her humiliation. She is treated as a slave to
cook for the huge family and is given to eat the leftovers. She has a miscarriage and loses her child bearing capacity. Thus, she is considered a damaged product. Uma thinks that Anamika will be happy to stay with her parents but she is affronted by her mother: “You are so silly Uma...How can she be happy if she is sent home? What will people say? What will they think?” (71) Uma is taken aback with her mother’s insensitive attitude whereas Aruna reacts by saying, “Who cares what they say? Who cares what they think?” (71) Her crossness is mellowed down by the mother: “Don’t talk like that...I don’t want to hear all these modern ideas. Is it what you learnt from the nuns at the convent?” (71) She terrorizes them that their education could be stopped as “All this convent education-what good does it do? Better to marry you off than let you go to that place?” (71)

Anamika’s death is reported in a frivolous tone. The news is like a shock one receives “when the electricity suddenly comes to life, blindingly with a thump, and lights up the message.”(151). It is revealed that Anamika had poured kerosene and burnt herself to death in the kitchen. The reaction of Anamika’s parents is “...it was fate. God had willed it and it was Anamika’s destiny. What Uma said was nothing.” (152). Anita Desai sarcastically reveals the acceptance of such events as mere fate. She scorns at the patriarchal gaze and its inability to see these horrific details. Thus, marriage is the only destiny for a girl even if it kills her and compromise is the only choice, no matter how unhappy she is. The real ‘feminism’ in this sense of liberation is made possible with the consciousness of the younger generation of women, Uma, who despite her dullness longs for education and be economically independent of her parents. Though she belongs to the category of “doorway poise”, she too becomes a victim of the patriarchal structure and becomes a hysteric. She is married off to a man much older than herself. She too suffers at the hands of her in laws and realizes to her utter shock that she is married to a man already married. He had married her for a dowry that he needed to fulfil the needs of his already existing family.

In contrast to Anamika’s parents, Uma’s parents are sensible enough to bring her back home and thus Uma is saved from death. Uma’s epileptic fits are given a religious turn that a woman without a husband is bound to be a devotee of Krishna, the God of Love.
Thus religion serves as a comfort to make up for the damage done to her life and to alleviate the wound caused by glaring truth. The people around Uma, provide her with a solution to her ‘loneliness’- by allowing her a vocation in life. Aruna, the anxious sister, who had summed up Uma’s marriage with “Did he touch you?” (102) takes care not to spoil her own. She warns her: “Don’t you dare do that at the wedding, don’t you dare!” (102) Thus, the writer offers no logical solution and through the representation of stark realities comically, emerges a darker vision of Indian society. “From Maya in the first novel to Uma in Fasting, Feasting, there is a gap of two generations. Maya is enclosed within her mental space and her geographical space to claim her husband’s love. She has no space of her own in defiance of the heterosexual social space offered to her as a wife to a man.” Monisha’s case in Voices in the City is also similar, and both Maya and Monisha are trapped in their social predicament. With Sita in the third novel, there is a revolt which becomes self defeating in the end. Here the remarks of Brajesh Kumar seem quite apt. He says about Desai “that she never tries to justify the actions of the women protagonists in her fictional world but grants freedom to act in their own ways. In this way, she has made a sincere endeavor to contribute to the Indian fiction with a feminist concern, though she has carefully avoided associating herself with any feminist movement.” (71-72)

A small change in the perception of the woman’s condition leads to a gradual social change brought about through the changes in the mindset of females. In Clear Light of Day, Bim is forced to make choices, which, in no way, represent compromise with a sense of defeatism. It becomes a choice of responsibility, where she plays the gender role of a matriarch, who undertakes the responsibility of the family and that of a helpless sibling, Baba, dependent on her for his survival. Herein, Desai makes an attempt to reveal how gender roles can defy the masculine and feminine paradigms of activity and passivity based on sex distinction. While the males of the household are rendered as irresponsible or selfish (as Raja) or weak (as Baba), Bim emerges as the patriarch/matriarch to resolve personal conflicts and undertake responsibilities.
Though in the Indian joint family, usually it is the eldest member of the family who holds the family together, Anita Desai reverses the gender paradigms. According to her, being a matriarch or a patriarch is a matter of psychic quality. Bim’s matriarchal values of affection along with patriarchal values of control, make her as the first member for carrying the burden of family history and responsibility. This strength of character is sadly lacking in the women in *Fasting, Feasting*. The characterization of Anamika exhibits that educational freedom alone does not suffice for liberation. Her surrender to a catastrophic marriage and a dismal death is owing to the lack of inner strength to oppose the family tradition. Thus, through the predicament of Anamika, Desai investigates the effect of patriarchal domination in Indian psyche that requires immense courage and fortitude to lift the mask of representation i.e. marriage for women and higher education for men. Though Uma possesses the strength, she lacks the mental ability whereas Aruna is an opportunist, who knows how to claim her happiness through feminine charm and common sense. She has the courage and dexterity to shape her own destiny. Thus these three women characters are representative of the three levels of emancipation of the Indian middle class women. Though there has been a significant change in the social structures in the middle class and elitist societies in the recent years, such realities are still prevalent. In the recent past, women have learnt to accept challenges to identify their gender roles in society.

4.5. Conclusion

The women of India always adjust and compromise to lead a peaceful life thereby lending a practical touch to Indian feminism. Compromises play a significant role in the works of Anita Desai—a situation true in the context of every modern woman. Indian women need to regain their sense of identity. Though Anita Desai may realize the need for change corresponding to Indianness and think of a solution, such thoughts are not reflected in her fictions. Anamika’s death cannot be accepted with an indifferent pathetic savour but that is exactly what Desai does in her novel, *Fasting, Feasting*. Her novels, except for *Clear Light of Day*, do not project women as capable of possessing identity and there is only a yearning for a better existence. It is only Bim, who attains a
constructive vision of maintaining the family ties in the midst of a decaying culture, with its fast eroding values of the old Delhi days.

In order to pacify their inner turmoil, Desai’s female protagonists take recourse to nature and assert their identity. Nature, besides providing refuge from the routine modern world of technology, also guides them in securing their identity as an individual. Desai also investigates patriarchal oppression through the ingrained code of social imagination with regard to the ‘desirable’ image of the woman ‘the Sati-Savitri-parampara’. Women are both physically as well as sexually restrained to find their subjectivity. The novels of Anita Desai examine the neurotic explosions resulting from sexual oppression in women along with investigating how women as the subject of feminism are produced and suppressed by the power structures. Her works question the existing patriarchal set up through women’s consciousness and raise questions on the intellectual and psychological dimensions of Indian male consciousness. Despite increasing women’s consciousness, patriarchal oppression will continue to exist (though the intensity may be reduced) merely because of the differences in the anatomy of the males and females and owing to intellectual and psychological dimensions of Indian male consciousness.