CHAPTER VI
EXPLORING THE FEMININE PSYCHE

Desai's greatness as a writer revolves round her achievement in exploring the psyche of her characters. She plumbs the depth of the inner life of Indian women. The rewards are remarkable and deeply enlightening. The probing of the novelist always brings up innumerable conflicts, mostly psychological. They all point to the need for a new direction in the life of Indian womanhood. Bipin B. Panigrahi says:

The novels of Anita Desai depict extreme situations arising out of conflicts in the inner configurations of the individuals — the conflict between reason and instinct, the will and reality, involvement and detachment. These conflicts revolve round the interplay of the 'self' with others.¹

Desai has not only depicted these conflicts but also probed the reasons behind them. Even a casual survey of her novels brings out the fact that the existing gender inequality based on money, the dichotomy that exists between the public and private spheres of a woman's life, the male dominance in society and sex role stereotyping have contributed to the various kinds of conflicts — inter-personal and intra-personal in which the female self is tossed about, beaten, battered and even broken.

Desai "... summons the larger interest of a troubled country",² to a new examination and evaluation according to John. M. Gregory. The larger conflicts are

mostly sociological. They present themselves in the form of trans-culture encounters with old traditions clashing with the new ones. They are also partly political. Religious belief systems of the old and new types contribute much to these conflicts. In a developing country like India there are many contradictory value systems which pull the self in opposite directions. These, according to Desai, contribute to many inner and outer upheavals.

6.1 Desai's Locale: As An Extension of The Self

Desai’s critics unanimously agree on one point, and that is, she has successfully portrayed the Indian woman’s world. There is definitely an inward-turning to convey what a woman is, what she says, sees, and does. It is the intimate world of the female self that is revealed in the majority of Desai’s novels. But this concern for the private, intimate world does not neglect or reject the exterior world. In her novels the locale becomes an extension of the self. They are also inextricably bound.

In Cry, the Peacock through Maya, the locale of the novel is projected. The locale of Old Delhi with its pedestrians, bicycles, Red Fort area, “... Juma Masjid rising like muezzin’s call to prayer into a sky of heavy gray tinged pearl and people lying asleep in the shade of trees on the ghost swept maidan...”, become alive in her fictional canvas. Maya’s tortured self, the psychic energy that emits from her merges with the intense summer of Delhi. Her anguish becomes excruciating as the summer becomes intense. She longs for her summer home in the hills of Darjeeling. The intensity of Maya’s feelings is conveyed through this objective correlative, i.e., the locale. The locale embodies Maya’s disappointments and fevered responses. It also passes and repasses through sudden climatic changes. The locale then becomes the conscious field of the

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identity of a person. Her helplessness, the discordant notes in her life and its innocuous disasters are projected on to the locale thus:

the garden and beyond it, the street, lay spread out, pinioned by the sun, like a great pressed flower, pressed so long ago that it was now quite, sapless, dry, fading fast to assume the colour and finally the nature of dust. Nothing could move. No leaf could stir, no blade of grass.4

We also see the outside world through Maya. The moments in Maya’s consciousness pass one by one, just as the outside world changes, overlapping and tense moments vibrate to culminate in something tragic and terrible.

In *Fire on the Mountain*, Carignano symbolizes Nanda’s isolated self. She has lived her life without any intimacy. Like her, Carignano also raises barriers or defences through its barrenness and emptiness. It is a secluded place among the rocks and pines of Kasauli. She has spent a great deal of energy, rebelling against herself, her husband and children. So she feels very comfortable in Carignano:

here on the ridge of the mountain, in this quiet house. It was the place, and the time of life, that she had wanted and prepared for all her life — as she realized on her first day at Carignano, with a great, cool flowering of relief — and at last she had it.5

Nanda Kaul was a withered, tall, gray and thin woman. Her image is projected by this locale. “Pine trees with charred tree trunks and contorted branches, striking melodramatic attitudes as on stage. Rocks arrested in mid-roll, rearing up, dropping.

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4 Ibid., pp. 182-183.
Occasional tin roof tops, glinting.\(^6\)

Raka's withdrawal is not fabricated. She is at peace with herself in Carignano unlike her grandmother. The child’s loneliness, and deprivation makes her a fugitive in the company of nature. The sense of pitifulness, aching restlessness and exasperation of the child is telescoped into the locale. Raka feels that:

there was something about it — illegitimate, uncompromising and lawless — that made her tingle. The scene of devastation and failure somehow drew her, inspired her. It was the ravaged, destroyed and barren spaces in Kasauli that drew her.\(^7\)

In *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* Sita escapes to the island Manori. Manori, the island looks dark against the sky. It is like her self that is disillusioned by her meaningless existence. She, like Nanda Kaul, longs for isolation. Sita’s deprivation, long periods of boredom force her to seek refuge in this island which belonged to her father. She was running away from the “black drama in this crow-theatre, murder, infanticide, incest, theft and robbery, all were much practised by these rough raucous rasping tatterdemalions.”\(^8\)

The island becomes symbolic of her psyche, and reflects her irrational fears, her unuttered frustrations, and becomes the predominant motif of Sita’s life. “The island had been buried beneath her consciousness deliberately, for years. Its black magic, its subtle glamour had grown too huge, had engulfed her at a time when she was still very young and quite alone.”\(^9\)

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\(^6\) Ibid., p. 41.
\(^7\) Ibid., pp. 90-91.
\(^8\) Anita Desai, *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* (New Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 1982), p. 38.
\(^9\) Ibid., p. 57.
Sita feels that unless she comes to terms with the polarities that exist in her past, she can never be at peace. So here is a quest for her real self, her identity. After experiencing many conflicts she realises her true self, which frees her from her emotional bondages. When a person becomes aware of his or her self, a reorganization is inevitable. And this is exactly that makes Sita appraise her world in an objective manner.

In *Voices in the City* Calcutta is the city of darkness, death and destruction. The city epitomizes the existential agony of Nirode, Amla and Monisha. Amla realizes that the city had changed Monisha her sister. She feels that it

seized the girl, turned inside out, giving her an eery unreality.

Something Amla saw had laid its hands upon her, scarred and altered her till she bore only the faintest resemblance to the quiet and subtly uncaring elder sister Amla had remembered.¹⁰

Monisha warns her sister that she should not allow it to oppress her. Nirode and Monisha rebel against the oppressive atmosphere of the city. Monisha tries to reach for her identity but feels that she has “no faith, no alternative to my confused despair, there is nothing. I can give myself to, and so I must stay . . . . Ah yes, yes, then it is a choice between death and mean existence and that surely is not a difficult choice.”¹¹ And her choice is the tragic end.

Amla, a young, career-minded girl, an extrovert unlike her brother and sister, also feels dejected in Calcutta. The city oppresses her and she exclaims to Nirode that “this city, this city of yours, it conspires against all who wish to enjoy it, doesn’t it?.”¹²

The three of them ask the fundamental questions about human existence and are

11 Ibid., pp.121-122.
12 Ibid., p. 158.
confused about human nature. Monisha and Nirode speak about the inevitability of death and nothingness, and are victims of self-destructive urges. Amla on the contrary focuses on the positive features of anxiety, anxiety as the road to self affirmation.

Desai’s Calcutta becomes a part of existential design of the characters in the novel. The disintegration of values in society force individuals to be inauthentic non-actualizers. Thus Nirode feels

like a man who has spent three years in jail and emerges to find he is afraid of the plangent and populated world. He folded his arms closely about himself and wished he had a bell to ring. I am a leper, he wanted to ring and call, leave me, do not come near. I am a leper, diseased with the loneliest disease of all.13

Thus the city not only symbolizes the existential agony, hostility, resentment and isolated existence of individuals but also assumes the status of the authoritarian form which oppresses and restricts the potential of human beings.

The Clear Light of Day, is set in Old Delhi. The changes that come over a Hindu family after independence are recorded. The house is old and does not change like its locale, Old Delhi. But the characters change within this milieu. Tara finds that Old Delhi and their house have never changed. Bim clarifies her sister’s remarks by saying that “Old Delhi does not change. It only decays. My students tell me it is a great cemetery, every house a tomb. Nothing but sleeping graves. Now New Delhi, they say is different.” 14

There is monotony and boredom but it is not hostile. It is like Bim’s mentally retarded brother Baba who is confined to his room. He never goes out. This symbolizes

13 Ibid., p.61.
the cultural decay, disintegration of values in society. The Misra women who were married and rejected, the idle brothers who exploit these hard working sisters symbolically represent Old Delhi that has become a fen of stagnant waters, the city that is torn apart by the riots of partition. “Swarmed and crawled with a kind of crippled, subterranean life that made Bim feel that this city would never recover from this horror, that it would be changed irremediably....”15 Bim feels wretched and miserable seeing violence all over the city.

Desai feels that the strong personal relationship will never be threatened by these communal riots. The Hyder Alis never come back to their house in Old Delhi. But Raja’s relationship with them never changes. He in fact marries Benazir, Hyder Ali’s daughter. Raja in fact has deep sympathies for Muslims in India.

Thus Old Delhi inspite of its decadence represents the concrete self, the actual self, which has the power to stand the ravages of time. The novel ends with Bim’s realization “that soil contained all time, past and future, in it. It was dark with time, rich with time. It was where her deepest self lived and the deepest selves of her sisters and brothers and all those who shared that time with her.” 16

Bye-Bye Blackbird is set in the England of “Dickens and Lamb, Addison and Boswell, Dryden and Jerome. K. Jerome ....” 17 The black birds are the immigrants in England, especially people from India. The locale, known for its cold climate freezes the self of the immigrants and many become claustrophobic. England is known for its silence unlike India. Dev feels that the city is empty:

The English habit of keeping all doors and windows tightly shut

15 Ibid., p.86.
16 Ibid., p.182.
of guarding their privacy as they guarded their tongues from speaking and their throats from catching cold... remains in comprehensible to him.¹⁸

Dev feels that it is "...utterly silent deserted — a cold wasteland of brick and tile".¹⁹

Adit on the other hand is completely enslaved to England. He loves the nice warm pubs and the organized life in England. But his attitude changes and he goes back to India in search of his roots. Dev, on the other hand is conquered by England.

...England's green and gold fingers had let go of Adit and clutched at Dev instead. England had let Adit drop and fall away as if she had done with home or that he had done with her, caught and enmeshed his friend Dev.²⁰

Here too the locale becomes a powerful motif of the existential agony of human beings. She is the (m)"other" who not only conditions but also modifies the self of the individual. Thus, milieu is inextricably bound with the self of human beings. It becomes a part of one's existence.

In Baumgartner's Bombay, Hugo Baumgartner, a German jew seeks asylum in Bombay. The main story takes place in Bombay. Hugo Baumgartner spends his childhood in Germany and a part of his youth is spent in Calcutta. But the novelist focuses her attention on Bombay. The atmosphere of the city is not only oppressive but also overwhelming. Hugo Baumgartner is shocked when he sees the families living on pavements and cattle stalls. "He knew the absolute degradation of their lives; he knew the

¹⁸Ibid., p.63.
¹⁹Ibid., p.63.
²⁰Ibid., p.261.
violence it bred — the brawling in the night, the beating, the weeping.”21 There was dirt and squalor all around him. Baumgartner felt that he was “an old turtle trudging through the dusty Indian soil.”22 Bombay metropolis swells into life with her shops in causeway, “... the cheap, readymade garments spread on the pavements for display ... the fruit stalls and snack stalls decorated with red chillies, yellow lemons and lilac onion-rings.”23

Lotte, Baumgartner’s girl friend, also feels alienated in this hostile country. She is apprehensive about their end. She tells Baumgartner about how they are going to die. “... dogs die like that, in the street. This is how we go, Hugo’, she wagged her head. ‘In the end — alone’.”24 It is not the sophisticated, elite and middle class life that we encounter in Baumgartner’s Bombay. But it is misery, poverty, the battle for survival that the poor have to fight, their dehumanized existence that confront us in Desai’s Bombay.

Through Baumgartner, Desai asks the question:

was it not India’s way of revealing the world that lay on the other side of the mirror? India flashed a mirror in your face with a brightness and laughter as raucous as a street band. You could be blended by it. But if you refused to look into it, if you insisted on walking around the back, then India stood aside, admitting you where you had not thought you could go. India was two worlds, or ten. She stood before him, hands on her hips, laughing that blood-stained laugh: Choose! Choose!25

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22 Ibid., p. 11.
23 Ibid., p. 19.
24 Ibid., p. 73.
25 Ibid., p. 86.
India is as complex as the individual according to Desai. The composite culture, traditional beliefs and value systems make life intriguing. The diversity of the country itself is overwhelming to any outsider. Baumgartner is murdered brutally by his own guest. Desai feels that in a country where contradictions exist, it is difficult for the individual to choose. Baumgartner never got an opportunity to choose in this land of contradictions.

Mirpore is the locale in Desai’s In Custody. Desai also brings back the stifling atmosphere of Old Delhi. “Mirpore, its solid anonymity its ahistory, its unproductivity and its petty mercantile ethos forms a grim backdrop against which Deven’s aspirations look absurd”.

Deven is impoverished as Mirpore. Deven sometimes feels that it was “... a cruel trap, or prison, as well, an indestructible prison from which there was no escape”. People in Mirpore never ventured out. They lived and perished in this same town. There were Hindus, Christians and Muslims. Temples were numerous and there was only one church which was very small. Deven feels trapped by his marriage, by his friends and by the poet he idolized. He feels that the whole milieu subsumed his self and defeated him. He searches for freedom, for a draught of fresh air. He looks up:

...at the dusky pelt of the sky for some chink that promised, or assured, escape, but even the stars were smothered in murk. No message came whispering on a nocturnal breeze; every leaf on the neem tree hung still, lifeless.

Thus the locale or milieu becomes a commanding centre in the novels of Anita Desai.

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28 Ibid., p. 131.
She renders effectively perceptions, thoughts and feelings as they occur in the minds of the characters. These characters of Desai are definitely a part of the locale, which reflects, expands and transforms their identity. It is not possible to free ourselves from this social milieu which is an integral part of our psychological milieu.

6.2 Conflicts Galore

Desai has portrayed these intense conflicting drives which virtually sabotage the self of the Indian woman. In a structured society, when transition occurs due to focussed consciousness or awareness of individuals, conflict arises between societal interest and individual interest. The intensity of the conflict will be more when the interests of the individual are subversive or are thought to be subversive. The societal forces circumscribe the powers and potentials of individuals for “maintaining” equilibrium. This is more so in the case of women in a country like India where culture, law and societal belief systems marginalize them. Conflicts which are thus inevitable, become an integral part of society.

Participation of women in the independence struggle contributed to a symbiosis of rationality with the search for self-sentience. This contributed to a systematic, methodical and continuous pursuit of reasons which lead to the repression of women. This very naturally resulted in a process in which conflicts surfaced in many forms with lived realities coming to the force. Desai took these up and dealt with conflicts galore in her novels in one form or another. Desai said, “whoever is interested in the subject, will have to research for them himself.”

Desai’s critics unanimously agree on one aspect and that is the fact that she has presented the problems of Indian woman in her novels using the stream-of-conscious-

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ness technique more than any other narrative style. Desai feels that the social milieu is not so important as the inner life of the individual marked by a variety of conflicts. Desai says, “I am just aware that every human being’s territory is really very, very small. And all you can explore is a very tiny section of this territory, and this is a more interesting technique than covering a large area.” The stream-of-consciousness technique can be described as “the inward-turning to convey the flow of mental experience . . . .” According to William James, who coined the phrase, the technique denotes continuity or flow of thoughts, the innermost feelings, perceptions, memories and associations. The intimate world of the self is revealed through this technique. The main focus is the inner landscape of the individual. One advantage of this technique is that the author has the full freedom to intercept this “flow” at any point of time and can continue with the narration as she/he wants. Desai exploits this “ . . . technique for viewing the world through the eyes and the mind of a particular character . . . .”

Desai skilfully documents the conflicts of the self, especially those of women whose life is the thematic focus of this writer. She powerfully interrogates the conflicts that fragment the self. She pinpoints the psychological processes of sex-role stereotyping that is done with the intention of marginalizing women. The ontological insecurity, estrangement, sense of loss, withdrawal, regression, the widening gap that exists between the sexes and the neurotic entanglements which generate severe kinds of hopelessness that lie deeply buried in the psyche of human beings are effectively brought

to life by her. "Anita Desai is a great analyst of the human mind, a creator of brilliant characters and an astute interpreter of life." \(^{33}\)

In *Baumgartner's Bombay, In Custody* and *Bye-Bye Blackbird* the conflict between the individual and society is clearly revealed. In *Baumgartner's Bombay* Desai deals with the life of a German Jew Hugo Baumgartner who is dispossessed not only in Germany but also in India. During the war he is battued in India by the British and imprisoned for six years in a British internment camp. After the war Baumgartner is released. He comes back to Bombay. But life in Bombay is empty, bleak and meaningless. He is known to his friends as a mad man and "Dumm Kopf." But for his friend Lotte, his business partner Chimanlal and the cats he is a *firanghi*, a foreigner. Desai sums up the reasons for his conflict thus:

\[\text{Accepting — but not accepted that was the story of his life, the one thread that ran through it all. In Germany he had been dark — his darkness marked him the Jew, } \text{der Jude}. \text{ In India he was fair — and that marked him } \text{firanghi}. \text{ In both lands, the unacceptable.}\] \(^{34}\)

After living in India for fifty years, Baumgartner was a stranger, an alien in this land. Talking of the immigrants Desai says that life, like "a grey and lazy sea rose and obliterated them, draining them of colour and substance." \(^{35}\) The conflicts that take place between Baumgartner and his immediate environment lead to his isolation, his complete alienation. He feels odd with himself and the world. The living styles of Indians alienate


\(^{34}\) Ibid., p. 22.

and suffocate him. "Baumgartner found no joy in the streets where he walked aimlessly, compulsively in order to put off going back to his room." 36 Here going back to his room is suggestive of the ontological conflicts that alienate him from his real self. Baumgartner is vandalized by the sense of loss of identity. In Bombay the environment is not only coercive but also hostile. Baumgartner lacks the will to preserve his identity. This is evident in his acceptance of the chaotic atmosphere of Bombay. The accumulating dirt and debris in the street and the polluted atmosphere of Bombay stifle him. He tries to ignore them. He longs to go back to Calcutta to the inn named 300 and the clubs Prince's or Firpo's where he could find his old acquaintances. But he knew it was an improbable possibility. And "... life and that time was a closed book or like a pack of cards — finite in number." 37 This longing confirms the fact that he wants to have an identity of his own and that can take place only in an environment which will recoup his self-hood and his self-confidence.

The cultural conflicts Baumgartner experiences shatter his identity. He is alienated from his environment. He feels that he is the "... indigestible, inedible Baumgartner. The god has spat him out. Raus Baumgartner out. Not fit for consumption, German or Hindu human or divine." 38 This distanciation unsettles his identity and this is indeed the reason why Baumgartner feels like a paravall when he attends the funeral of his friend and partner Chimanlal. Chimanlal's relationship with Hugo Baumgartner transcends culture, class, caste and creed. Here is a relationship in which there is perfect understanding and trust. Chimanlal loved Baumgartner like his own brother. But to Chimanlal's son he was a parasite, a firanghi, a mad man and a billie-wallah sahib. The

36 Ibid., p.171.
37 Ibid., p.172.
38 Ibid., p.190.
anguish that is raging inside his tight-lipped rectitude is voiced in these lines:

Baumgartner joined the mourners at the cremation, standing at the edge of the crowd, all of whom shrank away from him, horrified by the presence of a foreigner, a firanghi, at such an intensely private rite. Baumgartner too wished he had not come, shuffled away.  

The motif of conflict is deployed to highlight the fragmentation of his identity. Baumgartner's quest for attaining wholeness never materialises in this environment. The outcome of trans-cultural conflicts experienced by Baumgartner is that he withdraws into his own world. He never tries to resolve his conflicts himself at the intrapsychic level. The total repertoire of Baumgartner's behaviour centres around the fact that he continues to battle with anxiety and this is finally channelized into regression. What causes regression is elucidated by Elaine Y.L. Ho thus: "... crisis of identity is reconstructed as a rediscovering of self. History — his own and as the collective experience of diaspora — has cast Baumgartner as outsider, a marginal."  

His real self abandons at times the matured path of gratification and behaves like a child. In a state of regression Baumgartner asks Lotte, his girl friend for more chocolates like a child; "'No chocolate?', he whined. 'No chocolate even Lotte?.'" This regression gives him an infantile mode of satisfaction. His consciousness moves from the unpleasant present situation to early childhood experiences. While he is with Chimanlal in the members' enclosure to see the horse race his mind goes back to his

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39 Ibid., p. 206.


childhood. He is transported into another world which is more real to him than the present situation.

That was how he remembered the scene now, and also remembered his body rolled into a ball at the bottom of his dark, damp bed, while he clutched his right foot and his right hand with his left, and muttered like a wizard, Mick-muk-mo, make it so.42

The protagonist's regression has many causes. Of them one stands out. As a boy he desperately wanted his father to take him to horse races. But his father never took him. And Baumgartner rebelled against this rejection in a violent manner. But now, thirty years later, he was watching the horse races in a country that rejected him. He tries to philosophize and seeks reasons: "... they all fell away from him into abyss."43

Desai's Baumgartner holds himself aloof from external happenings. In a large gathering he finds himself lonely and utterly lost. With Chimanlal and Lotte he is warm because his safety is not mocked at. This novel pursues the identity theme realistically in its descriptions and symbolically in the chronological passing of time. The lines "... his war not their war. And they had their own war. War within war. Everyone engaged in a separate war, and each war opposed to another war,"44 highlight the conflicts that are manifest in society. There is no way in which one can escape this conflict. Baumgartner is all alone in confronting the burden of loneliness, anxiety and guilt of leaving his mother alone in Germany, when Hitler was unleashing terrorism. Baumgartner sees his identity in terms of an outcast, a firanghi and thus he loses himself. Desai successfully

42 Ibid., p. 193.
43 Ibid., p. 216.
portrays Hugo Baumgartner's desperate attempt to preserve his self and identity through psychological insight of the artistic kind.

Sarah in *Bye-Bye Blackbird*, like Baumgartner, is a victim of alienation but in her own country. She marries Adit, an Indian immigrant in England. She suffers from transcultural conflict. The systems in society are so powerful that they generate conflicts which fragment the identity of the individual. Desai deploys the stream-of-consciousness technique to reveal the forces which war on self. How Sarah's identity is threatened by her marriage is brought out in the scene, where she reacts to Adit's accusation that she is filthy in allowing her cat to smell the rice that she has cooked. She retorts: "I don't think I could live in a house without pets somehow." 45 Her loneliness, anxiety, guilt in marrying against the wishes of her family all have their cumulative effect on her behaviour. A microscopic slight is treated as a proof of deep ill-will. Her mother's letter brings out all the subdued conflict between her existence and essence and her inability to relate fully with the asocial and egotistical attitudes of society. She lashes against the vacuity of her existence:

Don't you treat me the way she always does — as though I am not an individual with my own life to lead, but just — some appendage to them, with nothing but duties and responsibilities instead — instead of rights. 46

She reasserts her identity, unlike Baumgartner who forfeits it, in the hostile land. Thus Desai reaffirms the fact that only the individual can conquer the self-defeating conflicts by realising his or her personal worth and by sorting out the discrepancies that exist between the two selves — the real self and the pretentious social self.

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46 Ibid., p. 270.
A major function of the self-image is to bring consistency in behaviour. When the individual has a stable mental picture of himself or herself, it becomes the source of inner cues for consistent behaviour and thus resolves the conflicts. As evidence of it Sarah moves towards achieving a unified self: But Baumgartner’s story is different. His plight reminds us of Milan Kundera’s lines in *Life is Elsewhere*:

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But I
subdued myself
getting my heel
on the throat
of my own song.  
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Baumgartner’s diminishing faith in his self-worth contributes to his withdrawal and renunciation of the world in which he lives. The anxiety that is generated by these conflicts blindfolds him and leads to self-aggrandizement. Here Baumgartner becomes an inauthentic man and so his self does not fight his battles or resolve them. He feels relieved that...he had never been a part of the main stream. Always, somehow he had escaped the main stream.” 48

Adit and Dev in *Bye-Bye Blackbird* experience the post-colonial and cultural dilemma of Indian immigrants. The trans-cultural and ideological conflicts along with the feeling of “secondariness” cause alienation in them. Jawaharlal Nehru expresses the same trauma thus: “I cannot get rid of that past inheritance or my recent acquisitions...I am a stranger and alien in the west.” 49 Adit like any other immigrant is completely enslaved to the western culture. He praises the English culture, history and their ideas of liberty. He indulges in invective denunciation of immigrants who are

conscious of their "nativism" and secondary status. Adit feels that it is the typical 'Bengali Babu' attitude that causes this alienation and unhappiness. He from the beginning tries to interrupt Dev's diatribe of Englishmen's treatment of Indian immigrants. Dev is shocked when the boy at the bus stop calls them "Wogs". According to him the English cannot delitescence their prejudice towards Asians. His conflicts stem from the opposing forces of atavistic slavishness and his strong sense of post-colonial identity. Albert Memi suggests that "... the pathology of this post-colonial limbo between arrival and departure, independence and dependence has its source in the residual traces and memories of subordination."

Adit is enamoured of England. He confesses that he hardly notices "... the drawbacks." But the residual traces and memories of subordination alienate him completely in the end. A long weekend in Sarah's country house completely changes his outlook. He feels trapped in an alien country. Adit feels useless, absurd and lost. Desai brings out the subaltern trauma of Adit thus:

sometimes it stifles me — this business of always hanging together with people like ourselves, all wearing the label Indian Immigrants, never daring to try and make contact outside this circle .... It's so stifling — all the time, all the damned time — being aware of who one is and where one is. God, I'm fed up."

Adit finally resolves his conflict by taking a categorical decision of going back to India. Dev on the other hand gets a job as salesman in Foyle's book shop. He was slowly coming to terms with his "Indianness" in this alien country. Two hundred years of

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51 Anita Desai, Bye-Bye Blackbird (New Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 1985), p. 188.
52 Ibid., p. 188.
enslavement has its own impact. The language, inspite of regionalism and intense nationalism, survives as the language of the middleclass and elite circles in India. It is language that has colonised the self of an educated Indian. Dev’s communings with English landscape reveal it:

...this was the England her poets had celebrated so well that he, a foreigner, found every little wild flower, every mood and aspect of it familiar. It was something he was visiting for the first time in his life, yet he had known it all along — in his reading in his day dreams — and now he found his dreams had been an exact, a detailed, a brilliant and mirror life reflection of reality. English Literature! English Poetry! he wanted to shout and, instead, raised his arms to the sky, clasped them in pagan worship, in school boy excitement. 53

Desai is apparently an artistic alter ego of the author whose affiliation to the English language and literature remains invincibly intact. Desai has mentioned in one of her interviews that she has personally not experienced any racial discrimination. But she feels that the language she chose to express her creativity is at best an immigrant in India. It has no tradition. So she says that “...a writer has rather a fearful time of it, picking and choosing his way amongst thorns, pot-holes and booby - traps.” 54

Desai throughout emphasizes the suffocating repressiveness of conflicts. The dynamic organization of the self is threatened by these conflicts. In Custody, charts the journey of Deven a young lecturer who works in Lala Ramlal College, Mirpore. Deven's

53 Ibid., p. 170.
conflicts bring out the trauma of a middle class Indian intellectual pitted against a consumerist, acquisitive culture which corrupts and exploits.

The chaotic familial and social situation of independent India, the frightening and bewildering aspect of rootlessness are perceived by Desai. Only a coherent self-image can solve the conflicts according to her. Deven is crushed by the proprietorial demands of society, family and culture; “The tedium of it settled upon him like a grey, crumbling mildew. He felt aged and mouldy.” 55 Desai has used specific terms to suggest the alienation of Deven from his environment. “He feels as if he were a stranger, and an interloper . . .” 56 Deven’s wife Sarala is a disappointed person. There is no understanding or intimacy between Sarala and Deven. The social, familial and economic pressures drive them apart. Sarala’s resentment stems from Deven’s thorough neglect. To Deven Sarala is “. . . plain, penny-pinning and congenitally pessimistic.” 57 To us she is “. . . the abandoned wife.” 58 Both feel trapped by the hostile environment.

Deven faces the patches of meaningless existence. The ambivalent attitude of others around him along with familial and social obstacles create an excessive detachment from life. He feels that:

   every effort he had made had ended in defeat: most of the poems he had written and sent to Murad had been rejected, his monograph never published, his wife and son eyed him with blatant disappointment; nor had he won the regard of his colleagues or students. The inherent weakness in his father that had made him

56 Ibid., p. 66.
57 Ibid., p. 66.
58 Ibid., p. 66.
an ineffectual if harmless, teacher and house holder had been passed on to him. He felt it inside him like an empty hole, one he had been staring at all his years, intimidated by its blackness and blankness."

Deven is "framed" in a society where the socio-political conditions restrict and limit the development and expression of personality. The estrangement of Deven from his environment is suggested in these lines:

And that was all he was — a trapped animal .... Marriage, family and a job had placed him in this cage, now there was no way out .... It was only a kind of zoo in which he could not hope to find any freedom, he would only blunder into another cage inhabited by some other trapped animal.60

The repetition highlights the emotional trauma of an alienated person. Deven’s alienation and the resultant conflicts move him away from people. The compulsive nature of conflicts manifests itself on the self as neurosis. Deven feels defenceless and alienated. Alienation is self-destructive as it causes the paralysis of one’s mental prowess. Social identification has always been an important stage in the development of the self. When the self is uncomfortable in the ethical world, it generates conflicts.

These conflicts in turn lead to social and psychological separation of the self from the ethical world. So the thrust in alienation is given to three aspects. That is the self’s inability to identify with the social and ethical world around it; secondly the inability to assert its individuality and freedom and finally the awareness that it is a circle

59 Ibid., p. 128.
60 Ibid., p. 131.
without a solid firm centre. The centre, of course, is a strong cohesive self. Its totality and intrinsic worth contribute to self-actualization or in other words make the circle complete with a centre. When this centre or nucleus of a person is at stake, he feels alienated from his environment. This is exactly what happens in the case of Deven, Hugo Baumgartner, Adit, Dev and Sarah. Desai points out the insurmountable conflicts faced by the modern man. When the conflicts become “insurmountable” the person can neither fight nor appease, justify or they cause an automatic drifting of the individual from the environment. Deven, like a typical alienated human being, becomes conscious of his unworthiness, and hence falls into the abyss of self-contempt and defeatism. When confronted by many conflicting drives Deven feels victimized. He feels that, like him, his wife Sarala too is a devocalized victim of many unresolved conflicts.

He understood because like her, he had been defeated too; like her, he was a victim. Although each understood the secret truth about the other, it did not bring about any closeness of spirit, any comradeship, because they also sensed that two victims ought to avoid each other, not yoke together their joint disappointments.\(^{61}\) After coming back from home Sarala finds Deven’s passivity unbearable:

She began to get irritated by his inaction. She wanted to get on with the cleaning of the house. She got up and went to fetch the duster, shouting from the kitchen, ‘how could you let the house get so filthy? Why didn’t you call for the sweeper to come and clean?’\(^ {62}\)

The deteriorating relationship between the husband and wife, the regular occurrence of

\(^{61}\) Ibid., p. 68.

\(^{62}\) Ibid., p. 194.
spousal disturbances are looked at, psychologically by the author. The distrust between the two also contributes to many conflicts. Deven’s failure to accommodate his wife’s needs and Sarala’s inability to voice her suffering throw light on the negative aspects of stereotyping that exists in our society. They are rooted in the psyche of individuals and they manifest in their attitudes and behavioural patterns of the individuals. Even an offhand reaction is coloured by stereotyping. We here stumble over one potent question, and that is: how can we resolve these conflicts between man and woman? We can resolve them by recasting the “roles”, and redefining the “roles”, by stabilizing the shaky identity and recouping the crushed self-worth of the “second x”.

Deven is conscious of his wife’s repressed state. But he is afraid to do anything that would free her from her marginalized existence. Deven treats his wife in a traditional manner. He is very sure about his wife’s submissiveness. Perhaps that is the only thing he is sure about, in his life. Even education, his wide reading and finer sensibility have not changed the stereotyped attitude of Deven towards his wife. In support of this the authorial voice speaks:

Sarala never lifted her voice in his presence — countless generations of Hindu womanhood behind her stood in her way, preventing her from displaying open rebellion. Deven knew she would scream and abuse only when she was safely out of the way, preferably in the kitchen, her own domain.63

The behaviour of Deven marked by conflict may now be analyzed. Deven feels that by reaching out to his wife he might lose his control over her. He also feels that his non-masculine overture may not be to her liking. Since she would consider it a degrading act

on his part. The inner conflicts of Devan run on parallel lines with those of Sarala. Like a typical Indian wife she is a regular practitioner of the act of repression with its negative and disastrous consequences. Karen Horney points out that quite often the repression of aggression against the male drains all her vital energy. The woman then feels helpless to meet life. She will shift the entire responsibility for her helplessness on to man, robbing him the very breath of life.  

So it is the fear of losing one's pedestal position, the power to control and "own" her completely that contributes to his deviant behaviour. Deven, like the majority, is enslaved to "... an idea which is at first a modus res considerandi, a way of regarding becomes a form which strikes its imprint upon the insight. We begin to regard things typically: in types, then stereotypes."  

The inherent rhythm in Desai's narrative movement transforms the lived experiences into artistic reality. Here she uses the process of psychologizing or seeing through:

Psychologizing goes on whenever reflection takes place in terms other than those presented. It respects an interior, not evident intention; it searches for a hidden clock work, a ghost in the machine, an etymological root, something, more than meets the eye; or it sees another eye. It goes on whenever we move to a deeper level.  

This is what is done by Desai. Desai brings to light the highly contradictory values,

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66 Ibid., p. 135.
divergent ways of living and powerful circumstances that keep the individual "in custody". We are reminded of the lines by Narendra Patil:

Circumstances
have slapped down a suit
on burning thoughts
in my minds!
They've put all burning mind
in custody.67

The patriarchal ideology is in a way responsible for keeping women in custody. The root of female oppression and the resultant conflicts is traced back to this ideology. The woman becomes 'angst'-ridden when she is kept in custody by an ideology that allows her no freedom. She becomes claustrophobically inactive and her self is buffeted by emotional conflicts and mordant pessimism. The denial of rights and privileges, unfulfilled desires and the re-contre of her two selves lead to the decentering of the self. The edgy moments of the self, its longing for a tangent to achieve wholeness and the turbulence created by the internalized inferiority feelings of the female self are adequately mirrored by Desai. There may be imperfections in this mirrored world, but the most important and fundamental thing is to convey the warp and weft of mind with all its sincerity. What one feels is that conflicts are the main connecting thread running through every novel of Desai. These conflicts take on extra significance because of their psychic territoriality. We are duly reminded of Jung’s famous saying that “... the human psyche is the womb of all the sciences and art.” 68


6.3 Losing Battles

Most of Desai’s novels deal with conflicts created by the stratification of men above women. This power over women down the ages has created a powerful image of man as a patriarch, law giver or a “boss” or a person who is in charge of women’s life. With a new awareness penetrating the minds of women, their attitude towards the existing socio-familial environment becomes polemic. The appetitive need for a new self-image and the recurrent trope of transformed women are the direct results of conflicts according to Desai.

In *Cry, the Peacock*, Desai in a very subtle manner brings out the conflicts created by patriarchal ideology. She implies very effectively that there is no hope of woman achieving wholeness and self-actualizing if she subscribes to patriarchy. Maya is the victim, the deprived woman in this novel. Her father and her husband Gautama represent the patriarchal order. Maya’s conflicts generate an all consuming resentment against these two “masters” in her life: The conflicts become very intense when her awareness gains a focus. Her life has become “a world no longer in control of itself. A force existing in another sphere had taken it over, was altering it into something fierce, strange....”69 This force is the byproduct of this new awareness which shakes her out of her complacency. She makes an attempt to disengage herself from the psychic burden of dread, anguish and nausea. “The pressure was tremendous, suffocating. My feet dragged and my body pushed against the resident atmosphere, as though I were wading. Wading out of my depth. It was all strange, deathly strange.”70

She is unable to swim forcefully against this depressive cognitive schemata

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70 Ibid., p. 184.
influence. She is victimized by the so called plastic passions of guilt, anxiety, bitterness, frustration and resentment. They make women passive. Maya feels entrapped in a loveless marriage. "Had there been a bond between us, he would have felt its pull, I thought of him so deeply. But of course there was none." The low self-esteem along with non-understanding husband causes depression and helplessness in Maya. She becomes psychotic. She loses her sense of self and is uncertain about her values and choices. She feels that he is her persecutor and if she wants to survive he has to be killed. In a psychotically charged atmosphere she kills Gautama. Under emotional stress, she not only commits murder but also commits suicide.

Maya’s soliloquy bears testimony to the fact that she tries to substitute her mother for Gautama, like a person who is psychotic:

And so there was gratitude amidst all my other feelings when I turned and saw him comeback, pulling a fine muslin shirt over his bathed body, his face set in a frame that was remote, reflective and yet not without a tenderness that come from relaxation. Tenderness. At that moment, I felt it for him, deeply in a rush. There is a powerful motivation among these women to use these men as substitute mothers. In other words it is a caricature of femininity which develops under the influences of cultural forces, particularly male domination. General studies indicate the fact that depressed individuals show enhanced encoding of negatively toned information to positively toned information. This can even make a person hysterical. Hysteria was often confused with demonic possession. It was derived from the Greek word hyster, meaning uterus. Psychological studies have categorically proved that hysteria is a women’s effort

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71 Ibid., p. 108.
to maintain her relationship with man, often in a sexually provocative manner. Maya is forebodingly silent at times when she interacts with Gautama. Gautama’s inability to understand her trauma makes her feel that

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\ldots \text{I am there Alone} \\
\text{Forlornly, Silently} \\
\text{Play in the evening garden} \\
\text{Myself with me}^{73}
\]

It is Maya’s obsession with self-defeating conflicts that finally contributes to her tragedy. We are reminded of what Albert Camus once said that the art of suicide is prepared within the silence of the heart as in the great work of art. The integration of all our emotions take place in amygdala in the brain.

The Electro-encephalogram (EEG) Electro-occulogram (EOG) and Electro-myogram (EMG) record electro chemical changes that take place in the brain when neurosis occurs. A normal person screens the incoming sensory stimuli and he is able to match them against the information stored in the memory. But in a depressed person there is distortion and misinterpretation of incoming sensory stimuli. So the self-image will be defective as it is based on false precepts. Most studies have demonstrated a reduced number of 3H-imipramine-binding sites in depressed patients. “All mental activities (behaviour, thoughts, feelings) are paired with biological events in the brain.”^{74}

Adverse experiences in childhood also make a person prone to delusion in adult life. Maya feels that the “mnemonic” words from her childhood haunt her. She hallucinates:

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... I conjure up odours and temperatures out of the air, seeking to recreate the world I have lost, and succeeded in summoning up a host of visions, so brilliant, that they sear me and annihilate me, my body and surroundings, and I am torn between two worlds — the receding one of grace, the approaching one of madness. My body breaks in the battle.75

"The receding one of grace" definitely signifies the empowered self, the real self, that will give her actualization.

Shashi Deshpande like Desai has traced the alienation and splintering of the female psyche under the rubrics of sexuality. Like Desai’s heroines Deshpande’s heroines too, struggle for self-actualization. Like Maya in Cry, the Peacock. Jaya in That Long Silence feels trapped in her marriage. Jaya says that they are “...two bullocks yoked together” and that “it is comfortable for them to move in the same direction.”76 Desai’s Maya reveals her anger, frustrations and bitterness openly in front of Gautama. Jaya on the other hand feels she cannot display her anger openly. She confesses to Kamat, her friend that “...there is no space for anger in my life, no room for despair either.”77 Like Maya, Jaya also becomes neurotic. Both have an obsession about death. Jaya hallucinates that her husband is dead. She fabricates the death scene in her imagination. Perhaps’s he’d fallen out of the train... Perhaps’s he’d had a heart attack... Perhaps’s he’d been runover. They would bring his body home and then carry away again. Raam naam satya hai they would chant as they took him away. And I would lie down

75Anita Desai, Cry, the Peacock (New Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 1980), p.177.
77Ibid., p. 147.
here and watch shadows move along the walls, the ceiling: *Ram naam satya hai.*

But Maya not only contemplates the death of her persecutor but also makes it a possibility. She feels that only her husband’s death can “free” her from the boiling pot of her miseries.

Shashi Deshpande, like Desai, feels the sex-role training is given in the Indian society from the beginning. This is endorsed in many ways. The myths, epics, folk tales, and customs and belief systems force women to remain in a subjective position. From childhood itself they are made conscious of their limitations — of the limited space that they should occupy. It is always hinted that one who crosses the boundary will always be rejected socially. Shashi Deshpande highlights this fact through Mira, in her novel *The Binding Vine.* Mira’s poems unravel the powerful indoctrination of these values: Mira writes about the advice given to the girls when they get married:

Don’t tread paths barred to you
obey, never utter a ‘no’,
Submit and your life will be
a paradise, she said and blessed me.

It is this submission that is perpetuated by the dominant ideology. Urmila, Mira’s daughter-in-law, probes the misery experienced by the latter. Mira’s son Kishore also typifies a patriarch. His step sister Vaana is also forced into patriarchy’s straight jacket. This fact is revealed by Urmila’s criticism about Harish’s behaviour. She vehemently tells Vaana to force Harish, so that he helps her in cleaning the house:

Urmila: Why can’t Harish help?
Vaana: He comes home so tired . . .

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78 Ibid., p. 137.
Urmila: ‘You know Vanaa, what you’re going to become, coping with everything, the way you are?’

Vaana: ‘What?’

Urmila: ‘A super woman’

Vaana: Good! And doesn’t that make Harish a super man?’

Urmila: ‘No, a super brat’.80

Urmila feels suffocated by this attitude of Vanaa. She feels that only by asserting oneself, one can escape from being exploited. The evil connotations of patriarchy has its breeding ground in self inflicted emptiness and powerlessness of Indian women.

Deshpande’s That Long Silence also probes the issue of patriarchy. Jaya, the heroine in the novel is a writer. She feels helpless before the constraints of society and family. Her anxiety is compounded by her repressed anger against the objectless existence of women in general. She feels that, how to achieve sovereignty will be a timeless question as “...the real picture, the real ‘you’ never emerges. Looking for it is as bewildering as trying to know how you look. Ten different mirrors show you ten different faces.” 81

Here the “mirror” gains added significance. Luce Irigary is a psycho analyst who has given a wider feminist perspective for the mirror. She uses the word speculum (a concave mirroring medical instrument) to bring forth the importance of woman mirroring her own self and not the self that is fabricated by the patriarchy. According to her a woman even when she looks in the mirror, reflects the image created by man, a defective image which gives emphasis to what she lacks, compared to men. Luce Irigary goes to the extent of saying that “where woman does not reflect man, she does not exist and will never exist until the Oedipus complex is exploded and the “feminine feminine” is

80 Ibid., p. 81.
released from its repression.” It is this a new self-concept, which is entirely free from the traditional constraints that women need for becoming actualizers in life.

Sashi Deshpande brings forth conflicts through dialogues. The whole theme, and the perspectives of the novelist are expounded through dialogue. When Deshpande creates a scenic form of life through powerful dialogue, Desai uses iterative narration to bring out the essence of life. These two writers point out that patriarchal ideology is powerful because of their systematic indoctrinations of the fact that woman needs someone to protect her, marriage can ensure her safety and that she is inferior and weak. The family, more than any institution, perhaps woman herself, has encouraged patriarchy. How Desai and Deshpande have brought forth this particular issue can be scrutinized. Sita in Where Shall We Go This Summer feels alienated from her husband. But her rejection towards the end gives way to “...a positive cyclone of feminine instinct a mental reckoning...” at the sight of her husband Raman. She feels that “neither the sea nor the sky was separate or contained — they rushed in to each other in a rush of light and shade impossible to disentangle”. In Voices in the City Otima, the mother who loses her daughter Monisha is described thus: “She no longer needed him, nor her other children. She was a woman fulfilled — by the great tragedy of her daughter’s suicide — and it was, he saw, what she had always needed to fulfil her:

Tragedy. Her life so far had been a dazzling sketch... but incomplete without a back ground, for oh, the background provided by a slack, sprawling drunkard, absurd in his too tight silk coat and a flimsy glass of liquor trembling in his hand, it

83 Anita Desai, Where Shall We Go This Summer? (New Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 1982), p.129.
had never fitted, she had preferred to do without it. Her daughter Amla confesses that her parents’ marriage must have been something of a financial settlement. Otima, Monisha’s mother, is subsumed by this ideology. But she who had suffered so much allows her daughter to be “moulded” or “fixed”, just the way the ideology wants her to be. Right from childhood, marriage is posed the be-all and end-all of woman's life.

Dr. Bhaskar Jain in Deshpande’s *The Binding Vine* asks Urmila why Shakutai, the much oppressed and tortured woman in the frame work of marriage longs for her daughter Kalpana’s marriage. Through Urmila, Deshpande interprets the psychology of an average Indian woman:

Urmila: ‘One always hopes one’s children will get more out of life than one has. And women like Kalpana’s mother do find something in marriage’.

Bhaskar: ‘What?’

Urmila: ‘Security. You are safe from other men.’

Bhaskar: ‘Oh come on . . .’

Urmila: ‘It’s true, Even if it hasn’t worked out for her, it usually gives them that guarantee of safety. It takes much greater courage to dispense with a man’s protection.’

Bharathi Mukherjee in her novel *Wife* highlights the fact that woman herself is responsible for exacerbating her oppression within the family. Mukherjee portrays how this indoctrination affects the female psyche through Dimple Das Gupta. The Novel begins thus: “She fantasized about young men with mustaches, dressed in spotless white, peering into opened skulls. Marriage would bring her freedom, cocktail parties

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84 Ibid., p. 153.
on carpeted lawns, fund-raising dinners for the noble charities. Marriage would bring her love."  

How tortuous it is for the female psyche to be crushed by this ideology, is pinpointed by Nayantara Sahgal in her novel Storm in Chandigarh. Dubey remarks that it can be very suffocating for two totally different individuals to be bound forever in marriage. He feels that can happen only in a country like this which produces people of such vastly different traditions. And a thin veneer of Westernization succeeds in fooling people that they come from the same past. Get two people unlike together in marriage and every effort at growth on the part of one can look like an art of betrayal to the other. 

Desai stands apart from her contemporary writers as her characters display a rare intensity and psychological depth. In her fictional canvas characters dominate. The action is thus subordinate to the psyche of the character. Even the minutest feeling of the character is traced with all its sincerity. Her focalization is character and it evokes not only a visual sense but is broadened to include, cognitive, ideological and philosophical orientations. We feel that “... the metonymic relation between external appearance and character traits has remained a powerful resource in the hand of many writers”, especially Desai. For examining and attacking the prejudices and exploitation of women, Desai has obsessively created fiercely independent, docile and neurotic

women characters. She feels that there should be an authentic space and original female tradition for women. There is an intensity about the characters that stands apart. Desai is able to perceive that the cure for immured female self lies in the new self-concept, and self-realization. The author has carefully sewn together the irreconcilable contradictions of gender and stereotyping, the cultivated accents of acquiescence, "... the dailiness of women's lives..." and the changing parameters of her life. The unique thing is that she reminds us of the importance of integrating women's potential. In her writings "the truths we are salvaging from, the splitting open of our lives are the connecting links, the nexus in which experience is transformed into meaning, into a way of knowing."

All these women novelists have encapsulated the conflicts galore experienced by Indian women. They have delineated very powerfully the "coping mechanism" used by women. The relationship is unbalanced and hence generates conflicts. No matter how much development or progress we achieve the plight of women will remain the same unless the psychological aspect of patriarchy is altered through education and annihilation of the psychological role-slots in which men and women are locked.

6.4 Battles Fought and Unfought

In Indian society the patriarchal voice of judgement prevails in every aspect of a woman's life. It assigns assymetrical values to male and female. It affects adversely a woman's ability to signify. She stands on the battle-field on the conflicted ground — where she has to battle against her traditional self-image and against the irreconcilable contradictions of "dis-eased" and infected patriarchal value system. Sheela Rowbotham a socialist feminist suggests that

... in order to create an alternative, an oppressed group must

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alone shatter the self-reflecting world which encircles it, and at
the same time, project its own image on to history. In order to
discover its own identity as distinct from that of the oppressor, it
has to become visible to itself.90

We feel that repression indeed is the most powerful weapon that is used against
women. This has been instrumental in their disillusionment as it constantly shattered
their self-worth. Indian women clings on to the false image which is inscribed in her
psyche. The psyche experiences loss and feels that

... the daily life constantly reminds us that gendered subjectivity
is a fragile construction, a gossamer web that weaves and re-
weaves itself. We live with (often painful) awareness that subjec-
tivity is demanding and requires constant negotiation against heavy
odds. We are surprised and frustrated at the gaps between what
we want to say and what we can say, at the grandeur of our de-
sires and the poverty of our accomplishment.91

Anita Desai is a root worker, who excavates and projects the many battles that are
fought and unfought against the subjectivity of women. Her women characters are all
captured up in this repressed vacillation of gender or the instability of identity. Inspite of
rigid compartmentalization and slotting, the relationship overlaps and intercepts in
many ways generating powerful conflicts, within the existing system. Women are caught
in the strangling grip of conflicts as the real nature of woman, her true self is distorted or
repressed within the existing framework. According to Desai in patriarchal societies

91Shari Benstock, Textualizing the Feminine: On the Limits of Genre, (Norman: Oklahoma
the emotional conflicts become "... a great monster, ennui, as a kind of primal melancholy, a compensation of apathy and boredom which is rendering the subject claustrophobically inactive, also brings painful hypersensitivity and nervousness".  

Desai has highlighted the fact that the potential forms of resistance against traditional femininity contributed to emotional conflicts. This resistance has also generated distrust between the sexes. The subjectivity of women is partly due to their exclusion from socio-political set up. Man's inability to control women, and his distrust of the other sex is rooted in sexuality. According to Karen Horney:

man's fear of woman is deeply rooted in sex, as is shown by the simple fact that it is only the sexually attractive woman of whom he is afraid and who, although he strongly desires her has to be kept in bondage.

In psychoanalytic theory subjectivity of the female is defined in terms of lack and the women are then tied to the age old concept of femininity. Undue importance is given to this "lack" or "defect" in woman from childhood itself. In The History of Sexuality Foucault says that sex is the focal point in society through which individuals assert their power and control their counterparts. To the marginalized, the inequalities that exist in society may appear natural as they relate it to the rational product of sexuality. This is the reason why boys and girls from a very early stage are given different social and psychological orientation. In other words:

... the day to day practice of education and socialization constitutes differences in strength and skills between girls and boys,

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endowing individuals with specific perceptions of their identity and potential, which appear natural to the subjected individual, rather than as the product of diffuse form of power.\textsuperscript{94}

This also contributes to many conflicts in the minds of girl children. Desai draws our attention to this particular conflict in \textit{Clear Light of Day} and \textit{Cry, The Peacock}. In \textit{Clear Light of Day}, Bim and Tara are curious to know why Raja is so different from them. Bim, especially envies his freedom and wants to know what exactly gives him so much of freedom. Wearing Raja's trousers Bim feels that great possibilities unexpectedly opened up now they had their legs covered so sensibly and practically and no longer needed to worry about what lay beneath ballooning frocks and what was so imperfectly concealed by them. Why did girls have to wear frocks? Suddenly they saw why they were so different from their brother, so inferior and negligible in comparison: it was because they did not wear trousers. Now they thrust their hands into their pockets and felt even more superior. . . . as if in simply owning pockets one owned rushes, owned independence.\textsuperscript{95}

The question “why should a girl wear frock?” definitely throws light on the boundless power sexuality has on children. We also feel that women are defined in terms of their relationship with men. The sex role stereotyping is rooted in the family. The roles are defined and fixed in advance and are made to appear natural. This leads to self-effacement in some, with no focussed consciousness. But in some with more


than ordinary awareness it triggers many conflicts. Bim searches for an answer while Tara her sister accepts it as a natural process. Maya in Cry, the Peacock envies her brother Arjuna. She is very much conscious about the "difference" between them. Desai uses the metaphor of kites to bring forth the effects of this doctrination. Maya is pruned by her father for playing the traditional role whereas Arjuna is free like a hawk, who always fought against oppression. The following extract confirms the aforesaid argument, "Mine were awkward kites and they never lost their earth bound inclination. Arjuna’s were birds — hawks, eagles, swallows in the wind." 96 This emphasizes the unlimited freedom enjoyed by men in general.

Maya meekly submits to the conflicts. But Bim fights against them with a purpose and that is the purpose of achieving wholeness. Maya’s neurosis can be traced back to her implicit sexual orientation that disrupts the potential of the female. According to Michel Foucault, "the family was the crystal in the deployment of sexuality: it seemed the source of a sexuality which it actually, only reflected and diffracted. " 97

Feminist discourses have always tried to find out whether this sexuality is biological or psycho-sociological. “Is sexual difference biological?” was the question that challenged feminists. Freud was the first one to give it a psychological perspective. The androcentrism of Freud culminated in pronouncing women as constitutionally weak and inferior. He completely overlooked the importance of gender identity and the fact that gender and sex are closely connected to a person’s image building. The term gender was first used by Stoller. Psychoanalysis began to probe the relation between individual and society. Erich Fromm and Reich who used socialist principles for research concluded

that the family was responsible for derogation of women and that sexuality is not natural.

Most of the feminists along with psychoanalysts and psychologists feel that the pattern of gender relation is social rather than biological. It exploded Freud's theory that woman's inferiority was due to the biological "lack" and that the subjectivity of woman is but natural. Lacan gave importance to the mirror stage in which the child strives for a false sense of mastery and wholeness.

The Lacanian theory rests on this two part assertion that the infant subject although born with recognizable biological sex characteristics becomes a gendered sex only when it takes its place as a "she or he". The only signifier for sexuality is the phallus.98

Lacan concludes by saying that woman can only be written without the definite article. Thus he too denies woman a universal status. Derrida's law of genre operates psychically. The difference between the sexes is a difference within the gender and it is contaminated by the genre. So there is conflict between subjectivity and autonomy. There are many kinds of sexual exclusivity that are imposed on women socially and psychologically. Psychoanalysis has made many valuable contribution in this field. Stoller makes an emphatic distinction between sex and gender. According to him sex is biological, gender psychological and so, a part of acculturation process. Gender is a term that has psychological and cultural connotations rather than biological. If the proper terms for sex are "male" and "female", the corresponding terms for gender are masculine and feminine. The latter may be quite independent of biological sex. Kate Millet in her Theory of Sexuality argues that our social circumstances along with asymmetrical value systems very powerfully influence gender identity. She says that:

while we may niggle over the balance of authority between the personalities of various households, one must remember that the entire culture supports masculine authority in all areas of life and outside of the home — permits the female none at all.\(^99\)

The cultural policing that is done contributes to the double standard that exists in society. This has permeated in to all spheres of activity and contributed to male superiority and the reification of the female. Woman is hence denied an equal status, rights and privileges. Down the ages till the beginning of the 19th century she was looked upon as an object of sensuality. Michel Foucault feels that repression has indeed been the fundamental link between power and knowledge and sexuality since the classical age, it stands to reason that we will not able to free ourselves from it except at a considerable cost . . . .\(^{100}\) And repression was felt more by women than men in the established structure. Great philosophers, law givers and writers gave her an image that centred around nothing but subjectivity. Demosthenes, Xenophon and Solon, have all, according to Foucault, tried to tie women indissociably to the confines of home. Demosthenes in Against Neaira says that men can keep mistresses for the sake of pleasure, “concubines for the daily care of our persons, but wives to bear us legitimate children and to be faithful guardians of our household.”\(^{101}\)

Women were inevitably bound by social and juridical status. To homogenize, to interpret the complex ensemble of psycho-social relations which marginalize women becomes an ordeal for feminists and women activists. Women writers articulate the

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misery of these oppressed and silent women. The penetrative imagination of Desai has etched the battles that are fought within the "conjugal cell".

Desai’s views regarding the role of woman in marriage has a psycholanalytic perspective. The focus will be on that which causes the conflict between men and women in this particular frame work? What are the battles that are left unfought and why are they so...? Desai seeks an answer by highlighting the psychological facet which concerns self and the emotions. She focalizes on the cognitive and emotive orientation of women. When we vocalize our “difference” the battle ensues. Tradition has always insisted on women to embrace silence and docility to make their marriage successful. They have to reach wholeness through their husbands, rather than achieving their own identity. But when marriage becomes a “conjugal cell” for oppression, her self is shattered to pieces. Monisha in Desai’s Voices in the City is obsessed with the “dailiness” of her life. “The concept of dailiness is a structuring principle in woman’s life according to Suzanne Juhasz.”102 It emphasizes the spatial and temporal arrangements in a woman’s life. The monotony of dailiness is voiced through Monisha. Monisha is immobilized by this dailiness. Monisha feels that if one meekly submits to the existing system, one will survive. Those who wage war are “beaten down, spurned, turned away into an anonymous solitude....” 103 She is rejected by her husband Jiban who is enmeshed in a power structure. Monisha in fact echoes the feeling of many repressed women who interiorize that “anatomy is destiny”.104 Being a woman she is to be secluded, confined and delimited in her movements. Her husband Jiban’s indifference and lack of understanding subjects her to the inexorable silence. Monisha fights her battle, in silence. She

103 Anita Desai, Voices in the City (New Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 1965), p.128.
104 Luce Irigary, This Sex Which is Not One, trans., Catherine Porter et. al., (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press), p.71.
is forced to resubject herself to the slavery in the family. Desai gives a gripping account of the oscillations and diremptions through which Monisha’s consciousness passes, seeking wholeness, an identity of her own. Monisha’s battles are fought within herself. The encounter is between her aspirations for getting autonomy and the primordial consciousness that compels her to abandon her search for autonomy and self-certainty. Monisha’s monologue before she commits suicide epitomises the thwarted agony of a self’s long peregrinations of consciousness towards an adequate self-concept. The internal thrust of thwarted emotions manifests in her suicide which becomes ominous and in eluctable. Monisha’s conflicts are revealed in these lines:

I am different from them all. They put me away in a steel container, a thick glass cubicle, and I have lived it all my life, without a touch of love or hate or warmth on me. I am locked apart from all of them, they cannot touch me, they can only lip-read and misinterpret. Similarly I cannot really hear them.105

The very interiority of the image, “thick glass cubicle” and “steel container” its apparent fixity, the mirage of coherence and the turbulent sensation it evokes fall in the psychoanalytic tradition. Here the essential self is always at war when it confronts the hostile milieu. The demands of the rigid, real life situations thwart the self’s entire cognitive development. According to Freud neurotic conflict will not be resolved unless the psychic drives are completely brought into harmony with the outer world. Desai suggests that

femininity is a role, an image, a value imposed upon women by male systems of representations. In this masquerade of feminin-

105 Anita Desai, *Voices in the City* (New Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 1965), p. 239.
ity, the woman loses herself, and loses herself by playing femininity.\textsuperscript{106}

The ineludible battles are fought by women who are capable of re-vision — the act of looking back or of seeing with fresh eyes what a woman is and what her prerogatives are. It is finally the woman’s sense of herself embattled, possessed with a new consciousness that generates dynamic energy that creates a new self-concept. The battles fought by these “revisionist women” focuses on uncertainty and indeterminacy experienced by women within the marital framework. Desai captures very well the hurt, humiliation, distrust, cheating and temperamental incompatibility of the husband and wife. Monisha tries to defend her self but fails and that it generates self-destructiveness that subsumes her self. Caught up in the frightening acceleration of disappointments and existential agony she ends her conflicts thus:

\begin{verbatim}
   terrible heat seared her eyeballs — a great fog enveloped her, not the white one of her dreams but black, acrid, thick — and god the pain! Here it was, on her eyes, her face, here it came — there, all over — with her arms she wrestled with it, she fought it, it was not what she wanted — she screamed No! No! No!\textsuperscript{107}
\end{verbatim}

This is a situation arising out of specific psychological oppression. Monisha who wants to experience desire, to experience feeling which is real and authentic, feels defeated.

According to Lacan desire is a function central to all human experience. There are two kinds of desires — desire experienced in the conscious, which belongs to the other (internalized cultural and social values) and the desire of the impossible organized

\textsuperscript{106}Luce Irigary, \textit{This Sex Which is Not One} trans., Catherine Porter et.al. (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press), p. 84.

around a primordial lack, a longing for wholeness or completeness, that the subject feels can be fulfilled. Desai, the author, is definitely re-enacting a psycho analytic situation where the protagonist “recognizes unnameable unassuageable desire.”108 Lacan interprets the situation thus:

We can distinguish desire - which belongs to the Other, is experienced as “alien” and whose “discourse” is the unconscious — from “desire”, which belongs to conscious life but cannot perceive its relation to desire. Blinded to the other side of desire, the subject wants to see itself in command of its attachments to objects and people. This second kind of desire participates in transference, seeking an “other” with whom to establish a relationship which is complementary. The transference is doomed to failure (it is known by its failure), precisely because no other can assuage Other’s Desire.109

Monisha’s suicide can be explained as a search for the “other space” or “New Space” which exists outside the realms of patriarchy.

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109 Ibid., p.11.