CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Fiction

Fiction has become in our times the most powerful and popular literary genre. This form which was evolved more than two hundred years ago has uninterruptedly and comprehensively depicted the saga of human activities and experiences, rich and varied, unfolding thoughts and feelings, hopes and dreams, down the ages.

According to Robert. B. Henkle, “fiction and drama present men and women reacting to each other in the way that is closer to real life.” Even as the visual media make a steady progress conquering multitudes, the popularity of fiction has not ebbed. It is a form or genre people will never willingly let die as it depicts effectively “… the most thorough knowledge of human nature, the happiest delineation of its varieties, the liveliest effusion of wit and humour to be conveyed to the world in the most chosen language.”

It is definitely the fact that it holds the mirror up to life that gives this genre an extra-ordinary power and makes it very popular. In a novel we try to discover things which we know and which we do not know. It offers us insight and adventure more than many other genres. We move to a different world created by the writer to share his discoveries and to discover our own self. This exploration of the self makes our life rich and profound.


Thus, the uniqueness of this form lies in the fact that apart from the novelist the reader also becomes a part of the creative process with much of ease. Another reason for its popularity is that it stimulates curiosity in the reader to know what happens to others, what they think and feel.

Novels are popular as they demand very little from the reader. A reasonable proficiency in the concerned language will enable the reader to enjoy the novel. Novels also transport us into a different world and there we meet the familiar and the unfamiliar. The propagandist element in fiction is so artistically cloaked that its effect is maintained at a subtle level. This intellectual metamorphosis that novels bring about, can never be overestimated as it holds “the world of life under a permanent light.” Due to its vitality it has a pre-eminent place in the flourishing literary world of today. Out of the collage of the chaotic human life as we all live it, the novel attempts a kind of verbal montage which easily puts across to people its subtle and not so subtle messages. This genre starting from a common stem has taken separate roots in strikingly different cultural circumstances throughout the world.

1.2 Indian Fiction in English

The beginnings of any genre are closely associated with social and political movements in a particular historical context. When we trace the rise of Indian fiction in English specifically to a moment in history, we are convinced that it evolved in the wake of our contact with the west. Most of the critics feel that English education along with the influence of the west made this genre very popular in India. According to Pratima:

The synthesis of eastern and western literary modes has given a comprehensive perspective to the Indo-English writers, and they

---

have successfully analysed the psychological, emotional and spiritual crisis experienced by the Indian intellectuals as well as men and women representing the different layers of Indian society.4

Stories and story telling have been a part of Indian culture and life in general. Folk tales, legends and epics have been interiorised by the people even as they listened to highly improbable situations in an unreal life. Through the highly improbable lives of gods, goddesses, kings and queens, they try to civilize mankind. There is a wide gap between the life that is presented by these narratives and the real life that is lived by ordinary human beings. Set against this backdrop is this new form which mirrors real life. It is its veritable closeness to life that makes it very popular.

The novel acquired a distinct identity especially during the colonial period. The flexibility of the form and the freedom of the genre, was the main reason which made it very popular among the intellectuals. Many writers of the old order discovered that it was an effective way to inveigh British imperialism. The story tellers wanted not only to entertain but also to create an awareness about the pathetic life of Indians in general.

Thus in the beginning the Indian novelists presented an acute awareness of traditional values, spiritual concepts and also the urge to infuse modernity in Indian life. The novelists, we feel, were delicately poised between the two powerful worlds. Meenakshi Mukherjee evaluates the early Indian novels thus: “Inspite of the various limitations and incompatibilities, the novel in India which began under the British tutelage soon acquired its own distinctive character.”5 The works of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, Sarat Chandra, Raj Lakshmi Debi and Toru Dutt, bear testimony to this fact.

The tension that was brewing in the socio-political arena also triggered the rise of novels in India. English was at that time the lingua-franca and most of the committed writers chose this medium which would draw the attention of people easily. Even when they followed the pattern of English writers, there was the cloaked intention of popularizing patriotism and nationalism. They were not fully successful in exploiting the potential of this form but depicted the Indian social, political and domestic scenes effectively. The tragedy of the mute and the oppressed Indians is clearly portrayed by these novelists. The intrusion of the author is very self-evident and it affected the spontaneity of the narration. Characters are victims of the powerful establishment and their struggle is presented as futile in most of these novels.

The credit of writing the first novel goes to Bankim Chandra Chatterjee. His *Raj Mohan’s Wife* was published in 1864. Many writers followed this tradition and regional novels also became very popular in India. In Bankim Chandra Chatterjee’s novels, importance is given to the socio-political scenario rather than character delineation. In Rabindranath Tagore we can see a shift from society to the individual. Even here the “Character” does not acquire a totality as in later novelists.

It was in the 1950’s that the novelist’s interest began to shift from the public to the private sphere. The freedom at midnight stirred not only the emotional excitement among masses, but also gave a new intellectual freedom for many writers. This intellectual awakening was felt in all literary forms, especially in novels, which led to its unprecedented growth.

The pioneers of modern novels in India are Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand and R.K. Narayan. In their novels there is a tension between the native experience and the alien medium. But they are successful in exploiting the form rationally to give it a concrete identity. Anand’s fight has always been against exploitation, oppression and caste.
C.D. Narasimhaiah says: "As a writer of fiction Anand's notable marks are vitality and actuality."\(^6\)

What distinguishes R.K. Narayan most significantly from other Indian novelists is his acute awareness of the socio-cultural tensions that exist in Indian society. He writes about life that is known to him, and his "...characters are that curious blend of East and West which all Indians are..."\(^7\) R.K. Narayan's fictional canvas focuses mainly on the life of ordinary Indians. The lived experience he creates in his novels transcends the barriers of class and creed, and even nationalities.

In Raja Rao, we can witness the fusion of the philosopher and the patriot set in the historical context. We can see his response to colonialism, east-west interaction and his innate Indian sensibility with emphasis on Vedanta. In his novels he has used Indian myths effectively. According to Shantha Krishnaswamy "...most of the writers of this period were committed to national goals, some were content to be chroniclers or observers. K. Nagarajan, K.A. Abbas, Mulk Raj Anand, Venu Chithale and the early novels of R.K. Narayan; Raja Rao and Markandaya belong to this period."\(^8\)

1.3 Feminine Voices

Twentieth century has witnessed many changes in Indian literature in English especially because of the arrival of many women writers. Their presence has deeply influenced Indian fiction. According to Susie Tharu:

These writers contested the structures that were shaping their world. They tactically redeployed dominant discourses, held on

---


to older strains, and recharged them with new meanings and even
introduced new issues and new emphasis, new orientations.  

In the light of these perspectives, the novels of Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, Kamala
Markandaya, Nayantara Sahgal, Anita Desai, Bharathi Mukherjee and Shashi Deshpande
have become powerful paradigms of the struggle of Indian woman. These women novelists
have been focussing on the social, political and psychological struggles that Indian
women encounter. Their conflicts, victories and defeats, their struggle against the
Establishment, the resultant frustration take a thematic significance in their work.
The earlier Indian women writers in English like Kamala Markandaya and Ruth Prawer
Jhabvala portray life in post-Independence India. Both novelists probe whether the social
changes and cultural diversity affect the stability of the nation. To them, men and women
are victims of these socio-political and economic changes. The tragedy of their characters
is contributed by these changing socio-political ideologies that have the power to decentre
the individual and finally contribute to his or her tragedy.

Kamala Markandaya established herself as a writer with the publication of her
first novel The Nectar in the Sieve (1954). She has faithfully portrayed the basic struggles
and agonies of post-Independence India, through the main character Rukmani. Rukmani
represents a typical Indian rural woman, who is even now hovering precipitously on the
brink of survival. Kamala Markandaya portrays the pathetic situation of Indians torn by
communal riots, partition and socio-political and economic exigencies particularly
poverty. According to Meenakshi Mukherjee "Any novelist dealing with these turbulent
years had to impose an order upon the splendid chaos and thus discern a pattern in it to

---

illuminate a situation."\textsuperscript{10} This is exactly what is done by Kamala Markandaya in most of her novels. In \textit{Inner Fury} (1957), the story unfolds through Mira. It is set against the Quit India Movement and here "... the tragedy is engineered by politics ..."\textsuperscript{11} Mira submissively accepts her defeat before the forces of situations. In her other popular novels, \textit{Silence of Desire} (1961), \textit{Possession} (1963), \textit{A Handful of Rice} (1966), and the \textit{Coffer Dams} (1969) she has treated the whole gamut of human emotions, tangible realities and the cultural conflicts which force the individuals to search for identity in independent India.

Ruth Prawer Jhabvala portrays the cosmopolitan life in India. Her first novel \textit{To Whom She Will} portrays the agony of the ill-fated people who lost everything in the partition and in the riots that followed. Her deep sense of history is clearly revealed in her realistic portrayal of life in modern Delhi, the sweeping changes that gave it a new and distinct identity. She focuses not only on the tension that is brewing up between the new and the old ideologies in India, but also on the fabric of Indian cosmopolitan life that has the warp and weft of East and West ideals. In \textit{Esmond India, Get Ready for a Battle} and \textit{The Householder}, the pathetic situation of Indian woman, who is disregarded and bypassed, who meekly accepts her situation, is highlighted. In Jhabvala the social milieu is given more importance but "she is human enough to feel the heartache at the heart of humanity."\textsuperscript{12} It is essentially this quality that makes her a powerful Indian woman novelist.

The novels of Kamala Markandaya and Ruth Prawer Jhabvala have enriched Indian fiction by their humanitarian concern. It is definitely this aspect that gave inspiration

\textsuperscript{10} Meenakshi Mukherjee, \textit{The Twice Born Fiction} (New Delhi: Arnold Heinemann, 1971), p. 35.
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., p. 461.
to other committed writers that followed their path. In Nayantara Sahgal, Anita Desai and other women novelists, we see a new freedom, the wealth of experience and the bold exploration of new techniques. These women writers probe the Indian woman's new identity which is "...anchored in the bio-existential reality"... and which "...walks a razor's edge." 13 There is a search for identity in all its varied and complex forms in these writers. We come across individuals who are possessed and vandalized by the revolutionary changes in our times.

Nayantara Sahgal, in most of her novels, depicts the inner trauma of Indians who are exposed to various social, political and cultural changes. M.N. Shane points out that "...the loss of the understanding of the nature of man, according to Mrs. Sahgal is a major source of human sickness." 14 In This Time Of Morning, The Storm in Chandigarh, The Day in the Shadow, Mistaken Identity and other novels, the human predicament is realistically portrayed. According to her the materialistic world has robbed trust, love and innocence from Indian society as a whole. All her characters suffer from lack of understanding. Women in most of her novels share many similarities. They are disillusioned by their selfish husbands and society as a whole. They are also bold enough to go against the traditional image that is fabricated for them by the dominant male. Sahgal forcefully conveys that these traditional images are not innocent. They waylay the quest for identity, and confidence, and destroy the self worth of women at times. Nayantara Sahgal is thus a committed writer who celebrates life in her fictional canvas with her deep sense of humanism and an acute awareness of the political realities of the Indian subcontinent.

1.4 Anita Desai

Anita Desai is widely acclaimed as one of the foremost Indian novelists. She has almost a world wide audience making her a literary celebrity of lasting significance. Her uniqueness lies in the fact that in her novels we witness a long interrogation of the self through introspection, psychological analysis and stream-of-consciousness technique. She recasts the essence of Joyce, Proust and Kafka, in her own way, mostly treading over alienation with special reference to feminine psyche in her novels. The interior landscape peopled by women characters is set against the background of man's domination of social and domestic life with accumulated authoritarianism as its foundation. According to P.F. Patil, "... in Anita Desai's novels the inner workings, the inner sensibilities are more compelling than the outer weather or the visible action.” Thus, the question of the self dominates her fiction. She believes firmly in the impeccable dignity and in the inviolable sanctity of the self. In her novels she highlights the fact that "... without this sense of dignity and sanctity of the self, existential awakening of the self remains vulnerable and the inner space can once again become contaminated.” She is an explorer par excellence of the interior human experience. Desai portrays the monotony of quotidian dreams of the individual, the probable impossibility of knowing one's own self and the paradoxical nature of human existence. Desai herself feels that "... all my writing is an effort to discover and then to underline and finally to convey the true significance of things.”

---

Desai deals with the enigmatic and chaotic fabric of Indian woman's life. She highlights the subtle texture of fleeting impulses, disappointments, frustrations, aims, transient feelings and distorted visions of life of Indian women, all resulting in the fragmentation of her personality. In an interview she tells Florence Libert that her interest "... is the individual, a certain psychology of the individual." 18 She further adds that "... it isn't only an individual psychology that I am pursuing when I write. I am interested in language, in prose style, in aligning words to experiences, with images." 19 While depicting the psyche of Indian woman, Desai uses powerful images which emblematize oppression, exploitation and fragmentation of the self. These contribute to the self-forfeiting feelings which damage the self-image. Desai is very successful in squaring up these self-forfeiting feelings which sabotage the self-image. According to Nancy Good "... dragons was the perfect name to give these self-sabotaging thoughts." 20 Desai, like a Modernist writer, shows in a subtle manner, how to slay these dragons.

Desai is remarkable for her psychological approach to the lived experience of innumerable characters who partake of every day human reality. Shantha Krishnaswamy evaluates her art thus: "Her interest in the consciousness of the women in her novels enables us to see the Indian women adequately from inside." 21

Anita Desai writes on the lines of Virginia Woolf who believed in the Joycean method of probing the depths of human mind. Desai unravels the oppressive forces of

19 Ibid., p. 52.
the female psyche which cause disillusionment. In her first novel *Cry, the Peacock*, Maya the protagonist is constantly seized by fear of death, loneliness and alienation from her husband Gautama who always preached detachment. To Maya “... he looked more or less like a meditator beneath the bo-tree, seated upon a soft tiger skin, too fastidious to touch the common earth ...”  

Gautama fails to understand the trauma of self that is at war. Maya cannot comprehend the philosophical attitude of Gautama. Maya longs for a realistic approach and feels that Gautama will never understand her agony. She finally blurts out vehemently: “You know nothing of me — and of how I can love. How I want to love. How it is important to me.”  

Gautama remains unperturbed when Maya calls him a betrayer. Four years of marriage makes Maya neurotic. Her gradual degradation which results in neurosis is very effectively traced by Desai. By illustrating many typical incidents, Maya’s neurosis is made self-evident from the beginning. The sight of the caged monkeys at the railway station invokes a violent reaction. She starts crying and Gautama feels ashamed of her. She identifies her trapped situation thus: “There I was amongst them, not one of those who sat quietly, in an infinity of sadness and resignation, but one of those who clung, clung to the bars till they cut into my flesh, and rattled them, shook them, crying over and over again.”  

We feel that “... the unusual juxtapositions and arresting metaphors constantly assault the senses of readers, almost demanding that they feel the way Maya herself feels.”

---

23 Ibid., p. 112.  
24 Ibid., p. 156.  
Desai probes intensely the sentience of the female protagonist. For Gautama "... she is the incidental, the inessential, as opposed to the essential. He is the subject, he is the Absolute — she is the other." 26 Desai feels that this forms the kernel of the outlook of majority of Indians towards their women. The main defect of this outlook according to Desai is the refusal to regard woman as a being capable of her own desires and interests. This contributes to a passionate and partisan outlook which denigrates the sentience — mind and will — of a woman. Maya is definitely a victim of such partisan outlook. She feels trapped by her marriage to Gautama whose thoughts or actions cannot supply an antidote to her anxieties and anguish. Gautama’s behaviour activates her Voices Introjects or self-defeatist feelings and she becomes neurotic. “Maya’s neurosis which tries to shatter the very identity of woman in our contemporary society dominated by man, in which a woman longing for love is driven mad or compelled to commit suicide.” 27

Like Maya, Monisha in Desai’s Voices in the City is also a victim of a loveless marriage. Monisha is also deprived of her husband’s understanding and emotional support. Like Gautama in Cry, the Peacock, Jiban in Voices in the City can see Monisha only as a traditional wife. Both of them cannot comprehend the fact that these women have a mind of their own, feelings of their own, and that they need an important place and an effective voice in the existing framework of marriage. Monisha feels that not only her marriage but also her existence has become “... traceless, meaningless, uninvolved.” 28

We feel that Desai has successfully dealt with the frustrations of Indian women arising out of a loveless marriage, and indifference shown by the patriarchal family. P.F. Patil

asserts that Anita Desai "fearlessly puts forward the fact that in society marriages generally follow the jungle law of the survival of the fittest."  

Another victim of this particular system is Sita in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*. But in Sita we can see the new self-concept of women slowly emerging. Bim in *Clear Light of Day* and Amla in *Voices in the City* have this new self-concept which inspires them to go against the existing system. "Bim attains self-identity not in self-insulation but in self-actualization brought out by the metaphor of awakening. All dualities vanish and Bim attains self-fulfillment and the wholeness of ‘being’."  

This is applicable to Amla who "passes through variegated psyche situations till she establishes a contact with her real self and attains equipoise." Desai’s significance lies in the fact that she portrays vividly and with incomparable subtlety, the intellectual sobriety and sensibility of her protagonists. Sita in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* decides to go to Manori, a lonely island, when she realises the fact that her self-worth is trampled upon by the selfishness of her husband and children. When her husband calls her a deserter she emphatically retorts that she is not a coward to commit desertion. Her self-assertiveness takes a new dimension when she says to her husband "...there must be some one who says, ‘No’, Raman." Desai also very emphatically points to the fact that women make many unpleasant compromises, for the sake of family. Sita very powerfully lashes against Raman her husband thus, "Very hard — this making of compromises when one didn’t want to compromise ... ."  

---


31 Ibid., p. 34.

compromises women have to make for the sake of the powerful patriarchal system. The limitations that are imposed by socio-political and familial systems create a confrontation between the authentic self of woman which is longing for self-expression and the "imposed self" which predates on socialization, tradition and patriarchal structures. Simone de Beauvoir puts down this clearly, "... the drama of woman lies in these conflicts between the fundamental aspirations of every subject (ego) who always regards the self as essential and the compulsions of a situation in which she is the essential." 33

Desai's fictional canvas conveys powerfully the fact that a woman is assessed, evaluated in terms of her merging with institutionalized patterns of sexuality and norms of appropriate feminine behaviour. When she deviates from this institutionalized behaviour patterns there is the danger of being labelled as weird and perverse. According to Desai, a woman's self is always at war. She is always battling against the powerful image created for the praxis of men. This idealized self batters woman and drains her energy. Instead of fighting against these "stacked rules and systems", we can use it to create another self-image. It will be a rational and active process which will liberate and empower women. A new self-image suited to their needs will be egalitarian in concept and productive in action.

1.5 Significance

Desai's significance lies in her ability to transmute authentically the inner-most feelings, thoughts and emotions of the self, especially the feminine psyche. In her novels we find a quest for reality and essential human experience. She depicts the unpredictable nature of life, the conflicting dilemmas and sufferings that are inevitable in a woman's life. Her novels portray the struggle of the female psyche for identity. Her uniqueness

lies in the fact that these experiences are processed and combined with her intuitive knowledge. It is her intuition that becomes the life force of her novels.

Anita Desai has said that:

one can only feel one’s way by intuition. Intuition is silent. Also one must have the critical sense to know when something threatens to cloud this vision. One must avoid such things, discard them. Writing is not an act of deliberation, reason or choice. It is a matter of instinct, silence, compulsion and waiting.\(^{34}\)

Desai’s artistic significance lies in the fact that she is the first Indian woman novelist to experiment in psychological novels. She explores the psyche of her characters, the intimate world of the self. The psychological conflicts are more prominent than the sociological conflicts. But she integrates both judiciously in her novels. “It is in the very intermingling of the imaginative and realistic worlds, in the intellectual and emotional concerns and tensions, the innumerable sensuous images bathed in colours, scents, perfumes that the novel proves to be an intense experience.”\(^{35}\)

Desai has graphically portrayed the intense conflicts that are produced in the individuals — the inter-personal conflicts as well as intra-personal conflicts. The self is subsumed by the conflicts at times. Sometimes they result in withdrawal, alienation, repression, neurosis and aggression. This is more intense in the case of women, according to Desai. In all her novels, we come across conflicts — conflicts with the locale, conflicts in man-woman relationships, conflicts within oneself, conflicts which are externalized. Desai’s artistic relevance lies in the fact that she has traced the root of these

---


conflicts. The conflicts experienced by Maya in *Cry, the Peacock* have a neurotic quality. For conveying Maya’s mental deterioration, varied responses and her emotional turbulence, Desai uses varied techniques of narratology. The character’s language is individuated and is made different from that of the writer. There is a certain explicitness that is very profound in this first novel. Maya’s turbulent emotions are described thus:

> What was true? What was lasting? What to believe in? What to reject? Danger, Dangers... the warning came whispering over a vast distance to me, struggling through the mass of truths and lies in nightmarish disguise. ‘I have to go’, I cried rising to my feet, and then and then more urgently, ‘Gautama, I must go’.  

The trauma of Monisha is expressed giving importance to suggestiveness and indeterminacy. “Yet, did I not once possess it — this essential instinct of theirs? Why am I so sad? Why am I so afraid? Do I recall a time — an epoch ago — when I understood as well as they?” The sentences suggest that the participation of the reader is insisted on more, as the author becomes subtle in her narration. In *Bye-Bye Blackbird* this technique becomes more specific. The style evolves a definitive turn for precision and clarity. The abundance of subordinate clauses and questions is comparatively less in her later novels. Saraha’s thoughts are described thus by Desai: “If only she cried out once before the tangle of figures succeeded in drawing her thoughts wholly to them, if only she were allowed to keep her, one role apart from the other, one play from the other, she would not feel so cut and slashed into living, bleeding pieces. Apart-Apart. That

---

37 Anita Desai, *Voices in the City* (New Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 1965), p. 239.
enviable cool, clear, light, quiet state of apartness." 38 In Where Shall We Go This Summer the character’s speech becomes indicative, at the same time it remains as a silent activity of the mind. The style as well as the visual quality assumes a gradation. Sita’s conversation with her husband Raman can be analysed here:

Sita : ‘How are the boys?’ She urged hoarsely.

Raman : ‘Well.’ Again she waited. She waited, clenching her hands for something more — the news that they wanted her, missed her.” 39 Sita’s silent thoughts are vocalized here. Bim’s anguish in Clear Light of Day, while telling Tara that she has forgiven her brother Raja is emotionally charged, and Desai has used the choicest words to express her agony:

Tell him, I’m waiting for him — I’m waiting for him — I want him to come — I want to see him. As if frightened by this breakdown in Bim’s innermost self, this crumbling of a great block of stone and concrete, a dam, to release a flood of roaring water. 40

The covertness of the author becomes more in all the other succeeding novels. But the author is not completely absent, as the locale is analogous not only to character trait, but also to a passing mood. But it is not strictly confined to indicating the mood of the character. Deven’s disappointments are reflected through the physical environment. Thus he feels that “… all he could measure upto was this — this shabby house, its dirty corners, its wretchedness and lovelessness. Looking around it, he felt himself sag with

39 Anita Desai, Where Shall We Go This Summer? (New Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 1982), pp. 131-132.
relief and gratitude. At the same time his shoulders drooped in defeat.” What is reflected here is the non-verbal utterance of Deven combined with the overtness of the author. The reader experiences the empirical world around him along with the author. Thus the utterances of the author are combined with the dynamics of the character. This fusion makes the language self reflexive. The novel is basically a self-reflexive genre. The novel is, for Bakhtin, “the crowning achievement of prose, therefore it is in the novel that intertextuality appears most intensely.” Dialogues are composed to set off other discourses. In Desai’s Baumgartner’s Bombay the authentic creative voice is not subdued to the character’s voice. The pathetic situation of Baumgartner, when his friend Chimanlal’s son cheats him, is created with consummate skill:

What are you talking about, show me one paper — he handled the table with the flat of his hand, making Baumgartner wince — ‘show me one paper you have signed or my father has signed’. ‘No, no, there are no papers,’ Baumgartner told him, learning forward to calm him. ‘Your father and I—we were friends—we didn’t draw up any legal papers—it was just an understanding, a friendship’. ‘My father is no more, Mr. Baumgartner,’ the boy said stiffly.

Baumgartner understood that he no longer had anything to claim in the firm as his own. With Chimanlal’s death he felt utterly alone, depressed and desolate. The existential trauma and the pathetic situation of Baumgartner haunt the reader.

In Journey to Ithaca Desai’s mastery of narration is revealed. She combines the

---

two forms — Analepsis and Prolepsis. Analepsis is the narration of a story event at a point in the text, after, later events have been told. The story begins with Matteo, Sophie’s husband in the hospital in India, which can be listed as ‘b’, if the order of events is ‘a, b, c’. From that point the story goes backwards and forwards coming back to the present and then moving backwards again to trace the past of Matteo’s guru who is like a mother to him and who lives in the Abode of Bliss. The narrative technique used in the mother’s story is definitely proleptic. Prolepsis is a narration of a story event at a point before earlier events have been mentioned. So the order of events in the mother’s story is c, a, b. The wordy battle between Matteo and Sophie is used with the polemic purpose of giving insight to their different personalities. Sophie is unable to accept Matteo’s absolute faith in ‘Mother’. This is brought out in this dialogue:

Sophie : Philosophy of India: The absolute, the soul, the supreme, supra this and supra that. Don’t use those words. I am sick of them. They are nonwords.

Matteo, bitterly : ‘And what words you like ?, Don’t tell me, I can guess, food, bed, baby, house. Are those your words’.

Sophie : ‘Yes! They are good words and I like them. Say them again. I didn’t know you’ve forgotten them’.  

Thus we can trace the growth of the novelist’s narrative skill. From a structural point of view, the action, emotion, characters, plot, narration and the story line are integrated in

strikingly original manner. Madhusudan Prasad remarks that Desai's "deep probing into the dim-lit inner domains of her major characters, her striking symbolism, her telling imagery and the resultant textural density of the novel — all reveal her uniquely original genius as a powerful novelist." 45

Another significant feature of Anita Desai is that in her novels the locale becomes an extension of her self. A character's physical surroundings as well as social and familial surroundings are used as trait-connoting metonymies. Her analogy thus reinforces characterization. It enhances the readers' perception of the character. "One important ingredient of her art is that in her novels Desai paints ornate, engrossing portraits of the outer world with its rich peripheral details, projecting the turbulent chaos of the inner world of her protagonists . . . ." 46

Anita Desai has very powerfully depicted the conflicts experienced by Indian women in general. She has depicted "the conflicts galore" experienced by women as they remain deprived politically and socially, and also within the patriarchal family. According to Desai these negative valences will sabotage the self of Indian woman. Indian woman is forced to project an inauthentic self-image, given to her by the patriarchal structure. So when a crisis occurs, the image is shattered and she experiences an utter sense of hopelessness and misery. So what he needs, according to Desai, is a new self-image which will enable her to achieve success.

Revolutionary changes are sweeping all over the country and they have created a new awareness among women. It is this new awareness that makes the conflicts more intense. Women who never questioned the existing belief systems, and traditions have

started questioning the validity of these norms. Desai's female protagonists represent the new women of India with a focussed consciousness. They rebel against the existing power structures, internally as well as externally. Desai explores the feminine psyche very deeply to dig out the reasons for women's oppressions. She herself has declared "writing to me is process of discovering the truth — the truth that is nine-tenths of the iceberg that lies submerged beneath the one-tenth visible portion we call reality. Writing in my way is plunging to depths and exploring this underlying truth." 47 The underlying themes of her novels do not impede the smooth progress of the plot which she handles with dexterity. It is real life that we see in Desai, with all its violence, squalor, existential agony, frustrations, hope, hopelessness and simple pleasures.

1.6 Justification

Anita Desai the writer has received and is still receiving an overwhelming critical response not only in India, but also in the West. Most of the critical works point to one main aspect, and that is, the fact that she has depicted the frustrations of the female psyche. This study has explored the root causes of these frustrations within the socio-cultural framework, and has established the fact that there is a new self-concept of Indian woman emerging from the novels of Anita Desai. Analysis of the critical data on Desai highlights the fact that they all pinpoint the female subjectivity that is self-evident in her novels. Most of them conclusively point a finger at the patriarchal system in India which marginalizes women. An in-depth research combining feminism, history, sociology, psychology and using the tools of pure psychiatry to explore the development of the self, especially the Indian woman's self, remains relatively unexplored and hence this study.

1.7 State-of-the-Art Review

Anita Desai’s fictional canvas holds a mirror up to real life situations. She is a writer with a vision and expresses truthfully her views of life in general. She presents the harassed, circumscribed world of the Indian woman in most of her novels. Desai the writer is more concerned about the individual than the environment. She herself has confessed that she was deeply influenced by Emile Bronte, Virginia Woolf, Forster, D.H. Lawrence, Henry James, Malcolm Lowry, Joyce, Proust, Dostoevsky, Chekhov and Kawabata. Her favourite poets are Eliot, Rimbaud, Hopkins and Rilke.

Some of the major studies of her work may now be mentioned. Asha Kanwar, in a comparative study entitled *Virginia Woolf and Anita Desai: A Comparative Study* remarks that “in both Woolf and Desai, we find an almost obsessive involvement with character’s past as a key to their consciousness, their life. Preoccupations with nostalgia and memory thus become an integral part of their craft.” Desai’s protagonists’ tragedy is rooted in the past. The majority of them have a past that has psychologically tortured them. It generates conflicts in a powerful manner. In Maya (*Cry, the Peacock*) it is father fixation along with the Albino’s ominous prophecy, in Monisha, (*Voices in the City*) it is her parents’ unhappy married life and an unhappy childhood, in Nanda Kaul’s life (*Fire on the Mountain*) the betrayal of her husband and children, in Sita (*Where Shall We Go This Summer?*) it is again father fixation and the absence of her mother, in Bim, Tara and Raja (*Clear Light of Day*) it is unhappy childhood and parental neglect. In *In Custody* Deven’s thwarted ambitions and inferiority complex, in *Baumgartner’s Bombay* the separation from his mother during the world war and in *Journey to Ithaca* Matteo’s

---

unhappy childhood and obsession with attaining spiritual enlightenment, give rise to the conflicts.

Peter Alcock says that in Desai's fiction "... no self-consciousness obtrudes, rather we have the expression of, surely, a uniquely Indian sensibility that is yet completely at ease in the mind of the west." 49 Her spontaneity of expression encircles her story line and she interprets a highly complex, everchanging ensemble of social relations in which women are confined. The impasse of action and the avid impotence of the fractured self of Indian woman is depicted very powerfully, without any self-consciousness.

The delineation of conflicts has elicited much critical acclaim. P.M. Nayak and S. P. Swain say that "the individual self struggles for the attainment of an authentic existence and hence it moves from a mistaken and confused awareness of identity to quiet self-assertion of individuality." 50

According to Desai conflicts are a part of life and they exist in man-woman relationship. In the Indian context the conflicts become more due to compartmentalization of man and woman. Stereotyping in society also contributes to the oppression of women. These conflicts have many negative results. Many women suffer from identity crisis. Most of the female protagonists are driven to the point of suicide. Others become neurotic. Sudhakar Ratnakar Jamkhandi emphasizes the fact that

Desai is able to illustrate that (i) the sensibility of the Indian housewife, a victim of society's malicious traditions, is significant and that (ii) the effect of self-centredness or self-pity is detrimental


Women empowered with education, new orientations and economic independence refuse to accept meekly the traditional constraints of patriarchy. This is a major concern of the novelist. How these Indian women with a new awareness, with a focussed consciousness decide to go in the opposite direction is very often the main thematic concern in Anita Desai. Meena Belliappa remarks that Desai’s novels mark a new beginning in the female literary framework in India. According to her, “...the focus of interest has shifted from girlish romance to a more complex search for value in human relationship.” 52 It is a mature world that is delineated by Desai, a world that rejects, accommodates, oppresses and propels the individual. The predicament of the individuals, caught in the whirlpool of socio-cultural changes, their struggle to survive, their alienation and existential agony are portrayed by Desai. Thus in her novels, “...she looks at the problem of rootlessness, in its different forms, candidly and closely, and describes its social and individual effects without mincing words.” 53

Desai uses the stream-of-consciousness technique in her novels. The inner-most feelings and thoughts of the character are revealed using this technique. The success of her novels depends upon this technique according to many critics. “Anita Desai, like some masters of fiction, manages to raise the action and the plot above timeliness and transitory ephemerality, and yet at the same time, gives the impression of timeliness also. She achieves this by memory flash backs, and the device of stream-of-consciousness probing into past, present and the future.” 54

---

Desai is also much acclaimed for her feminist perspectives. Her concern for Indian women surfaces very clearly in most of her novels. The patriarchal power structure has held Indian woman in chains. The inequalities that exist between the sexes, along with socio-cultural belief systems, oppress women. Even now violence is used against women to suppress them. Rape is in fact the most powerful weapon used against women. Bride-burning, ill-treatment of widows, marital disharmony owing to lack of sensitivity, dowry deaths, suicide and neglected children are very much a part of Desai’s fictional canvas.

According to Ruth. K. Rosenwaser “Desai’s women are heroines who voice their dissent through their recognition of and resistance to male dominance: in their relationship with their husbands (Maya and Sita) within their joint family (Monisha), with friends (Sita), with larger society (Ila and Bimla).” The perceptible reality of women in India, woman as mother, sister, daughter, grandmother, friend and as a conscious “being-in-itself” and “being-for-itself” gained her considerable recognition as a significant novelist in English. A.V. Krishna Rao says that Desai is a novelist “who does not fight shy to probe into the sub-conscious layers of experience of sensitive young men and women in an urban milieu.”

It is the journey of the Indian woman from being to becoming that is traced by Desai. This study probes into the evolution of a new self-concept of Indian woman emerging from the novels of Anita Desai. Hence this effort in exploring the text on the lines of psycho-analysis, social psychology and other literary theories in the ensuing chapters.

1.8 Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this study are:

1. To explore the novels of Desai and other contemporary women writers to prove that a new feminine sensibility is slowly evolving and is getting established in India. A comparative study of Desai and her contemporary women writers point to the fact that these women are vocalizing the new awareness of Indian womanhood.

2. To attempt a critical, historical analysis of the self-concept of Indian women as derived from socio-religious, political and cultural traditions and beliefs, down the ages.

3. To apply many psycho-social theories, feminism and psychological theories, to trace the root cause of gender-based oppression.

4. To establish Desai as a psychological novelist who writes using the stream-of-consciousness technique.

5. To establish that there is a new self-concept of Indian woman emerging from the novels of Anita Desai. The new Indian woman is making her presence felt in a striking way by means of self-assertion with roots in modern education, exposure to development, cultural contacts and the exploitations of one’s capabilities and mental resources.

6. To point out how this self-concept will empower woman to achieve self-actualization and how it is instrumental in bringing about rewarding changes, in the individual and society at large.

1.9 Theoretical Foundations

All appropriate theories of literary research are used in a flexible manner. Since Desai’s novels present the chaotic situation of modern life with its tragic implications for her protagonists as also possible alternatives, she is a writer of the Modernist school. Therefore, her works are scrutinised from the angle of Modernist techniques which implicitly highlight solutions.
Anita Desai retains a high level of subjectivity. What strikes her is the landscape of the psyche. The study focuses on her artistic penchant for internalising what is really external.

“It is fatal to write with an audience in mind.” This statement of hers is an index of her commitment to intuition, subjective states of mind, pure imagination and such faculties. Many psychological theories starting with the theories of Freud and his contemporaries and the modern theories in psycho-analysis are made use of in exploring this aspect of her writing. Transactional Analysis which goes deep into the psychology of interpersonal relationships is used in this study.

Sociological ideas with a bearing upon man-woman equation, with a special emphasis on theories of sexuality, gender subjectivity and sex-role stereotyping are adequately applied in this study.

1.10 Methodology

The main part of the method is a close reading of the primary and secondary sources. The primary sources are the novels of Anita Desai and her other prose writings. Her writings will be scrutinised in the light of psychological and literary theories. The secondary sources include various book length and shorter studies on her novels. The methodology aims at scrutinising her literary achievements to establish that there is a new self-concept emerging from the novels of Anita Desai.

1.11 Hypothesis

The hypothesis attempts to postulate that there is a new self-concept of Indian woman emerging from the novels of Anita Desai. To prove this, a close reading of the novels of Anita Desai, her interviews, articles and secondary sources on the author are used. They are read in the light of sociological, psychological, literary, philosophical and feminist
theories. The application of inter-disciplinary theories brings forth a whole new approach as far as the author is concerned. Hence it is a rewarding experience for women who stand on the threshold of the new millennium, who are searching for new horizons and new orientations. This will definitely help them re-position their status in the patriarchal framework.

The new self-concept is the ultimate outcome of many interactions taking place at different levels — psychological, spiritual, economic, educational and cultural. The thesis probes all the areas to prove that the new self-concept of Indian woman is radically different from the traditional self-concept. The hypothesis attempts to postulate the impact of the new self-concept with its long-lasting influence on the psyche of Indian woman.

1.1.2 Scope of the Study

This study focuses on the fiction of Anita Desai who is acclaimed as one of the foremost novelist of Indian writing in English. She writes in the Modernist perspective pointing to the evils and weaknesses that exist in Indian society. She encapsulates the anguish of a self that is unable to achieve actualization. The environment (family and society) oppresses the individual with more than ordinary sensibility. The existential trauma, the dualities of a structured society that pull the self in diametrically opposite directions, the fragmentation of the self and the resultant frustrations are effectively conceived by Desai.

In an interview with Yasodhara Dalmia, Desai herself says that “there are other elements which remain basic to our lives. It means the human condition itself. It is only superficially affected by the day to day changes. We continue to live in the same way as we have in the past centuries with the same tragedies and the same comedies. And this is why it interests me.”

---

Desai the writer stands for a change. The study brings to light how she vocalizes her perception about change. It focuses on the identity of the individual, especially Indian woman. It highlights the advantages of transeffecting an identity to solve the conflicts. Therefore this study explores in detail the roots of man-woman inequality in India. It also pinpoints the advantages of having a new self-concept. The evolution of this new self-concept is traced through Desai's novels, placing them within the framework of sociology, psychology, ideology, history and Piaget's theory of intellectual structuring.