CHAPTER - II

GENDER DISCRIMINATION
A girl— an asset or a liability ...? The numerous responses to this debated question comes in the form of varied arguments, contradictory views and judgements. The fact remains, she is treated more as a responsibility rather than an asset. Still, the so-called civilized and modern India in the twenty first century is unfair to the fair sex. The very thought of a girl child is a matter of shame and fear for parents, where as a boy is looked up as a symbol of honour and pride for the family.

A girl is not safe even in a woman's womb. She is killed before birth and her right of living life is snatched by her own parents. The growing percentage of female infanticide proves such cruelty done to a girl child. A girl pays the price of being a girl. On one hand, where the birth of a boy is welcomed with open arms, on the other, girls are looked down upon. Right from infancy to puberty to adulthood, she is strictly asked to live her life on certain rules ascribed to her by the family. And boy is blessed to do things as he likes, because he is the one who has the right to live... The biased sensibility towards women is clearly perceptible in the given lines:

It is the nature of woman in this world to cause the seduction of man, for which reason the wise are never unguarded in the company of a female. A female indeed is able to drive from the right path in this life not only a fool, but even a sage and
can lead him in subjection to desire or to wrath.¹

Times have changed, generations have changed, but attitude towards a female is still the same. She is the one who is blamed. A girl is convinced and made to accept her secondary place without any complaints.

People worship Goddesses in the form of Durga, Kali, Lakshmi and Saraswati, but the qualities for which these deities stand are snatched from a girl. She is devoid of that power, education and confidence which is deserved by her also. The suppression on the part of families in the form of over-protectiveness, mars her being and blocks mental growth. She suffers neglect, ignorance and biasedness at the hands of her family and then later on, at social level. She is compelled to make choices, not in accordance with her needs, but as man defines it. God knows how much fate has been nice to her all through. Thanks to the social reformers that India had, whom efforts paid in abolishing Sati-pratha from this country. Otherwise numberless women might have been sufferers of such ordeal phases. In the words of Shri Radhakrishna; "Centuries of tradition have made the Indian woman the most patient woman in the world whose pride is suffering."² In every way, she is dependent on male for her survival. Her personality is moulded in such a way, where she finds herself incapable of speaking her mind and heart.

(1) Quotation from Manu from The Laws of Manu, translated by G. Buhler, 1886. This has been taken from Neera Desai, Women in Modern India, Bombay: Vora and Co. Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1957, first edition, This edition 1977, P. 17.

Women are made reluctant to cross specific 'Laxman-Rekha' in the form of restrictions imposed on them by patriarchal system. They are taught always to have a smile on their faces and entertain guests, unconditional. Care for their families performing all their respective household duties without any argument and to hide their pain. They are expected to be self-sacrificing and devoted at the cost of other's happiness. Women from all walks of life, be it urban or rural, faces ignorance and indifference towards their rights. If there is a working woman, then also she is expected to fulfil all her duties, without any kind of support from her husband. Just because she is a woman... she has no right to question this kind of biasedness done to her. She is not even allowed to discuss and reveal her problems, physical as well as psychological before her family, which ultimately proves dangerous for her life. But no one cares, and why should one...? She should not dare to have a life of her own. She is not expected to dream and possess desires. Since ages, her sole aim has been to obey and follow commands of her father's first and then her husband whose will is the will of God for her. As stated by Manu:

'Day and night women must be kept in subordination to the males of the family, in childhood to the father, in youth to her husband, in old age to her sons...; 
"Ever though the husband be destitute of virtue and seeks pleasure elsewhere he must be worshipped as God."' Varied religions and cultures have distinct

ideologies about woman. Digambar Jain religion believed that a woman's salvation is never possible until she is reborn as man. Her life is only suffering quietly the pangs of male-domination without raising questions. It is considered an auspicious thing for a woman who die before her husband being a "Saubhagyavati" all her life.

She is degraded to live a parasitic existence, within confined four walls. This deprives her from any kind of participation on socio-political level. When she gets married, her life is handed over to another master (husband) to rule and dominate over her. The unfortunate part is that mother herself acts as a major contributing factor in making daughter submissive and meek. At least she should support her daughter to stand at her own, but sadly this attitude is missing from millions of families.

On the miserable plight of women within social context, Maitreyi Mukhopadhyaya's observation need to be mentioned here:

It should be emphasized that the poor status of women, their oppression and exploitation, cannot be examined as an isolated problem in Indian society. Although the status of women constitutes a problem in most societies in the rigidly hierarchicoal and inequitable social structure which exists in India, the relative inferiority and superiority of various roles is much more clearly defined. The inequality and subordination of women is an instrument or function of the social structure. 4

The atmosphere in which she is being brought up plays a crucial role

in developing and shaping her sensibilities. The fear of speaking her heart and mind and indecisiveness makes her totally dependent on others. Women are colonized, dominated and controlled in the form of gender discrimination bestowed on them. Everything is given to the male, and the female is left to serve not to demand.

In one of his work focusing on feminism and Virginia Woolf, Herbert Marder furiously stated his thoughts on gender-biasedness, by saying:

The son of my house may be granted freedom to develop his mind, he may have a room of his own, but the daughter is expected to be at everyone's beck and call ... For domestic life cultivates the irrational side of a woman's nature; it is distinguished by the privacy of intellect. The domestic arts involve mainly the fine discrimination of feelings and the ability to bring about adjustments in personal relations.\(^5\)

The picture which emerges before readers is that a perfect woman should embody the qualities of being soft, docile, vulnerable, sacrificing and under male supervision. She should never cross the 'laxman-rekha' drawn by patriarchal institutions. This the reality of modern era which caught writers attention and Anita Desai being a keen observer of life, could not left it untouched. Being a woman, she herself was aware of the plight of women in Indian society.

A woman is treated as a discriminated being, a slave. People are still obsessed with the idea of having a male child in the family. Even metropolitan cities are in no way mentally advanced and craves

for a son to look after their families. In the genre of Indo-Anglian novelists, women’s issues were not given primary importance. Even with the emergence of women novelists, very few of them explored the inner psyche of women, which hitherto had been suppressed. But with Anita Desai, readers got opportunity to dwell in the realm of her works and to get familiar with the dark and cruel facets of women lives. In her novels:

moral values of women are conveniently altered to suit the demands of men who treat them as 'objects', 'possession' to be ruled and controlled by psychological insecurity nurtured in them through myths, customs and societal discourse.⁶

An idealised image in scriptures, but maltreated and abused in reality, this the paradoxical situation of women in India. No matter, how much country is progressing, the different norms for boys and girls still persist in society.

Gender inequality exists and have been a way of life here. Craving for parental affection, innate desire for care and understanding, supportive homely atmosphere, are the few dreams for a girl which is unfortunately, never actualised. She is left with an empty heart, waiting for warmth and affection all her life. Anita Desai has also highlighted the consequences of this discrimination on the psyche of girl which later on turns her into a neurotic creature. The suffering and pain of Indian women in some form or the other has aesthetically found place in the novels of Anita Desai. The

marginalisation and oppression of woman within a male-dominated framework with its various aspects have been delineated by the novelist.

The very first novel, *Cry, the Peacock*, by Anita Desai proved to be a trend-setter in the realm of psychological realism. Its story revolves around Maya, a hypersensitive and passionate woman. She has been brought up like a princess, in an over-protective atmosphere by her father. Being never exposed to the harshness of life, she created a make believe fantastic world around herself and expected goodness from her life always. Her father decided to get her married to a friend of his, Gautama, a prosperous and practical minded reputed lawyer.

One of the glaring realities of Indian social context one comes across here, that is parents decision to get their daughter married to a person of their choice. Gautama was twice the age of Maya, so it was quite natural that there was bound to be difference in their approach towards life and relations. Like any other girl, she, with dreams of a perfect marriage in her eyes, became Gautama's bride. In her in-laws house, she found everyone too much preoccupied to spend time with her. They all were engrossed with discussions, newspapers, parliament updates and legal matters, so do not have time to analyse emotions and attachments.

Maya craved for love and care, but could not express her desires, that in turns adds pain to her living. Gautama was too busy in his work to spare time for his wife, who desperately needed him.
The plight of Maya is well explicit here; "Nor will you ever understand. You know nothing of me- and of how I can love. How I want of love. How it is important to me. But you." The anguish of Maya is the voice of millions of women, who are not treated as companions, but rather considered as bitter halves. Maya is sexually unsatisfied and Gautama's cold response makes matter worse. If a man wants physical satisfaction, he does not have to plead before woman. But a woman, confined within traditional bounds of society has no option, but to wait and makes her husband understand of her urge. Anita Desai has handled this issue in a subtle way. When a woman tries to express her physical urge, she has to face jibes and humiliations at the hand of husband who calls her insane at this behaviour of hers. Just because she is a woman... she is treated in such a cruel way.

Maya is living a grubby and grimy life unfulfilled longing for love. She is not completely detached from social and familial ties, yet lives an incomplete life. In one of other instances from the novel, one can see the mentality of an Average Indian woman, who do not want a girl child. The society is responsible for such discriminated behaviour. One of an acquaintances of Maya, Mrs. Pom tells her about, what she wants to have; "I'm to have a baby- in November. I take flowers to the temple every Thursday- I want it to be a boy." Mrs. Pom's mother-in-law has given this precious advice and offer prayers to God to bless her with a baby boy, as it will bring pride to their family. Maya gets irritated of such thoughts of her. Maya was a

(7) Anita Desai, Cry, the Peacock, (Delhi : Orient Paperbacks, 1980), P. 112.
(8) Ibid., P. 63.
childless woman, that increased her torments again.

Maya looked up to her Mother-in-law for maternal tenderness, as she had been a motherless child. But Gautama's mother being a social worker had no time for Maya. Her wish to be cared is revealed here; "And yet I yearned for her to hold me to her bosom. I could not remember my own mother at all. My throat began to swell with unbearable self-pity." Instead, her mother-in-law was more interested in the money which came from Maya's father quite often. This attitude also reflects one of the issues called dowry system which makes the hell of a woman's life. Her mother-in-law inquired; "When will your father send me another cheque, Maya? Tell him I need it urgently— the nurses in the creche have not been paid this month." The demanding tone of Maya's mother-in-law reflects the kind of pressure a daughter-in-law faces after marriage. Maya can not complain nor can question, just because she is a woman, she is to obey her command.

Again in one of the instances from the novel, the degradation of women is perceptible. On one hand, where Maya talks about the problems out of which a woman is forced to enter into prostitution, Gautama thinks that; "They are merely physically aberrant women of small ambition, who think it a compliment if men leer at their thigh." Maya feels sad about his conception of women. Somehow it also indicates that Gautama, in general holds no respect for woman. The

(9) Ibid., P. 163.
(10) Ibid., P. 47-48.
(11) Ibid., P. 90.
kind of indifferent and neglecting attitude he has for Maya is again shown, when after arguing with her wife, he says; "Really, it is quite impossible to talk to a woman."\textsuperscript{12} Maya's want of care and attention is just an illusion for Gautama. He gets irritated and every now and then, leaves no chance in insulting her by calling childish and immature. Among his friends, most of the time he taunts Maya and discuss about her emotional attachments.

Gautama calls her as one of those overbearing woman who is not wanted by anyone. Maya's psychic condition is explicit in these lines; "I was alone. Yes, I whimpered, it is that I am alone, and then gave myself up to a fit of furious pillow-beating, kicking, everything, but crying."\textsuperscript{13} Anita Desai has brilliantly drawn the picture of an uncared woman living a ruthless life. Maya is alone in the midst of familial ties. She considers her existence as a meaningless one without any proper direction. If she was properly looked after and exposed to the hardness of life, then things would have been different for her. Life became tragedy for her. Believing in an astrologer, who prophesied that her marriage will be a disaster and either Gautama or she would die, Maya kills her husband and then go back to her father's house, and again is lost in the toy world of childhood days and then a sudden tragic death of hers closes the chapter of her unlived life.

Anita Desai's second novel, \textit{Voices in the City} is a pathetic story of Monisha, a sensitive and intellectually sharp girl, married to Jiban, an indifferent husband to her. She agreed to get married to a

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\item[12] \textit{Ibid.}, P. 124.
\end{footnotes}
man of her father's choice like any other submissive girl would do. Jiban's family was a respectable one and he had a secured career, so Monisha's father thought of him as best suited for his daughter. Amla, sister of Monisha, after watching nonentity existence of her sister is compelled to question; "And why had Monisha, with that powerful silent stubbornness of hers, never rebelled?" Monisha's character mirrors the plight of millions of girls who are asked to get married where they are asked to, without any questioning.

Girls do not have the right to decide for their own lives. This is the glaring truth of so-called modern Indian social scenario. Monisha was married in Calcutta, where lives of Bengali women was enclosed within set parameters of patriarchal system. Monisha felt; "The Eyes of these silent Bengali women are not dead, but they anticipate death, as they do everything, with resignation." Women were completely at the altar of male domination, tolerance and suffering. Monisha is one of those women who is forced to live a monotonous and a loveless life. Being a daughter-in-law of a joint family, she was living her life in serving chapatis and cutting vegetables.

She holds no value in the eyes of her in-laws and husband. She feels stifled in the suffocated atmosphere as a handicapped observer. Her coarse treatment by them is clear, when she is even not spared of blaming for committing a theft. Her mother-in-law furiously screamed:

(14) Anita Desai, Voices in the City (New Orient Paperbacks, 1980), P. 198.
(15) Ibid., P. 121.
I will not have a thief in my house, I say, I will not have a thief in my house. Who is to tell who this thief is? After all, you were the only person who was in the room all day.\textsuperscript{16}

Monisha could not stand the word thief. She was broken, and to make matter worse, when she told Jiban that she is innocent, even he blamed her for the theft. Just because she is a woman, no one believes her.

One of the harsh realities is uttered by Amla's Aunt, whose own daughter suffered in a bad marriage:

Women place themselves in bondage to men. Whether in marriage or not. All their joy and ambition is channeled that way, while they go parched themselves.\textsuperscript{17}

This perception of hers is the hard facet of Indian society. Women are mutely suffering at the cost of their meaningless existence. Monisha was no exception. She also had to give massage to her mother-in-law. The gesture of Jiban's mother compelled Monisha to think that; "She thinks I am touching her feet. But I am not. I do not touch her, nor does she touch me- there is this darkness in between."\textsuperscript{18} This is the paradoxical situation where a woman do not feel the pain of other woman just because she does not belong to her own. A daughter-in-law suffers and could nor express her troubles and when she does, she faces humiliation. Here Monisha's mother-in-law feels proud to get massage from her son's wife.

\textsuperscript{(16)} \textit{Ibid.,} P. 137.
\textsuperscript{(17)} \textit{Ibid.,} P. 221.
\textsuperscript{(18)} \textit{Ibid.,} P. 139.
Anita Desai has aesthetically delineated the crux of Monisha's pangs and sufferings. To make life worse for her, she is a childless woman. Her family members gossip about her infertility. In Monisha's words:

Like a burst of wild feathers, realised full in my face, comes the realization that they are talking of me, my organs, the reasons I cannot have a child.\(^{19}\)

This is the real face of Indian society, where a woman is solely blamed for being unable to produce a child. She is looked down upon by people around her. As time passes by, life becomes unbearable for Monisha. She even gets indulge into diary-writing. In her in-laws house, she does not even have a room of her own.

The taunts and jibes of family members, uncaring husband pushes her into darkness. She thought death to be the ultimate escape from her painful existence. She felt; "*They put me away in a steel container, a thick glass cubicle, and I have lived in it all my life, without a touch of love or hate or warmth on me.*"\(^{20}\) She opted to commit suicide and burnt herself. She paid the price of being a woman. Her turbulent life is a reflex of lives of millions of women all over, who spend their lives in waiting for nothing and then dying misunderstood, as even after death it is she who is blamed for the wrong happened with her.

The third novel *Bye-Bye Blackbird* by Anita Desai throw light on the life of female protagonist Sarah, an English girl who got

\(^{19}\) *Ibid.*, P. 113.

married to a brown-skinned Indian. Sarah decided to get married to Adit, an Indian settled in England against her parents wish. She tries her best to adjust with Indian style of Adit but in due course, she start feeling displaced in her own country. Sarah’s character mirrors the problem of those women who have to change their life-style according to the conveniences of their male counterparts.

Sarah’s bewilderment is an account of her cross-cultural marriage with Adit. She was a working woman, yet she tried to maintain a balance between her professional and married life. It was always Sarah who listened to Adit, who loved her, no doubt, but hold superiority as being a man. One of his statements clear his psyche towards Sarah, when he says:

These English wives are quite manageable really, you know. Not as fierce as they look– very quiet and hardworking as long as you treat them right and roar at them regularly once or twice a week.\textsuperscript{21}

Adit was in a way, teaching his friend Dev how to manage wife. Dev continued the conversation by saying that; "\textit{The English wives are Not so different from the meek Indian gazelles then.}\textsuperscript{22} Both of them Adit and Dev, share same mode of thinking regarding women. They believed in controlling woman and make her dance to their tunes.

Be it India or European country, the condition and status of woman is more or less the same. She always have to keep aside her


\textsuperscript{(22)} Ibid., P. 29.
ambitions for the sake of family.

Adit’s decision of settling in England was out of economic reasons. But he used to feel himself as an exile there. So he decided to go back to India. He does not even gave a thought about how Sarah would feel on leaving her native place forever. Adit declares his final decision and says:

I can't stand it, Sarah. I tell you, I've had enough. It's all got to end now. There must be a change. A- a big change I've got to do it. You- you understand? Now don't stop me, don't say anything. I've made up my mind.²³

All this scared her, for a minute she thought that Adit has decided to break his marriage with her. Here the husband has imposed decision on wife to follow without any arguments. Sarah was into tears, but said nothing. Then Sarah informed Adit about her pregnancy. Adit had little concern for her health. His male-chauvinistic attitude is very well explicit here; "He was more or less confident that when his son arrived- of course it would be a son, that he never doubted- he would be proud of it."²⁴ He wanted his son to be born in India. He was very callous about the sickness of Sarah. All he thought was of returning back. Sarah silently agreed to every decision of his. She was going to leave everything in England. Even when she asked Adit about taking their pet dog Bruce with them, he refused.

Before leaving for India, Adit had a get together, where also he kept reminding Sarah about the kind of life she is going to have

(23) Ibid., P. 202.
(24) Ibid., P. 214.
in her in-laws home. He says:

    She is going to live a family of in-laws, a very big one, and
    learn their language and habits... Don't you go imagining a life
    of luxury, Sarah.²⁵

Adit kept on repeating all these things to Sarah, so that she could
make herself ready for all the changes. It was not an easy task for
Sarah to fulfil all expectations of Adit, but still she prepared herself.
Sarah had to leave behind her childhood memories, her parents, her
job to save her marriage, as Adit was in no mood to change his
decision. She moulded herself according to Adit's way of living.
Being a woman, she saw no option but to adjust for the sake of her
male-counterpart.

Another novel, Where Shall We Go This Summer? revolves
around the story of Sita and her complexities. Sita is one of those
women who are fed up of their monotonous lives and wanted to
escape from it all. She is a mother of four and pregnant with the fifth
one. Her husband, Raman, is busy in money-making and have no time
for his emotionally starved wife. Sita feels exhausted of her life which
is involved only in rearing children and looking after house.

Sita wishes to escape from the grudges of city and went to
Manori island in search of peace of mind. But, now her children could
not let her think of herself, as they were so much used to city that Sita
have to compromise. So when Raman comes to Manori, to take them
back, she readily agrees and; "She allowed him, them, to have his own

²⁵ Ibid., P. 213.
triumph, not to try to cap it with her verse." Sita felt herself defeated at the cost of her family responsibilities, which demanded the sacrifice of her dreams. Sita, in this sense, is very realistic, as she portrays a woman who opt to compromise. This is a fact of millions of women's lives who are bound to suppress their desires for their families. Sita killed her inner demanding psyche for her children's future.

Anita Desai's next novel Fire On the Mountain which bagged the prestigious Sahitya Academi Award, is an aesthetic delienation of the life of troubled female protagonist Nanda Kaul, who has lived a life of unfulfilment and deprivations. She led her life in performing duties as a wife of vice-chancellor of Punjab University and also as a mother of their children. Her husband's house was always crowded with guests and visitors. Nanda Kaul for people was like a queen of Mr. Kaul, but the trauma and pain of her existence was only seen and felt by herself. She led a monotonous life, looking after the needs of children and husband, who had an affair all his life with Miss David, in his wife's knowledge. But Nanda Kaul was helpless and just became a spectator of their romance. No one had time and concern for her:

Mentally she stalked through the rooms of that house- his house, never hers- very carefully closing the wire-screen doors behind her to keep out the flies, looking sharply to see if the dark furniture, all rosewood, had been polished and the doors of the gigantic cupboards properly shut.27

(26) Anita Desai, Where Shall We Go This Summer? (New Delhi: Orient Paperbacks) 1982), P. 151.

Her life was reduced to kitchen area with no space of her own. This is the tragedy of millions of women who spends their life in caring for their families, but in return, get ignorance from them. Anita Desai has explicitly shown the painful psyche of Nanda Kaul.

After the demise of her husband, she shifted to Carignano, not out of choice but she was forced to do, as nobody needed her.

Nanda Kaul waited all her life for tenderness and care from her family, but was left with empty hands and heart. She thought to get peace at Carignano, but here also the arrival of her great granddaughter Raka, disturbed everything. Nanda Kaul died after hearing the shocking news of her friend Ila Das, who was a social worker, being brutally raped and killed by one of the villagers. Ila Das met such a tragic end because she tried to stop marriage of an under age girl. Her father Preet Singh prized Ila Das in a disastrous way:

She struggled, choking, trying to stretch and stretch and stretch that gasp till it because a shout, a shout that the villagers would hear, the red dog would hear, a shout for help.\textsuperscript{28}

But no one heard her voice. A man here proves his manhood by assaulting a woman. The fact of physical abuse is pathetically expressed by the novelist:

Her eyes still swivelled in their sockets, two alarmed marbles of black and white, and quickly he left the ends of the scarf, tore at her clothes, tore them off her, in long, screeching rips, till he came to her, to the dry, shrivelled starved stick inside

\textsuperscript{28} \textit{Ibid.}, P. 142.
the wrappings, and raped her, pinned her down into the dust
and the goat droppings, and raped her.29

Just because she was a woman, she paid such price. Here one
witnesses a perfect instance of male domination over woman. Ila Das
was a good, helpful and harmless lady. She was blighted by the
ruthless fate and cruel manliness.

Another sufferer of male tyranny appears in the form of Tara,
Raka's mother, a victim of husband's cruelty. Having an alcoholic
husband who is also indulge in affairs, Tara's life is no less than a hell.
All this adversely affected the innocent mind of her daughter Raka,
whom she decided to sent away to Nanda Kaul for few days.
Deprivation of parental affection and care moulded Raka's personality
into a solitary creature, and slowly she created her own world of
privacy, unaware of anything around her.

Thus one can see how the discrimination of the fair sex can
prove fatal not only to herself but her family too. Anita Desai, with
wider description of such female characters focusses on the inevitable
plight of Indian woman in various roles.

Next novel of Anita Desai, *Clear Light of Day* through
its female protagonist, Bim, reflects the reality of Indian Urban
women who are forcibly single, independent and carrying all the
responsibilities of house hold. Bim is a simple, intelligent and caring
woman. Being the eldest, she incurred all burden of the family. After
the death of their father, Bim solely got her brothers and sister settled

(29) Ibid., P. 143.
down in life. She did not think of her own marriage because of their responsibilities. His brother Raja, whom she thought would look after the family, deserted his sister and ran away to Hyderabad and got married to Hyder Ali's daughter. He overlooked every duty of his for the sake of money of his father-in-law.

With the character of Bim, one witness a little transition of woman from the subdued to an independent one. Yet the sufferings were almost the same. She is also a victim of injustice done by a man, his brother. Another sufferer to mention would undoubtedly be Bim's aunt, Mira Masi, who lived all her life a pitiful existence, for she was a woman. She was younger to Bim's mother. Married at the tender age of twelve, her husband left for England for studies immediately after the wedding.

He died there because of cold, leaving his wife in India lamenting all her life. Mira's in-laws blamed her unfortunate horoscope for their son's death, so she was asked to pay for her guilt. Living a pathetic life, she suffered at the altar of mate domination. Also; "At night she massaged her mother-in-law's leg and nursed wakeful babies and stitched trousseaux for her sister-in-law."30 This is the real picture of traditional India, where widows are forced to live a pathetic life. Aging made Mira Masi bald quite early, that actually saved her from the lustful eyes of her brothers-in-laws. They got bored by watching her unpleasant appearance, so eventually kicked her out.

Then Mira Masi came to Bim's house, where she spend all

her life in looking after the children and rearing them up. For them; "She was bony and angular, wrinkled and desiccated—like a stick, or an ancient tree to which they adhered." Mira Masi is a fine example of a suppressed woman victimized by the patriarchal syndrome prevalent in society. Had she been given freedom to live her life, things would have been different for her. The male-dominating syndrome and their set norms restricted her life and live for others.

The next novel by Anita Desai In Custody, have a female character Sarla, a typical Indian Hindu wife, domineering, simple and undemanding. Like any other girl, she too dreamt of a happy married life with all the luxuries and comforts, but all got crushed when she got Deven, a low paid lecturer as her life partner. Sarla represents those woman whose desires and aspirations are never been take care of. Relatives of Deven found in her the perfect soul mate:

plain, penny-pinching and congenitally pessimistic. What they had not suspected was that Sarla as a girl and as a new bride, had aspirations too.32

No one cared for her choice, but forced her to get married to him. Sarla was a helpless creature, submitting herself to the realities of her unsatisfied marriage:

The thwarting of her aspirations had cut two dark furrows from the corners of her nostrils to the corners of her mouth, as deep and permanent as surgical scars.33

(31) Ibid., P. 111.
(33) Ibid., P. 68.
Anita Desai has explicitly drawn the psyche of unhappy Sarla. She mutely accepts all the deprivations, keeping aside all her dreams. She is in a kind of custody in the four walls of her husband's house.

J.P. Tripathi aptly remarked; "Sarla is a typical Hindu wife, simple, timid, obscure, domineered, undemanding and co-operative." Sarla could not take any step for her own self because being an uneducated woman, she was dependent on her male-counterpart. This dependence syndrome is one of the major reasons for women's suffering at the altar of male. If Sarla would have been a literate, she could have even tried to support her family financially. But the confinement within four walls of the house prevented her from doing so and reduced to a dependent creature all her life.

The theme of gender-discrimination has been elaborately discussed by Anita Desai in her next novel, Fasting, Feasting, which was even shortlisted for the prestigious Booker Prize for the year 1999. The novel initiates with the pathetic suffering of Uma, belonging to a middle-class family, an uncared and unwanted girl. She is a member of a typical conservative, orthodox and domineering Indian family, where male dominates keeping female subordinates. Girls were the unfortunate, discriminated sex. In the words of Uma's mother:

In my day, girls in the family were not given sweets, nuts, good things to eat. If something special had been bought in the market, like sweets or nuts, it was given to the boys in the family.\(^{35}\)

\(^{(34)}\) J.P. Tripathi, The Mind and Art of Anita Desai (Bareilly : Prakashan, 1986) P. 144.

She wanted to make her daughters realise that they are fortunate enough to get proper food and clothing, despite being girls. The fact remains that still the boys are the privileged ones.

Boys are destined to feast, and daughters are expected to fast all their lives. Birth of a son is looked up as a matter of pride and honour for the family and Uma's family was no exception. When Uma's brother Arun was born:

Arriving home, however, he [Papa] sprang out of the Car, raced into the house and shouted the news to whoever was there to hear. Servants, elderly relatives, all gathered at the door, and then saw the most astounding sight of their lives- Papa, is his elation, leaping over three chairs in the hall, one after the other, like a boy playing leap-frog, his arms flung up in the air and his hair flying. 'A boy!' he screamed, 'a bo-oy! Arun, Arun at last'\(^{(36)}\)

There was celebration and joy all around. The arrival of Arun changed the life of Uma at once, infact, made worse. Her mother started giving instructions, regarding Arun's care, folding nappies, preparing milk and making him sleep, all these were now priorities of Uma's life. When Uma requested mother to do all that after completion of homework, she immediately said; "Leave all that',... We are not sending you back to school, Uma you are staying at home to help with Arun."\(^{(37)}\) Uma being a docile and submissive creature mutely suffers

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\(^{(36)}\) Ibid., P. 17.

\(^{(37)}\) Ibid., P. 18.
injustice done to her. On the other hand, one witnesses the character
of Aruna, her younger sister, who lived on her own terms. The
existence of Uma was looked up as a sign of shame for the family.

The mother of Uma is an image of typical submissive Indian
Wife, who has moulded herself according to the needs of her husband.
In fact she is used to stick with her counterpart's decision. Whereas her
husband do not even care for the fact that late pregnancy might be
a risk for his wife. As; "They had two daughters, yes, quite grown-up
as anyone could see, but there was no son. Would any man give up
the chance of a son?" A woman's life has no value before the desire
of having a son. Here, a woman is put into danger and could even
sacrifice her life for the sake of a son. By delineating different aspects
of a female, Anita Desai proves to be an excellent observer of every
little feeling of a woman.

Being a woman herself, Uma's mother left no stone unturned
in hurting the feelings of Uma. Despite advanced technologies and
progressive attitudes, the parasite of gender-discrimination is to be
seen in urban as well as rural areas on a large scale. Major setback
for a girl comes when she is made deprived of education, as it
happened with Uma. This, in turn, blocks her capacity to think and
decide. Her dull appearance made life unbearable for her. Many
proposals for marriage came for Aruna, her younger sister, but for Uma
it was disappointment from everywhere. When two attempts of getting
Uma married ended in failure, her mother got angry on every little

(38) Ibid., P. 16.
thing of hers.

Her family treated her like a useless creature and always neglected her existence:

Had anyone looked, they might have noticed that Uma's face was losing its childish openness of expression and taking on a look of continual care.\(^{39}\)

She started looking more than her age. Finally, they get a match for their uneducated, not so good looking daughter, Uma. Harish was the man, married before, but had no issue, engaged in pharmaceutical business, considered perfect for Uma according to her parents.

On the day of her wedding, lot of emotions were flashing in her heart and fear too of stepping into another role of a wife now. Harish appeared as; "The man looked as old to her as Papa, nearly, and was grossly over weight too. While his face was pock marked."\(^{40}\)

There was no sign of enthusiasm on the groom's face.

Once the ceremony was over, she came to railway station with her husband. Everyone got busy in searching their seats and making themselves comfortable in the compartments. Uma felt lovely as; "None of them paid her any attention once they had found her a place to sit on the bunk."\(^{41}\) After reaching home, Harish told her that he was leaving for work and went away. She had nothing to say. She was left alone with a big family staring at this newly bride, making comments about her saris, jewellery and finally she was asked to get

\(^{39}\) Ibid., P. 86.

\(^{40}\) Ibid., P. 88.

\(^{41}\) Ibid., P. 90.
into kitchen.

Not even for a minute she felt like a newly wedded bride, instead she was only instructed by everyone to do things. He was waiting for Harish but did not know what to do. As a submissive typical Indian wife; "She did not dare ask them where he was for fear of not getting an answer." Next day her mother-in-law told that he is gone to Meerut.

Uma was not aware of the game fate played with her. After few days her Papa came there and disclosed the cruel truth before her that:

Harish was married already, had a wife and four children in Meerut where he ran an ailing pharmaceutical factory to save which he had needed another dowry which had led him to marry again.

Uma was shattered and could not bear such cheating which ruined her life for no fault of hers. She was on her away back with Papa. While Papa kept on moaning for the money he spent on her marriage, people in the train were looking at Uma; "Who kept her head wrapped up in her sari in an effort to screen her shame." Uma had to suffer all this just because she is a woman, an illiterate one, completely under male domination. On reaching home, Mama got busy in checking the trunks they gave in dowry and jewellery.

No one even thought of Uma's turbulence and pain she was

(42) Ibid., P. 92.
(43) Ibid., P. 93.
(44) Ibid., P. 94.
suffering through. Now; "Uma was considered ill-fated by all and no more attempts were made to marry her off."\(^{45}\) Her life was again indulged in looking after kitchen stuff and obeying instructions of Mama Papa.

She felt like an outsider, an additional burden on the family. But she was helpless as Uma was imprisoned within four walls of home-womb-tomb. An acquaintance of their family, Mr. Dutt, offered a job for Uma so that it could help her in standing on her own, but he faces immediate refusal from her mother, saying; "Our daughter does not need to go to work, Dr. Dutt, As long as we are here to provide for her, she will never need to go to work."\(^{46}\) Dr. Dutt insisted them to allow Uma to work outside as that can help in forgetting the trauma of the disastrous marrige she went through. But her parents did not felt any need.

The word 'need' here reflects the mind set of her parents, who considered food and clothing as the only necessities for their daughter. Do they care to think about the basic needs of Uma...? Uma desperately needed support, confidence and care from her family to make something out of her pathetic life. But unfortunately, like millions of girls suffer, nobody thought of their interests and basic needs. Their wishes are ignored by their family, because they are the fair sex, the subordinate ones.

Life for Uma was restricted within four walls. She was not

\(^{(45)}\) Ibid., P. 96.
\(^{(46)}\) Ibid., P. 96.
allowed to have any contact from the world outside. Even making a phone call was prohibited to her, once she did called up her school teacher, as a consequence, she was brutally scolded for her unauthorised use of the phone. Another incident to mention of her suppression would be Mrs. Henry invitation to her for a coffee party. But again, she was told; "It is not good to go running around. Stay home and do your work- that is best."\(^{47}\) Yes, the work of listening jibes and taunts of her parents, hearing laughter of visitors, looking after kitchen stuff and then brooding alone.

This is the kind of discrimination she suffers at the hands of her parents, who restricted her freedom in every possible way. Uma's life was no less than a living hell, dancing to the tune of her parents. Just because she is a female. Uma was fond of poetry and it was her companion in solitude. Again, this was not tolerated by her mother:

Reading, reading- didn't you say your eyes were hurting? So now why are you reading? Put it away and fetch a cup of coffee for Papa. It is time for Papa's coffee and biscuits.\(^{48}\)

The reader could feel the pain of Uma and that is where the excellence of Anita Desai lies. One could identify with these little incidents as they are so real.

Mother of Uma shouted so loudly thinking she will get afraid. But Uma showed no sign of fear as now she was accustomed to such rude behaviour. She silently moves towards the kitchen and did her stuff. Anita Desai has very minutely touched the inner psyche and gave

\(^{47}\) Ibid., P. 114.

\(^{48}\) Ibid., P. 136.
voice to unsaid words of Uma through her gestures. Uma had no
existence for herself and for others. In Mama's words; "You, you
disgrace to the family- nothing but disgrace, ever!" The word
'disgrace' is a blessing showered on Uma by her mother, a reality
faced by millions of girls. The son adds honour to the family, and
daughter just disgrace...

The whole life of Uma went on like this, under the
domination of her parents with no value of her own, because she was
a female who is there to obey not demand. The novelist has painted
a gloomy picture of Uma, who is tortured, exploited and humiliated by
her own family. She was taught to obey the orders of colonizer (Papa)
without showing any resistance. He was the one who decided
everything for the silent subaltern sufferer daughter, Uma. Patriarchy
ideology in the form of her father ruined her life. If she was given
proper education and care, as was bestowed on son, then life would
have been different for her. But she was suppressed under strict
patriarchal syndrome, leaving no space for her to breathe.

Another glaring instance of sex discrimination appears in the
form of Anamika, Uma's cousin, an attractive, charming, promising and
intelligent girl with a bright future, as she got admission into the
University of Oxford, which is applaudable. But the fact of being a girl
thwarted her could-be great future as her parents decided to marry her
off. They used that letter of admission as a medal for enticing grooms

(49) Ibid., P. 53.
for her; "They did not allowed her to go for further studies and, she could never bring herself to contradict her parents and cause them grief." Anamika accepted her parents decision and stifled her dreams. At the day of her wedding, everyone noticed; "that she was marrying the one person who was totally impervious to Anamika's beauty and grace and distinction." Her groom's gesture showed his attitude and pretended superiority to Anamika. He was constantly looking at his mother, as if everything in his life is and will be decided her only. His bride:

Anamika was simply an interpolar, someone brought in because it was the custom and because she would, by marrying him, enhance his superiority to other men. So they had to tolerate her.

It is the woman who has to bear the pangs and frustrations of man, not vice-versa. Anamika's marriage was the beginning of her traumatic life, where; "Anamika was beaten regularly by her mother-in-law" Her educated husband said nothing in his wife's favour. Anamika's life was restricted to four walls and serving meals, and she was left to eat the remains in the pots.

Such pitiful condition... only because she was an obedient daughter and now a dutiful wife who will not say anything but suffer:

(50) Ibid., P. 69.
(51) Ibid., Pp. 69-70.
(52) Ibid., P. 70.
(53) Ibid., P. 70.
When Anamika was not scrubbing or cooking, she was in her mother-in-law's room, either massaging that lady's feet or folding and tidying her clothes.54

She was living a pathetic life, never went out with her husband and was not allowed to visit friends. Then she had a miscarriage after brutally being beaten. Now, she was declared unfit to produce children.

Her life became a curse, as she solely was blamed for all this. Uma's family thought Anamika could be sent back to her home, that was relieving for Uma as she thought that would help Anamika. But mother of Uma, as a typical Indian woman, says; "How can she be happy if she is sent home? What will people say? What will they think?"55 This is the fallacy widely spread in Indian society, where a girl is disowned even by her parents, after they get her married and unload their burden. Such cruelty was bestowed on Anamika for twenty-five years and finally she got an escape from this pain, in the form of death. Her mother-in-law told, she unlocked the kitchen and put herself alight. The family was unaware of the tragedy as they was sleeping and Anamika's husband was out of the city.

Anamika is not more than a wooden creature, subjected at the hands of male. First her father decided for her life and then there was no support from her husband. Sometimes the worst enemy of a woman is a woman and this fact was been vividly explored in the novel. Here mother's indifferent

(54) Ibid., P. 71.
(55) Ibid., P. 71.
attitude towards their daughters proved fatal. Despite being educated, Anamika could not stand against tortures hovering on her life, because being a woman she was taught to obey, not to rebel.

If Anamika's parents were little supportive in sending their daughter for further studies and making a life of her own, then life would not have been so unfair to her. She too paid the price of being a girl. The inhuman treatment done to her reveals the hypocrisy of so called modern India, where a man gets married to an educated girl, but do not respect her existence and do not even allow her to come in between his false ego.

The next novel by Anita Desai, *Baumgartner's Bombay*, has focussed on a woman's problem of adjustment in an alien country. Through the character of Lotte, one comes across another aspect of feminine psyche. She was a German, moved to India and there she met Kanti Lal, a Marwari seth, who offered her home, financial security and promise of marriage. But he introduces her to his family and children as their governess. Lotte mutely accepted and was devoted to him.

Kanti Lal treated her as his kept and used to visit her periodically to fulfil his sexual urges. In Lotte's own words; "*He leaves me here like a widow and lives in Calcutta himself.*" Kanti Lal used her like an object to serve him when and how he wants. After Kanti's demise, things changed for Lotte, His sons threw her out of the house.

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by saying; "Who is this woman? We don't know this woman. Throw her out." Lotte looked after his children when they were small. She was dedicated to her relationship. But family of Kanti Lal rejected and disowned her. Lotte's character is a fine example of a woman who gave everything to her man but was left alone in the end. She is also a victim of male-domination syndrome.

Anita Desai's female characters holds mirror to the condition of women in Indian society. She makes reader aware of the plight and anxieties of woman in the form of Maya, Monisha, Sarah, Sita, Nanda Kaul, Bim, Sarla, Uma, Anamika and Lotte, with their apprehensions, fears, traumas, aspirations and suppressions. One comes across different women facing distinctive problems with one common reason, the fact of being a woman, they suffer at the cost of their families. The unloved childhood, dissatisfying marriages and unfulfilled desires are the vital causes for their troubled inner psyche.

Anita Desai attempted to lend a voice to those silences of women which hitherto had been not felt, if heard through. If such women were given equal status, proper attention and value to their existence, life would have been positive to the fair sex.

(57) Ibid., P. 77.