ABSTRACT

The present thesis is concerned with delineation of the theme of alienation and search for identity in the select novels of Anita Desai who is acclaimed as one of the greatest writers of Indian fiction in English. A contemporary novelist, Anita Desai mostly deals with the predicament of women in a male dominated society and gives prime importance to the place of women in man-woman relationship. Although many first generation women writers of Indian fiction such as Kamala Markandaya, Shashi Deshpande, Nayantara Sahgal have written on a wide range of issues and experiences concerning their women characters, Anita Desai is probably the only novelist who projects the inner world of her female protagonists from a different perspective: she portrays the splintered psyche of suffering women, who are tormented with a sense of alienation, which leads to a search for identity.

The first chapter which serves as the introduction to the study examines Anita Desai’s place in the galaxy of Indian novelists in English. The first chapter begins with an introduction to the intellectual atmosphere of Anita Desai’s age. It gives a brief account of the contribution of Anita Desai’s contemporary women writers and explains how Anita Desai has carved a niche for herself by providing a psychological insight into the mental makeup of her women characters. Thus, Anita Desai’s preoccupation with the study of the inner world of the individual,
particularly the undeserved miseries and untold sufferings of the women who are ruthlessly persecuted and rendered vulnerable, alienated, and helpless, and search for self-identity in almost all her novels merit detailed examination and the present study is one such modest attempt in that direction.

The second chapter, *Enigmatic Alienation: Cry, the Peacock* analyses the character of Maya in *Cry, the Peacock*. It can be considered a trend-setting novel as it brings out the troubled psyche of the neurotic woman in Indian fiction in English. The very beginning of the novel reveals the husband-wife estrangement. Maya, an introvert and a pampered daughter of a wealthy aristocratic father, is married to the much older Gautama. She feels completely neglected by her husband. She is obsessed with the prophecy of disaster that she heard in her childhood and it creates in her a sense of immeasurable alienation. Unable to live with the trauma of caused by the negligence of her husband and the lack of communication love and affection in marital life, she kills her husband, goes mad and finally commits suicide.

The third chapter *Exploration of Alienated Self: Voices in the City* deals with different ways of life of the three siblings, Amla, Nirode and Monisha in the novel *The Voices in the City*. The city of Calcutta plays a crucial role in the novel. Desai illuminates the myriad ways in which her protagonists try to search their
identities. It describes the corrosive effects of city life upon Indian family. Brought up on luxury by an over-indulgent mother, Nirode settles down in Calcutta and becomes absorbed into its bohemian life. His elder sister Monisha lives out a servile existence within the rigid confines of a traditional Hindu family. Nirode goes in his own way and sacrifices everything for his life. Monisha cannot bear her stifling existence in the household of a wealthy old Calcutta family. Monisha and Jiban’s marriage is the most pathetic illustration of maladjustment in marriage. Lack of privacy, her incapacity to bear a child, and lack of communication with her nonchalant husband torment her. She feels alienated from her husband and ponders over the problems of attachment. At last, she sets fire to herself which appears to be the only remedy to end here unbearable agony.

The fourth chapter *Alienation in an Alien Land: Bye-Bye Blackbird* deals with the story of the immigrants’ love-hate relationship in *Bye-Bye Blackbird*. It is a symbolic novel in which Anita Desai presents the East-West encounter. The novel explores the problems of alienation, maladjustment, sense of rootlessness, and quest for identity and the final decision in the lives of the three major characters: Dev, Adit and Sarah. In the first part of the novel, Dev arrives in England for higher studies and he stays with Adit and Sarah. He is perturbed when he finds Indians humiliated in both private and public places. In the second part, Dev changes his opinion and begins to feel a charm for the country and decides to
live in England. In the last part, Adit is well settled in England and he feels homesick for India. Finally, he decides to leave for India along with his English wife Sarah. The novel deals with the psychic turmoil of Sarah who struggles to seek her identity on an alien soil.

The fifth chapter *Search for Self: Where Shall We Go This Summer?* depicts the protagonist Sita’s search for identity in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* It pictures the tension between the sensitive wife Sita and the rational husband Raman. The interrogative feature of the title is symbolic of the uncertain state of the protagonist’s mind, of her awareness and of her indeterminate fate. It tells the story of the boring and lonely experiences of a sensitive, over-emotional, middle-aged married woman Sita. She is alienated from her husband and children, and she is reluctant to give birth to her fifth child in the ‘world of destruction’. She is an introverted character who suffers from constitutional inability to accept the authority of the society. Hence, her alienation is natural and dispositional. She escapes to the island where she realizes the true character of her husband and she decides to live with him. Ultimately, she succeeds in re-establishing her contacts with the homeland.

The Sixth chapter *Solitary Hearts: Fire on the Mountain* highlights plight of three female characters, Nanda Kaul, Raka and Ila Das in *Fire on the Mountain*. It is highly a sensitive interpretation of the maladies lonely individuals, women in
particular. The story is of a solitary woman Nanda Kaul who lives as recluse in Kasauli. She craves for a peaceful widowhood, the complete separation from the crowded house. She prefers to give rest to her painful psyche and her stagnated pulses. But Raka, her grand-daughter’s arrival at Kasauli disturbs her heavenly life. Her friend Ila Das’ visit also intensifies the agony to Nanda Kaul. In sum, this novel is an extension of Desai’s conviction that everyone in this world is lonely and that involvement in human relationship invariably leads to disaster. The themes of solitude, alienation, the futility of human existence and struggle for survival form the major themes of the novel.

The concluding chapter, in addition to being a summing up, attempts to focus on all the protagonists of Anita Desai who are alienated from their family and society, their mental upheavals, their marital discord and search for their identity. Most of Desai’s characters live in solitary confinements. All protagonists taken for study-Maya, Monisha, Sarah, Sita and Nanda Kaul, live in their own secluded world and are unable to accept the dictates of a male-dominated society. They put up a brave fight which makes them undergo many psychic upheavals and sets them on in a quest for identity. But they are not altogether lost in the whirlwind of their emotions because in the end, they are capable of attaining emancipation and finding solutions to their ills by self-discovery or at least by self-destruction.
CHAPTER-I
INTRODUCTION

Indian English Literature has a relatively recent testimony which is aged only one and a half centuries. It records a drastic development in the world. Singh points out, “Indian literature is one though written in many languages” (10). Writers use literature as their weapon to express their rebellious and thought provoking ideas. So, they enjoy their freedom of writing. They express their thoughts through their seminal writing. Since the pre-Independence era, the Indian authors wrote in different genres like poem, essay, drama and short story. In the past few years, authors have been substantially contributing to world literature. ‘Novel’ is a new literary genre in India which showed its face in formal prose form and slowly emerged as an artistic form. Novel experiments the creative transformation of writers to be Indian in notion, sensation and experience, yet also to encourage the graces and submit to the authority of English for expression.

Indian novelists in English attempt to employ Indianness in their works. Writers treated political and social themes till 1970s. The characters of their stories are princes, paupers, saints, sinners, farmers, servants, untouchables and coolies. They developed their story in the city or village. The most interesting and dedicating themes are like the country’s independence movement, East-West encounter, tradition –modernity, materialism and spiritualism. In the later years, the gradual growth of fiction in India is made by gradual shifting of focus from the external world to the inner world of the individual.