CHAPTER 1

Desai, Deshpande and Sahgal: A Re-Introduction

1.1 One Half of the Ground

1.2 The Self, Family and Society
It has begun. The Great Tradition in Indian English Fiction by women writers.

1.1 One Half of the Ground

It is hundred and forty six years since the publication of the first Indian novel in English\(^1\), and Indian English fiction has reached its prime. With the publication of novels such as Venkataramani’s *Murugan the Tiller* (1927) and *Kandan the Patriot* (1932), and Anand’s *Untouchable* (1935) and *Coolie* (1936), or Rao’s *Kanthapura* (1938), the Indian novel in English had made its mark even before the country had freed itself from the British yoke. These writers, and their contemporaries, had taken upon themselves the task of portraying the struggle for freedom, and the death and destruction brought about by the partition of the country. The Gandhian civil disobedience movement is highlighted in *Kandan the Patriot*. And there is *Kanthapura*, a Gandhi Purana in its depiction of the impact of Gandhi’s name and ideas on an Indian village, a village that becomes symbolical of the seven lakhs of villages in India during that period. Abbas’ *Inquilab* and Anand’s *The Sword and the Sickle* also portray the political scenario of the twenties. Bhattacharya’s *So Many Hungers* (1947) highlights the impact of the Quit India Movement on the masses. *Untouchable* has been read as the microcosm of India and *Coolie*, as its macrocosm: “*Coolie* is verily a cross-section of India, the visible India, that mixture of the horrible and the holy, the inhuman and the humane, the sordid and the beautiful.”\(^2\) Characters from various sections of society find portrayal in these novels. Sweepers like Bakha, coolies like Munoo, and coppersmiths like Lalla Murli Dhar and capitalists like Seth Gokal Chand\(^3\) come alive in them. Novels like Bhattacharya’s *So Many Hungers* (1947) have Gandhian figures like Devata and patriots like Rahul along with the capitalists creating food scarcity. Almost all the novels of this period show a major preoccupation with the oppression of the individual in a ruthless society.
The authors take up cudgels for the sweeper, the peasant, the plantation labourer, the sepoy, the city worker. They take up cudgels for victims of poverty and economic exploitation, for victims of caste, of social and political injustice, of squalor and backwardness, and ignorance and superstition.

Issues that the Partition had brought in its wake become the material for much of Indian English fiction in the later decades. Chaman Nahal’s *Azadi* published in 1975 is about mid-1947, those months of the partition horrors “exploded by the criminally short-sighted British rulers and (even more) by our own ‘national’ leaders afflicted with sudden blindness and loss of nerve”⁴. Manohar’s Malgonkar’s *A Bend in the Ganges* (1964) is also about Punjab in the August of 1947. *Distant Drum* (1960) - by the same author – portrays the strife in Delhi and Kashmir. Balachandra Rajan’s *The Dark Dancer* (1959) too offers glimpses of partition horrors. Again, Khushwant Singh’s *Train to Pakistan* (1956) is an imaginative record of the partition. And then there is the ‘arch-novel of liberation’ - Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* (1981). Important public figures like Indira Gandhi and major events in the Indian subcontinent find a space in the novels of Rushdie. The novels of these writers do not fail to deal adequately with the social changes, the issues related to social justice, and the problems of a post-Independence India. Apart from *Kanthapura* that Rao had written in 1938, and *The Cow of the Barricades* that was published in 1947, his novels published in 1960 (*The Serpent and the Rope*) and in 1965 (*The Cat and Shakespeare*) also reveal the same “sensitive awareness of the forces let loose by the Gandhian revolution as also of the thwarting or steadying pulls of past tradition.”⁵ *The Serpent and the Rope* has been described as a mini-*Mahabharata* in the idiom of our age, and *The Cat and Shakespeare* as similar to one of the longer Upanishads.⁶ The Chinese invasion of 1962 is the genesis of Bhattacharya’s *Shadow from Ladakh* (1966). And in *He who Rides a Tiger* (1955), it is the ideologies of people belonging to backward classes that find expression. Bhabani
Bhattacharya has been appreciated for his sensitive understanding of the problems of contemporary Indian society, for being “a humanist who has used realism to communicate his humanistic vision of life.” The same critic calls R.K. Narayan “a social worker behind a mask” (46). Novels like *Swami and Friends* (1935), *The Bachelor of Arts* (1937), *The Dark Room* (1938), *The English Teacher* (1945), or *Waiting for the Mahatma* (1953) are very much sociological studies of the people of India, their mind-set and behaviour during those days. The Malgudi novels depict the changes that India rapidly undergoes with time. As in India, hotels, haircutting saloons, printing presses, and suburban stores and photo studios spring up in novels like *Mr. Sampath* (1949). Narayan's *The Vendor of Sweets* (1967) and Chintamani’s *Vedantam: The Clash of Traditions* depict the impact of Western culture upon traditional Indian families. In Nahal’s novel – *Into Another Dawn* (1977) – one finds Ravi Sharma in two households, one in Haridwar and the other in USA. From Raja Rao and Mulk Raj Anand and R.K. Narayan, to Bhabani Bhattacharya and Manohar Malgonkar, social, economic, political and cultural issues are the leading motifs to be discovered in Indian English fiction.

The younger generation of Indian novelists also deal with issues that are as “vast as the sub continent.” Like Rushdie, there are Amitav Ghosh, Upamanyu Chatterjee, Rohinton Mistry and Mukul Keshvan who have made use of historical and political events in their novels. Vikram Seth’s *The Suitable Boy* (1992) recreates the multitudinous life of India after Independence; and shows the country moving from disillusionment to greater disillusionment. But apart from the patterns of consciousness in a new India, this generation of Indian novelists also deal with the existential throes of individuals. For instance, fragmented identities form a noteworthy feature of Rushdie’s Saleem Sinai, the protagonist of *Midnight’s Children* (1981). The protagonists of writers like Arun Joshi wade through meaninglessness and rootlessness. Ratan Rathor shifts from one world to another (both coexisting in Delhi itself); in an attempt to cleanse his soul of the
layers of dirt, Ratan makes it a point to wipe the shoes of devotees on the temple steps every morning. And Billy Biswas, after his training as an anthropologist in the States, gets away from civilized society and lives in the jungle among the Adivasis! Sindi Oberoi, Billy Biswas, Ratan Rathor, Som Bhaskar9 ... are all seen to be "making desperate attempts to silence the insidious bug within and reach a rapport with the world. One tries to flee himself, another his home and class, a third his shameful past, and the fourth the furies within."10 The first novel in verse by an Indian, The Golden Gate (1986) by Vikram Seth depicts the lives of five characters in San Francisco who find themselves unable to escape from an inner emptiness. In Manoj Das' Cyclones (1987), the protagonist Sudhir Chowdhury is tormented by an emotional cyclone. Upamanyu Chatterjee's English August: An Indian Story (1988) is again about the contemporary youth's quest for self-realization. These novels can therefore be said to deal with the inner life of man.

Indian English Fiction belongs to an Indian tradition because like other Indian literatures, it is created by Indians from the same milieu. "It is that they are pre-occupied with things that are Indian – Indian themes, Indian characters, Indian life and manners, Indian totems and taboos. It is this which has made English fiction by Indian writers unmistakably national."11 An appeal for humanity finds expression in these novels. But as Sulshila Singh has pointed out, human experience has been synonymous with masculine experience over the centuries with the result that "the collective image of humanity has been one-sided and incomplete."12 Women constitute one half of India. Well, almost: considering that the sex ratio of females and males here is 933 : 1000!13 But when it comes to women, their experiences hardly find enough depiction in the novels of Indian male novelists across a whole century. Novels such as Mulk Raj Anand's Gauri or R.K. Narayan's The Dark Room, and even the Painter of Signs proclaim that there are works by male writers that pivot around women. Sir Jogendra's novel is about Kamni the barber's daughter, Balakrishna's is about The Love of Kusuma. But
though the novels have women in them, and some of them even have titles named after the female protagonist, these novels do not deal adequately with the psychic functioning of the female characters. Society and its ways are evident in them, but the reader is kept at a considerable distance from the woman herself.

The novels of Anand, Rao, Narayan, Bhattacharya, Tagore ... all have images of women drawn from Indian culture. They extol the mother as protector and preserver, as strong-willed, soft-willed, self-sacrificing and affectionate. They extol the traditional Indian wife as 'the good wife', 'the pativrata nari', 'the ideal woman'. The ideal Indian woman - a paragon of virtue, gentle, long suffering, forgiving. It is this image of Indian womanhood that finds its prototype in the women of these writers. In Narayan's The Financial Expert (1952) Margayya's wife is a meek and submissive woman. In Bhattacharya's Music For Mohini (1952) the female protagonist needs her husband to come and save her from sacrificing her blood to the Goddess. Mohini works hard to make Behula a model village; but she is able to do so because they are causes that are dear to her husband, and she can not fail him in the responsibilities that he gave her. Bhattacharya's Kajoli reveals courage, and a capacity for endurance when it comes to miseries. They are all tender charming virtuous victims. It is stereotypical images of womanhood that are projected in the novels. Rosie is shown to behave "like a baby: excited, thrilled, appreciative of everything ... The girl was in ecstasy. Our house was surrounded by rich vegetation. She ran like a child from plant to plant with cries of joy, while the man looked on with no emotion." Along with the Rosies, are the Bilasias and Mohinis who are presented as stereotypes of the 'emotional wife' married to the 'intellectual husband' exemplified by Marco or Billy or Jaydev. With the husband presented as purusha (man) and the wife as prakriti (nature), the characters in these novels typify the man-mind/ woman-matter dichotomy. And if she is not Savitri the good wife, then she is Daisy 'the siren', 'the stern mentor', 'the ruthless dictator',
whom the community at Malgudi condemns as the 'intruder', as one whose role in the community is disruptive. In Narayan’s *The Dark Room* Ramani appreciates Savitri as a dutiful wife who would “rather starve than precede her husband”(16). If she is not the selfless self-denying epitome of virtue, then she is a vamp, a victimizer, a predator “who like Eve instigates man to do things which ultimately ruin him ... who frustrates man’s attempts to make a better life.”17 Either a selfless and docile woman, an angel, or a woman who is not so, a monster. If Rushdie trivializes women in his novels, Arun Joshi also depicts them exclusively from a masculine perspective. Woman has been defined as nothing more than “an entity that concerns man either in his real life or in his fantasy life.”18 Or, as Mulvey has argued, “women are constantly confronted with their own image in one form or another... Yet in a real sense, women are there not at all. The parade has nothing to do with women, everything to do with man.”19 Women are found to be depicted only in terms of man’s preferences, his requirements, his desires, or his fears. The writers remained silent about the realities, the experiences, the concerns, the conflicts, the values and anxieties of their women, as women - the one half of India!

If I were a man who cared to know the world I lived in, I almost think it would make me a shade uneasy - the weight of that long silence of one half of the world.20

But there are a few women writers who have chosen to break that long silence. A major segment of Indian English fiction is the work of women writers who have chosen to write her stories rather than his stories. And one of the reasons women have taken up pens in their hands is because they find in it opportunities to break that long conspiracy of silence, and to create a world in which they can “set the conditions of existence, free from the direct interference of men”.21 In her work a woman can concern herself with women as subjects, and explore their realities from a perspective that is her own - a woman’s. Fiction by
women novelists becomes the work of the marginal and the oppositional, work that offers women the possibility of identity and inclusion as women, and not as angels or monsters. Women come together in these novels, they interact and introspect, reveal themselves in their various dimensions, and become subjects in their own right. Indian society has undergone a whole lot of changes in the last half century. The struggle for Independence, and the achievement of it, the spread of education, the arrival of new ideas from the West, employment opportunities for women, economic independence, women’s movements ... have all gone together to open up new vistas for women. Fiction by Indian women novelists – women who took up writing in the latter half of the twentieth century – reflect the shift in the sensibilities of women. As women themselves, these writers seem to proclaim that as occupants of one half of this world, one half of the ground, and one half of the sky, is theirs - or should be. New directions in Indian English fiction can be mapped in their work – directions that are new not only with regard to themes, focus and sensibilities, but also in forms and techniques. Kamala Markandaya. Ruth Prawar Jhabvala. Arundhati Roy. Bharati Mukherjee. Suniti Namjoshi. Manju Kapur. Rama Mehta. Gita Mehta. Nargis Dalal. Jai Nimbkar. These women novelists, and a few others as well, have gone a long way in enriching Indian English fiction. And among them are three significant names: Anita Desai (b 1937), Nayantara Sahgal (b 1927), and Shashi Deshpande (b 1938).

With the publication of Cry, The Peacock in 1963, Anita Desai had ushered in a new era of psychological realism in Indian English Fiction. Desai was born to a Bengali father and a German mother, and has a graduate degree in English from Miranda College, Delhi. Married to Ashwin Desai, she is the mother of four children. The novels of Anita Desai reveal a preoccupation with human values and beliefs, and human existence. Dhavan has pointed out a major theme recurrent in her novels: “the agony of existence in a hostile and male-dominated
society, that is not only conservative but also taboo ridden." As one of her characters, Maya says, people spoke
of discussions in parliament, of cases of bribery and corruption revealed in government, of newspaper editors accused of libel, and the trials that followed, of trade pacts made with countries across the seas, of political treatises with those across the mountains, of distant revolutions, of rice scarcity and grain harvests... They had innumerable subjects to speak on, and they spoke incessantly.

But what Maya never got is the opportunity to speak of her own self. Desai thinks of the world as an iceberg, with one tenth of it visible above the surface of the water, and (mis) taken for reality. In an interview with Yashodhara Dalmia in The Times of India, Desai asserts that what she seeks to explore in her novels is the remaining nine-tenths of the iceberg that lie submerged and make up the truth.

A Sahitya Akademi Award winner for That Long Silence (1988), Shashi Deshpande declares that three things in her early life had made the writer in her: that her father himself was a writer, that her education was exclusively in English, and that she was born a female. Shashi Deshpande is the daughter of a renowned Kannada dramatist, Sriranga, also a Sanskrit scholar. After her schooldays in Dharwad, Karnataka, Deshpande did a BA in Economics from Elphistone College, Mumbai, and then an LLB in Bangalore. Later, she also got a masters in English from Mysore University. She is married to a neuropathologist and is the mother of two sons. Deshpande does not deal with socio-political issues, or have catastrophes in the lives of her people.

We are rational, unprejudiced, broad-minded. We discuss intelligently, even solemnly the problems of unemployment, poverty, corruption, we scorn the corrupt, we despise the ignorant, we hate the wicked. And our hearts bleed, Naren, for Vietnam, for the Blacks, for the Harijans... But frankly, we don't care a damn. Not one gaddam about anything but our own precious selves, our own precious walled-in lives.
Deshpande’s central characters are “well-educated, hardworking people in secure jobs, cushioned by insurance and provident funds... healthy, well-fed children going to good schools.”27 In her fiction Deshpande explores how an economically independent middle class woman’s search for personal goals can become cause for conflicts in her family life. Her novels have a significance of their own just because they deal with the experiences of women in drawing rooms - and kitchens!

Rich Like Us (1985) brought Nayantara Sahgal the Sinclair prize for fiction. Nayantara Sahgal was born in 1927 to Vijayalaksami and Ranjit Pandit. Her mother, Jawaharlal Nehru’s sister, was the first cabinet minister in the world and India’s Ambassador at the U.N. After a degree in History and Philosophy at Wellesley, America, Sahgal had got married to Gautam Sahgal, but later walked out of the relationship. The socio-political scenario of post-Independence India is the basic theme of Sahgal’s work. Born an aristocrat and brought up in a world of politics as Nehru’s niece, Sahgal had keenly observed the Indian socio-political scenario that finds ample reflection in her novels. In fact, even the characters are mostly those of her own class, and belong to North India. Like Desai and Deshpande, Sahgal too raises an objection through one of her characters that women were not a subject for discussion. They were wives, daughters, mothers. They belonged to their men by contract or by blood... they were dependents, not individuals... The one thing you could not crave, the thing that was a crime, was that they should inhabit the world as your equals, with the splendour and variety of human choice before them. They themselves were afraid to for they had no preparation for it ... A woman was not entitled to a past, not entitled to human hunger ... or even human error. In the fires and desolations of living she ranked as not quite human.28

Sahgal, in her novels, underlines the need for freedom - not just for the country, but also for the individual, irrespective of whether the person is a man or a woman.
Since conventional discourse serves to alienate a woman from her own self, Desai, Deshpande and Sahgal choose to draw attention to those aspects of women's experiences that are either presented in an idyllic manner, or go unrecorded. For these writers, the novels become a medium for manifesting women's differences, for presenting different ways of reconstituting women's subjectivities. Women from different backgrounds and different generations come together in their novels. And questions arise. These authors seem to ally themselves with all that is muted, and marginalized, and un-represented, or misrepresented in Indian culture and society. Their fiction offer new insights, and embody perspectives that are very different from those by most writers. There are no attempts to 'write like a man.' By projecting visions that are specifically female, each of these three women novelists writes her own Self into existence - as a woman.

1.2 The Self, Family, and Society

The analysis in this dissertation is based on the vital interpersonal psychic self. In this thesis, the 'self\textsuperscript{30} refers not to the Self of religious, philosophical or metaphysical parlance, but to the individual in her conscious and unconscious dimensions. The 'self' is the term used for the centre of consciousness and agency, for the subject of experience.\textsuperscript{31} It is used for an individual's psyche encompassing her conscious and unconscious needs, wishes, desires, fears, repressions. As part of the mechanics responsible for her thoughts, emotions and behaviour, the self thus refers not only to the words she speaks or the actions she takes, but also to the thoughts she thinks. The self is regarded as that urge in the psyche of an individual to achieve a sense of wholeness, a sense of fulfilment. As the core of an individual's psychic life, this study views the self as the core of her identity, her very survival. The relationship between the self and society is
inextricable. A person’s consciousness, her thoughts and ideas are not independent because the self is created not in a vacuum, but in society – by society. The self arises out of social experience and interaction, it is formed by a person’s observation of the world and practical engagement with it. As Lorraine puts it, “the self comes into being as the individual negotiates her cultural inheritance and reframes it, perhaps through a conflictual process, to meet her requirements. It is this conflict and the choices it compels which forge the self.” And since gender is the first differentiating factor among individuals, it turns out to be a basic determinant of a person’s experiences of her life, of her self. This dissertation seeks to examine the multitudinous forces that converge in the formation of a woman’s self. It endeavours to analyze how the fiction of Desai, Deshpande and Sahgal depict the interaction between the inner psychic world of a woman and the external society in which she has to live, and shape her existence, and also find some measure of fulfilment. In an attempt to explore different approaches to the representation of women, and the realities of women’s lives, this work draws on the work of three different writers. The women of three Indian women novelists are gathered so that various aspects of feminine selves can be studied in the context of a wide variety of settings in contemporary Indian society.

This work does not claim to make use of the entire corpus of the fiction of the three authors. Four novels of each, and Stone Women, a collection of short stories by Deshpande, forms much of the matrix of this study. Maya is the protagonist of Desai’s Cry, The Peacock (1963). It is the story of a young and sensitive woman married to a middle aged lawyer, whose fears, and failure to find fulfilment in the relationship leads to neurosis. Where shall we Go This Summer? (1982) has Sita – sensitive individual and wife and mother who is dissatisfied with her life in a mundane, materialistic and violent world. The same writer’s Voices in the City (1965) has Monisha, whose failure to find a space for self-actualization makes her decide to put an end to her existence. And there is Nanda Kaul, a great
grand-mother, the protagonist of Desai's *Fire on The Mountain* (1977). The novel revolves around her life as a wife, a mother, a grand mother, and then, as a great grand mother. Shashi Deshpande's Indu in *Roots and Shadows*, her Sarita in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980), Jaya in *That Long Silence* and Vanaa in *The Binding Vine* (1993) are all educated intelligent middle class wives going through doubts, fears and agonies as they seek to affirm their selfhood. Nayantara Sahgal's *A Time to be Happy* (1957) has the narrator's affluent family residing in Sharanpur, a small town in Uttar Pradesh, that flourishes in a textile industry owned by the British. The interest of this study in the novel lies in the characterization of Maya. *This Time of Morning* (1965) has bureaucrats and ministers making waves in the city. There is Rakesh, an officer in the External Affairs Ministry, there is Kalyan Singh, a minister, and Kailash, a Gandhian. But it is the women in this novel – Mira, Rashmi, Nita – who are taken up for study. *The Day in Shadow* (1971) too has post-independence Delhi for its setting. There are businessmen and politicians making shrewd manoeuverings in the ministries. But again, it is the female protagonist Simrit who is a major source of interest in this work, like Saroj in *Storm in Chandigarh* (1969). This novel depicts the city passing through a period of political strife, and an IAS officer Vishal Dubey becomes the spokesman for the peace and progress of the nation. *Rich Like Us* (1985) has a woman IAS officer Sonali confronting the problems of post-independence India – the rampant corruption, the perils of emergency, demolition of the slums and cramped working conditions.

The novels of Sahgal deal with the political administrative scenario, the impact of transition, the disillusionment with independence, the degeneration of values and corruption. She highlights post-Independence India as a country in which the innocent man is arrested if he does not flatter the leader in power, or an IAS officer is demoted when she does not sanction the happyola drink agency that has the 'good will' of the men in power. Nayantara Sahgal is one who had
grown up with politics. She was – in her own words – “born into politics”, and what she heard for breakfast, lunch and dinner was politics. However, unlike other critical surveys on Sahgal, this thesis does not deal with these aspects of her novels. The focus of this dissertation is the private sphere of the political novels. Similarly, Anita Desai also has male protagonists and novels dealing with issues like the East-West encounter. She finds a place in university syllabi and a few of her novels have been the source of interest for various aspects such as her poetic prose. But this dissertation does not claim to deal with all the themes in the fiction of these writers, or all their characters, ethics, or aesthetics. What this thesis seeks to offer are new readings of Desai, Deshpande and Sahgal, with the self, family, and society depicted as major themes. The focal point of this study is this thematic preoccupation that emerges in their fiction – the exploration of the Indian psyche and its relation to society. It seeks to map the unfrequented territories of a woman’s psyche, and is principally concerned with the presentation of women’s experiences in different situations and at different stages in their lives.

The bharatiya nari is a crystallization of different patterns of perception of her values, her role, her conduct … The Indian woman is the way the Indian man has perceived her! In Tagore’s words she is “endowed with the passive qualities of chastity, modesty, devotion and power of self-sacrifice in a greater measure than man is.” By projecting the image of the Indian woman as a self-denying and self-effacing being, the concept of the Indian woman, or the qualities identified as becoming of her, are socially produced within language. The good wife “must prove superior to her husband not only in her truism but also in her mature forbearance of his foibles.” A general remark that embodies the expectations from wifehood. The Indian society constitutes and endorses a discourse that demands the self-sacrifice of a woman. The gentle, pliant, service-minded Indian woman is one who does not have hungers of her own, or one whose hunger is satiated by feeding her family. The forms of subjectivity that are
structured for Indian women imply a satisfaction and fulfilment that is quite masochistic. She is not a Being-in-Itself but a Being-for-others. The subject positions within the religions and cultures of Indian society celebrate a particular mode of femininity regulated by such norms of self-lessness that also restrain her from seeking selfhood. And all these virtues are rhetorically reinforced constantly, emphasizing their obviousness, and pressurize a woman to accept them. And when a woman offers resistance to being masochistic with her capacity to ‘give’, she is made to feel guilty of being indifferent, irresponsible, wicked – selfish in another word. Or, ‘unfeminine’ in one more word. As Foucault puts forward the argument, social practices and discourses are ways of constituting knowledge, forms of subjectivity, and power relations.

Discourses are more than ways of thinking and producing meaning. They constitute the ‘nature’ of the body, unconscious and conscious mind and emotional life of the subject which they seek to govern ... the ways in which discourse constitutes the minds and bodies of individuals is always part of a wider network of power relations, often with institutional bases.37

Sita is a product of Indian culture. Vivekananda proclaims that the Hindus as a race could not have produced the image of Sita without revering woman. In his words: “a race that produced Sita ... has a reverence for women that is unmatched on earth ...”38 But it has been pointed out that even myths describe it all from the male point of view. The Indian tradition presents the virtuous woman as a kind of Sati, as one whose life ends in self-immolation. “She is there to suffer, to stay put, and to endure all the problems that come her way.”39

Patriarchy can be shown to be at work in offering such an image as a universal for Indian womanhood. By reinforcing the Sita-Sati-Savitri images of womanhood as the ones that the Indian woman ought to emulate, such stereotyping becomes a strategy that makes a woman see her self and make her choices “not in accordance with her true nature in itself, but as man defines her.”40 His Other. And then, a woman’s self comes into being as she negotiates her way through the forces that
converge to form her self into the other. The opening theoretical move in feminism - in order to be the Self / the Subject / the Transcendent himself, he seeks to establish her as the Other / the Object / the Immanent. He finds her subordination to be necessary for his own freedom. And then relationships between him and her become power-structured, and arrangements are made in a manner that privileges him over her. She is relegated to secondary roles - as feminist thinkers point out - and comes to internalize the concepts that dominate her in her social, political and cultural life. He and she remain stuck on the images and roles that a gendered society has laid out for them to follow, and the self turns out to be a product of society depending on whether it is the male Self, or his Other. The self is socially and culturally constructed.

This study therefore addresses the self not as a given but as a construct. The focal point of this thesis is the relationship between two protagonists - the Self and Society. Society which exists both as "a physical reality outside and a psychic agent within". This dissertation endeavours to examine how Desai, Deshpande and Sahgal highlight the impact of social constructs on the mind of an individual, and depict society's role in conditioning an individual's psyche, in moulding an individual's life. In its attempt to highlight the gendered aspects of social behaviour, it explores the everyday practices of family life, the socio-cultural and material practices, and the institutional and ideological discourses that merge to construct and reproduce gendered identities. It seeks to analyze the social constitution and regulation of femininity and highlight the social web of forces that converge to form a woman's self. Various theories have been incorporated in the analysis of social institutions like marriage, with regard to language, social meanings, ideology, power ... and the construction of a woman's conscious and unconscious sense of self - a sense of self that is developed and consolidated, or refashioned, during different phases of her life. A large number of
characters, and consequently, a wide variety of existences enables this study to explore different ranges of experiences that form the axis of women's lives.

The basic unit of society – the family – is the locus of this study. Most of the protagonists taken up for study are wives and mothers – Indian wives and Indian mothers – and the home – the Indian Home - is at the core of the novels. The characters of Desai, Deshpande and Sahgal are not Indians living abroad, like those of many other Indian women novelists. For instance, Bharati Mukherjee’s Wife (1993) is Dimple who “in her attempts to look like an American, she tries to develop an illicit relationship with another man, wears clothes of American friends, borrows English words, plans to commit suicide, and even to kill Amit.”


Most Indian women novelists have ‘interesting’ (?) stories to offer in their work. Nargis Dalal’s Minari is loaded with historical elements, chivalry, idealism, romance. Iqbal Sing is a ‘genius’ who becomes a bandit and Mrs Rula Ranganathan – born to an Indian father and Greek mother – dies of alcohol! The
novel has a Mr Tejpore who ‘loves’ Zora, Anita and Rula. And *Possession* by Markandaya has the ‘hero’ entangled with Caroline, Ellie and Annabel! In *A Doll for the Child Prostitute* Kamala Das has a prostitute secretly marrying her student client who sells his pen to visit her or saves his lunch allowance and bus fare for her. It has a mother who sells her girl child to the keeper of a brothel. In *The Sisters* by Nargis Dalal, the man wants to marry his wife’s sister. In another novel Rahul, the Yogi of Swami Sukhanand Ashram is seduced by Goldie, a white woman. In *Two Virgins* by Kamala Markandaya, Lalitha goes to Bombay to become a film actress and gets pregnant by a director who betrays her. The protagonist of Sunny Singh’s *Nani’s Book of Suicides* (2000) goes to America, and then to Mexico, but cannot get away from a grandmother who has the magical power of entering people’s minds and reading their dreams, a grandmother who torments her with “stories of times gone by” (106). And Anita Nair’s *The Better Man* (1999) has the spirit of an unhappy mother haunting the ancestral house. Fantastic stories form a part of Gita Hariharan’s *When Dreams Travel* (1999). The novels of Desai, Deshpande and Sahgal do not have such elements. The interest of their novels do not lie in the plot, or sensational story telling like Belinder Dhanoa’s *Waiting For Winter* (1991) where the protagonist Pratibha marries an NRI only to find that he is already married to an American, whose father gets killed in a terrorist attack and whose mother goes insane. The fiction of Desai, Deshpande and Sahgal do not have hair-raising incidents lined up one after the other like Bharati Mukherjee’s *Jasmine* (1989) where the husband is killed, the wife raped and transformed in America into Jane Ripplemayer, who then becomes pregnant by a banker gunned down by an angry customer that leaves him handicapped ... In the novels of Desai, Deshpande and Sahgal, there is no evidence of magic realism like Suniti Namjoshi’s *The Conversation of Cow* (1985) where the Guru of the heroine appears in the form of a cow and the two of them move around in Canada. The women of Desai, Deshpande and Sahgal do not
belong in a world like Namjoshi’s *Maya Diip* where the boys are drowned in the sea on the attainment of puberty and the women of the island are free from patriarchy! The novels of Desai Deshpande and Sahgal do not have talking flowers like *St. Suniti and the Dragon* (1994) and in them the heroine’s skin colour does not change in response to the changes in the country she resides in. In their novels no heroine finds herself ship-wrecked on a remote island where she acquires magical powers and becomes *The Mistress of Spices* like Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s *Tilottama*. In them, the heroine does not find herself infatuated with a mentally deranged cousin - Or find marital happiness in a way that is reminiscent of a Mills and Boons like Nirmala Moorthy’s *Maya* (1997).

A Desai Deshpande or a Sahgal novel has no romance, adventure, intrigue. Instead, the novels show concern with ideas and characterization. The protagonists of Desai, Deshpande and Sahgal find themselves in circumstances that are ‘ordinary’, and they live lives that are average too, but they themselves are not average in their sensibilities and outlook and attitude. They are not average women, but ones who make “a stand against the general current.” Desai’s words for her women are applicable to those of the other two writers as well:

> It is easy to flow with the current, it makes no demands, it costs no effort. But those who cannot follow it, whose heart cries out “the great No” who fight the current and struggle against it, they know what the demands are and what it costs to meet them.

The interest in the fiction of these authors lies in showing how the contemporary educated Indian woman attempts to cope with the forces within herself, and outside herself, in her search for identity and fulfilment. The interest in the fiction of Desai, Deshpande and Sahgal lies in demonstrating how the family and society work to produce a multiplicity of voices internalized within a woman’s self. The interest in the fiction of these authors lies in showing how social and familial structures exert their power over an individual as she seeks different ways to
retain her self as an integrated whole. The novels present a whole lot of attitudes that lie between the extremes of a Savitri who continues to swallow the traumas inflicted by her husband, and a Daisy who rejects the institution of marriage, whose creator declares that she has no use for men as an integral part of her life.47 The novels of Desai, Deshpande and Sahgal are not monolithic structures, but offer different subject positions and differences and contradictions. The fiction of these writers do not let out of sight the close relationship between literature and life. They choose to present women as they really are, and it is the depiction of their needs, conflicts and dilemmas that make them convincing. The novels reveal a preoccupation with truth, a “perpetual search for meanings”. They are efforts to discover, underline and convey the true “significance of things.”48

NOTES

1. This is a reference to Bankim Chandra Chatterjee’s Rajmohan’s Wife published in 1864
2. K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar, Indian Writing in English (1985; Delhi, Sterling, 2000) 390
3. Bakha and Munde are the protagonists of Mulk Raj Anand’s Untouchable and Coolie respectively. Lalla Murli Dhar and Gokal Chand are characters in the The Big Heart, another novel by the same writer.
4. Iyengar, Indian Writing in English 751
5. Ibid., 368
6. Ibid., 409
7. Pramod Singh, Major Indo-English Novelists and Novels (Jaipur: Sublime, 2001) 104
8. R.S. Pathak, Indian Fiction of the Nineties (Delhi: Creative Books, 1997) ix

10. Iyengar, *Indian Writing in English* 748

11. G.P. Sharma, *Nationalism in Indian English Fiction* (Delhi: Sterling) 31-32


16. The prototype of the ideal Indian woman, Savitri, and her opposite, Daisy are characters in Narayan’s *The Dark Room* and *The Painter of Signs* respectively.


20. These words by Elizabeth Robins have been used by Shashi Deshpande as the epigraph of her novel *That Long Silence*. (1988; Delhi: Penguin, 1989).

22. Though an European by birth, Jhabvala is regarded as an Indian novelist because it is her experiences of this country that forms the basis of her work. Moreover she is the wife of an Indian architect.


25. Yashodhara Dalmia, “An Interview with Anita Desai". The Times of India, 29 April 1979

26. Shashi Deshpande, Roots and Shadows (Hyderabad: Orient, 1983) 97

27. Shashi Deshpande, That Long Silence 5.


30. Theories of the ‘self’ such as those forwarded by Freid, Jung, Adler, etc. are not found applicable within the scope of this study.


32. These words by Rosenberg have also been used by Philip Blumstein in “The Production of Selves in Personal Relationships.” See Ana Branaman, ed., Self and Society (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001) 10


34. These are references to Nishi’s father and Sonali in Nayantara Sahgal, Rich Like Us (1985; Delhi: Harper Collins, 2003).


41. Manmohan Bhatnagar, ed. *Feminist English Literature* (Delhi: Atlantic, 2002) 106

42. Pradip Singh Rathod, “Culture as Protagonist in Bharati Mukherjee’s *Wife*.” Mashkoor Ali.

43. *Maya Diip* is the ‘island of illusion’ in Suniti Namjoshi’s novel published in 1989- *Mothers of Maya Diip*.

44. This is a reference to Krishna Chahal of Nira Sibal’s *Yatra*

45. I have in mind Jhabvala’s *The Poet and Dancer*.


47. In Narayan’s words, Savitri shows the “utter dependence of woman on man in our society.” He feels that he has “moved along with the times” in portraying Daisy who “not only is she not dependent on men, she actually has no use for them as an integral part of her life.” See S. Krishnan, “A Day with R.K. Narayan,” Bhatnagar and Rajeshwar, ed. *Indian Writings in English*, vol. vii, (Delhi: Atlantic, 2000) 41