ABSTRACT

The dissertation entitled, The Concept of Indian Wife: A Comparative Study of Selected Novels of Anita Desai and Kamala Markandaya endeavours to examine the problems encountered by the married Indian women as depicted in the selected novels of Anita Desai and Kamala Markandaya and also analyzes the ways the protagonists have adopted to overcome the problems of their lives. Anita Desai and Kamala Markandaya are the two great artists in the realm of English fiction. A comparative study of the two novelists provides a fascinating and rewarding experience. A large number of critical articles and some full length studies with regard to the two writers have appeared individually. However, except for an article or two, not many studies have attempted a comparative analysis of married Indian women in the novels of these two writers.

Hence, this study seeks to examine the portrayal of married women by these two contemporary Indian women novelists. The thrust of the study is on the depiction of women as wives in particular because the protagonists are women in almost all of their novels chosen for study. Three novels of each writer in particular, which are relevant for the study, have been taken to assert the title, An Indian Wife. The novels that are taken up for the study are: Nectar in a Sieve, A Handful of Rice and The Silence of Desire by Kamala Markandaya and Cry, the Peacock, Where Shall We Go This Summer? and Fire on the Mountain by Anita Desai.
The juxtaposed critical study of these six novels yields more penetrating insights into the characteristic traits of the women protagonists depicted in their novels. All the six texts represent varied voices of resistance of women in the Indian patriarchal societies. The protagonists have similar experiences to some extent, but each protagonist has adopted her own way to tackle the circumstances faced by her. It is a journey into the hitherto veiled thoughts of these married women. As and when the context demands, the elements of comparison and contrast are brought into focus in all the chapters so that the examination of the novels of both the writers results in the enhancement of each others’ significance.

This is not a feminist study nor does it attempts to apply feminist critical tenets to the novels or novelists under consideration. However, it must be admitted that as the world presented in these novels is viewed by women, it is bound to project a women’s point of view. But this is not necessarily a feminist point of view. Infact, these writers may be considered post feminist writers to a great extent. A comparative study of different roles played by married women, which are traditionally associated with them are studied in detail. The attitude of the women characters towards these roles is also examined. After examining the differences and similarities, an attempt is made to study the ways and means adopted by these selected women characters to solve the problems of their married lives and
achieve their identity. This study also tries to bring out the message which the writers try to convey through their characters.

This dissertation presents synoptic views of Anita Desai and Kamala Markandaya’s portrayal of women protagonists in terms of the shifting sensibilities and changing attitudes of married Indian women. It also tries to analyze the portrayal of women characters who belong to rural and urban upper classes of Indian society. As an artist Kamala Markandaya’s fiction is concerned with change in feminine sensibility brought about by the social, economic and cultural forces, whereas Anita Desai’s major concern is about exploration of the psychological condition of the oppressed hyper-sensitive women. This study is an attempt to analyze various married women characters against the background of important aspects of woman’s life – marriage, migration, motherhood and midlife.

The traditional Indian wife is the best antidote to modern ills related to family and culture. In all sections of the society whether in lower class or upper class or middle class, Indian wife is all what men can dream of. But she has lived in a society totally ruled by tradition and appropriateness in which she is no more than a second-class citizen. However, during the second part of the 20th century, one can witness a dramatic improvement in the lives of Indian women. The period leading to the new millennium coincides with a state of self-awareness which causes women to break away from obsolete customs and stereo-types maintained by patriarchy. Along with household
responsibilities, she now works outside the vicinity of her household, just like her male counterparts in various fields. She has also begun to fight for her rights despite the enormous pressure of patriarchy. The modernity set in by the Western culture motivated women to revolt against the existing moribund conditions and to seek their fulfillment and identity by carving their course independently.

Unfortunately, some women in search of their identity alienate themselves from the realities of human life. They fail to establish harmonious human relationships with people around. The reasons for such failures have been delineated convincingly in the writings of both the writers. The prime concern of Anita Desai has been the exploration of the inner selves of her married women protagonists who are always in search of their identity, whereas Kamala Markandaya attempts to focus on the inborn superior characteristic features of the Indian wife, who tries to keep the family ties intact.

The aim of the study is to trace out the problems of married Indian women as depicted in the novels of both the writers and seek positive solutions to their problems. The study also aims to explore Anita Desai and Kamala Markandaya’s answers to intriguing questions like:

- How should the equation between husband and wife be? What is the role of the wife in maintaining harmonious relationship with her husband?
• What are the strategies adopted by the married women to fulfill their “needs” in the new environment?

• Why do the tender filial bonds degenerate into bondages? Why there is graded change in woman’s outlook towards her role as wife and mother in the family?

• Why are husband and wife, many a time, alienated rather than harmoniously united? What are its effects on child’s mental growth?

• What are the peculiar psychic traits of those women who make a smooth transition from one relationship to another and enjoy the warm security of kith and kin?

• How do middle-aged women resolve the midlife crises that creep into their lives?

• What is that writers try to accomplish through their novels? And what is their message to the society?

The argument of the dissertation has been arranged in five chapters. They are:

1. Image of Indian Wife: Women Writers’ Perspective.
2. Marriage: Salvation or Bondage?
3. Migration: To Heaven, Hell or Purgatory?
4. Motherhood and Midlife: Fulfillment or Curse?
5. Attitudinal Variations: A Logical Consummation.
CHAPTER – I

The Introductory chapter, Image of Indian Wife: Women Writers’ Perspective gives definition of “wife” and her status in the Indian society as described in various religions and religious scriptures. It further justifies the title of the thesis, the choice of the writers and their novels selected for the study. The thesis enumerates briefly, the beginning of Indian Writing in English followed by the depiction of Indian women characters by male and female writers. It also brings out contrasting views of the male and female writers in their depiction of women characters. This chapter makes a comparative study of both the writers, selected for the study, with respect to their narrative techniques, characterization, imagery, landscape, etc. This chapter serves as the preamble for this dissertation.

CHAPTER – II

The second chapter, Marriage: Salvation or Bondage? deals with the aspect of Marriage. Indians attach great significance to the institution of Marriage and, believe that marriage is not just a relation between two individuals but rather the blending of two families. In this context, it is studied whether the Indian wives depicted in the novels have meaningful marriages which lead to salvation or manacled marriages which are bondages for them. This chapter defines Marriage, its importance in Indian society and position of women as wife from the ancient to the modern times in the Indian society. In addition, it also discusses the marital spectrum devised by famous Socio-psychologists, John J. Leaderer and Dr. Don D. Jackson and analyzes the marriages portrayed
in the selected novels of Anita Desai and Kamala Markandaya. The chief focus is on gender-relationship in the portrayed settings of marriages. This chapter presents the lives of compatible and incompatible couples and places them in one of the categories of marriage mentioned in the marital spectrum. It also analyzes the nature of matrimonial bonds in the novels of both the writers. This chapter discusses about the Indian women who make their home by facing all the hardships of their lives and also about the women who break their home with their unnecessary speculations.

**CHAPTER - III**

The third chapter, *Migration: To Heaven, Hell or Purgatory?* is about migrating to new place after Marriage. It throws light on the lives of married Indian women who migrate to husband’s place after marriage. This chapter focuses on the “human needs” discussed by a socio-psychologist, Abraham Maslow in his theory, “Hierarchy of Needs”. The needs of married women characters in the selected novels of Anita Desai and Kamala Markandaya have been analyzed and compared in the light of Maslow’s theory. Further, it presents how in the pursuit of fulfillment of needs, the heroines adopt some strategies to face the unexpected situations in the new environment. These survival strategies of married women in the novels of Anita Desai and Kamala Markandaya have been analyzed. Finally, the strategies, which are viable for heroines to cope with the new circumstances at their husbands’ place, are discussed.
CHAPTER – IV

Chapter four, Motherhood and Midlife: Fulfillment or Curse? is about changing attitudes of mothers towards Motherhood. In many cultures motherhood is mandatory, upon which the ‘identity’ of a woman depends. Hence, this chapter presents “motherhood and midlife” as major aspects of a woman’s life. It brings out the comparative difference of the image of the mother perceived by male and female writers and, throws light on the concept of motherhood and sentimentality connected with it in India. Further, it also analyzes the mother characters as depicted in the selected novels of Anita Desai and Kamala Markandaya to see whether motherhood brings fulfillment to woman’s life or whether it is curse for her. It also discusses the midlife of women characters selected for the study and also about the midlife crises that creep into their lives. Along with exploring the nature of filial ties in Anita Desai’s works and comparing with that of parent-child bond in the novels of Kamala Markandaya, this chapter also discusses how the reminiscences of the past show their affect on the midlife of the women protagonists. The chapter discusses how the disturbing marital bond of the parents distort the psyche of the children who inturn, fail to socialize themselves. The effects of single-parent brought up, particularly how the absence of mother results in improper psychological growth of girl-child is discussed in this chapter. The chapter also highlights the importance attributed to mother in a family unit.
CHAPTER – V

The concluding chapter, **Attitudinal Variations: A Logical Consummation** sums up with a message from the writers. It details the message that Kamala Markandaya and Anita Desai try to give to the society through their novels. The chapter analyzes the influence of environment, education and experience which shape the attitude of human beings. As psychological attributes and external stresses either positively or negatively influence the human behaviour and the solidarity of human ties, the chapter discusses the reasons for abnormal behaviour of the Indian wives depicted by Anita Desai and, humble behaviour of the Indian wives depicted by Kamala Markandaya. The importance of positive attitude and vocation in life has been emphasized by bringing out a comparative study of Desai’s and Markandaya’s women characters. The importance of relationship between husband and wife and their living together by submerging their egos has been highlighted in this chapter. The discussion is concluded with the observation that there is a need for adjustment and acceptance among couples as fulfilling bonds go a long way in infusing one with a sense of security and fulfillment. In this connection, the role of married Indian woman is highlighted because the responsibility lies in her hands to keep the family ties intact.

On the whole, the thesis contributes the following aspects: It stresses the need for balanced personality which is expected of an Indian wife for achieving harmony and fulfillment in life. It tries to
analyze the motive of both the writers behind their design of the married women characters. For instance, the effects of balanced or imbalanced personality are clearly brought out by analyzing and comparing Anita Desai’s hyper-sensitive heroine, Maya (Cry, The Peacock) with that of Kamala Markandaya’s matured heroine, Rukmani (Nectar in a Sieve). The thesis explains the importance of the mother who is indispensable for girls, particularly during adolescence. Similarly, company of girls of the same age group is also essential for developing a sense of a separate identity. It discusses how the absence of mother and girlfriends affect the child’s personality to an extent that she grows into womanhood, unprepared and unwilling to shoulder the responsibilities of a wife and a mother. For instance, motherless Sita (Where Shall We Go This Summer?) creates dissonance and disharmony in her life with her unusual behaviour which in turn disrupts the marital relationship between her and her husband, Raman.

The thesis emphasizes the universal need for human ties. It conveys the message that running away from human contact or one’s kith and kin is not enviable preposition for woman who faces identity crisis. The thesis further explains that no normal human being can isolate or alienate herself from the family. Such trail to alienate oneself goes in futile. This idea is brought out by Anita Desai through her character, Nanda (Fire on the Mountain). For instance, Nanda desires loneliness. She wants to be all alone without any kind of disturbance
from the people who are closely related to her. But when she is
ignored by her great grand daughter, she makes desperate yet futile
attempts to weave fantasies to win over her. The thesis also focuses on
the inborn applaudable characteristics of an Indian wife who carries
the familial bonds perfectly well. For instance, Markandaya’s woman
character, Rukmani (Nectar in a Sieve) who represents an ideal Indian
wife, stands with all strength to bear the onslaughts of cruel nature
and an all-pervading industrialization that invade her life. The thesis
also underlines the need for uninhibited communication between the
husband and the wife. It discusses the annihilating impact of poverty
and hunger on the emotional bonds that exist between the husband
and the wife, and also between the parent and the child. It speaks
about the requirement of “presence of mind” on the part of woman to
deal with difficult situations that come across in her life. An Indian
wife should be smart enough to resolve the problems and save her
marital bond from disintegration and degeneration. For instance, this
smartness is displayed by women characters like: Nalini (A Handful of
Rice) and Sarojini (A Silence of Desire) who with their timely action
save their marital bonds from disintegration.

Hence a comparative analysis of the works of these novelists
throws light on the diverse contemporary problems viz. social,
cultural, economical and psychological problems which pose
challenges to woman’s identity as well as integrity of her family. The
greatness of Indian woman lies in keeping her identity protected as well as her family ties integrated without disintegration.

The purpose behind the selection of theme is to focus on the appreciative qualities of an Indian wife who display stoic nature in trying circumstances and face multi-dimensional pressures and tensions with patience and endurance. It also aims to unravel the potential of Indian wife who has the capacity to balance her identity and her family responsibilities equally, inspite of many challenges in an Indian family setup.