

A Study of Comparison of Traditional and Modern Oeuvre

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Abstract

The term “Feminism” has different uses and its meaning is often contested. Some writers use this term to refer to a historically specific political movement in the US and Europe; whereas, others use it to refer to the belief that there are injustices against women, though there is no consensus on the exact list of these injustices. Although the term “feminism” has a history in English, linked with women’s activism, from the late 19th century to the present, it is useful to distinguish feminist ideas or beliefs from feminist political movements, for, even in periods where there has been no significant political activism around women’s subordination, individuals have been concerned with and theorized about justice for women. To speak of “Feminism” as a theory is already a reduction. However, in terms of its theory, ‘Feminism’ may be categorized into three general groups: theories having an essentialist focus, including psychoanalytic and French feminism; theories aimed at defining or establishing a feminist literary canon or theories seeking to re-interpret and re-vision literature and culture and history and so forth from a less patriarchal slant including gynocriticism, liberal feminism; and theories focusing on sexual difference and sexual politics including gender studies, lesbian studies, cultural feminism, radical feminism, and socialist/ materialist feminism.

Further, women and men needed to consider what it meant to be a woman, to consider how much of what society has often inherently female traits deemed are culturally and socially constructed. Simon de Beauvoir’s study, *The Second Sex*, served as a ground-breaking book of feminism that questioned the ‘othering’ of women by Western philosophy. Early projects in feminist theory included resurrecting women’s literature that, in many cases, had never been considered seriously or had been erased over time, e.g. Charlotte Perkins Gilman was quite prominent in the early 20th century but was virtually unknown until her work was ‘re-discovered’ later in the century. Since the 1960s the writings of many women have been rediscovered, reconsidered, and collected in large anthologies such as *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women*.

However, merely unearthing women’s literature did not ensure its prominence. In order to assess women’s writings the number of preconceptions inherent in a literary canon dominated by male beliefs and male writers needed to be re-evaluated. Betty Friedan’s *The Feminist Mystique* (1963), Kate Millet’s *Sexual Politics* (1970), Teresa de Lauretis’s *Alice Doesn’t: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (1984), Annette Kolodny’s *The Lay of the Land* (1975), Judith Fetterly’s *The Resisting Reader* (1978), Elaine Showalter’s *A Literature of Their Own* (1977), or Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gulbar’s *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979) are just handful of the many critiques that questioned cultural, sexual, intellectual, and psychological stereotypes about women. Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Right of Women* (1792) which discusses male writers like Milton, Pope, and Rousseau; Olive Schreiner’s *Women and*

Labour (1911); Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929), which vividly portrays the unequal treatment given to women seeking education and alternatives to marriage and mother-hood; and Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) which has an important section on the portrayal of women in the novels of D.H. Lawrence:

“The Radical Feminists allege that marriage is at the very root of women's subjection to the man because, through it, man controls both her reproduction and her person”.

Indian English literature originated as a necessary outcome of the introduction of English education in India under the colonial rule. The new literature, however, is characterized by Indian themes, Indian reality, and above all, by a new language, that is, a new English, adequately suitable for the communication of Indian experience.

Indian English literature is today a fast growing discipline at the levels of creativity and criticism. The earlier shackles, skepticism and cynicism, with which the new literature was born, have vanished with the passage of time. Today this literature, which was born on Indian soil in the hands of Indians, is widely acclaimed even outside the land of its birth. Speaking about Indian English fiction, Braj B. Kachru remarks:

“Indian English fiction is now being studied and discussed in the entire English speaking world by those interested in the Indian subcontinent or in non-native English, and by linguists for its thematic and stylistic Indianness. At least half a dozen Indian English novelists have created a small but slowly increasing international reading public for themselves e.g., Mulk Raj Anand, Anita Desai, Manohar Malgonkar, Kamala Markandaya, R.K. Narayan, Raja Rao, Khushwant Singh and Nayantara Sahgal.”

Obviously, international attention to these Indian writers is due to their Indianness, conveyed through their work in more ways than one, including themes, images, myths, symbols and linguistic nuances. Typical Indian themes are said to be the caste system, social attitudes, social and religious taboos, superstitions, notions of superiority and inferiority. Even more important issues pertain to socio-cultural ethos and philosophical heritage. Moreover, as K.S. Srinivasan aptly points out, myths are also repositories of Indian identity:

“The characteristic Indianness is traceable to the totality of the myth of India, embodied in themes, such as Siva- Parvati, Radha-Krishna, Ram-Sita and so on, they being part of our collective national psyche . . . Tales from Panchatantra, Kathasaritsagara and the extinct Brihatkatha are as much part of the national psyche”.

The emergence of women novelists in Indian English literature took place as early as the last quarter of the nineteenth century. But, it was only after independence that they could make solid contribution to Indian English fiction. The post-independence period has brought to the forefront a number of noted women novelists who have enriched Indian English fiction by a creative release of feminine sensibility. The ‘woman’ has been the focus of many literary works in this period. Writers like Kamala Markandaya, Nayantara Sahgal, Ruth Praver Jhabvala, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Kiran Desai etc. have achieved recognition in recent times.

Problems of women, which were till now in the periphery, have now shifted to the centre. Through the eyes of these women writers one gets a glimpse of a different world, till now not represented in literature. Women, who were till then treated as second class citizens, were assigned their due place in these novels. These novels present a picture of the impact of education on women, her new status in the society and her assertion of individuality. The works of Indian women novelist like Anita Desai and Shashi Deshpande can be compared with those of the Canadian novelists, like Margaret Atwood, Margaret Lawrence and Aritha Van Herk. All these writers write of life as seen by women and life as affecting women. The Feminist movement in the West has inspired a new approach to reality in relation to woman and her portrayal in literature:

“Coined by the feminist scholar, Elaine Showalter, the term ‘gynocriticism’ has now become synonymous with the study of women as writers, and provides critics with four models concerning the nature of women’s writing that help answer some of the chief concerns of feminist criticism. Each of Showalter’s models in sequential subsuming and developing the preceding model, as follows : (1) the biological model, with its emphasis on how the female body makes itself upon the text by providing a host of literary images and a personal, intimate tone; (2) the linguistic model, concerning itself with the differences between women’s and men’s use of language and with the question of whether women can and do create a language peculiar to their gender and utilize such a language in their writings; (3) the psycho-analytic model, based on an analysis of the female psyche and how such analysis affects the writing process and (4) the cultural model, investigating how the society in which female authors work and function shapes women’s goals, responses and points of view”.

A literary manifestation of the specialization process creates a different linguistic experience and environment for male and female experiences, especially in novels, we can move much closer to the female experience. Novels, therefore, are seen as structured and extended statements about reality.

Of the varied hues and shades of the women novelists, Anita Desai happens to be one of the major voices of the modern Indian English fiction. She represents the welcome “Creative release of the feminine sensibility” which began to emerge after World War II. She is a recorder of the dilemma faced by an individual in the Indian urban set up. She ushered a new era of psychological realism in this genre with her novel *Cry, The Peacock* (1963).

Anita Desai, like Kamala Markandaya, has made human relationship central to her fictional concern. Her serious concern is with the journey within her characters. Therefore, the recurring theme that we come across in her novels is the agony of existence in a hostile and male dominated society that is not only conservative but also taboo-ridden. The metaphysical world attracts her too; and so does the mental apprehensions and the sense of insecurity in the life of her protagonists who are undergoing traumatic psychic experiences due to the collapse of value-system and lack of satisfactory alternatives. Despondency, frustrations and failures do not give rise to complete chaos and anarchy in human relationship. We see the struggle of the protagonists as heroic attempts that finally bring glory to the individual and add dignity to the spirit of freedom.

As K.R.S. Iyengar has aptly put it, her forte becomes:

“ . . . the exploration of sensibility - the particular kind of Indian sensibility that is ill at ease among barbarians and the philistines, the anarchists and the amoralists”.

The women characters of Kamala Markandaya are generally conformists and traditionalists. In her novels, *Possession* and *Two Virgins*, the central consciousness is that of a woman. Her women

characters possess an admirable strength to face the calamities of life and are adept at the wisdom of compromise and adjustment. Her novels *Nectar In A Sieve* and *A Handful Of Rice* portray the harsh economic reality in rural areas. Kamala Markandaya draws her canvas on the changing socio-economic scenes making her novels a wonderful kaleidoscope. She shows dexterity in her selection of characters and situations. Her characters represent a wide spectrum: peasants, queens and concubines, rural and city breeds, English officials in India and Indian émigrés in England. An adept teller of tales,

“She claims to be on the side of the human and life,
against machinery, against exploitation of the weak,
against war and violence”

Woman’s struggle is one ranging from survival at the sheer physical level to the quest for identity. Most women have to grapple with conflicting situations at home and also outside. In Markandaya’s wide repertoire of women characters, ranging from the harassed, victimized peasant women to the princess of *havelis*, we discern the plight of the Indian woman crippled by her sex, society and economic condition. Traditional patriarchal Indian society confines woman to the taboo-ridden path. Rukmani of *Nectar in a Sieve*, Markandaya’s debut novel, exemplifies the large mass of underprivileged rural women whose backs are bent with ill-rewarded labour. The ravages of nature and hunger for millions have been treated sensitively in her novels. As H.M. Williams has rightly observed :

“Yet Markandaya’s picture is not despairing. Human dignity survives, especially in the passionate and loyal Rukmani, a brilliantly conceived character who changes from dignified stoicism to acts of near-lunatic madness when goaded beyond patience, are made vividly credible. The dignified religious sense of fate in the Indian peasant is portrayed with sympathy”.

Kamala Markandaya’s *A Silence of Desire* (1960) and Anita Desai’s *Clear Light of Day* (1980) clearly connect the desire for freedom of the spirit with the freedom of body and mind, centering on the older women protagonists’ quest for spiritual fulfillment only through the worldly context. Markandaya and Desai question the codes of Brahminical orthodoxy that define women within the confines of their domestic existence, particularly in terms of their conjugal and maternal responsibilities. *A Silence of Desire* and *Clear Light of Day* dramatize the difficult struggle by which women seek detachment from the ties on the material plane in order to enter a space, traditionally reserved for men, of spiritual discovery.

Nayantara Sahgal wrote novels mostly related with the political affairs of India. Her novels take a stand against the vital relationship, like, marriage going sterile. Her female characters opt out of it and find fulfillment in extramarital relationships. They want to establish a new order with changed standards where women can be their true selves and there is no need for hypocrisy. But, Sahgal seems to have avoided going into the depths of woman’s mind. Seema Jena remarks:

“The tension and anxiety of being modern in traditional society have been overlooked by most of these writers who have devoted their attention to broad social features that emerge in course of the gradual metamorphosis of the old order. So intense was their devotion to the physical aspect of this change that they failed to properly take note of and project the psychological reality.”

Nayantara Sahgal's *The Day in Shadow* (1971) has attracted little favourable critical attention from the feminists. While the realism of its portrayal of the protagonist's suffering has generally been acknowledged, the novel, on the whole, has been attacked as a bad feminist book . . . anti-feminist, pro-male. Her novel is, moreover, characteristically a feminine novel, not because the author is so thoroughly indoctrinated in patriarchal ideas that she speaks and thinks like men want (women) to, but, because the people, the situations and the narrative structure that she employs are based on recognizable feminine archetypes in which protest and hard-thinking analysis subvert the surface acceptance. As Annis Pratt notes,

“. . . to use our drive for authenticity in order to shape feminine archetypes into fiction, to bring elements of our inner world into consciousness and give them shape in the social form of the novel, is an act of defiance with perilous consequences.”

Nayantara Sahgal and Anita Desai have both produced new and very mature works. Sahgal has grown tremendously, both in commands over event and character, and in ironic detachment. Desai has progressed beyond the intense involvement with personal psychology and stream of consciousness narration to a deep understanding of wider social problems of class and culture.

Another remarkable woman writer is Shashi Deshpande. She not only forthrightly articulates a thematic and technical maturity but also effectively communicates an intensely apprehended feminine sensibility. She has apparently injected a new consciousness, offering varied interpretation of imperishable Indian values as well as highlighting our cultural heritage. She added a new depth, a new dimension, to Indian English fiction. The novel, *That Long Silence*, which won Shashi Deshpande the Sahitya Akademi Award for 1990, tells the story of an Indian housewife, who maintains silence throughout her life. The novel ends with her resolve to speak, to break her long silence.

The women protagonists in these novels achieve “Personhood” yet do not negate the family or the society. They go beyond, what Elaine Showalter calls, the “Female Phase” (Showalter: 13) which is a phase of self discovery, a turning inward, freed from the dependence of opposition, a search for identity. They no doubt discover themselves but the quest does not end there. It could be observed that they are not feminists in the first stage but in the second.

“The second stage cannot be viewed in terms of women alone, but also in terms of the separate personhood or equality with men. The second stage involves coming to new terms with the family, new terms with love and work”.

Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence* could be read as crystallization of memory and catharsis. It is an autobiographical narrative of Jaya. Her husband could not understand her feelings, as a result of which, she was torn from within. This estrangement between Jaya and her husband reminds one of Anita Desai's *Cry, The Peacock* where an ever-widening gap in communication between Maya and her husband is felt throughout the novel.

Like Virginia Woolf or Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande is a prose rhapsodist of feelings, sentiments and emotions passing through human consciousness. Anita Desai and Shashi Deshpande specialize in depicting the undulations of the female ego or self under the pressure of critical human situations and emotional relationships. Their attention is also focused on feminine suffering in the complex cultural stresses and strains in Indian society, having strong past moorings. Both, Anita Desai and Shashi Deshpande, explore human relationships in modern Indian society, particularly the husband-wife

relationship. Shashi Deshpande's women, like those of her predecessor, are tolerant, obedient and submissive. But a feminist awakening and upsurge is all along notable in their feelings and conduct.

Another most popular woman novelist is Kiran Desai, daughter of the author Anita Desai. She is a born story teller. Her first novel, *Hullabaloo in The Guava Orchard* (1998), and the next novel, *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006), which won Kiran Desai the Booker prize for 2006, tell the story which revolves around the inhabitants of a town in the north-eastern Himalayas.

Kiran Desai's *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* is a pacy, fresh look at life in the sleepy provincial town of Shahkot in India. The central character of the novel, Sampath Chawla, failed postal clerk and pathological dreamer, escapes from his work and his oppressive family to live in a guava tree. Here, he spends his life snoozing, musing and eating the ever-more exotic meals, cooked for him by his sociopathic mother. He begins to amaze his fellow townspeople by revealing intimate details about them, gleaned from a bit of lazy letter opening whilst still working at the post office, and by spouting a series of truisms worthy of a Shakespearian fool.

Before long, he becomes known as a local *guru*, and attract such a strong flow of visitors that opening hours have to be established in the orchard to allow him to rest. Soon, commercialism, a recurrent theme in Desai's work, takes over -Sampath's fast thinking, entrepreneurial father Mr. Chawla, who, at first, despaired at his son's inanity, now sees his chance to make the family's fortune. He sets up his picturesque family in a compound around the guava tree that is soon lined with colorful advertisements for tailors, fizzy drinks, talcum powder and insect repellent.

Visitors bring gifts that Mr. Chawla can sell, the family bank account begins to grow and he looks at investment plans. All goes well until the arrival in the orchard of a group of languor monkeys who have developed a taste for alcohol and begin to terrorize the town. The tale continues, with a growing sense of impending doom, as the family and the various officials of the town try to resolve the monkey problem.

Like many important works of literature, the book can be read on several levels - as an inventive, fast moving, delicious tale, full of rich descriptions and marvelous comic cartoon like personalities, but also as a deeper study of the pathos of familial misunderstanding the ridiculousness of hero-worship, the unpredictability of commercialism and the ineptness of officialdom.

Many of these themes are explored further in Kiran Desai's next novel, *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006). The story revolves around the inhabitants of a town in the north-eastern Himalayas, an embittered old judge, his granddaughter, Sai, his cook and their rich array of relatives, friends and acquaintances and the effects on the lives of these people brought about by a Nepalese uprising. Running parallel with the story set in India, we also follow the vicissitudes of the cook's son, Biju, as he struggles to realize the American dream as an immigrant in New York.

Like its predecessor, this book abounds in rich, sensual descriptions. These can be sublimely beautiful, such as in the image of the flourishing of nature at the local convent in spring : 'Huge, spread-open Easter lilies were sticky with spilling antlers; insects chased each other madly through the sky, Zip Zip; and amorous butterflies, cucumber green, tumbled past the jeep windows into the deep marine valleys'. They can also be horrific, such as, in descriptions of the protest march: 'One jawan was knifed to death, the arms of another were chopped off, a third was stabbed, and the heads of policemen came up on stakes before the station across from the bench under the plum tree, where the towns people had rested themselves in more peaceful times and the cook sometimes read his letters. A beheaded body ran briefly down the street, blood fountaining from the neck.....'

The Inheritance of Loss is much more ambitious than Hullabaloo in its spatial breadth and emotional depth. It takes on huge subjects such as morality and justice, globalization, racial, social and economic inequality, fundamentalism and alienation. It takes its reader on a seesaw of negative emotions. There is pathos-which often goes hand in hand with revulsion, for example, in the description of the judge's adoration of his dog, Mutt, the disappearance of which rocks his whole existence, set against his cruelty to his young wife. There is frequent outrage at the deprivation and poverty in which many of the characters live, including the cook's son in America; and there is humiliation, for example, in the treatment of Sai by her lover-turned-rebel, or Lola, who tries to stand up to the Nepalese bullies.

Against these strong emotions, however, Desai expertly injects doses of comedy and buffoon like figures. One of these is Biju's winsome friend, Saeed, an African (Biju hated all black people but liked Saeed), with a slyer and much more happy go lucky attitude to life. Whereas, Biju finds it difficult to have a conversation even with the Indian girls to whom he delivers a take away meal, Saeed had many girls. "Oh myee God!! he said. Oh myee Gaaaawd! She keeps calling me, he clutched at head, "aaaiii.....I don't know what to do!!It's those dreadlocks, cut them off and the girls will go." "But I don't want them to go!" Much of the comedy also arises from the Indian mis- or over-use of the English language. "Result unequivocal" the young Judge wrote home to India on completing his university examinations in Britain. "What" asked everyone "does that mean?" It sounded as if there was a problem because "un" words were negative words, those basically competent in the English agreed. But then, his father consulted the assistant magistrate and they exploded with joy "Boss, the judge's friend from his university days is a wonderfully optimistic but pompous individual, made all the more ridiculous by his over use of British idioms "Cheeri-o, light-o, tickety boo, simply smashing, chin-chin, no siree, how's that, bottom's up, I say!"

An original and modern aspect of Desai's style is the almost poet like use she makes of different print forms on the page: She uses italics for foreign words as if to emphasize their exoticness and untranslatability; and capitals for emphasis when someone is angry, expressing surprise or disbelief, a natural development of the etiquette that to write in capitals is like shouting. She also exploits our modern mania for lists. In an age where our media is filled with top tens and top one hundreds-most voted - for politician, best dressed woman, richest man etc., Desai produces her own array of matter of fact but quite unnerving lists - the parts of their bodies which touch when Gyan and Sai Kiss; the free gifts that you get from a charity if you make a donation to a cow shelter; the wide variety of puddings that the cook is able to make, the list rattled off with no spaces as if expressing both the urgency of the speaker to impress and his perplexity at the foreignness of English pudding names.

Anita Desai confesses that while she 'feels about India as an Indian', She thinks about it 'as an outsider'. Desai probably derived this point of view from her German mother, whom she aptly describes as carrying 'a European core in her which protested against certain Indian things, which always maintained its independence and its separateness'. Her oeuvre has explored the lives of outsiders within Indian society and, more recently, also within the West. Her fiction has covered themes, such as, women's oppression and quest for a fulfilling identity, family relationships and contrasts, the crumbling of traditions, and anti-Semitism. The Euro-centric and social biases that are sometimes detected in her fiction, therefore, may be more productively read as the result of the author's focus on uprooted and marginalized identities. Tellingly, the literary example which Desai set off to emulate was that of another migrant to India of German origins: Ruth Praver Jhabvala, though, some critics detect a Western disdain for Indian social customs in her fiction.

Ultimately Desai's literary world is not sharply divided along Western and Eastern lines. On the contrary, ever since her novel Baumgartner's Bombay (1987), east and West have been treated as mirror of each other. Desai's novels and short-stories evoke characters, events and moods with recourse to a rich use of visual imagery and details, which has led to comparisons with the modernist sensibilities of T.S. Eliot, William Faulkner and Virginia Woolf. The origin of her stories is itself rooted in images that remain in the mind but they often are also forgotten, and they pass through one's life and then they vanish. However, there are certain images, certain characters, certain words that you can't forget, you remember, they stay with you and eventually these come together, you being to see what the connection is between them.

A close study of Anita Desai's work reveals her struggle for female autonomy played out against the backdrop of the patriarchal cultural pattern. At the outset, it seems, she is asking a new and different question. Her writing can be viewed as a self-conscious reaction to overwhelming masculinity of privileged dominant gender. We can identify in her character a defiant tone of voice in asserting the personal and the subjective. Her emphasis is psychological rather than sociological; her profound intellectual maturity provides a frame-work based on gender (female) as the ideological scheme for the analysis of society in general.

Like all feminist literary artists, a sustained analysis of allusive and elusive expression of individual is imperative for her. Her purely subjective novels depend upon a private vision. This private vision poses extreme situations arising out of conflicts between the will and the reality revolving around the "self". Carl Rogers rightly defines human interactions as a way of self-disclosure arguing.

"Man lives essentially in his objective functioning, is the result of subjective purpose, and subjective choice".

Now the centrality of self in Anita Desai is concentrated in terrifying isolation, finding it hard to reconcile with the world around "self". Her protagonists, therefore, are constantly confronted with the stupendous task of defining their relation to themselves and to their immediate human context. Acceptable behavioural pattern is alien to them. The root is not far to find. Her central characters, by and large, have strange childhood from which they develop a negative self image and aversion. The immediate result is their fragmented psych to view this world as a hostile place. For them, domestic life is not their world, rather, it is a trap where their individual problems interact; and dissonance in their relationship brings solitary confinements and shows their reluctance to face reality. Though there is a different set of character also who compromise with life - Sita, Bim, Sarah and Amla,

"Bim discovers through the serious consideration of her whole life
the urgent need to correlate her knowledge with her imagination."

However, there is a complex and confused attitude towards the 'self' and also in relation to male, resulting from a nagging sense of insecurity and trying hard to rediscover the logic of identity in dominance. Monisha, Sita and Nanda Kaul, all are raising the question of patriarchal power structure.

In a subtle but decisive manner the self image of Anita Desai's protagonists, structures the way in which all violence and disturbing things are due to man and patriarchal power. Her women know how they have been trapped and how they can begin to live afresh, but the obstacle is man. Man enters in her world as a disturbing factor. But in the process, she reduces the patriarchal discourse to a set of clichés and soon her women are caught by fantasy:

“Maya, from her childhood, regards the world as “a toy especially made for her, painted in her favorite colours and set to dance to her favourite tunes”.

Monisha, in her own estimation, is like “the lost princess of the fairy tale who sat somewhere in the deepest shadows of this forest, silent and unattainable”. Sita, despite her maturity, leads “a lulled life, half-conscious, dream-like” Nanda Kaul, too, knew it well that “Fantasy and fairy tales had their place in her life”. Even in her old age she is seen “reconstructing; block by block, of the old castle of childhood”. Now, people who break away from what is real and rational and feel alienated, shunning reality and escape into a dream world, do give way to tragic consequences.

A common trait in all major women characters of Anita Desai is their longing to be free of all kinds of social and familial involvement. One recalls, Simone de Beauvoir’s caution that:

“. . . the independent woman is one who, like men, can move from immanence to transcendence in her public life activities and avoid sadomasochistic relationships in her personal life”.

In the midst of social contempt they face a particular dilemma nurtured by marital disharmony. Perhaps, Bim is the only exception, as she is deeply committed to certain responsibilities even while struggling against the consequent psychological strain. Feminist reaction in this sense goes beyond being a mere revision and becomes revenge. In her Endeavour to humanize woman, it seems, Anita Desai dehumanizes the male and thereby duplicates rather than transcends the ideology she reacts against. In an attempt to root out the essentials of the woman condition, she perpetuates gender bias. Such an anti-male attitude does not help to release the male-female relationship in any form a determinate position.

In her fiction, Anita Desai has continued to seize upon the shapelessness and meaninglessness of life and impose a design on theme. She believes that literature ought not to be confined to the portrayal of outer or inner reality. It should deal with life and with death. Anita Desai finds that novels, when one reads them, have the power to convey truth far more vividly, forcefully and memorably than any other literary form. It is because the artist knows how to select from the vast amount of material and present it significance of things. She must seize upon that incomplete and chameleonic mass of reality around her and,

“try to discover its significance by plunging below the surface and plumbing the depths, then illuminating those depths till they become a more lucid, brilliant and explicable reflection of visible world”.

Anita Desai, in her novels, mainly explores the emotional world of women, revealing a rare imaginative awareness of various deeper forces at work and a profound understanding of feminine sensibility as well as psychology. She sets herself to voice the mute miseries and helplessness of millions of married women, tormented by existentialist problems and predicaments. She is concerned with the psycho-logy angle of the problem faced by her protagonists. Her serious concern is the ‘journey within’, her characters, the central characters, mostly being women. The recurring theme in her novels is the trauma of existence in a hostile, male-dominated society that is conservative and taboo-ridden. She portrays the inner conflicts of her characters and also underlines their individuality and quest for freedom.

Anita Desai’s first novel, *Cry, The Peacock*, broke new ground in Indian English fiction and is said to be a trend-setter. It has been termed as ‘a poetic novel’ by the critics. Maya, the protagonist of the novel, is highly sensitive woman who suffers from neurotic fears caused by the predictions of an albino priest

about her untimely and possible death four years after her marriage. She is married to a practical, unsympathetic, rational, down to earth man. She suffers from incompatibility in her married life and tries to escape into a world of imagination and fantasy. Maya also suffers from father-fixation. She looks for her father in twice-her-age husband. Having virtually nothing in common, they are bound by matrimonial bonds. For Maya, freedom is impossible unless she removes Gautama, her husband. She pushes him from the parapet in a fit of fury and to transfer the albino prediction about death to Gautama. Anita Desai has successfully shown the transformation of a sensitive woman into a neurotic person.

In her second novel, *Voices in City* (1965), Anita Desai is not concerned with the physical aspect of the city Calcutta but on its influence on the three characters of a family. The novel is divided into four sections, namely, 'Nirode', 'Monisha', 'Amla', and 'Mother'. All these sections are devoted to the characters as named by the title. The first section 'Nirode' is about the alienation and conflict in the mind of Nirode. He is an artist who is struggling with art form and his life. He brings out a magazine 'Voice', but is not happy with its success and prosperity. Nirode also suffers from Oedipus complex, like Maya. And like her, he too wants to destroy the figure of his obsession, his mother. He believes that his mother has an affair with Major Chadha, her neighbour. Nirode wants to forget this episode and so alienates himself from his mother. Anita Desai has probed into the psychic working of the disturbed artist, who has lost his faith in life. Madhusudan Prasad feels that,

“Desai delves deep into human psyche and tries to explore very adroitly the dim domains of the conscious of the major characters in the novel”.

Monisha, like other heroines of Anita Desai, is sensitive and suffers from an ill-matched marriage. She lacks understanding and love from her husband, and finds it difficult to adjust into the joint family. She takes to diary writing and alienates herself from everyone. She is an example of maladjusted woman who is an introvert. Monisha is unable to bear the charge of theft by the family members and even her husband. She commits suicide by self immolation. Amla, her youngest sister, a commercial artist, too, suffers from conflict in her life. She rises above the complexities of relationships to realize the destroyer. She is described as an onlooker, not getting involved with the affairs of her children.

The third novel *Bye, Bye, Blackbird* (1971), depicts the plight of Indian immigrants in London. The novel has the theme of East-West encounter. It has three parts - 'Arrival', 'Discovery' and 'Recognition and Departure'. Dev arrives in England for higher studies and stays with his friend Adit and his English wife Sarah. He is perturbed by the insults and humiliations Indian have to face in public and private places. Adit is happy with his peaceful life in England.

But in the second part of the novel a gradual change comes over. Adit feels nostalgia for his country and realizes the superficiality of his life in England. He returns home in the end, whereas, Dev is stuck by the charm of this land and stays on. Anita Desai has also described the difficulties faced by Sarah, an English wife with an Indian husband. The title of the novel refers to England's bidding, farewell to an Indian - a 'Black bird'. Anita Desai has created a lively picture of immigrant Indians. She has also portrayed the conflict of the immigrants who cannot sever their roots and yet make an effort to strike new roots in an alien country and eventually become alienated.

Her fourth novel, 'Where *Shall We Go This Summer?*' (1975) depicts the tensions between a sensitive wife, Sita, and the rational and worldly husband, Raman. The story is about Sita who has four children and is reluctant to abort or give birth to the fifth child. She is a sensitive person, sensitive towards violence and death prevalent in the world and thinks that by giving birth, she would be doing an act of

destruction. Sita is not happy and satisfied with her married life also. Her husband is busy with his own work and has no time for his wife. Sita feels betrayed and lonely, and goes to the island of Manori, her childhood home. She is looking for peace on the island.

Instead, she feels alienated. As she has adjusted herself on the island, her husband comes to take the children. Sita is angry and disturbed at first but realizes the futility of escaping from her duties. She reconciles the realities of the life and returns with her husband. Madhusudan Prasad considers the novel “a wonderful poetic *tour de force*, singularized by her intense lyrical fervor and wild poetic imagination which do not run riot, but instead, remain under a certain curious discipline.

Anita Desai’s fifth novel *Fire On The Mountain* was published in 1977. It won the Royal Society of Literature’s Winfred Holtby Memorial Prize and the 1978 National Academy of Letters Award. The novel is almost of Nanda Kaul, wife of the onetime Vice-Chancellor of Punjab University, who withdraws herself to a lonely, secluded house Carignano, in Kasauli. Nanda lives her life all by herself in her old age and she does not want to be disturbed by anyone or anything. Even the postman is an intruder. Nanda is upset and disturbed by the arrival of her great grand daughter, Raka. The novel is divided into three parts - ‘Nanda Kaul at Carignano’, ‘Raka comes to Carignano’ and ‘Ila Das leaves carignano’. In the first part, the author describes the arrival of Raka and the disturbance it causes in the life of Nanda. In the second part, Raka, a sensitive and an introvert girl, loves the life at Carignano. She is a lover of nature and spends her time roaming in the surrounding places. Ila Das, a childhood friend of Nanda, who is a welfare officer in the nearby village, comes for a visit. Anita Desai has described her barren life and her tragic death in the end of novel. She also makes Nanda realize the truth of her life, from which she is trying to escape. The end of the novel is sudden and unexpected. The title of the novel refers to Raka setting the forest on fire. R.S. Sharma says that it is

“expressive of Raka’s resolve to destroy a world where a woman cannot hope to be happy without being unnatural.”

Anita Desai has depicted the theme of alienation and relationships in this novel.

Anita Desai’s next novel *Clear Light Of Day*, was published in 1980. She has described the book as a ‘four dimensional piece’. Time plays an important role in the novel as she herself says about time ‘as a destroyer, as a preserver and about what time does to people’. She makes it clear in the novel that time passes, but things remain the same except that the pattern changes.

Clear Light Of Day is a family drama about the Das family - mainly the four children - Bim, Tara, Raja and Baba. The story is narrated from the point of view of Bim, the protagonist of the novel. Bim and Tara are sisters and their mother suffers from diabetes and dies. The parents had no time for their children, and had a led a busy life playing cards. Bim has to shoulder the responsibilities of her brothers and sister. She sacrifices her life for her siblings, educating them and marrying them. She also takes the responsibility of her mentally-retarded brother, Baba; senile aunt, Mira Masi, and the decaying house. Tara marries Bakul, a foreigner diplomat and goes abroad. Raja, too, leaves Bim and his house and goes to Hyderabad to Hyder Ali. He marries Hyder Ali’s daughter and settles there. Bim is hurt and feels neglected by everyone. She is unable to accept Raja and Tara. Bim refuses to go to Hyderabad on the occasion of the marriage of Raja’s daughter. In anger, she thinks of sending Baba to the marriage but realizes her mistake. In the end she is aware of her weakness and repents of the wrong done towards Raja, Baba and Tara. In *Clear Light of Day*, she sees the truth and matures to forgive everyone.

Her next novel, *In Custody* was published on 1984. This novel is about the plight of Urdu poet. Deven is a lecturer in a private college in Mirpore. He aspires to be a writer and has great interest in Urdu poetry.

He belongs to middle class, striving hard to make ends meet. He is in a pitiable state, unable to stand against injustices. He is married to Sarla, an uneducated girl, who is miles away from literature. Here again we see maladjustment in marriage. Deven gets an opportunity to interview Nur Shahjehanabadi, a renowned poet of old days. Deven comes to see the disparity between Nur's poetry and life.

He sees the decadent life of the old poet. Somehow he records a part of interview, which is almost useless. He has to play it in the college as he has received a grant from the college for the purpose. Deven is also pestered by the old poet and his wives for money. However, Deven gets the courage to face everything in the end, and the novel ends at a positive note. The title suggests that Nur's poetry would be in safe custody of Deven but the irony is that he is in custody of Nur's personality. The poet himself is a prisoner of his circumstances 'changed times are not favorable to Urdu poetry and poets and flatterers and self seekers take the place of connoisseurs of poetry and appreciative audience.

Anita Desai's next novel, *Baumgartner's Bombay*, published in 1988, is about the plight of a displaced person. Hugo Baumgartner, a Jew, has to leave his country, Germany, at the rise of Nazism and comes to the British India before the Second World War to begin a new life. The story revolves round the life of Hugo in Germany and in many cities in India. It is a story of family less, rootless and homeless man, always trying to belong, wanting to be accepted, but never being accepted anywhere. The pathos of the novel lies in the fact that after living for fifty years in India Hugo is not accepted by the Indian Society. He is a 'firangi'. He picks up stray cats from the street to give them shelter.

In Desai's *Journey to Ithaca* the protagonists seek a solution to their problems. They feel that the solution lies in discovering some lost essence which they have already experienced, usually as children. They undertake a journey to recover that lost essence; but after what is difficult voyage, they end up disappointed, disillusioned. Such a pattern is seen in Desai's other novels also, viz. *Cry, the Peacock* and *Where Shall We Go This Summer*. Almost the same pattern is repeated again in Desai's supposedly strongest novel, *In Custody*.

Fasting, Feasting is compartmentalized into two distinct sections – Part One dealing with family intrigues through socio-cultural and spiritual experiences in India and Part Two describing (though not so extensively) familial existentialism in a small town in America, weaving the main fabric of the plot around female characters. The reader is introduced to a couple known as MamaPapa throughout the novel - a unique manner of expressing their oneness, having three children - Uma, Aruna and Arun. Apparently the family is closeknit:

“It was hard to believe they had ever had separate existences, that they had been separate entities and not Mama Papa in one breath”.

But in reality the atmosphere at home is highly charged with surreptitious intrigues. When the father goes to work the mother indulges in all those clandestine activities which he volubly opposed and disapproved of, such as, play cards with the neighbours and chewing betel leaves. Uma and Arun were quite like their mother. Uma, the docile daughter, would stifle her emotions merely to please MamaPapa while Aruna made no efforts whatsoever to conceal her rebelliousness.

The novel *Fasting, Feasting* deals with the story of two very different worlds - an extremely orthodox and domineering Indian family and an unusually idiosyncratic family in Massachusetts. Uma, the protagonist of the first part of the book represents the attitude of the author. Through this woman character, Anita Desai wants to expose the hypocrisy, and male chauvinism in a particular conservative family. She shows how Uma bears the brunt of many insults and abuses flung by her own parents. Though she is the most neglected child of the family, yet she is needed at every time. In the very

opening of the book, the author connotatively presents the luxurious life of the parents through the image of the 'swinging sofa' (*Fasting, Feasting*: P.1). The opening passage is so rich in both matter and manner that it is enough to suggest the ensuing events and the discriminating attitude of the parents to their daughters.

“On the veranda overlooking the garden, the drive and the gate, they sit together on the creaking sofa-swing, suspended from its iron frame, dangling their legs so that the slippers on their feet hang loose. Before them, a low round table is covered with a faded cloth, embroidered in the centre with flowers. Behind them, a pedestal fan blows warm air at the backs of their heads and necks.”

The family in which Uma is brought up is highly conservative traditional and bragging. Everything is in the direct control of the Mama Papa. Mama keeps ordering the cook through Uma from her swing throne. The parents don't do anything in the house except visiting the coffee house and attending the clubs. Both their daughters are very submissive and so they seldom rebel against the step-motherly conduct of the family.

The women depicted in Part One of *Fasting, Feasting* - Uma, Aruna, their mother and Anamika, are in one way or the other victims of the age old traditions and customs of India's social set up. In Part Two of the novel two other female characters - Mrs. Pattons and her daughter Melanie have been portrayed by the author. Both feel suffocated in the modernized but highly impersonal Western lifestyle. Mrs. Pattons, obsessed with the idea of food, makes frantic trips to the market only to ensure that her kitchen cabinets are well stocked with edible goods. Mrs. Patton's bulimic daughter, Melanie, shuns company. She is averse to converse with anyone including people of her own age group. Both Mrs. Pattons and Melanie find the Western environment to be stifling and phlegmatic. The excessive freedom in the West had induced the over dosage, and then the ultimate repulsion led to another kind of suffocating environment. Though the novel is distinctly divided into two parts, yet the narrative does not project any indication of being disjointed. Episodes are dexterously correlated, characters are realistically delineated and reminiscences are meticulously interwoven into a single fabric of a fine narrative.

Desai's new novel, *The Zigzag Way*, tells of an American, adrift in a foreign culture that remains frustratingly inscrutable. Eric is a New England-born graduate student in history at Harvard who follows his scientist girlfriend, Em, on a research trip to Mexico. Once she sets off with her colleagues to conduct field observations, he is left alone and overwhelmed by his own lack of purpose. Remembering that his Cornish grandfather, about whom he knows next to nothing, had worked as a miner in the Sierra Madre in the early part of the 20th century, he determines he will use the trip to find out more about his family's past. Along the way he meets an eccentric, powerful European woman, Doña Vera, who has become a champion of indigenous culture but whose own past is mysterious. The stories of Eric, his grandparents and Doña Vera are interwoven into a short, contemplative narrative. Eric is a passive narrator, clambering his way through the beautiful but beguiling scenery, which is described in florid, dense prose reflecting his sensory overload. Desai has uncovered a compelling chapter in Mexican history.

Anita Desai has tried to present her themes organically with appropriate adjustments and adaptations in spheres of style and point of view. The result is her comparative superiority over other Indian women novelists writing in English. While going through the major novels of Anita Desai, one can realize that

she belongs to the 'female' phase, during which the focus is on uncovering misogyny in male, and text is being replaced by a turn inward for identity.

This inward search for identity is a common factor among the central women of Desai, whether it is the immature and psychologically alienated Maya, or the stoic Nanda Kaul, all of them suffer owing to male domination. Anita Desai wants to stress in her novels the various qualities of an Indian woman – her emotions, her sensitiveness, her tenderness, her sexuality. She arouses physical attraction in the heart of the male sex. This is her most overwhelming facet. Without the presence of woman, home is not home but a dreary desert. Her attitude is very close to Anees Jung:

“In this complex pantheon of diversities, the Indian woman remains the point of unity, unveiling through each single experience a collective consciousness prized by a society that is locked in mortal combat with the power and weakness of age and time. She remains the still centre, like the centre in a potter's wheel, circling to create new forms, unfolding the continuity of a racial life, which in turn has encircled and helped her acquire a quality of concentration”.

Anita Desai may not be a 'radical feminist', in the real sense of the term, but then, given the context, this woman novelist presents the woman's problems with such an understanding that she is 'feministic', to say the least. In her novels taken for discussion, Sarah is the only girl with an employment and that too, that of a teacher. The other women are housewives. By presenting the stereotype woman and her problems in an understanding and sympathetic way, she makes everybody realize the predicament of the women in a male chauvinistic society. The protest element is implicit.

To say that Anita Desai is a Feminist writer is not to deny her artistic achievement. She is not just a propagandist. Socio-, psycho-, philosophic dimensions in her novels are quite impressive. That woman is the centre of her novels, is not only natural but quite convincing. As Mrinalini Solanki explains:

“As a consummate creative artist, Anita Desai shows tremendous potential and vitality. In her writings she not only offers an expose of human life in its shocking shallowness or outward show, but also provides, down deep, a philosophical probe or basis to sustain our life. She emerges neither as a downright pessimist nor an incorrigible optimist. All along, her earnest endeavour is to hold a mirror to life, and in the process, to unravel the mystery of human existence”.

In the process she does present the plight of the women, the underdog and that makes her a Feminist. The idea of empowerment is an elusive dream to Desai's protagonists as they yearn to express themselves in difficult situations. Though Desai does not offer alter-native and radical models of female behaviour, she depicts the irreconcilable contradictions, the discontinuous identities and the fragmented nature of the life of her protagonists. They live and die as dreamers, but are never denied, a rare wisdom about their status and position in the social fabric to which they belong. Failure in one aspect of the women's lives does not render them dysfunctional in society. It is their ability to live life as women according to their own terms that mark them as strong survivors in a hostile patriarchal world in Desai's fiction.

Wavering Between Traditional and Western Models:

With the new strains and challenges that have emerged from the Indian family, the life of married woman has been going through an evolution. It has been wavering between traditional and western models. The fast-changing social and family environment has thrown up new challenges for married couples. The educated women of today living in urban areas are liable to develop a marked tendency to become extraordinarily conscious of their individuality and individual status and are prone to have marital discord is a lack of adjustment and synchronization in the marriage.

It symbolizes a breakdown in the commitment and co-operation of the married couples. Usually, marital discord originates when enmity develops among the partners through internal and external manifestations like constant finger-pointing, physical aggression, antagonism, and so on. It is a process that begins before physical separation and continues even after the marriage is legally ended. Marital discord is a very effective stressor that can prompt individuals to enter mentally disturbed stages or engage in behavior that will lead them to have psychotic or hysteric manifestations. It is a significant predictor of subsequent delinquency and depressive symptoms for married couples. It is evident that marital problems are more likely to cause depression than depression causing marital problems.

Marital discord is as old as the organization of marriage itself, even if it has diverged from time to time and from person to person. In the pre-industrial period, men and women who came jointly into marriage shared intellectual values, mutual dedication, belief and hope which subordinated the interests of the individuals, resulting in the smooth relationship of the family. There were many tensions in their marital relationship, women did suffer untold miseries, but the ethical and religious convictions, economic belief and the fear of social condemnation kept them together.

Discord and Suspension of Marital Rights:

Discord within marriage is a strong catalyst of suspension of marital rights. However, in context in which divorce is rare and stigmatized, we might not expect marital dissolution to be as sensitive to marital discord. For examples, instead of dissolution occurring due to a general lack of emotional compatibility, marital dissolution in India may require more aggravate, or severe discord as perceived by at least one the spouses.

Marital discord in marriage is not new to India as well, and it has existed at all eras of well-known history. But separation was resorted to only in severe cases where there was intolerable malice, abandonment, mental illness, sterility, and disloyalty. In the wake of the industrial mutiny, marital discord has come to presume greater importance. Men and women who come together in marriage lacked knowledge of various psychological and social aspects of life, the proper understanding of which would make sure of attitudes of affability, flexibility and self-control. In the commercial age, the increasing liberty of married woman has pulled her further apart from compromise and has changed the concept of marriage. In the words of Virendra Kumar “from stability, permanence and indissolubility to discord, separation and divorce”. Frequent marital discord can lead to growing dissatisfaction for the partners involved, which force people to consider an alternative remaining married. For example, a person who is forced to deal with marital dispute on a regular basis might grow dissatisfied and try to live life independently.

Disparity and Dissatisfaction:

Anita Desai has highlighted marital discord as a serious concern in her works. She humbly admits that she is allergic to writing social novels. However, she is involved in the problems of marital discord and the insincerity, the faithlessness and the soul-destroying, grinding process of compromise which

accompany it. Anita Desai while choosing marital discord as a theme, highlights how the lack of ability to put one's soul and convey freely one's fear and agony result in the snapping of communication between husband and wife. Unusual attitudes, individual complexes and fears add to this distancing between husband and wife resulting in conjugal disharmony. In each of her novels, one encounters traumatic experiences of married lives. Each novel, maintaining the basic features of marital discord, presents different features of the problem to which Mrs. Desai gives new aspect and visualization. She bravely puts forth the fact that in society, marriages usually pursue the jungle law of the survival of the fittest and being physically stronger, man survives. In her novels, marital discord is reflective of the social parlance. Excessive bondage and high level of restrictions imposed on a girl who recently parted from her parents, hit her psychology leading to excessive frustration. This frustration emerges out in different forms like suicidal tendencies, non-adjustments, marital discords, psychological irritation and many more. Hence society and its restricted canvas play a great role in dealing with the girl's psychology.

Protagonists Trapped in Marital Relations :

In the novels of Anita Desai, most of the protagonists find themselves trapped in marriage. Desai comments: "There are those who can handle situations and those who can't and my stories are generally about those who can't. They find themselves trapped in a situation over which they have no control. Desai, Anita Cry, the Peacock. All her characters fight the current and struggle against it. They know what the demands are and what it costs to meet them.

There is an effort, in the novels of Desai, to represent and understand the feelings, thoughts and doubts, which remain, locked up within the inner recesses of the isolated female heart. Anita Desai's novels represent intense study of personal life, the conflicts and anxiety which the females face. The characters of Anita Desai are trapped in the web of unreceptive circumstances.

Anita's Unconventional and Painful Realistic thesis:

Anita Desai's robustly outspoken manner of propagating the typically unconventional but painfully realistic thesis that the institution of marriage is increasingly taking the shape of the dead albatross around the necks of the modern, emancipated self-respecting women. Desai focuses on the personal struggle of middle-class women in existing India as they endeavor to prevail over the societal limitations forced by a tradition-bound patriarchal society.

She has specifically mentioned middle-class women, with which she clearly points to such women who are traditionally bound with certain restrictions of family and society. Her central theme in many of her novels has been the portrayal of women's viewpoint, alienation of middle class women and tension that crops up in middle class families. Her novels, with a touch of feminist concern, portray the failed marriage relationship which often leads to disaffection and loneliness of the characters. She writes for the woman who is always dominated initially by father and then by the husband.

Focus on Emotional Reactions of Women:

Women have been moved from different stages of life and the novelist sharply focuses upon the emotional reactions of the woman as she experiences these segments. She may be called the spokesperson of Indian culture as she authentically conveys its problems, uncertainties, complexities and paradoxes. She is an expert in depicting the reaction of women towards a given situation, for example,

apathy of parents, ill treatment by in-laws, and indifference of the husband. She describes the Indian woman as a fighter, a sufferer, a survivor, a brave woman and in later novels eventually a winner because of her determined spirit and attitude of compromise.

Social Realities

Anita Desai's works are directly related to social realities. Social realities are related to new family norm in which it is difficult for a girl to adjust or deal with the situations and circumstances. But Anita Desai does not reside like others on social concerns. She explores deeper into the forces that condition the growth of a female in this patriarchal male subjugated society. She examines social realities from the psychological viewpoint without posing herself as a social reformer. Her novels are studies of the inner life of characters and her talent lies in the description of minute things that are usually ignored.

In Search of Significance:

Anita's women are in everlasting pursuit for a consequential life. Anita Desai states that all her writing is "an effort to discover, to underline and convey the true significance of things." Jasbir, This explains her involvement with her characters. Her protagonists suffer strongly because of their fruitless attempts to find poignant contact, response and understanding. Anita Desai's novels are in tune with her idea that "a woman writer is more concerned with thought, emotion and sensation."

Depression and Other:

In her writings she has touched upon depression, time apart, sex, household responsibilities, irritating habits, large family circle, expectations, and family decision-making, as the reasons which lead to marital discord.

Depression:

It is a condition of mental disturbance, severe dejection, accompanied by feelings of hopelessness and inadequacy which create difficulty in maintaining interest in life. Same is the condition of Anita Desai's women characters who deal with frustrations, depression, and rejection in their life. They like solitude and privacy. Anita Desai is concerned with the depression and oppression of these intensely introverts female characters that are unable to vent their emotions. As in *Cry, the Peacock*, moving from one pit of despair and depression to another, Sita's feeling of hopelessness and dejection is depicted by: "All order is gone out of my life. There is no plan, no peace, nothing to keep me within the pattern of familiar everyday life."

Time Apart

Time apart and a lack of worthwhile time with each other serves to get people out of sync. This makes life unbalanced and creates issues which result in marital discord. In the novels of Anita Desai, one major reason of marital discord is lack of time given by the male characters to their wives. As in Gautama's, in *Cry, the Peacock*, busy profession spares him no time for his family. With no vocation to occupy herself with, Maya broods over the coldness of her husband: "Telling me to go to sleep while he worked at his papers, he did not give another thought to me". In *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*, Sita, in spite of living under the same roof for twenty years and parenting four children the couple hardly

spend time with each other and they always remain like “an ill-assorted couple lacking altogether in harmony in their lives.”

Regularity, quantity, quality and infidelity are all frequent causes of hassle and dissonance in marriage. In reference to Anita Desai’s *Cry, the Peacock*, the root of Maya’s distress is her marriage, is his disconnected and aloof behavior to the amount of not fulfilling her physical and emotional desires. “A continuous frustration of the body’s sexual needs can be disastrous to somebody like Maya, given her fierce instinctuality.”

Irritating Habits:

Irritating habits of partner incite impatience or anger. At times, people find some of their partner’s habits undesirable and thus causing friction in relationship. In *Cry, the Peacock*, Maya, the central character of the novel, who has failed to grow out of her childhood, lives in a world of fantasy and fairytale that is far removed from reality. This irritated Gautama who was rather a mature man.

Large Family Circle:

Large family or in other words ‘joint family’ comprises of married couple and husband’s other relatives. Life for a newly married woman becomes difficult if the in-laws don’t give her necessary support and space. It gets difficult for her to adapt in a new environment as she comes out of the protective shell of the parental family. In case of Monisha in *Voices in the City*, her life is in a state of deprivation due to the domination of her in-laws. Repeated comments by her in-laws on her inability to conceive makes her go through psychological misery.

Expectations:

It is a strong belief about what might happen in the future. Especially in marriage, spouses have certain hopes and expectations from their partners. The difficulty with expectations is that they are often poorly defined and sometimes completely unknown. And unknown things generate curiosity. Most of the people idealize marriage and become disheartened once those prospects aren’t met.

Family Decision Making:

It relates to important decisions related to family; for e.g. decision involving child planning. For Example: - In *Where Shall We Go This summer?* When Sita came to know that she is fifth time pregnant, the intensity of the feeling of obsession is apparent in her constant fear of child-birth. She feels a strong revulsion as her husband was confused and puzzled. She herself takes a quick decision that she doesn’t want to have the baby. This decision brings discord into their married life.

Conflict

It is a serious disagreement or argument or eternal conflict between the sexes. After marriage when men do not behave according to the expectations of women and vice-a-versa, conflict is obvious. In *Where Shall We Go this Summer?*, Sita’s husband gets irritated when Sita decides to go to the island in her pregnant condition. He says “Not much longer to go now, Sita, it’ll soon be over. You are doing a blunder”. But she wasn’t ready to listen and in frustration she says “I am trying to escape from the madness here, escape to a place where it might be possible to be sane again.”

Isolation:

Isolation in Anita Desai's novels was a significant cause of Marital Discord. In the novels, isolation operates at two levels - physical and mental. Physical Isolation may be within the wall of the house in which a woman is alone and nobody is there to care for her and mental isolation occurs when a woman feels that her husband does not care about her. *Custody*, the problem between Deven and Sarla is the lack of togetherness. She expects her husband to take care of her with continued responsibility. Because of opposite temperaments, they hardly spend time with each other. Thus, this isolation makes Sarla go through mental trauma and live an isolated life.

Lack of Communication :

Husband - wife alienation ensuing from lack of communication and unpredictable inappropriateness form a very important issue of Anita Desai's novels. Anita Desai's women long for love and unity of the strength which they recognize as the panacea of the troubles of the world. Their refusal to surrender and the incapability to accept their partner's perspective, unavoidably results in separation and isolation. As in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*, Sita finds herself alienated from her husband due to lack of communication. She remains an ignored personality. She creates a world of her own which she fills with extraordinarily sensitive beings. Lack of understanding on the part of her husband, and incapacity in them both to strike a sympathetic chord between each other leads to discord.

Domestic Violence:

As one would mostly assume, domestic violence is not limited to physical violence only. Emotional abuse and economic deprivation can also be categorized under domestic violence. This has also become a significant concern leading to marital discord.

Novels Dealing with Complexity of Human Issues :

Anita Desai highlights significant issues about the complexity of human relationships as a big contemporary problem and human condition leading to marital discord. In her novels, like, *Cry the Peacock*, *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*, *Voices in the City*, and *In Custody* she depicts the fruitless marriage relationship which frequently leads to separation and isolation of the characters. The concept of dysfunctional marriage is addressed in Desai's first novel – *Cry, the Peacock*.

Cry, the Peacock

Cry, the Peacock portrays the psychic uproar of a young and sensitive girl Maya who is disturbed by a childhood prediction of a fatal disaster. The novel is about Maya's cry for love and relationship in her loveless wedding. The peacock's cry is an implication of Maya's distressed cry for love and life of involvement. It "explores the turbulent emotional world of the neurotic protagonist Maya who smarts under an acute alienation stemming from marital discord and verges on a curious insanity."

In this novel, Maya, who's obsessed condition is brought about by multiple factors, include marital discord and drabness as well as a psychic disorder. Desai looks in to the cause for marital discord and mentions how such discord influences the family. Most of the times, the inability of an individual to be responsive to the behavior patterns of her partner leads to tension and stress in the relationship, while sometimes it is on adaptation of various levels of affection that strained relationships occur.

This novel explains both husband and wife relations in depth. It has been mentioned that both have strained relations because of their incompatible attitudes. Maya is pensive, receptive and sensitive, while Gautama is pragmatic, insensible and lucid. Maya is prosaic and high-strung Gautama isolated,

thoughtful and inaccessible. Maya has gentleness, quietness and affection, while Gautama is rigid and bitter.

The marital bond that binds the two is very brittle and shaky; the growing tension between them reaches its climax when Maya kills Gautama and then commits suicide. Maya is a convict of the past, lives almost eternally in the shade of a world of memories, which overwhelm her. Gautama, on the other hand, lives in the present and accepts reality and facts even though they are not very beautiful. On the contrary, Maya never tries to admit the truth, but she wants to live in her unreal fairy world. She keeps on recalling her childhood days and the love her father poured out on her. Maya herself is in two minds about her bond and love with Gautama as she always seeks the other father in her husband.

On other occasions she looks at her marriage as a fiasco as she says “broken repeatedly and repeatedly the pieces were picked up and put together.” The incompatibility between them emerges from their attitudes and approaches to life. With his pragmatic and practical attitude, Gautama fails to respond to Maya’s emotional needs. She is conscious of the insurmountable impasse between them.

Sensitive Maya is awfully distressed and loses her mental calm at the death of her dog and Gautama neglects the emotional yearning of Maya and says that he would bring another dog for her. This emotionless behavior makes Maya brood over Gautama’s insensitivity – “Showing how little he knows of my misery or how to comfort me”. Gautama is so near to her, yet so far. This gap in communication coupled with her obsession with the albino astrologer’s prophecy makes her an emotional wreck.

Not only Maya, Desai has used other characters as well to emphasize on issues of discord. Leila, Maya’s friend, married a tubercular patient for love. She rages and raves at the mockery of the marriage, yet puts up with all the childish vagaries of her husband.

Both marriages point out that qualities and shortcomings, capability and weaknesses of husband-wife and projects how they have not cautiously and deliberately been balanced to make a relationship successful. Similarities between the attitudes of both husband and wife to life and things in general play an important role in making their conjugal life successful. General situations in society are such that no proper time or thought is given to these affairs. It results in conflicts, desperation, separation and loneliness.

Women who are treated casually become sufferers in these conflicts. Their supposed reliability and traditional approach toward them cause alienation in their lives. They struggle against strong, negative, soul-killing circumstances but in vain. They become hopeless, desperate and nervous. Committing suicide, running away or living separately are the only solutions visible to them. The fact that finally Maya turns insane and kills her husband may contain an indirect comment on their different values of life. The novel becomes a fascinating psychological study of neurotic fears and anxieties caused by marital incompatibility and disharmony.

Madhusudan Prasad briefly alludes to Maya as a neurotic figure: “In *Cry, the Peacock*, Desai explores the turbulent emotional world of the neurotic protagonist, Maya, who smarts under an acute alienation, stemming from marital discord, and verges on a curious insanity.”

He partially agrees with the discovery of Maya’s neurosis in the novel based on ‘marital discord’ arising out of her ‘morbid preoccupation with death’ and it shatters the very identity of ‘women in our contemporary society dominated by man in which woman longing for love is driven mad or compelled to commit suicide.’

Maya’s psychosis does not completely occur out of ‘marital discord’ in which Gautama is utterly to be held responsible. On the contrary, he dreadfully tries to understand her problem. Furthermore, in her

hours of anxiety Gautama is very much worried about her troubled mind and acts as a nurse. Therefore, she admits that he is “her guardian and protector.”

The marital discord arises out of her neurotic traits which she is helplessly struggling to disentangle herself from. The novel sensationalizes the fight for life and death of Maya who is already oppressed by her irrational personality. Similarly Srinivasa Iyengar says *Cry, the Peacock* is really “Maya’s effort to tell her story to herself, to discover some meaning in her life, and even to justify herself to herself.”

Voices in the City

In *Voices in the City*, Anita Desai’s main concern is chiefly with human beings and their necessity for bonding and how in the absence of meaningful relationships a person suffers. She probes the psychic coercion that may affect an individual in forging long term relations and how an individual is exasperated if he is not capable to form such relationships. The theme of parting is treated in terms of mother-child relations which itself is an effect of discord in husband-wife relationship. Monisha lives a fragmented and famished life. She is estranged from her mother as well as her husband.

Her association with her husband is marked by loneliness and lack of communication. Jiban (her husband) thinks that a woman’s most important role is to take care of children and household jobs under the supervision of her mother-in-law. He has no time for her and no desire to share his sentiments as he is quite busy in his professional life. Monisha’s mis-matched marriage, her loneliness, unfruitfulness and pressure of living in a joint family with an insensible husband pushes her to breaking point. The element of love is missing in her life and at last she commits suicide.

If Maya’s misfortune in *Cry, the Peacock* emanated from her fascination with a father figure, Nirode’s (Monisha’s brother) calamity lies in his love-hate bond with the mother. The marital discord transforms Nirode’s parents into emotional monsters. The father turns into a drunkard, debased and dishonorable creature absolutely different from an easy-going, sports –loving and fond father. The mother is transformed from a sweet, sensitive, accomplished beauty into a cold, practical and possessive woman having no human warmth and tenderness even for her own children. Anita Desai presents through these images that a marriage without mutual respect and love, is at best a farce, at worst it is a kind of disease that destroys body, mind and soul completely.

Where Shall We Go This Summer?

Anita Desai’s other novel *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* (1975) is similar to her first novel *Cry, the Peacock*, and focuses on marital dissonance which accentuated the perceptively highly strong nature of the protagonist. The mismatched couple, Raman and Sita are confronted with the same problem of discord. Sita’s marriage to Raman was not based on proper understanding and love between them. Desai gives the explanation as “and finally- out of pity, out of lust, out of a sudden will for adventure and because it was inevitable, he married her.” Sita represents a world of sentiment and feminine sensibility, while Raman is a man with an active view of life and the sense of the practical.

Sita is a restless, responsive middle-aged woman with unstable and emotional reactions to many things that happen to her, she always wants to escape reality and does not want to grow up and face the responsibilities of adult life. Raman represents shrewdness and an acceptance of the norms and values of society. He is brisk and precise in dealing with the business of life. He is unable to understand the hostility and passion with which Sita reacts against every unpleasant incident. His response to his wife’s recurrent outbursts is a mixture of bewilderment, tiredness, fear and finally a resigned acceptance of her abnormality. He cannot comprehend her boredom, her frustration with him.

The theme of estrangement and lack of communication in marital life is discussed by the writer in this novel. Since childhood, Sita remains a disregarded character. She is the result of a broken family. She yearns to have the attention and love of others, but her father remains busy with his chelas and patients. Even after marriage, she remains lonely as her husband Raman fails to fulfill her expectations. He fails to understand her violence and passion just like Gautama in *Cry, the Peacock*. Raman is wise, lucid and passive whereas Sita is unreasonable. Through Sita, Anita Desai voices the awe of facing all alone “the ferocious assaults of existence”. The conflict between two polarized temperaments and two discordant viewpoints represented by Sita and Raman, sets up marital discord and conjugal misunderstanding as the *leit-motif* of Desai’s novels. They are temperamentally poles apart which accounts for their being unable to forge a harmonious marital relationship.

Where Shall We Go This Summer? May thus be seen as a fable on the incapability of human beings to relate the inner life with the outer, the individual with society. It does suggest that a life of complete inwardness is not the solution to the problems of life. It shows that human happiness is in balancing the opposites of life. The novel shows Desai’s terrible image of life, in which the blameless bear the pain. They pay a heavy price for their honesty, and virtue, while traditional values of society push them over the edge.

In Custody

In Custody, Desai focusses again on marital friction and relationship problems. Desai has repeatedly tried to project the idea that a blissful conjugal life is a rainbow-colored dream of romantic mind, or wishful thinking of an immature intellect. In a marriage, adjustment for a woman means deleting her individuality, her inner self, her conscience, so that the ideal couple represents the self-satisfied, arrogant husband and his legally bonded woman slave. In this novel, the married couple lead a gloomy married life. They are quite different from each other in their temperaments. Deven is a professor of literature and Sarla has no concern in literature. She is unaware that her husband’s frequent visits to Delhi is to meet his girlfriend. Sarla is a picture of a discarded wife.

The problem of marital discord in the novels lies in the fact that Gautama in *Cry, The Peacock*, Jiban in *Voices In The City*, Raman in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* and Deven in *In Custody* are practical and matter-of-fact men while Maya, Monisha, Sita and Sarla in these four novels respectively are idealistic. Maya, Monisha, Sita and Sarla each crave for love and understanding but their tragedy is that they are married to wooden, hard-hearted and insensitive men. All the marriages in her novels are more or less business dealings, the under-counter profits rationally handed over to the male partners.

But not infrequently this order is violently convulsed, the caged bird batters its head against the iron bars and manages to leave a few bloodstains. Similarly a wife revolts, runs away, commits suicide, becomes a homicidal maniac, and finds tremendous freedom in blessed widowhood. The great ‘No’ is said at least to ensure freedom of both body and mind. By implication Mrs. Desai makes it clear that either one should remain unmarried, unfettered and unaccepted by the society as such, or marry and be damned to an everlasting private hell. In consequence, therefore, she is taken with definite discomfort by the complacent reading public. Her novels are indeed chilling encounters of the traumatic experiences of married lives with developed egos. The attitudes of spouses towards each other’s role and status might be of considerable importance for marital harmony or disharmony. The decline in harmony can be associated with emphasis to individualistic, materialistic and self-oriented goals over that of family well-being. And this later takes the shape of marital discord.

Thus *A Study Of Comparision Of Traditional And Modern Oeuvre* deals with the different characters of Anitha Desai who is considered to be one of the most important women writers of the modern times. She speaks volumes of the dipressed women in this world where male domination is at a high rate. Her readers will be a lot emotional while reading her each and every novel. The message she expresses in her novels is really worthy to the present world. Its inspiration lasts long in the minds of the readers.