



Women novelists in Indian writing in English from post-Independence era till today

Dr. Sangoju Rajeswari

Professor

State Council of Educational Research and Training, Vijayawada, India

Abstract: Woman has been the focus of many literary works down the centuries. In an age of development and fluctuation in every field, one cannot easily ignore half the population. Indian writers in English have also come out of their shells of "non-attachment" and have started acknowledging the stature of the Indian woman in a male-dominated society. The concept of Indian womanhood is as divergent as the country itself and has undergone drastic and dramatic changes from era to era. India has travelled from her glorious past to degeneration; from spiritual ascendancy to communal clashes; from captivity to independence; from agrarian revolution to cyber technology. The role of the Indian woman has also changed from that of deity to *devadasi*, from *shakti* to *abala*, and from homebound creature to a professional outfit. Here it is important to mention that the Indo-Anglian fiction too presents a consistent picture of the changing social realities during this eventful century. Those interested in categorizing may find it convenient to divide the Indian English Fiction into two broad categories as - the Pre-Independence and Post-Independence groups of writers.

Woman has been the focus of many literary works down the centuries. In an age of development and fluctuation in every field, one cannot easily ignore half the population. Indian writers in English have also come out of their shells of "non-attachment" and have started acknowledging the stature of the Indian woman in a male-dominated society. The concept of Indian womanhood is as divergent as the country itself and has undergone drastic and dramatic changes from era to era. India has travelled from her glorious past to degeneration; from spiritual ascendancy to communal clashes; from captivity to independence; from agrarian revolution to cyber technology. The role of the Indian woman has also changed from that of deity to *devadasi*, from *shakti* to *abala*, and from homebound creature to a professional outfit.

Here it is important to mention that the Indo-Anglian fiction too presents a consistent picture of the changing social realities during this eventful century. Those interested in categorizing may find it convenient to divide the Indian English Fiction into two broad categories as - the Pre-Independence and Post-Independence groups of writers.

The post-Independence period in the recent Indian history corresponds suitably with her concept of the "nodal period" when a number of Indian writers of fiction in English try to explore and manifest Indian reality. In these writers one does not find either the commitment of the earlier period or even the amused narration of the trials of the middle class, trying to unite the past traditional outlook with the fast-emerging realities of the modern living conditions. In this effort, the writers of the post-Independence phase move

inward. They get more and more psychologically planned and try to evaluate the sociological effect on the psyche of their characters.

This movement, from the outward gross realities to inward complexities, found as its mouth-piece, a number of women novelists who, by the peculiar situation of their existence, have been able to see the Indian complexities from close quarters, where constraints of varied hues and shades work upon the sensitive individuals. Fiction by women writers provides insights, a wealth of understanding, a reservoir of meanings and a basis of discussion. There has been a growing interest on women's issues and women writers focus on these issues. Many creative writings in English and many writers including Nayantara Sehgal, Shashi Deshpande and Shobha De have dealt with such issues.

There is a galaxy of women writers who have contributed to the development of Indo-English prose and verse. Toru Dutt and Sarojini Naidu were the pathfinders and made way and inspired the new generation of men and women writers. There is a fine incorporation of Indian artistic sensibility and western literary types and genre in their poetry. The Indo-English literature has presented the political, social and cultural crises in India. Social hypocrisies, ugly social practices of caste-system, and superstitions in Indian society have been analysed thoroughly in Indo-English literature. The synthesis of the Eastern and Western literary modes have given a comprehensive perspective to the Indo-English writers and they have successfully analyzed the psychological, emotional and spiritual crises experienced by the Indian intellectuals as well as by men and women representing the different strata of Indian society.

Women writers comprise a sizeable segment of Indo-English writers. They present the age-old problems of Indian womanhood. As Indo-English literature has absorbed the new trends from the western literature, its theoretical foundations range between Greco-Roman theories of literature and Marxist and existentialist, psycho-analytic and other avant-garde movements in the world of literature. The English language has given the most direct access to the ever-growing horizon of human knowledge. The Indo-English writers could easily bypass the hurdles of race and culture, perhaps with ease, as compared to the writers in the regional languages. From Raja Ram Mohan Roy to the youngest Indo-English writers, the continuous absorption of the spirit of modernity, science and rationality, and the stress on forging a balance between tradition and modernity can be found and this has brought forth the new awareness towards the archetypal themes and national ethos.

Of the different colours and shades of the women novelists, Anita Desai is one of the many voices of the modern Indian English fiction. She is a recorder of the dilemma faced by a person in the Indian urban set up. She introduces a new age of psychological realism in this genre with her novel *Cry The Peacock* (1963). Anita Desai, like Kamala Markandaya, has made human relationship as a centre of her fictional subject. She is mainly concerned with the journey within her characters, the main protagonists being female characters. Therefore, the repeated theme that we come across in her novels is the agony of existence in a hostile and male-dominated society which is conservative. The physical world attracts the writer to the mental apprehensions and the feeling 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. One sees 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 described it as

“.....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 writers of the present century have the same thematic concerns but the treatments are their own. All of them are chroniclers of the tension in the wake of India's emergence as a developing nation. One also finds a conflict between tradition and modernity. In the novels of women writers, one comes to know about women who are traditional in their way of living but modern in their outlook and have the capacity to retain their individuality. There is a clash between awakening individuals and the dominance of the conventional social fabric where the individual finds his vulnerability.

Kamala Markandaya is deliberated to be a pioneer in treating this theme in her novels. If traditional women, who still hold their individuality, make their appearance in the novels of Kamala Markandaya, women who face challenges in their quest for self-fulfillment are seen in the novels of Ruth Pravar Jhabvala. The women characters of Markandaya are generally conformists and traditionalists. In two of 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 present a sample of the whole Indian society. She depicts the change in the rural areas. Her novels, *Nectar In ASieve* and *A Handful of Rice*, portray the harsh economic reality in rural area. The ravages of nature and hunger for millions have been treated sensitively by her in these 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”.

A post-Independence writer, Kamala Markandaya, draws her canvas on the changing socio-economic scene, 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-breds, English officials in India, and Indian émigrés in England. From the first to the last, Markandaya's novels present women who prove themselves to be as resistant and resourceful as the earth. The positive attitude of these women is an outcome of their inner strength which can withstand social oppression. Their strength does not lie in their muscular power but in their inherent capacity for compassion, sacrifice, nurturance and acceptance of the inevitable. Chronicling the experience of the Indian woman, Markandaya shows her as the pillar of the society - supporting, strengthening and enduring everyone around her, Markandaya's fictional canvas, thus, portrays certain social conventions and attitude that victimise women.

Another outstanding woman novelist is Ruth Praver Jhabvala whose six novels deal with the middle-class family of Delhi. She is mainly concerned with the family life, the personal relationship and the social problems. Political issues come up only when her characters and their turmoil have any relation to it. She maintains a sympathetic but ironic tone, seeing Indian social problems objectively and coolly.

“She takes an amused look at arranged marriages in India. She observes the metropolitan variegated life in Delhi in her novels, *To whom she will* and *The Nature of Passion*, with objectivity which made K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar rightly call her novels, "exquisite comedies of urban middle class life in the nineteen-fifties and sixties".

Another well-known novelist belonging to same cadre is Nayantara Sahgal who wrote novels mostly concerned 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 extra-marital relationship. 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 on this:

“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 and Ruth Praver Jhabwala (both born 1927) have explored different dimensions of marriage in India. While Sahgal strikes a strong key-note in showing her female characters breaking away from unhappy marriages, Jhabwala takes an amused look at arranged marriages in India with her Jane Austinian tongue in the cheek style.

Sahgal's novels take a stand against a vital relationship like marriage going sterile. Her female characters opt out of it and find fulfilment in extramarital relationship. All her novels, viz. *A Time to be Happy* (1958), *This Time of Morning* (1968), *Storm in Chandigarh* (1969) and *A Day in Shadow* (1971), portray this theme, with major political events as backdrop. Many critics have called her novels political, because of vast and recurrent references to political happenings in the country. However, what makes them stand apart is her bold proclamation of freedom for women, especially in their personal lives. In a society which views any relationship outside marriage as violation of an accepted ethical code, Sahgal's novels make a strong plea for women to have equal opportunities to find fulfilment. Though contemporaries, Anita Desai and Sahgal are virtual contrasts in the portrayal of female characters and their attitudes to marriage. While Anita Desai's female characters desperately struggle to make their marriages a success, however unfulfilling they may be, Sahgal's heroines opt out of it.

Another well-known feminist 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. Deshpande has added a new depth and dimension to the Indian English fiction.

In Deshpande's two novels, *Roots and Shadows* (1983) and *That Long Silence* (1989), although the women protagonists achieve 'Personhood' yet they do not negate the family or the society. They go beyond what Elaine Showalter calls the "Female Phase" which is a phase of self-discovery, a turning inward freedom 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".

It is a kind of enlightened reintegration into the society where they find their own voices; no longer being 'other directed'. On the surface, the concern of their writing seems to be akin to the work been done by men.

Shanta Rau's *Remember the House* is a search for her Indian roots, an expression of patriotic emotions. Sahga's male protagonists are also in an euphoric mood after the country's independence. Marriage is a concern only for Jhabwala's heroine, Nimmi. The heroines are caught in an ambiguous situation between two cultures and are preoccupied with existential concerns. These early novels - part confessional, part autobiographical - are beginning expressive of tentative trainings. Markandaya turns to rural India and the theme of poverty, thus moving out of her own actual experience (Markandya had moved to England in 1948).

In order to place Anita Desai in proper perspective, it is necessary to see her along with the other women novelists who have more or less the same thematic concern and who, in their own way, deal with the commonly shared theme of human relationship. All of them are chroniclers of the tension in the wake of India's emergence as a developing nation. For a better and easier understanding of this aspect of modern Indian women fiction writers in English one may look for general tendencies which unmistakably point towards certain commonly shared themes in their fiction.

One of the themes recurring in the novels written during the post- Independence decades is the individual's nostalgia in treating the joint family. Often the central figures in the novels, in order to seek their own identities consciously, try to break away from the kind of life they are nostalgic for. The institution of the joint family gives opportunity for group human behaviour. It symbolizes an expansive pre-industrial way of life, and it represents a deeply entrenched form of orthodoxy, against which, the individual may find himself helpless. It gives way to presenting the conflict between two sets of values - one standing for the supremacy of social hierarchy; and the other, for that of the individual.

The treatment of the theme by women novelists is a three-faceted affair. A personal story slowly develops into a wider conflict in which are involved the individual's identity for supremacy and the social demands. The personal story, thus, is used as a springboard to explore social change in India in all its complex manifestations. They seem to examine the transition from a traditional society to an urban industrial metropolitan society in its comprehensiveness.

In sum, it can be said that the fictional world of the Indian women writers encompasses a whole range of themes and trends related to the freedom struggle, partition holocaust, social evils in the form of caste, religion, low status of woman, poverty, and corruption and so on. More modern themes like man's sense of alienations depicted in newer modes of narrative techniques, in what has come to be termed as "The Psychological novel", also present clear contrasts to the earlier modes of simple narrative techniques. The fresh crops of writers have adopted varied themes and styles of narration and more confident approach to novel writing. With it, the Indo-Anglian literary tradition has come to acquire a new character, and wider acceptance.

The comparative achievement of Anita Desai becomes clear when one notices that her fellow women writers like Kamala Markandaya, Ruth Praver Jhabwala, Nayantara Sahgal, and Shanta Rama Rau seldom try to portray the psychic elements involved in these themes in their fullness. The tensions and anxieties of being modern in a traditional society have been overlooked by most of these writers who have mainly devoted their attention to broad social features that emerge in the course of gradual metamorphosis of the old order. So intense is their devotion to the physical aspects of this change that they fail to take note of and project the psychological reality which must, of necessity, be allowed an upper hand in the face of the world undergoing a rapid change with the advancement of scientific and technological knowledge and rapid progress of communication and industrialization.

Anita Desai adds a new dimension to English fiction by concentrating on the exploration of this troubled sensibility a typical modern Indian phenomenon. In contrast to her, in Jhabwala's works, the social background is rather more important than the characters, in Kamala Markandaya's works the emphasis is as much on the principal characters as on matters - economic, political, social and cultural. Nayantara Sahgal, while dealing with social problems, confines herself to a particular social class, namely the upper class and the aristocracy.

Anita Desai is an Indian novelist and short story writer. She is known for her sensitive portrayal of the inner feelings of her female characters. Many of her novels explore tensions between family members and the alienation of middle-class women. In her later novels, she wrote on varied themes such as German anti-Semitism, the demise of traditions, and Western stereotypical views of India.

Born as Anita Mazumdar on June 24, 1937 in Mussoorie, Anita Desai's mother was German and her father was Bengali. Anita Desai completed her schooling from Queen Mary's Higher Secondary School in Delhi and graduated in English literature from the University of Delhi (Miranda House) in 1957. She has taught at Mt. Holyoke and Smith Colleges and was a member of the Advisory Board for English in New Delhi. Presently she lives in United States where she is John E. Burchard Professor of English at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, MA.

She grew up during World War II and could see the anxiety her German mother was experiencing about the situation and her family in Germany. The congenial aesthetic environment at home contributed a great deal to fertilize her creative; and her grassroot level experiences helped in consolidating the maturity of her vision. When she was a child, her parents, sisters and brother used German for conversation. She began to write prose, mainly fiction, and published some small pieces in children's magazines when she was seven. Her first story was published at the age of nine. When she realized that the Germany she had known was devastated, her mother never returned there, nor had any desire to return. Anita herself did not visit until she was an adult.

Anita Desai worked for a year in Max Muller Bhawan, Calcutta and then she was married to Ashwin Desai. She has a family with four children. She has been living in various cities like Calcutta, Bombay, Chandigarh, Delhi and Pune; some of which are well described in her novels.

Anita Desai made her debut as novelist in 1963 with *Cry, The Peacock*. It was followed by *Voices of the City* (1965) - a story about three siblings and their different ways of life in Calcutta. Her novel, *Fire on the Mountain* (1977), won the Winifred Holtby Memorial Prize. Anita Desai's other works include *Clear Light of Day* (1980), *In Custody* (1984) *Journey to Ithaca* (1995) and *Fasting, Feasting* (1999), each of which was shortlisted for the Booker Prize. Besides these, she has also published collection of short stories, viz. *Games at Twilight and Other Stories* (1978) and *Diamond Dust and Other Stories* (2000).

She is the recipient of the Sahitya Akademi Award for her novel *Fire OnThe Mountain*. Her novel, *Where Shall We Go This Summer* has won The Federation of Indian Publishers and Author's Guild Award for Excellence in Writing in 1979. She was awarded the Neil Gunn International Fellowship for 1994. *In Custody* was made into a film by Merchant Ivory productions in 1993, starring Shashi Kapoor, Shabana Azmi, Om Puri; and screenplay by Anita Desai. Her children's book *The Village by the Sea* (1982), won the Guardian Children's Fiction Award. Her most recent novel is *The Zig Zag Way* (2004), set in 20th century Mexico.

Anita Desai is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature in London and she has been a member of the Advisory Board for English of the National Academy of Letters in Delhi and a member of the American Academy Art and Letters. She has been Visiting Fellow at Girton College Cambridge (England) and has taught writing at Smith College and also has been the Purington Professor of English at Mount Holyoke College in the United States.

The Indo-German aspect of Desai's background is the centre-piece of all her writings and no worthwhile study of her work can be made without taking notice of her parent's past and their influence on her sensibility. She has been writing since the age of seven. She tried her hand at short stories, illustrated them diligently and sewed them into covers so as to make them look as 'proper books'. These little pieces got published in the children's magazines. She occasionally contributed a short story to the college magazine. In her twenties she started writing novels on small scale. The writers who have made a significant impact on Desai's thinking and writing are Emily Bronte, Virginia Woolf, D.H. Lawrence, Henry James, Proust Dostoevsky, Chekhov, Kawabata, Rimbaud and Hopkins. She was only nine years old when she first read *Wuthering Heights* and although she could not have understood half of it, it struck her:

“with a gale force, it set my hair on end, I vibrated to that experience and reality has never again seemed to me half as intense, significant and overwhelming as the world of books . . .”

In this way, these Western novelists and poets greatly influenced her. They suited her purpose and, like them, she has made use of the techniques like flash-back and stream of consciousness in some of her novels. She was furnished with the charm of rhythms and style by the poets of the East. Whatever she heartily welcomed was deeply and successfully entrenched within to enrich her creative perspectives.

Anita Desai has always been inspired and encouraged by Ruth Praver Jhabvala. She has been influenced more by European and American literatures:

“Anita Desai's achievement would appear significant if we remain mindful of her problems of devising the proper metaphor to express the working of the inner mind. Though she has had the models of the Bronte, she had few Indian models to follow and thus it is her own that she succeeds in evolving a technique and suitable style to communicate the critical ordeal in which the individual is placed in her novels.”

Among the women Indian-English novelists, Anita Desai is the one and the only writer who has discussed the art of fiction most cogently and comprehensively. The critics have come to accept her as the imaginative contemporary of the European, American and Commonwealth modernists, like, Iris Murdoch, Saul Bellow, Patrick White, Margaret Attwood; and that she has the same kind of aesthetic aspiration.

Anita Desai has tried to adapt to the traditions of American and English novels in her work. Like the American writers, she sees more deeply, darkly, privately; and like the English writers, her stress of voice is on an appreciation of reality with an aim to bring order in disorder. Her fiction takes its tone and form polarities, opposites and irreconcilable:

“oddity, distortion of personality, dislocation of normal life, recklessness of behaviour, morbidity of temperament, malignancy of motive - these together with the profound poetry of disorder, radical forms of alienation, maladjustments and contradictions seem to have persevered as the best of the great traditions”.

Anita Desai's fiction is untransparent and unpredictable, unlike the fiction of R.K. Narayan and Kamala Markandaya. Writing, for Anita Desai, is a process of discovering truth, but this truth, for her, is not metaphysical, nor is it the superficial reality. Life has infinite variety and it may take any form according to the individual. Her notion of reality of life seems to be greatly influenced by Virginia Woolf who maintains that:

“Life is not a series of big lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end”.

Anita Desai chooses the inner reality to the outer. She is interested in the social or political themes, the outer weather, the physical geography or the visible action. Her forte is the exploration of the interior world, plunging into the limitless depths of the mind and bringing out the hidden truths of human psyche. Her purpose of writing is to discover for herself and then, to describe and convey the truth. She takes 'Truth' as synonymous of 'Art', not 'Reality'. She says

“Writing to me is a process of discovering the ‘truth’ - the truth that is nine-tenth of the iceberg that lies submerged beneath; the one-tenth visible portion we call ‘reality’”.

She expresses at another interview -

‘Reality’ is merely the one-tenth section of the iceberg that one sees above the surface of the ocean, ‘Art’ – the remaining nine-tenths of it that lies below the surface. That is why it is more near ‘Truth’ than ‘Reality’. Itself ‘Art’ does not merely reflect ‘Reality’ - it enlarges it.

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 death. Anita Desai finds the 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 the significant 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 has sought new techniques to articulate the newly experienced outer and inner realities. She has used a style which is supple and suggestive enough to convey the fever and fretfulness, to record the eddies and currents in the stream of consciousness of her characters. The interplay of thoughts, feelings and emotions is reflected in language, syntax and imagery for her,

“it is depth which is interesting, delving deeper and deeper in a character, a situation or a scene, rather than going round about it”.

Anita Desai captures the psychological realism as intensified impressionism; and she, thus, tries to introduce a modern psychological vein, which is generally not encountered in any other Indo-Anglian writer of fiction. She subordinates the background to the characters in order to convey an intimate expression of the inner world of her characters. She portrays her characters as individuals ‘Facing, single handed, the ferocious assaults of existence’. The story is important for her only in so far as it reflects the obsessions of her characters.

Anita Desai's characters are generally neurotic females, highly sensitive and sequestered in a world of their own, of dream and imagination; and as a consequence, they are unwilling to adjust with the reality. Anita Desai is not a believer of feminist movements; and she makes it clear that her interest is with individual man and woman,

‘Only the individual, the solitary being, is of true interest.

One must be alone, silent, in order to think or contemplate or write’.

Her characters embark on a long voyage of contemplation in order to find a meaning of their existence:

“I am interested in characters who are not average but have retreated or driven into some extremity of despair, and so, turned against and made a stand against the general current. It is easy to flow with the current; it make no demands, it costs no efforts. But those who cannot follow it, whose heart cries out the great No; who fight the current and struggle against it, they know what the demands are and what it costs to meet them.”

These women characters live in seclusion with their material needs taken care of but their emotional needs remain unsatisfied. Most emotional effects in Anita Desai's fictional world are produced through tied images, conveying the streams of impulses flowing through the mind. These are more difficult and complex than free imagery which consists of visual images. She introduced new images, packed with freshness, intensity and unsurpassable evoking power. Her perception and understanding of the extraordinary queerness and mysteriousness of the world in which she lives enables her to make physical details indicate varying state of mind. Her protagonists, endowed with a heightened imagination and sensitivity, are complex, confused, irrational individuals as they are aggressively unrealistic about human limitations, having rejected the choices of salvation and fulfillment offered by religion and society.

Exploring their consciousness and bringing their conflicts to surface, Anita Desai uses images, which are surcharged with much deeper reverberations of unconscious meaning. She presents gestures and movements to suggest inside revolutions and concentrates on human action with a view to understanding the reality of associations floating in the mind. The correspondence between imagery and thought is very essential. It implies that images arise from psychological depths and are born out of context. In Desai's fiction, an image, a metaphor, or at times just a simple reference to something can be understood solely; as it functions within the novels as a whole. Thus, image groups are not merely theme supporters but theme carriers.

Like Yeats, Desai too sought a landscape that is symbolical of some spiritual condition. Imagery also enables this novelist to present her theme and ideas effectively. With the help of imagery Anita Desai is able to give concrete, visual expression to the most elusive thoughts and render her most subtle, baffling themes in a comprehensible and persuasive manner. The imagery of light and darkness enables her to bring out forcefully the dualities and ambiguities of human experience. She uses imagery also as a predictive, foreshadowing device. There are numerous examples in her novels to show that image foreground certain crucial events, changes in the attitudes of characters and also portent the conclusion. Imagery also, at times, brings out the narrator's or the writer's attitude towards the character; and thus help in establishing the tone and point of view.

Imagery brings to light aspects of Anita Desai's personality and art. Her tragic vision of life is established through a number of prey-predator images but there are also some comic and grotesque images showing the novelist in the role of a humourist, a role in which we are not usually inclined to see her, as she is essentially a tragic writer.

Stylistically, imagery makes Mrs. Desai's descriptions and analyses more vivid and introduces an element of concreteness and sensuousness in her writings. Through the use of reciprocal images which compares not only man to nature but also nature to man, Anita Desai is able to relate man of various orders of animate as well as inanimate nature.

Desai takes good care in using images that are fresh and alive with insight and evocative power. Only occasionally she employs images which seem forced and trite. They go away, being artificial and far-fetched. Sometimes they are commonplace and stereotyped, but usually her images are marked by accuracy of observation and unusual insight in proving the hidden relationship of thing. Thus, they not only enhance our understanding but are also artistically satisfying.

Anita Desai lays no special stress on the plot with the traditional notion of a beginning, middle, and an end. Story emanates directly from the characters she writes about. It is born out of their dreams, wills and actions. She feels that a story imposed from outside simply destroys their life and reduces them to a string of jerking puppets on a stage. She allows the character to grow and develop, and the narrative is allowed to move freely, and is not clogged by blocks. The plot is always simple and neat and never impedes the psychological revelation of the character. She says:

“My novels don't have themes, at least not till they are finished, published or read, do I see any theme. While writing, I follow my instinct, I follow flashes of insight, I veer away from or even fight anything that threatens to distort or destroy this insight and somehow come to the end and look back to see the pattern of footprints on the sand.”

Coming to her themes, Anita Desai seems to have opted for portraying various themes at a time in her novels; and in each individual novel these themes seem to be occurring again and again. She usually starts by presenting persons who are cut in different grains from others. They resist the demand of society and turn out to be rebels. Not finding a proper channel of communication they become alienated and brooding on their lives. All their wanderings and reflections finally bring them into new vistas of understanding which they had formerly ignored or rejected. Anita Desai's themes are, thus, original and entirely different from those of other Indo-Anglian novelists. Her novels are not political or sociological in character; but are engaged in exposing the labyrinths of the human mind and in indicating the ways to psychological fulfillment. Thus, her themes tend to wedge off the tracks of other novelists. Each aspect merges with the other and sometimes one finds a number of themes woven together. Using these themes as a foundation, the writer is able to build up her characters into a significant whole.

Anita Desai depicts life in her novels as it really is, life of the upper middle class society which she knows very well. She doesn't draw upon secondhand information. She gives authenticity and validity to her work by writing of life as she really sees it. The profound sensation of truth she feels is provided through artful and expert transitions and dexterity of the composition. Dostoevsky too says,

“to write a novel, there must be one or more strong impressions that the author has really experienced to the depth of his beings”.

Anita Desai has said in an interview that minor scenes and characters are based on real life but the minor characters and events are amalgamation of several characters and happenings or entirely imaginary.

Anita Desai shows close affinity with Virginia Woolf who also entered the consciousness of the characters and showed little concern for the actual outside action. The themes of Desai's novels are human nature and human relationships, like the novels of James Joyce and Virginia Woolf. The central theme of man-woman relationship, with which Anita Desai deals in all her novels, is governed by existential tones. The main themes dealt by existentialists are alienation, despair, frustration, anxiety and emotional life of the individual. Desai, too, deals with these themes as she is concerned with ‘human condition’ and explores the ‘emotional life’ of the people. Her central theme is the acutely sensitive wives and dismal, callous, inconsiderable, ill-chosen husbands. She has opted for portraying various themes at a time in her novels and in each novel, this theme seems to be recurring. She usually starts her novel by presenting persons who are sensitive and very different from others. They are not able to follow the general current and turn out to be rebels.

As a result, they become alienated, living a closed life on their own islands. Being sensitive, these characters start brooding on their lives. In the end, either they realize the truth or reality from which they had tried to escape and come to a new understanding. But, in certain novels, the characters are unable to face the reality and take refuge by killing themselves or others. Thus, her themes tend to wedge off the tracks of other novelists. Each aspect merges with the other and sometimes one finds a number of themes woven together. Using these themes as a foundation the writer is able to build up the characters into significant whole.

A novel is the author's views of life. As Henry James says, novels are “a personal impression of life”. (James: 508) A theme can be called the central idea of the novel. It is the unifying and controlling factor in the organization of his material. The central idea or the theme of the novel is the mother idea and this is the governing factor from which all the rest flow in the novel. One may say that a theme is the very nucleus of the whole design. All the other components of the novel, i.e., plot; characterization, description, setting, narrative-method and style etc. are its shaping pressures. All these things come within the magnetic field of the theme and become an organic whole. It is all pervading essence, embracing the entire length of the novel.

Anita Desai dealt with the theme of complexities of human relationships - mainly man-woman relationships, in her novels. She has given depth by treatment to this common theme which is unimaginable in the other Indo-Englian novelists. She explores the depth of her characters minutely and analyses them thoroughly. She has also dealt with the themes of loneliness, East-West encounter, vehemence and death, decadence and reality and illusion - the themes pertaining to the stressful modern life. She has written eleven novels till date. She has been “an authentic cartographer of the inward terrain” in her earlier novels from *Cry, The Peacock* (1963) to *Clear Light of Day* (1980). Her later novels show a marked thematic shift. As Shanta Krishnaswamy rightly points out:

“Her novels constitute together the documentation, through fiction, of radical female resistance against a patriarchally defined concept of normality. She finds the link between female duality, myth and psychosis intriguing; each heroine is seen as searching for, finding and absorbing or annihilating the double who represents the socially impermissible aspects of her femininity.”

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. *Cry, The Peacock* is about marital disharmony, lack of identity, escapism, and a sense of meaninglessness of life. Much has been written on the themes and style of Anita Desai's novels. Different attitudes to fate and fatalism presented in her novels are also considered in this work. Maya, the protagonist of the novel, is a 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's 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 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 ultimately sells it.

He is a person who loves anonymity and runs away from 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. The novelist has probed into 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 this novel.”

Monisha, like many 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 by 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 Indians 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 struck by the charm of this land and stays on. Anita Desai has also described the difficulty faced by Sarah, the English wife, with an Indian husband. The title of the novel refers to England's bidding farewell to an Indian - a ‘black bird’. Though Anita Desai has ‘disowned’ this book, she has created a lively picture of immigrant Indians. Desai has also portrayed the conflict of the immigrant who cannot sever his roots and yet makes an effort to strike new roots in an alien country and eventually becomes 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 things that by giving birth, she would be doing an act of destruction. Sita is not happy and satisfied with her married life. Her husband is busy with his 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 to 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 fervour and wild poetic imagination which do not run riot but instead remain under a certain curious discipline.”

Anita Desai's fifth novel *Fire OnThe Mountain* was published in 1977. It won the Royal Society of Literature's Winfred Holtley Memorial Prize and the 1978 National Academy of Letters Award. The novel is almost the story of Nanda Kaul, wife of the one time 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 led busy life playing cards. Bim has to shoulder the responsibility of her brothers and sister. She sacrifices her life for her siblings, educating them and marrying them. She also takes the responsibility of 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 his 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 in 1984. This novel is about the plight of Urdu poetry and an 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 Shahjehana-babi, 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 favourable to Urdu poetry and poets; and flatterers and self-seekers take the place of connoisseurs of poetry and appreciative audience.

Baumgartner's *Bombay*, Anita Desai's next novel, 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 familyless, 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. Anita Desai's *Journey to Ithaca* (1994) may be described as a story of multiple journeys undertaken by various people at many different planes of existence. These travellers are like so many pilgrims - one lighting his/her torch from another's light and giving the same to some other sojourner in his/her turn.

This novel is a manifestation of the wisdom of Oriental philosophy as Desai turns to Vedanta and Upanishads to convey her vision of spirituality. In this novel, the novelist transports the readers from India to Italy, Egypt and America while narrating the experiences of Mattoe, Sophie and the Mother – all foreigners. It is a moving story of the spiritual quests of Mattoe and the Mother who are directed towards India while the mundane search of Sophie starts from India. Born in a luxuriant Italian family, Mattoe leaves his home and journeys to India with his wife Sophie in search of something which is beyond his understanding. Right from the beginning he was a problem child to his family, though he was given formal education. Fabian, his private tutor, introduced him to Herman Hesse's *The Journey to the East* which instilled an interest in him about the mystical East. "It was the book that opened my eyes"

In the summer of 1975, Sophie and Mattoe left for India, dressed in identical blue jeans and T-shirts and sports shoes, carrying identical rucksacks on their backs, as did so many of their generation in Europe. In order to search for its "spiritual experience" they also joined the other foreigners who were "busily collecting saints as 'gurus' as earlier travellers had collected gold, spices or shawls" Shuttling throughout, seeking one guru after another, Mattoe finally reaches an ashram in the hills which is unique, for, 'the head is a woman' - the Mother, who exercises a strange hypnotic power over those who encounter her. In her speech, Mattoe feels

‘an experience of unity, the unity of the spiritual with the physical, the dark with the light, the human with the natural’.

He becomes so obsessed that he feels that 'any time spent away from the Mother, without her, was wasted time, empty time, dead time.' His family life deteriorates. He surrenders himself before the power of the aged woman. Mattoe's search for the spiritual integrity ends with the Mother because he does not have the confidence to pursue his search. With the death of the Mother, Mattoe's journey of transformation is stalled midway. His search for spirituality is unfulfilled and the divine remains unrealized. His anguish and frustration over Mother's death knows no bounds. He does not eat or drink and weep so much. Then, he just gets up one day and tells his fellow-men that he would travel north to the mountains where the mother received enlightenment, and he leaves.

On the other hand, Sophie seems immune to Mother's charisma. Neglected by Matteo, and enraged by his devotion to the mother, Sophie sets out on a quest of her own, seeking to trace the mother's life history, in order to expose her as a fraud. Sophie's journey uncovers the story of another quest: that of the mother, alias Laila, whose fiery spirit sought expression in an intense blend of creativity, amorous desire and spirituality. The trail leads from Egypt, where the 'Mother', as young Laila, grew up in Alexandria after the First World War, the daughter of a French schoolmistress and a Westernized Egyptian academic. As a schoolgirl, Laila fell in with a group of young Islamic anti-imperialists.

Drawn by their seriousness and lack of frivolity, she took to wearing a headscarf and attending classes in the Koran. Her parents were horrified and packed her off to her French aunt in Paris, where she is swept off her feet by the beauty and spirituality of an Indian dance performance. She begs Krishna, the handsome leader of the company, to accept her as a pupil. Krishna teaches Laila how to dance with sincerity and devotion. He carries her off on a tour of Switzerland, Venice and the United States, and in a few weeks Laila becomes so proficient that she replaces the leading lady. During these tours, unconsciously an amorous relationship seems to breed somewhere underneath in the heart of Krishna and he gives a new dimension to the dance of Radha and Krishna, called Hindu wedding. It shows Laila as a coy bride. Laila worships him and becomes his mistress. Krishna partners her in glamorous erotic dances, and discourses on the religious nature of Indian dance, and the inseparability of sacred and profane love. He demonstrates his ascetic commitment by refusing meat and alcohol, though not sex.

Laila is quick to sense that this dance had nothing to do with 'any religious belief or spiritual exercise, Indian or otherwise'. She feels betrayed as she wanted to dance not for displaying her physical charm or emotions, but for her, dance is the symbol of the union of the worshipper and the worshipped. She gets sick of performing at various places as she does not get spiritual contentment after these performances. She suffers disillusionment, accompanied by physical and mental break-down; and one day, she says to Krishna that she will leave and will not go on. Krishna leaves for India with Laila. After reaching India, Laila leaves Krishna and single-handedly embarks upon her spiritual quest. A diary records Laila's arrival in India, and her eventual adoption of the spiritual role through her encounter with a sage who becomes 'my Lord and my Beloved'.

Retracing Laila's footsteps, Sophie finds herself back at the Indian ashram. The Mother, meanwhile, has died, and Matteo has vanished. No one knows where he has gone. This is the beginning of another quest, for; Sophie knows that she must now seek out Matteo. Now she knows why the Mother went on that pilgrimage, and why she must go too.

The novel begins with Cavafy's poem "Ithaca", translated by Rae Dolven which ends thus: "*You must surely have understood by then what Ithacas mean.*" The plural word 'Ithacas' in the last line of the poem points out the symbolic nature of Ithaca. In the novel, India, more specifically, spiritual India appears as a kind of Ithaca. 'Ithaca' - the name of an imagined place in Greek mythology - means home, but home in a very different sense, which is almost like homelessness. It is a homecoming, but without the promise of domestic comfort, hearth and family. India and Ithaca become the same, one merging into the other. It is the home for the long-wandering, longsuffering, searching soul.

Anita Desai's next novel, *Fasting, Feasting* (1999), as implied by its very title, is a novel that forges a contrast between two cultural varieties - the Indian, known for its pious and ritualistic custom representing 'fasting'; and the other, American, a country of opulence and sumptuousness epitomizing 'feasting'. The plot is unfurled through the perceptions of Uma, in India, and of Arun, in America. Both of them are entrapped, irrespective of the culture and enveloping milieu, by oppressive bonds exercised by their own parents.

The novel has two parts. The first centers on Uma, the eldest daughter of an ambitious, conventional and conventionally ambitious lawyer and his equally conventional wife. The parents are known as Papa Mama, because they always agree, especially in disagreeing with almost everything their children may do or

want to do. They are 'enemies of abandon', and regard even the convent school to which they reluctantly send their daughters as a sink of modernity. Uma adores school, though she is a dismal failure there, being plain, short-sighted, clumsy, and not very bright. She is seventeen and her sister Aruna twelve when their mother becomes pregnant again: a terrible embarrassment at her time of life, until it turns into a triumph - this late child is a son!

Uma is immediately removed from school to help the ayah look after little Arun: what's the point of school, say PapaMama, when she fails all her exams; and anyway, it's time she was married. Although Uma is allowed to see photographs of possible suitors, as a 'sign of family's progressiveness', terrible humiliations follow. The first suitable boy comes to visit and prefers pretty twelve-year old Aruna; the second goes through with an engagement, but breaks it off and his father refuses to return the dowry. At the third attempt Uma is married and packed off to live with her in-laws in a strange town. They treat her like a servant, and she never sees her husband again after the wedding.

He is on business in Meerut, his parents say; but it turns out that that is where he lives with his another wife and children: Uma has married a bigamist. She returns home with another dowry lost and in permanent disgrace. So she becomes the family house-keeper, exploited and criticised, though efficient enough.

Her sexy sister Aruna, on the other hand, is clever and pretty, and has no problem finding a husband. Her main attraction is that his family lives in Bombay, a shopper's paradise. So, Aruna is happy, shops till she drops and goes to lots of parties. When she comes to visit her family, Uma has to look after her babies while she goes out with her friends. There is a poignant moment when Uma glimpses a possibility of escape. Dr. Dutt, the daughter of a former Chief Justice, arrives on her bicycle. She runs a department at the hospital, and has come to ask Uma to help out in a crisis: the newly established Institute of Nursing needs a domestic supervisor to run it for the twenty two trainees who have already moved in. Would Uma do it? 'Papa was quite capable of putting on a progressive, Westernised front when called upon to do so - in public, in society, not within his family of course - and now he showed his liberal educated ways by rising to his feet when Dr. Dutt dismounted from her bicycle', but that is as far as his liberalism goes.

Of course, Papa Mama refuses to allow their daughter to go out to work. So the prison gates close, and the closing coincides with the suicide - a traditional Indian suicide with kerosene and matches - of Uma's beautiful, talented cousin Anamika after twenty years in an unhappy arranged marriage, for which her parents forced her to renounce the Oxford scholarship she had been offered. Part one of the novel ends with Uma among the mourners watching Anamika's ashes being scattered in the sacred river. After that, Uma disappears from the story as completely as her cousin.

Part Two is less than half the length of Part One. Compared to the subtle, atmospheric, perceptive first part, the second part is crude: a familiar caricature of small-town America. The central figure is young Arun. He is not autistic like the brother in *Clear Light of Day*, but almost an uncommunicative and withdrawn. His life is 'a deep well of grayness', a never-ending academic grind from his earliest childhood on. Ambitious Papa coaches him daily after school. The Papa keeps reminding his son that his own parents were so poor that he had to do his home-work under a street lamp.

Arun duly wins a place at an East Coast college in U.S. He doesn't mix with the other students or talk to his equally taciturn room-mate. When the vacation comes, he goes to stay with a 'normal' American family. The Pattons are a cartoon family. The son is loutish health freak, his only interests being fitness, games, exercise and jogging. The daughter is bulimic: she stuffs herself with peanuts and chocolate, and then vomits it all up. Occasionally, she emits an obscenity, but otherwise refuses to speak. The mother is a shopaholic, not for jewellers, like Aruna, but for food. She takes a shine to Arun and makes him accompany her on her daily expeditions to the overpowering super-market where she stocks up the overflowing freezer. There are no family meals of the kind that cheer the Indians. The Patton family help themselves to snacks from the fridge. There is plenty of tension just the same - 'on the other side of the world, Arun is caught up again in the sugar-sticky web of family conflict'. When the hot weather comes, Mrs. Patton gives herself up to sunbathing, and toys with yoga; astrology, numerology, gemmology, karmic lessons. Arun is relieved when the vacation draws to its end.

So, through Arun's eyes, and to some extent as a result of his culturally challenging presence, Anita Desai presents a picture of middle class American life that is utterly dysfunctional. But it is again the women who are most deeply affected. Mom does all the shopping and cooking to feed the unappreciative men and the daughter who cannot eat. She fantasises about Arun's cultural authenticity, sees in him qualities for which she yearns. The daughter is a complete head case. She is fat - wanting to be thin, eating too fast, stuffing sweets until she vomits. And, Arun witnesses all of this. Eventually, in his deformity, he is the only presence that is not self-obsessed.

The title is important. "Fasting, Feasting" presents apparent opposites, two contrasting, if imbalanced scenarios, India and the USA. It offers two deformed observers, Uma and Arun. It unpicks two contrasting cultures and finds that women are slaves in both. The opposites are thus ultimately similar, hardly opposed.

The more the things change the more they remain the same. It doesn't matter where you live, how much you earn, what you do. The viciousness and lack of purpose that can pervade our lives, will do so, irrespective. Neither in excess, nor in deprivation or denial, is there happiness or peace of mind.

Anita Desai, being the daughter of a Bengali father and a German mother, and born in India, can write with authority about conflicts between cultures and about the presence of the past, as she did in novels like *Baumgartner's Bombay* (1988), *the story of an elderly German Jew in India*, and *Fasting, Feasting* (1999), in which an Indian student tries to adapt to the lifestyle of a Boston family.

Anita Desai's eleventh and the latest novel, *The Zigzag Way* (2004), is the story of twentieth century Mexico, through the turbulence of the revolution and personal calamity; and of the exploitation of the Mexican Indians. Eric, a Harvard graduate student, is a misfit in his family of hearty fisher-folks. Uncertain he will ever complete the book on immigration he has been funded to write, he impetuously decides to follow his scientist girlfriend to Mexico.

There, he is seduced by the magnificence of the country and its history, and stumbles on an astonishing discovery - his grandfather was one of the Cornish miners who, with his first wife, had gone out to Mexico and worked in the silver mines more than a hundred years ago. At a lecture on the Huichol Indians of the Sierras, given by the mysterious, exotic Doña Vera, Eric suddenly realizes that the place names she mentions are those he once heard from his Cornish grandfather, who once worked in the Mexican

silver mines. Eric promptly travels into the Sierras, finds Doña Vera, and begins to ask questions about the mines and the miners. Eric seeks to learn more about his grandfather who made an improbable journey from Cornwall, England to the silver mines of Mexico. Through this story, Anita Desai tries to understand Mexico.

In the second part of the novel, the author abandons Eric in order to explain how Doña Vera rose from prostitution to her present status as a wealthy grande dame. The third section of *The Zigzag Way* again plumbs the past, this time telling the story of Eric's grandfather, Davey Rowse, and the other Cornish immigrants, who ended up either dying, being killed, or having to leave Mexico.

The novel ends in the present, when at a local celebration called "*La Noche de los Muertos*," Eric encounters a ghost from the past and sees his own path into the future. As in her earlier works, in *The Zigzag Way* Anita Desai has again demonstrated her mastery of craft and her understanding of human nature.

In the title of the novel, 'zigzag' is used by novelist with reference to the path the miners with their heavy loads had to take, to descend and ascend from the bowels of the earth from which the ore must be extracted. They walk in a zigzag direction because they have found from long experience that their respiration is less impeded when they traverse obliquely the current of air which enters the pits from without.

"The Indian tenateros, the beasts of burden in the mines of Mexico, remain loaded with a weight of 275 to 300 pounds for a span of six hours. . . . They carry the minerals in bags made of the threads of pite. To protect their shoulders (for the mineros are generally naked to the middle) they place a woolen covering under the bag. We meet in the mine some 50 or 60 of these porters, among whom are men above sixty and boys of ten or twelve years of age. In ascending the stairs they throw their bodies forwards and rest on a staff. They walk in a zigzag direction because they have found from long experience that their respiration is less impeded when they traverse obliquely the current of air which enters the pits from without".

The novelist has found a similarity with this in Eric's zigzag journey which he takes to trace the history of his grandfather and other stories connected with it like that of Doña Vera. 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.

In *Indian Fiction in English* (1999) J. G. Masilamani talks about feminism in Anita Desai for him Anita Desai is obsessively concerned with the fate of married woman in Indian society today. The society is in a state of transition with its cultural values in the melting pot. One could sense in Desai's novel a compelling urge for a way of living which would respond to the innermost yearnings of women for freedom and self-dignity. He observes that in Desai's novels Indian husbands are preoccupied with themselves. They possess an image of a provider' around whom the wife orbits effacing herself completely. Giving the example of Sita and Raman in *Where Shall We Go This Summer* ?as recognizable mythic figures Masilamani says, "Sita's sojourn to the Island of Manori is impelled not only by the desire to free herself from her husband but from an entire civilization of which he is the representative figure." Her fiction is not

just Indian but global. This article shows that women have started to look for their place in the institution of marriage.

The present study seeks to focus attention on the way imagery operates in each novel. In the following chapters the novels are taken in chronological order and an attempt is made to identify and analyze the images that are integral to an understanding of the theme as it develops, and the characters in their varied mood.

The next chapter focuses on the theme of "Man-woman relation-ship". Anita Desai defines and expresses this theme in majority of her novels beautifully. Practically speaking, it is in the novels of Indian English and regional women writers that one gets more realistic portrayals of women. The focus in these novelists like Kamala Markandaya, Nayanatara Sahgal, Ruth Pravar Jhabvala and Anita Desai is on the woman's point of view. Even among these writers, it is only in the novels of Nayanatara Sahgal, and those of Anita Desai and Raji Narasimhan that we get a feminist consciousness. According to K. Meerabhai, in 'Tradition and Modernity': 'The Portrayal of Women by Women Writers':

"If traditional women who still retain their individuality make their appearance in the novels of Kamala Marandaya, women who face challenges in their quest for self-fulfillment are seen in the novels of Nayanatara Sahgal. Likewise women who opt for modernity for convenience and not out of conviction are presented by Ruth Pravar Jhabvala. Women who use modernity as a license for licentiousness too can be seen in these novels ..."

Markandeya's women characters reveal strength of character that enable them to face hurdles in life. They suffer heroically, though they are strong willed. Some of them sublimate their desires in religious faith. She describes the pulls that an Indian woman has to face between tradition and modernity. Shanta Krishnaswami in her book *The Women in Indian Fiction in English* writes:

"She (Ms. Markandaya) advocates a compromise in the elevation of her need for love, caring and autonomy into the larger concept of the sisterhood of man. The quest of autonomy for the self leads to nurturance of the family which in turn progresses to imaginative sympathy for the human race ..."

Markandeya points out in her novels how economic and social problems affect women more adversely than men. Ruth Pravar Jhabvala expounds the problems of the white women in India. She describes women who profess to be modern only because it is fashionable to be modern. They are seen to tread a new path for a while, returning to their traditional ways afterwards. She delineates the hypocrisy of nonconformists in a sarcastic but sympathetic manner, she does not deal with the feminist consciousness in women seriously.

Nayanatara Sahgal's women characters include divorcees, and suffering wives who herald a new morality. But the helplessness of the heroines comes through. Maya, in an article 'On Woman Coming into Their Own' comments about Mr. Sahgal are thus:

“She (Ms. Sahgal) has a mind of her own and her novels point an accusing finger at smug, chauvinistic Indian society that refuses to recognise the identity of woman as individual, ... Sahgal's women are mostly educated, aspiring individuals caged within the confines of a conservative society. The social institution of arranged marriage is a trap that curbs their development And chains them to the responsibilities of home ... The urge to escape from frustrating marriages is therefore a constant craving in Nayantara Sahgal's women characters ...”

Maya continues her assessment of Ms. Sahgal:

“What Nayantara pleads for is not the kind of 'Women's Lib' that Western feminists advocate, but the rightful place for a woman in a man – woman relationship. She does not reject the institution of marriage, but dictates the new terms by which it should be constituted. The image of the New Indian woman that emerges out of her novels is a voice to be reckoned with. She reflects the slow but successful feminist revolution working its way through a conservative male centered and husband oriented society.”

Besides the problems of frustrated wives and divorcees, Ms. Sahgal is one woman writer who has introduced and described the effect of politics in the life of the individuals concerned. In writing her fiction, Ms. Sahgal is better equipped in her technical skill and mastery over the language tone than in the thematic content. There are no themes comparable with those of the women writers in this study, except in the voicing of the feminist consciousness of women.

In Anita Desai's novels, particularly in *Cry the Peacock*, one gets a glimpse into the disturbed psyche of the modern Indian woman. The predicament of Maya, the heroine in *Cry, the Peacock* is comparable to Dimple in Mukhejee's wife. But the way they delineate the problem of the suffering wife is quite different.

As K.R. Sreenivasa Iyengar comments in *Indian Writing in English*:

“Over the whole narrative in *Cry, the Peacock*, the Peacock, which 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, over the whole narrative there hovers an uncannily oppressive sense of fatality.”

This is because Maya, married to the prosaic and practical Gautama, is influenced by a prophecy by an astrologer who predicts death for either husband or wife in the fourth year of marriage. This prophecy preys upon the ultra sensitive mind of Maya, there is a communication gap between the husband and wife, each engrossed in their own different worlds. Gautama could never understand Maya's obsession with the quality of existence, her father-fixation, and the hysterical longings for understanding in her, her wish to revert to a state of childhood innocence, her increasing sense of loneliness and fear of death.

Maya never gets involved with Gautama's life and desires. This creates a spiritual chasm in which Maya flounders. She finally thinks that, for the fulfilment of the prophecy, her own death is not necessary, but that it might be Gautama's. Thus she waits for the opportune moment to murder him and soon after pushes him off the parapet one day. He is oblivious of Maya's intentions till the end. Three days later, Maya chooses to commit suicide, killing her mother-in-law in the process, by embracing the older woman when she plunges down to her death from the top of the house. Just before her death, she has been recognised as insane and both Gautama's mother and sister decide to admit her into a mental asylum.

