

THE NEW SELF-CONCEPT OF INDIAN WOMAN
EMERGING FROM THE NOVELS OF
ANITA DESAI

Thesis submitted to
MAHATMA GANDHI UNIVERSITY
in fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY
in the discipline of English
under the Faculty of Languages

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March 1999

A. Q. 20.1.2001

CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the thesis entitled "The New Self-Concept of Indian Woman Emerging from the Novels of Anita Desai" by Mrs. Latha Nair, R. is a record of bonafide research carried out by her under my supervision and guidance.



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DECLARATION

I do hereby affirm that the thesis "The New Self-concept of Indian Woman Emerging from the Novels of Anita Desai" has not previously formed the basis for the award of any degree, diploma, associateship, fellowship or other similar title or recognition.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Fiction

Fiction has become in our times the most powerful and popular literary genre. This form which was evolved more than two hundred years ago has uninterruptedly and comprehensively depicted the saga of human activities and experiences, rich and varied, unfolding thoughts and feelings, hopes and dreams, down the ages.

According to Robert. B. Henkle, “fiction and drama present men and women reacting to each other in the way that is closer to real life.”¹ Even as the visual media make a steady progress conquering multitudes, the popularity of fiction has not ebbed. It is a form or genre people will never willingly let die as it depicts effectively “. . . the most thorough knowledge of human nature, the happiest delineation of its varieties, the liveliest effusion of wit and humour to be conveyed to the world in the most chosen language.”²

It is definitely the fact that it holds the mirror up to life that gives this genre an extra-ordinary power and makes it very popular. In a novel we try to discover things which we know and which we do not know. It offers us insight and adventure more than many other genres. We move to a different world created by the writer to share his discoveries and to discover our own self. This exploration of the self makes our life rich and profound.

¹ Robert B. Henkle, *Reading the Novel: An Introduction to the Techniques of Interpreting Fiction* (New York: Harper & Row 1977), p. 1.

² Robert Liddell, *A Treatise on the Novel and Some Principles of Fiction* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1969), p. 6.

Thus, the uniqueness of this form lies in the fact that apart from the novelist the reader also becomes a part of the creative process with much of ease. Another reason for its popularity is that it stimulates curiosity in the reader to know what happens to others, what they think and feel.

Novels are popular as they demand very little from the reader. A reasonable proficiency in the concerned language will enable the reader to enjoy the novel. Novels also transport us into a different world and there we meet the familiar and the unfamiliar. The propagandist element in fiction is so artistically cloaked that its effect is maintained at a subtle level. This intellectual metamorphosis that novels bring about, can never be overestimated as it holds "the world of life under a permanent light."³ Due to its vitality it has a pre-eminent place in the flourishing literary world of today. Out of the collage of the chaotic human life as we all live it, the novel attempts a kind of verbal montage which easily puts across to people its subtle and not so subtle messages. This genre starting from a common stem has taken separate roots in strikingly different cultural circumstances throughout the world.

1.2 Indian Fiction in English

The beginnings of any genre are closely associated with social and political movements in a particular historical context. When we trace the rise of Indian fiction in English specifically to a moment in history, we are convinced that it evolved in the wake of our contact with the west. Most of the critics feel that English education along with the influence of the west made this genre very popular in India. According to Pratima:

The synthesis of eastern and western literary modes has given a comprehensive perspective to the Indo-English writers, and they

³Milan Kundera, *The Art of Novel* (New Delhi: Rupa, 1993), p. 5.

have successfully analysed the psychological, emotional and spiritual crisis experienced by the Indian intellectuals as well as men and women representing the different layers of Indian society.⁴

Stories and story telling have been a part of Indian culture and life in general. Folk tales, legends and epics have been interiorised by the people even as they listened to highly improbable situations in an unreal life. Through the highly improbable lives of gods, goddesses, kings and queens, they try to civilize mankind. There is a wide gap between the life that is presented by these narratives and the real life that is lived by ordinary human beings. Set against this backdrop is this new form which mirrors real life. It is its veritable closeness to life that makes it very popular.

The novel acquired a distinct identity especially during the colonial period. The flexibility of the form and the freedom of the genre, was the main reason which made it very popular among the intellectuals. Many writers of the old order discovered that it was an effective way to inveigh British imperialism. The story tellers wanted not only to entertain but also to create an awareness about the pathetic life of Indians in general.

Thus in the beginning the Indian novelists presented an acute awareness of traditional values, spiritual concepts and also the urge to infuse modernity in Indian life. The novelists, we feel, were delicately poised between the two powerful worlds. Meenakshi Mukherjee evaluates the early Indian novels thus: "In spite of the various limitations and incompatibilities, the novel in India which began under the British tutelage soon acquired its own distinctive character."⁵ The works of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, Sarat Chandra, Raj Lakshmi Debi and Toru Dutt, bear testimony to this fact.

⁴ Pratima, "Where Shall We Go This Summer?", *Indian Women Novelists Set. I, Vol. IV*, ed. R.K. Dhawan (New Delhi: Prestige Books, 1991), p. 180.

⁵ Meenakshi Mukherjee, *Realism and Reality* (New Delhi: Oxford Univ. Press, 1985), p. 6.

The tension that was brewing in the socio-political arena also triggered the rise of novels in India. English was at that time the lingua-franca and most of the committed writers chose this medium which would draw the attention of people easily. Even when they followed the pattern of English writers, there was the cloaked intention of popularizing patriotism and nationalism. They were not fully successful in exploiting the potential of this form but depicted the Indian social, political and domestic scenes effectively. The tragedy of the mute and the oppressed Indians is clearly portrayed by these novelists. The intrusion of the author is very self-evident and it affected the spontaneity of the narration. Characters are victims of the powerful establishment and their struggle is presented as futile in most of these novels.

The credit of writing the first novel goes to Bankim Chandra Chatterjee. His *Raj Mohan's Wife* was published in 1864. Many writers followed this tradition and regional novels also became very popular in India. In Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's novels, importance is given to the socio-political scenario rather than character delineation. In Rabindranath Tagore we can see a shift from society to the individual. Even here the "Character" does not acquire a totality as in later novelists.

It was in the 1950's that the novelist's interest began to shift from the public to the private sphere. The freedom at midnight stirred not only the emotional excitement among masses, but also gave a new intellectual freedom for many writers. This intellectual awakening was felt in all literary forms, especially in novels, which led to its unprecedented growth.

The pioneers of modern novels in India are Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand and R.K. Narayan. In their novels there is a tension between the native experience and the alien medium. But they are successful in exploiting the form rationally to give it a concrete identity. Anand's fight has always been against exploitation, oppression and caste.

C.D. Narasimhaiah says: “As a writer of fiction Anand’s notable marks are vitality and actuality.”⁶

What distinguishes R.K. Narayan most significantly from other Indian novelists is his acute awareness of the socio-cultural tensions that exist in Indian society. He writes about life that is known to him, and his “. . . characters are that curious blend of East and West which all Indians are . . .”⁷ R.K. Narayan’s fictional canvas focuses mainly on the life of ordinary Indians. The lived experience he creates in his novels transcends the barriers of class and creed, and even nationalities.

In *Raja Rao*, we can witness the fusion of the philosopher and the patriot set in the historical context. We can see his response to colonialism, east-west interaction and his innate Indian sensibility with emphasis on Vedanta. In his novels he has used Indian myths effectively. According to Shantha Krishnaswamy “. . . most of the writers of this period were committed to national goals, some were content to be chroniclers or observers. K. Nagarajan, K.A. Abbas, Mulk Raj Anand, Venu Chithale and the early novels of R.K. Narayan; *Raja Rao* and *Markandaya* belong to this period.”⁸

1.3 Feminine Voices

Twentieth century has witnessed many changes in Indian literature in English especially because of the arrival of many women writers. Their presence has deeply influenced Indian fiction. According to Susie Tharu:

These writers contested the structures that were shaping their world. They tactically redeployed dominant discourses, held on

⁶ K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar, *Indian Writing in English* (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1985), p. 356.

⁷ Meenakshi Mukherjee, *Twice Born Fiction* (New Delhi: Arnold Heinemann, 1971), p. 67.

⁸ Shantha Krishnaswamy, *The Women in Indian Fiction in English* (New Delhi: Ashish Publishing House, 1984), p. 15.

to older strains, and recharged them with new meanings and even introduced new issues and new emphasis, new orientations.⁹

In the light of these perspectives, the novels of Ruth Praver Jhabvala, Kamala Markandaya, Nayantara Sahgal, Anita Desai, Bharathi Mukherjee and Shashi Deshpande have become powerful paradigms of the struggle of Indian woman. These women novelists have been focussing on the social, political and psychological struggles that Indian women encounter. Their conflicts, victories and defeats, their struggle against the Establishment, the resultant frustration take a thematic significance in their work. The earlier Indian women writers in English like Kamala Markandaya and Ruth Praver Jhabvala portray life in post-Independence India. Both novelists probe whether the social changes and cultural diversity affect the stability of the nation. To them, men and women are victims of these socio-political and economic changes. The tragedy of their characters is contributed by these changing socio-political ideologies that have the power to de-centre the individual and finally contribute to his or her tragedy.

Kamala Markandaya established herself as a writer with the publication of her first novel *The Nectar in the Sieve* (1954). She has faithfully portrayed the basic struggles and agonies of post-Independence India, through the main character Rukmani. Rukmani represents a typical Indian rural woman, who is even now hovering precipitously on the brink of survival. Kamala Markandaya portrays the pathetic situation of Indians torn by communal riots, partition and socio-political and economic exigencies particularly poverty. According to Meenakshi Mukherjee "Any novelist dealing with these turbulent years had to impose an order upon the splendid chaos and thus discern a pattern in it to

⁹ Susie Tharu and K. Lalitha, eds., *Women Writing in English: 600 B.C. to the Early Twentieth Century, Vol. I*. (New York: The Feminist Press, 1991), p. 154.

illuminate a situation.”¹⁰ This is exactly what is done by Kamala Markandaya in most of her novels. In *Inner Fury* (1957), the story unfolds through Mira. It is set against the Quit India Movement and here “. . . the tragedy is engineered by politics”¹¹ Mira submissively accepts her defeat before the forces of situations. In her other popular novels, *Silence of Desire* (1961), *Possession* (1963), *A Handful of Rice* (1966), and the *Coffer Dams* (1969) she has treated the whole gamut of human emotions, tangible realities and the cultural conflicts which force the individuals to search for identity in independent India.

Ruth Praver Jhabvala portrays the cosmopolitan life in India. Her first novel *To Whom She Will* portrays the agony of the ill-fated people who lost everything in the partition and in the riots that followed. Her deep sense of history is clearly revealed in her realistic portrayal of life in modern Delhi, the sweeping changes that gave it a new and distinct identity. She focuses not only on the tension that is brewing up between the new and the old ideologies in India, but also on the fabric of Indian cosmopolitan life that has the warp and weft of East and West ideals. In *Esmond India*, *Get Ready for a Battle* and *The Householder*, the pathetic situation of Indian woman, who is disregarded and bypassed, who meekly accepts her situation, is highlighted. In Jhabvala the social milieu is given more importance but “she is human enough to feel the heartache at the heart of humanity.”¹² It is essentially this quality that makes her a powerful Indian woman novelist.

The novels of Kamala Markandaya and Ruth Praver Jhabvala have enriched Indian fiction by their humanitarian concern. It is definitely this aspect that gave inspiration

¹⁰ Meenakshi Mukherjee, *The Twice Born Fiction* (New Delhi: Arnold Heinemann, 1971), p. 35.

¹¹ K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar, *Indian Writing in English*, (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1985), p. 446.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 461.

to other committed writers that followed their path. In Nayantara Sahgal, Anita Desai and other women novelists, we see a new freedom, the wealth of experience and the bold exploration of new techniques. These women writers probe the Indian woman's new identity which is "... anchored in the bio-existential reality" ... and which "... walks a razor's edge."¹³ There is a search for identity in all its varied and complex forms in these writers. We come across individuals who are possessed and vandalized by the revolutionary changes in our times.

Nayantara Sahgal, in most of her novels, depicts the inner trauma of Indians who are exposed to various social, political and cultural changes. M.N. Shane points out that "... the loss of the understanding of the nature of man, according to Mrs. Sahgal is a major source of human sickness."¹⁴ In *This Time of Morning*, *The Storm in Chandigarh*, *The Day in the Shadow*, *Mistaken Identity* and other novels, the human predicament is realistically portrayed. According to her the materialistic world has robbed trust, love and innocence from Indian society as a whole. All her characters suffer from lack of understanding. Women in most of her novels share many similarities. They are disillusioned by their selfish husbands and society as a whole. They are also bold enough to go against the traditional image that is fabricated for them by the dominant male. Sahgal forcefully conveys that these traditional images are not innocent. They waylay the quest for identity, and confidence, and destroy the self worth of women at times. Nayantara Sahgal is thus a committed writer who celebrates life in her fictional canvas with her deep sense of humanism and an acute awareness of the political realities of the Indian subcontinent.

¹³ Indira J. Parikh and Pulin K. Garg, *Indian Women: An Inner Dialogue* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1989), p. 43.

¹⁴ M.N. Shane, "Nayantara Sahgal's Novels: Some Thematic Concerns", *The Indian Novels* ed. T. Prabhakar (New Delhi: Phoenix Publishing House, 1995), p. 206.

1.4 Anita Desai

Anita Desai is widely acclaimed as one of the foremost Indian novelists. She has almost a world wide audience making her a literary celebrity of lasting significance. Her uniqueness lies in the fact that in her novels we witness a long interrogation of the self through introspection, psychological analysis and stream-of-consciousness technique. She recasts the essence of Joyce, Proust and Kafka, in her own way, mostly treading over alienation with special reference to feminine psyche in her novels. The interior landscape peopled by women characters is set against the background of man's domination of social and domestic life with accumulated authoritarianism as its foundation. According to P.F. Patil, "... in Anita Desai's novels the inner workings, the inner sensibilities are more compelling than the outer weather or the visible action."¹⁵ Thus, the question of the self dominates her fiction. She believes firmly in the impeccable dignity and in the inviolable sanctity of the self. In her novels she highlights the fact that "... without this sense of dignity and sanctity of the self, existential awakening of the self remains vulnerable and the inner space can once again become contaminated."¹⁶ She is an explorer par excellence of the interior human experience. Desai portrays the monotony of quotidian dreams of the individual, the probable impossibility of knowing one's own self and the paradoxical nature of human existence. Desai herself feels that "... all my writing is an effort to discover and then to underline and finally to convey the true significance of things."¹⁷

¹⁵ P.F. Patil, "The Wheel Turns: Central Theme in *The Village by The Sea*", *Indian Women Novelists Set. I, Vol. IV*, ed. R.K. Dhawan (New Delhi: Prestige Books, 1991), p. 47.

¹⁶ Yasodhara Dalmia, "An Interview with Anita Desai", *The Times of India*, April 29, 1979, p. 13.

¹⁷ Indira. J. Parikh and Pulin K. Garg, *Indian Woman: An Inner Dialogue* (New Delhi: Sage, 1989), p. 18.

Desai deals with the enigmatic and chaotic fabric of Indian woman's life. She highlights the subtle texture of fleeting impulses, disappointments, frustrations, aims, transient feelings and distorted visions of life of Indian women, all resulting in the fragmentation of her personality. In an interview she tells Florence Libert that her interest "... is the individual, a certain psychology of the individual."¹⁸ She further adds that "... it isn't only an individual psychology that I am pursuing when I write. I am interested in language, in prose style, in aligning words to experiences, with images."¹⁹ While depicting the psyche of Indian woman, Desai uses powerful images which emblemize oppression, exploitation and fragmentation of the self. These contribute to the self-forfeiting feelings which damage the self-image. Desai is very successful in squaring up these self-forfeiting feelings which sabotage the self-image. According to Nancy Good "... dragons was the perfect name to give these self-sabotaging thoughts."²⁰ Desai, like a Modernist writer, shows in a subtle manner, how to slay these dragons.

Desai is remarkable for her psychological approach to the lived experience of innumerable characters who partake of every day human reality. Shantha Krishnaswamy evaluates her art thus: "Her interest in the consciousness of the women in her novels enables us to see the Indian women adequately from inside."²¹

Anita Desai writes on the lines of Virginia Woolf who believed in the Joycean method of probing the depths of human mind. Desai unravels the oppressive forces of

¹⁸ Florence Libert, "An Interview with Anita Desai." *World Literature Written in English*, 30, No. I (1990), p. 51.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

²⁰ Nancy Good, *Slay Your Dragons* (London: Sheldon Press, 1990), p. 8.

²¹ Shantha Krishnaswamy, *Women in Indian Fiction in English* (New Delhi: Ashish Publishing, 1992), p. 243.

the female psyche which cause disillusionment. In her first novel *Cry, the Peacock*, Maya the protagonist is constantly seized by fear of death, loneliness and alienation from her husband Gautama who always preached detachment. To Maya "... he looked more or less like a meditator beneath the bo-tree, seated upon a soft tiger skin, too fastidious to touch the common earth" ²²

Gautama fails to understand the trauma of self that is at war. Maya cannot comprehend the philosophical attitude of Gautama. Maya longs for a realistic approach and feels that Gautama will never understand her agony. She finally blurts out vehemently: "You know nothing of me — and of how I can love. How I want to love. How it is important to me." ²³ Gautama remains unperturbed when Maya calls him a betrayer. Four years of marriage makes Maya neurotic. Her gradual degradation which results in neurosis is very effectively traced by Desai. By illustrating many typical incidents, Maya's neurosis is made self-evident from the beginning. The sight of the caged monkeys at the railway station invokes a violent reaction. She starts crying and Gautama feels ashamed of her. She identifies her trapped situation thus: "There I was amongst them, not one of those who sat quietly, in an infinity of sadness and resignation, but one of those who clung, clung to the bars till they cut into my flesh, and rattled them, shook them, crying over and over again." ²⁴ We feel that "... the unusual juxtapositions and arresting metaphors constantly assault the senses of readers, almost demanding that they feel the way Maya herself feels." ²⁵

²² Anita Desai, *Cry, the Peacock* (New Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 1980), p. 113.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 112.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 156.

²⁵ Ann Lowry Weir, "The Illusion of Maya: Feminine Consciousness in Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock*", *Perspectives on Anita Desai*. ed. Ramesh K. Srivastava (Ghaziabad: Vimal Prakashan, 1984), p. 151.

Desai probes intensely the sentience of the female protagonist. For Gautama “. . . she is the incidental, the inessential, as opposed to the essential. He is the subject, he is the Absolute — she is the other.”²⁶ Desai feels that this forms the kernel of the outlook of majority of Indians towards their women. The main defect of this outlook according to Desai is the refusal to regard woman as a being capable of her own desires and interests. This contributes to a passionate and partisan outlook which denigrates the sentience — mind and will — of a woman. Maya is definitely a victim of such partisan outlook. She feels trapped by her marriage to Gautama whose thoughts or actions cannot supply an antidote to her anxieties and anguish. Gautama’s behaviour activates her Voices Introjects or self-defeatist feelings and she becomes neurotic. “Maya’s neurosis which tries to shatter the very identity of woman in our contemporary society dominated by man, in which a woman longing for love is driven mad or compelled to commit suicide.”²⁷

Like Maya, Monisha in Desai’s *Voices in the City* is also a victim of a loveless marriage. Monisha is also deprived of her husband’s understanding and emotional support. Like Gautama in *Cry, the Peacock*, Jiban in *Voices in the City* can see Monisha only as a traditional wife. Both of them cannot comprehend the fact that these women have a mind of their own, feelings of their own, and that they need an important place and an effective voice in the existing framework of marriage. Monisha feels that not only her marriage but also her existence has become “. . . traceless, meaningless, uninvolved.”²⁸ We feel that Desai has successfully dealt with the frustrations of Indian women arising out of a loveless marriage, and indifference shown by the patriarchal family. P.F. Patil

²⁶ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans and ed. H.M. Parshely (London: Pan, 1988), p. 16.

²⁷ Madhusudan Prasad, *Anita Desai: The Novelist* (Allahabad: New Horizon, 1981), p. 3.

²⁸ Anita Desai, *Voices in the City* (New Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 1965), p. 139.

asserts that Anita Desai “fearlessly puts forward the fact that in society marriages generally follow the jungle law of the survival of the fittest.”²⁹

Another victim of this particular system is Sita in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* But in Sita we can see the new self-concept of women slowly emerging. Bim in *Clear Light of Day* and Amla in *Voices in the City* have this new self-concept which inspires them to go against the existing system. “Bim attains self-identity not in self-insulation but in self-actualization brought out by the metaphor of awakening. All dualities vanish and Bim attains self-fulfillment and the wholeness of ‘being’.”³⁰ This is applicable to Amla who “passes through variegated psyche situations till she establishes a contact with her real self and attains equipoise.”³¹ Desai’s significance lies in the fact that she portrays vividly and with incomparable subtlety, the intellectual sobriety and sensibility of her protagonists. Sita in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* decides to go to Manori, a lonely island, when she realises the fact that her self-worth is trampled upon by the selfishness of her husband and children. When her husband calls her a deserter she emphatically retorts that she is not a coward to commit desertion. Her self-assertiveness takes a new dimension when she says to her husband “... there must be some one who says, ‘No’, Raman.” Desai also very emphatically points to the fact that women make many unpleasant compromises, for the sake of family. Sita very powerfully lashes against Raman her husband thus, “Very hard — this making of compromises when one didn’t want to compromise”³² Desai challenges these

²⁹ P.F. Patil. *Indian Women Novelists Set I, Vol. II.* ed .R.K. Dhawan. (New Delhi: Prestige Books, 1991), p. 129.

³⁰ P.M. Nayak and S.P. Swain, “From Alienation to Identification: A Study of Anita Desai’s Novels.” *Commonwealth Quarterly*, 19, No.47, (Dec-Mar 1994), p. 34.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

³² Anita Desai, *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* (New Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 1982), p. 148.

compromises women have to make for the sake of the powerful patriarchal system. The limitations that are imposed by socio-political and familial systems create a confrontation between the authentic self of woman which is longing for self-expression and the “‘imposed self’ which predates on socialization”, tradition and patriarchal structures. Simone de Beauvoir puts down this clearly, “. . . the drama of woman lies in these conflicts between the fundamental aspirations of every subject (ego) who always regards the self as essential and the compulsions of a situation in which she is the essential.”³³

Desai’s fictional canvas conveys powerfully the fact that a woman is assessed, evaluated in terms of her merging with institutionalized patterns of sexuality and norms of appropriate feminine behaviour. When she deviates from this institutionalized behaviour patterns there is the danger of being labelled as weird and perverse. According to Desai, a woman’s self is always at war. She is always battling against the powerful image created for the praxis of men. This idealized self batters woman and drains her energy. Instead of fighting against these “stacked rules and systems”, we can use it to create another self-image. It will be a rational and active process which will liberate and empower women. A new self-image suited to their needs will be egalitarian in concept and productive in action.

1.5 Significance

Desai’s significance lies in her ability to transmute authentically the inner-most feelings, thoughts and emotions of the self, especially the feminine psyche. In her novels we find a quest for reality and essential human experience. She depicts the unpredictable nature of life, the conflicting dilemmas and sufferings that are inevitable in a woman’s life. Her novels portray the struggle of the female psyche for identity. Her uniqueness

³³ Simone de Beauvoir, *“The Second Sex”* trans., H.M. Parshley (New York: Bentam, 1961), p. xxvii.

lies in the fact that these experiences are processed and combined with her intuitive knowledge. It is her intuition that becomes the life force of her novels.

Anita Desai has said that:

one can only feel one's way by intuition. Intuition is silent. Also one must have the critical sense to know when something threatens to cloud this vision. One must avoid such things, discard them. Writing is not an act of deliberation, reason or choice. It is a matter of instinct, silence, compulsion and waiting.³⁴

Desai's artistic significance lies in the fact that she is the first Indian woman novelist to experiment in psychological novels. She explores the psyche of her characters, the intimate world of the self. The psychological conflicts are more prominent than the sociological conflicts. But she integrates both judiciously in her novels. "It is in the very intermingling of the imaginative and realistic worlds, in the intellectual and emotional concerns and tensions, the innumerable sensuous images bathed in colours, scents, perfumes that the novel proves to be an intense experience."³⁵

Desai has graphically portrayed the intense conflicts that are produced in the individuals — the inter-personal conflicts as well as intra-personal conflicts. The self is subsumed by the conflicts at times. Sometimes they result in withdrawal, alienation, repression, neurosis and aggression. This is more intense in the case of women, according to Desai. In all her novels, we come across conflicts — conflicts with the locale, conflicts in man-woman relationships, conflicts within oneself, conflicts which are externalized. Desai's artistic relevance lies in the fact that she has traced the root of these

³⁴ Anita Desai, "Replies to the Questionnaire", *Kakatiya Journal of English Studies*, 3 No.1, (1978), p. 5.

³⁵ Bharathi Parikh, "Cry, the Peacock: Unravelling the Psyche", *Osmania Journal of English Studies*, 22, (1986), p. 131.

conflicts. The conflicts experienced by Maya in *Cry, the Peacock* have a neurotic quality. For conveying Maya's mental deterioration, varied responses and her emotional turbulence, Desai uses varied techniques of narratology. The character's language is individuated and is made different from that of the writer. There is a certain explicitness that is very profound in this first novel. Maya's turbulent emotions are described thus:

What was true? What was lasting? What to believe in ? What reject? Danger, Dangers . . . the warning came whispering over a vast distance to me, struggling through the mass of truths and lies in nightmarish disguise. 'I have to go', I cried rising to my feet, and then and then more urgently, 'Gautama, I must go'.³⁶

The trauma of Monisha is expressed giving importance to suggestiveness and indeterminacy. "Yet, did I not once possess it — this essential instinct of theirs? Why am I so sad? Why am I so afraid? Do I recall a time — an epoch ago — when I understood as well as they?"³⁷ The sentences suggest that the participation of the reader is insisted on more, as the author becomes subtle in her narration. In *Bye-Bye Blackbird* this technique becomes more specific. The style evolves a definitive turn for precision and clarity. The abundance of subordinate clauses and questions is comparatively less in her later novels. Saraha's thoughts are described thus by Desai: "If only she cried out once before the tangle of figures succeeded in drawing her thoughts wholly to them, if only she were allowed to keep her, one role apart from the other, one play from the other, she would not feel so cut and slashed into living, bleeding pieces. Apart-Apart. That

³⁶ Anita Desai, *Cry, the Peacock* (New Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 1965), p. 86.

³⁷ Anita Desai, *Voices in the City* (New Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 1965), p. 239.

enviable cool, clear, light, quiet state of apartness.”³⁸ *In Where Shall We Go This Summer* “the character’s speech becomes indicative, at the same time it remains as a silent activity of the mind. The style as well as the visual quality assumes a gradation. Sita’s conversation with her husband Raman can be analysed here:

Sita : ‘How are the boys?’ She urged hoarsely.

Raman : ‘Well.’ Again she waited. She waited, clenching her hands for something more — the news that they wanted her, missed her.”³⁹ Sita’s silent thoughts are vocalized here. Bim’s anguish in *Clear Light of Day*, while telling Tara that she has forgiven her brother Raja is emotionally charged, and Desai has used the choicest words to express her agony:

Tell him, I’m waiting for him — I’m waiting for him — I want him to come — I want to see him. As if frightened by this breakdown in Bim’s innermost self, this crumbling of a great block of stone and concrete, a dam, to release a flood of roaring water.⁴⁰

The covertness of the author becomes more in all the other succeeding novels. But the author is not completely absent, as the locale is analogous not only to character trait, but also to a passing mood. But it is not strictly confined to indicating the mood of the character. Deven’s disappointments are reflected through the physical environment. Thus he feels that “. . . all he could measure upto was this — this shabby house, its dirty corners, its wretchedness and lovelessness. Looking around it, he felt himself sag with

³⁸Anita Desai, *Bye-Bye Blackbird* (New Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 1985), p. 37.

³⁹Anita Desai, *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* (New Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 1982), pp. 131-132.

⁴⁰Anita Desai, *Clear Light of Day* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980), p. 176.

relief and gratitude. At the same time his shoulders drooped in defeat.”⁴¹ What is reflected here is the non-verbal utterance of Deven combined with the overtness of the author. The reader experiences the empirical world around him along with the author. Thus the utterances of the author are combined with the dynamics of the character. This fusion makes the language self-reflexive. The novel is basically a self-reflexive genre. The novel is, for Bakhtin, “the crowning achievement of prose, therefore it is in the novel that intertextuality appears most intensely.”⁴² Dialogues are composed to set off other discourses. In Desai’s *Baumgartner’s Bombay* the authentic creative voice is not subdued to the character’s voice. The pathetic situation of Baumgartner, when his friend Chimanlal’s son cheats him, is created with consummate skill:

What are you talking about, show me one paper — he handled the table with the flat of his hand, making Baumgartner wince — ‘show me one paper you have signed or my father has signed’. ‘No, no, there are no papers,’ Baumgartner told him, leaning forward to calm him. ‘Your father and I—we were friends—we didn’t draw up any legal papers—it was just an understanding, a friendship’. ‘My father is no more, Mr. Baumgartner,’ the boy said stiffly.⁴³

Baumgartner understood that he no longer had anything to claim in the firm as his own. With Chimanlal’s death he felt utterly alone, depressed and desolate. The existential trauma and the pathetic situation of Baumgartner haunt the reader.

In *Journey to Ithaca* Desai’s mastery of narration is revealed. She combines the

⁴¹ Anita Desai, *In Custody* (London: Heinemann 1984), p. 67.

⁴² Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogical Principle*, trans., Tzvetan Todorov (London: Manchester Univ. Press, 1984), p. 66.

⁴³ Anita Desai, *Baumgartner’s Bombay* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1988), p. 206.

two forms — Analepsis and Prolepsis. Analepsis is the narration of a story event at a point in the text, after, later events have been told. The story begins with Matteo, Sophie's husband in the hospital in India, which can be listed as 'b', if the order of events is 'a,b,c'. From that point the story goes backwards and forwards coming back to the present and then moving backwards again to trace the past of Matteo's guru who is like a mother to him and who lives in the Abode of Bliss. The narrative technique used in the mother's story is definitely proleptic. Prolepsis is a narration of a story event at a point before earlier events have been mentioned. So the order of events in the mother's story is c, a, b. The wordy battle between Matteo and Sophie is used with the polemic purpose of giving insight to their different personalities . Sophie is unable to accept Matteo's absolute faith in 'Mother'. This is brought out in this dialogue:

Sophie : Philosophy of India: The absolute, the soul, the supreme, supra this and supra that. Don't use those words. I am sick of them. They are nonwords.

Matteo, bitterly : 'And what words you like ?, Don't tell me, I can guess, food, bed, baby, house. Are those your words'.

Sophie : 'Yes! They are good words and I like them. Say them again. I didn't know you've forgotten them'.⁴⁴

Thus we can trace the growth of the novelist's narrative skill. From a structural point of view, the action, emotion, characters, plot, narration and the story line are integrated in

⁴⁴ Anita Desai, *Journey to Ithaca* (London: Heinemann, 1995), p. 143.

strikingly original manner. Madhusudan Prasad remarks that Desai's "deep probing into the dim-lit inner domains of her major characters, her striking symbolism, her telling imagery and the resultant textural density of the novel — all reveal her uniquely original genius as a powerful novelist."⁴⁵

Another significant feature of Anita Desai is that in her novels the locale becomes an extension of her self. A character's physical surroundings as well as social and familial surroundings are used as trait-connoting metonymies. Her analogy thus reinforces characterization. It enhances the readers' perception of the character. "One important ingredient of her art is that in her novels Desai paints ornate, engrossing portraits of the outer world with its rich peripheral details, projecting the turbulent chaos of the inner world of her protagonists" ⁴⁶

Anita Desai has very powerfully depicted the conflicts experienced by Indian women in general. She has depicted "the conflicts galore" experienced by women as they remain deprived politically and socially, and also within the patriarchal family. According to Desai these negative valences will sabotage the self of Indian woman. Indian woman is forced to project an inauthentic self-image, given to her by the patriarchal structure. So when a crisis occurs, the image is shattered and she experiences an utter sense of hopelessness and misery. So what she needs, according to Desai, is a new self-image which will enable her to achieve success.

Revolutionary changes are sweeping all over the country and they have created a new awareness among women. It is this new awareness that makes the conflicts more intense. Women who never questioned the existing belief systems, and traditions have

⁴⁵ Madhusudan Prasad, "Voices in the City: A Critical Study" *Littcrit*, 7, No.2, (December, 1981), p. 58.

⁴⁶ Madhusudan Prasad, *Anita Desai: The Novelist* (Allahabad: New Horizon, 1981), p. 144.

started questioning the validity of these norms. Desai's female protagonists represent the new women of India with a focussed consciousness. They rebel against the existing power structures, internally as well as externally. Desai explores the feminine psyche very deeply to dig out the reasons for women's oppressions. She herself has declared "writing to me is process of discovering the truth — the truth that is nine-tenths of the iceberg that lies submerged beneath the one-tenth visible portion we call reality. Writing in my way is plunging to depths and exploring this underlying truth."⁴⁷ The underlying themes of her novels do not impede the smooth progress of the plot which she handles with dexterity. It is real life that we see in Desai, with all its violence, squalor, existential agony, frustrations, hope, hopelessness and simple pleasures.

1.6 Justification

Anita Desai the writer has received and is still receiving an overwhelming critical response not only in India, but also in the West. Most of the critical works point to one main aspect, and that is, the fact that she has depicted the frustrations of the female psyche. This study has explored the root causes of these frustrations within the socio-cultural framework, and has established the fact that there is a new self-concept of Indian woman emerging from the novels of Anita Desai. Analysis of the critical data on Desai highlights the fact that they all pinpoint the female subjectivity that is self-evident in her novels. Most of them conclusively point a finger at the patriarchal system in India which marginalizes women. An in-depth research combining feminism, history, sociology, psychology and using the tools of pure psychiatry to explore the development of the self, especially the Indian woman's self, remains relatively unexplored and hence this study.

⁴⁷ Anita Desai, *Contemporary Novelists*, ed. James Vinson (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1972), p. 348.

1.7 State-of-the-Art Review

Anita Desai's fictional canvas holds a mirror up to real life situations. She is a writer with a vision and expresses truthfully her views of life in general. She presents the harassed, circumscribed world of the Indian woman in most of her novels. Desai the writer is more concerned about the individual than the environment. She herself has confessed that she was deeply influenced by Emile Bronte, Virginia Woolf, Forster, D.H. Lawrence, Henry James, Malcolm Lowry, Joyce, Proust, Dostoevsky, Chekhov and Kawabata. Her favourite poets are Eliot, Rimbaud, Hopkins and Rilke.

Some of the major studies of her work may now be mentioned. Asha Kanwar, in a comparative study entitled *Virginia Woolf and Anita Desai: A Comparative Study* remarks that "in both Woolf and Desai, we find an almost obsessive involvement with character's past as a key to their consciousness, their life. Preoccupations with nostalgia and memory thus become an integral part of their craft."⁴⁸ Desai's protagonists' tragedy is rooted in the past. The majority of them have a past that has psychologically tortured them. It generates conflicts in a powerful manner. In *Maya (Cry, the Peacock)* it is father fixation along with the Albino's ominous prophecy, in *Monisha (Voices in the City)* it is her parents' unhappy married life and an unhappy childhood, in *Nanda Kaul's life (Fire on the Mountain)* the betrayal of her husband and children, in *Sita (Where Shall We Go This Summer?)* it is again father fixation and the absence of her mother, in *Bim, Tara and Raja (Clear Light of Day)* it is unhappy childhood and parental neglect. In *In Custody* Deven's thwarted ambitions and inferiority complex, in *Baumgartner's Bombay* the separation from his mother during the world war and in *Journey to Ithaca* Matteo's

⁴⁸Asha Kanwar, *Virginia Woolf and Anita Desai: A Comparative Study* (New Delhi: Prestige Books, 1989), p. 18.

unhappy childhood and obsession with attaining spiritual enlightenment, give rise to the conflicts.

Peter Alcock says that in Desai's fiction ". . . no self-consciousness obtrudes, rather we have the expression of, surely, a uniquely Indian sensibility that is yet completely at ease in the mind of the west."⁴⁹ Her spontaneity of expression encircles her story line and she interprets a highly complex, everchanging ensemble of social relations in which women are confined. The impasse of action and the avid impotence of the fractured self of Indian woman is depicted very powerfully, without any self-consciousness.

The delineation of conflicts has elicited much critical acclaim. P.M. Nayak and S. P. Swain say that "the individual self struggles for the attainment of an authentic existence and hence it moves from a mistaken and confused awareness of identity to quiet self-assertion of individuality."⁵⁰

According to Desai conflicts are a part of life and they exist in man-woman relationship. In the Indian context the conflicts become more due to compartmentalization of man and woman. Stereotyping in society also contributes to the oppression of women. These conflicts have many negative results. Many women suffer from identity crisis. Most of the female protagonists are driven to the point of suicide. Others become neurotic. Sudhakar Ratnakar Jamkhandi emphasizes the fact that

Desai is able to illustrate that (i) the sensibility of the Indian housewife, a victim of society's malicious traditions, is significant and that (ii) the effect of self-centredness or self-pity is detrimental

⁴⁹ Peter Alcock, "Rope, Serpent, Fire: Recent Fiction of Anita Desai.", *The Journal of Indian Writing in English*, 9, No.1, (January 1981), p. 33.

⁵⁰ P.M.Nayak and S.P. Swain, "From Alienation to Identification: A Study of Anita Desai's Novels" *Commonwealth Quarterly*, 19. No. 47, (December-March, 1994), p. 34.

in husband and wife relationships.”⁵¹

Women empowered with education, new orientations and economic independence refuse to accept meekly the traditional constraints of patriarchy. This is a major concern of the novelist. How these Indian women with a new awareness, with a focussed consciousness decide to go in the opposite direction is very often the main thematic concern in Anita Desai. Meena Belliappa remarks that Desai’s novels mark a new beginning in the female literary framework in India. According to her, “. . . the focus of interest has shifted from girlish romance to a more complex search for value in human relationship.”⁵² It is a mature world that is delineated by Desai, a world that rejects, accommodates, oppresses and propels the individual. The predicament of the individuals, caught in the whirlpool of socio-cultural changes, their struggle to survive, their alienation and existential agony are portrayed by Desai. Thus in her novels, “. . . she looks at the problem of rootlessness, in its different forms, candidly and closely, and describes its social and individual effects without mincing words.”⁵³

Desai uses the stream-of-consciousness technique in her novels. The inner-most feelings and thoughts of the character are revealed using this technique. The success of her novels depends upon this technique according to many critics. “Anita Desai, like some masters of fiction, manages to raise the action and the plot above timeliness and transitory ephemerality, and yet at the same time, gives the impression of timeliness also. She achieves this by memory flash backs, and the device of stream-of-consciousness probing into past, present and the future.”⁵⁴

⁵¹ Sudhakar Ratnakar Jamkhandi, “The Artistic Effects of the Shifts in Points of View in Anita Desai’s *Cry, the Peacock*.” *The Journal of Indian Writing in English*, 9, No.1 (January, 1981), p. 41.

⁵² Meena Belliappa, *Anita Desai : A Study of Her Fiction* (Calcutta: Writers Workshop, 1971), p. 27.

⁵³ O.P. Saxena, *Glimpses of Indo English Fiction: I*, (New Delhi: Jainsons Publications, 1985), p. 90.

⁵⁴ J.P. Tripathy, *The Mind and Art of Anita Desai* (Bareilly: Prakash Book Depot, 1986), p. 20.

Desai is also much acclaimed for her feminist perspectives. Her concern for Indian women surfaces very clearly in most of her novels. The patriarchal power structure has held Indian woman in chains. The inequalities that exist between the sexes, along with socio-cultural belief systems, oppress women. Even now violence is used against women to suppress them. Rape is in fact the most powerful weapon used against women. Bride-burning, ill-treatment of widows, marital disharmony owing to lack of sensitivity, dowry deaths, suicide and neglected children are very much a part of Desai's fictional canvas.

According to Ruth. K. Rosenwaser "Desai's women are heroines who voice their dissent through their recognition of and resistance to male dominance: in their relationship with their husbands (Maya and Sita) within their joint family (Monisha), with friends (Sita), with larger society (Ila and Bimla)." ⁵⁵ The perceptible reality of women in India, woman as mother, sister, daughter, grandmother, friend and as a conscious "being-in-itself" and "being-for-itself" gained her considerable recognition as a significant novelist in English. A.V. Krishna Rao says that Desai is a novelist "who does not fight shy to probe into the sub-conscious layers of experience of sensitive young men and women in an urban milieu." ⁵⁶

It is the journey of the Indian woman from being to becoming that is traced by Desai. This study probes into the evolution of a new self-concept of Indian woman emerging from the novels of Anita Desai. Hence this effort in exploring the text on the lines of psycho-analysis, social psychology and other literary theories in the ensuing chapters.

⁵⁵ Ruth. K. Rosenwaser, "Voices of Dissent: Heroines in the Novels of Anita Desai" *Journal of South Asian Literature*, 24, No.2, (Summer, 1989), p. 83.

⁵⁶ A.V. Krishna Rao, "Powerful Satire", Rev. of *In Custody*, *CRNLE Reviews Journal*, Nos. 1 & 2, 1988, p. 74.

1.8 Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this study are:

1. To explore the novels of Desai and other contemporary women writers to prove that a new feminine sensibility is slowly evolving and is getting established in India. A comparative study of Desai and her contemporary women writers point to the fact that these women are vocalizing the new awareness of Indian womanhood.
2. To attempt a critical, historical analysis of the self-concept of Indian women as derived from socio-religious, political and cultural traditions and beliefs, down the ages.
3. To apply many psycho-social theories, feminism and psychological theories, to trace the root cause of gender-based oppression.
4. To establish Desai as a psychological novelist who writes using the stream-of-consciousness technique.
5. To establish that there is a new self-concept of Indian woman emerging from the novels of Anita Desai. The new Indian woman is making her presence felt in a striking way by means of self-assertion with roots in modern education, exposure to development, cultural contacts and the exploitations of one's capabilities and mental resources.
6. To point out how this self-concept will empower woman to achieve self-actualization and how it is instrumental in bringing about rewarding changes, in the individual and society at large.

1.9 Theoretical Foundations

All appropriate theories of literary research are used in a flexible manner. Since Desai's novels present the chaotic situation of modern life with its tragic implications for her protagonists as also possible alternatives, she is a writer of the Modernist school. Therefore, her works are scrutinised from the angle of Modernist techniques which implicitly highlight solutions.

Anita Desai retains a high level of subjectivity. What strikes her is the landscape of the psyche. The study focuses on her artistic penchant for internalising what is really external.

“It is fatal to write with an audience in mind.” This statement of hers is an index of her commitment to intuition, subjective states of mind, pure imagination and such faculties. Many psychological theories starting with the theories of Freud and his contemporaries and the modern theories in psycho-analysis are made use of in exploring this aspect of her writing. Transactional Analysis which goes deep into the psychology of interpersonal relationships is used in this study.

Sociological ideas with a bearing upon man-woman equation, with a special emphasis on theories of sexuality, gender subjectivity and sex-role stereotyping are adequately applied in this study.

1.10 Methodology

The main part of the method is a close reading of the primary and secondary sources. The primary sources are the novels of Anita Desai and her other prose writings. Her writings will be scrutinised in the light of psychological and literary theories. The secondary sources include various book length and shorter studies on her novels. The methodology aims at scrutinising her literary achievements to establish that there is a new self-concept emerging from the novels of Anita Desai.

1.11 Hypothesis

The hypothesis attempts to postulate that there is a new self-concept of Indian woman emerging from the novels of Anita Desai. To prove this, a close reading of the novels of Anita Desai, her interviews, articles and secondary sources on the author are used. They are read in the light of sociological, psychological, literary, philosophical and feminist

theories. The application of inter-disciplinary theories brings forth a whole new approach as far as the author is concerned. Hence it is a rewarding experience for women who stand on the threshold of the new millennium, who are searching for new horizons and new orientations. This will definitely help them re-position their status in the patriarchal framework.

The new self-concept is the ultimate outcome of many interactions taking place at different levels — psychological, spiritual, economic, educational and cultural. The thesis probes all the areas to prove that the new self-concept of Indian woman is radically different from the traditional self-concept. The hypothesis attempts to postulate the impact of the new self-concept with its long-lasting influence on the psyche of Indian woman.

1.12 Scope of the Study

This study focuses on the fiction of Anita Desai who is acclaimed as one of the foremost novelist of Indian writing in English. She writes in the Modernist perspective pointing to the evils and weaknesses that exist in Indian society. She encapsulates the anguish of a self that is unable to achieve actualization. The environment (family and society) oppresses the individual with more than ordinary sensibility. The existential trauma, the dualities of a structured society that pull the self in diametrically opposite directions, the fragmentation of the self and the resultant frustrations are effectively conceived by Desai.

In an interview with Yasodhara Dalmia, Desai herself says that “there are other elements which remain basic to our lives. It means the human condition itself. It is only superficially affected by the day to day changes. We continue to live in the same way as we have in the past centuries with the same tragedies and the same comedies. And this is why it interests me.”⁵⁷

⁵⁷Yasodhara Dalmia, “An Interview with Anita Desai”, *The Times of India*, 29 April, 1979, p. 13.

Desai the writer stands for a change. The study brings to light how she vocalizes her perception about change. It focuses on the identity of the individual, especially Indian woman. It highlights the advantages of transeffecting an identity to solve the conflicts. Therefore this study explores in detail the roots of man-woman inequality in India. It also pinpoints the advantages of having a new self-concept. The evolution of this new self-concept is traced through Desai's novels, placing them within the framework of sociology, psychology, ideology, history and Piaget's theory of intellectual structuring.

CHAPTER II

INDIAN WOMAN DOWN THE AGES

Indian womanhood is at the cross roads of changes, some radical and some ephemeral. The pressures to which it is subject have been astoundingly varied with mutually cancelling effects. The melting pot of the female Indian psyche is in a state of perfect liquidity, with multifarious socio-economic and psycho-spiritual ingredients thronging from all sides. Out of this emerges a new self-image taking on the fascinating hues of freedom, self-respect, self-worth, confidence and allied attributes. But the process of change can be understood only in terms of neo-historicism. Therefore an examination-cum-analysis of the historical data relating to Indian womanhood is imperative. This alone can bring forth vagaries and vicissitudes which have been constructing and destroying the evolving image of the average Indian woman. A historical over-view of events and situations leading to the varied shifts and value scales of the Indian female is a logical necessity and so we attempt the same in the following sections.

2.1 The Vedic Woman

The essence of the Aryan civilization is preserved in the four Vedas namely Rig, Yajur, Sama and Atharvam and their different branches like Brahmanas and Upanishads. In order to understand the social, political and cultural background of the ancient Aryans, we have to explore the aforementioned Vedas. The word 'Veda' primarily means "knowledge" (from the word 'vid' which means to know), which virtually signifies sacred knowledge or scripture. "To the hymn collections of four Vedas and their Brahmanas the expression Veda is alone applicable."¹

¹ A.A. Mac Donell, *India's Past* (Varanasi: Motilal Banarassidass, 1956), p. 50.

Since we don't have any archaeological or historical evidence of the human activities in India till about 300 B.C., we depend upon Vedic literature as a valid document of Indian social, political and religious history. For convenience historians have divided the Vedic age into two: The Early Vedic or Rig Vedic age which begins from 1500 B.C. and the post-Vedic age which extends from 1000 B.C. to 500 B.C. "It was during the Rig Vedic or Early Vedic age that most of the hymns of the Rig Veda were composed. It was in the later Vedic period that the Brahmanas, the three other Vedas and the Upanishads were composed." ²

Though the early Vedic family was of the patriarchal type, women had some control over the entire household. The Rig Veda reveals a stage where women enjoyed equal status with men. "... a Rig Vedic hymn describes how a maiden could take a soma twig and offer herself as a sacrifice to Indra. Vedic sacrifices were performed jointly by husband and wife." ³ Patriarchy never denied women their rights and privileges. From 4th century B.C to 3rd century B.C. girls were given education. But this was practically confined to the well-to-do families. There existed the initiation ceremony or Upanayana, for both girls and boys. According to A.S. Altekar "... education was regarded as very essential to secure a suitable marriage." ⁴ In Rig Vedic society "... the practice of child marriage did not exist." ⁵ So women got an opportunity to acquire education. If they wanted to pursue knowledge without getting married, they were allowed to do so, without any constraints. The educators wisely divided women into two groups namely

² D.N. Jha, *Ancient India: An Introductory Outline* (New Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1981), p. 11.

³ A.S. Altekar, *Position of Women in Hindu Civilization* (1938; New Delhi: Motilal Banarasidass, 1959), p. 10.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁵ P.S. Joshi, *Cultural History of Ancient India* (New Delhi: S. Chand, 1978), p. 7.

Brahmavadinis and Sadyodvahas. “The former were life-long students of theology and philosophy, the latter used to prosecute their studies till their marriage at the age of 15 or 16.”⁶ Many educated women became teachers or Upadhyayinis. No wonder the age witnessed many sagacious and capable women “like Visvavara, Apala and Ghosha even composed mantras and rose to the rank of rishis.”⁷ Lopamudra, one of the female preachers, is said to have preached as many as 179 hymns of the first book of the Rig Veda along with sage Agasthya. There were many women poets and philosophers during this period. This confirms the fact that if given equal opportunities women can definitely prove that they are as capable and as intelligent as men. Majumdar points out that the Aryans never neglected or showed prejudice towards women as far as their education was concerned. May be they were not conscious of the gender power-politics and conflicts at that time, as society was not so complex and was at a developing stage.

Thus during the poetical period of the Vedas the Aryans, we can say, were concerned about the rightness of the social order in which they lived. The fact that the education of their women was not neglected itself shows the collective consciousness of a race which promulgated codes or laws which in turn contributed immensely to the creative force of the people which is crystallized in their Vedas. According to Ray Choudhiri, the position of women was much better in this period than the subsequent times. The period witnessed many women scholars who were well versed in sacred texts. “These women not only composed hymns but were also well-versed in sacred texts. Women also learnt music and dancing.”⁸

⁶ A.S. Altekar, *Position of Women in Hindu Civilization* (1938; New Delhi: Motilal Banarassidass, 1959), p. 11.

⁷ R.C. Majumdar, *Ancient India* (New Delhi: Motilal Banarassidass, 1964), p. 44.

⁸ Ray Choudhiri, *Social Cultural and Economic History of Ancient India* (New Delhi: Surjeet Publications, 1978), p. 37.

Even in early Rig Vedic age the birth of a son was much more welcome than the birth of a daughter. But the Rig Vedic society was free from social evils like female infanticide, sati and child marriage. As a sign of woman's social dignity widow remarriage was permitted in Rig Vedic society, as evidenced in the funeral hymn in the Rig Veda: "the widow who lay on the pyre by the side of her dead husband was asked to come to the world of the living."⁹

Girls normally married after puberty, as can be judged from the frequent mention of unmarried ones such as "Ghosha" who grew up in the houses of their parents. Moreover, "the data of the Rig Veda shows that the girls and boys of the Rig Vedic society had freedom to choose their partners in life."¹⁰

In Rig Vedic times caste system was not all rigid. There was no compartmentalization of society. During this time intercaste marriages took place in society. People were given absolute freedom to choose their caste. "In one case the father was a priest, the mother grinder of corn and the son a physician, all three lived happily together."¹¹

Rig Vedic women enjoyed economic independence also to a certain extent. The women belonging to lower strata took up spinning, weaving and needle work. Clothes were much more expensive in ancient India than at present. Among other important occupations, the first place must be given to weaving both in cotton and wool, which supplied clothes to people. "It is noteworthy as in later days, both men and women were engaged in this work as well as in the subsidiary process of dyeing and

⁹ K.M. Kapadia, *Marriage and Family in India* (1955; London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1966), p. 59.

¹⁰ P.S. Joshi, *Cultural History of Ancient India* (New Delhi: S.Chand, 1978), p. 6.

¹¹ D.N. Jha, *Ancient India: An Introductory Outline* (New Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1981), p. 17.

embroidery.”¹² In one of the hymns of Rig Veda, there is a simile in which night and dawn are compared to two young women engaged in weaving.¹³

There are many passages in Rig Veda that throw light on the extent of freedom enjoyed by women. They attended fairs and festivals and were free to move about with their husbands or loved ones. They were allowed to attend Sabhas or assemblies of the learned ones, in the company of their husbands or loved ones. “Like women at a gathering fair, the streams of oil look on with gentle smile and recline to Agni.”¹⁴ In the family at least to a certain extent women enjoyed equal rights, as the Aryans believed that “. . . the wife and the husband being the equal halves of one substance were regarded equal in every respect and both took equal part in all duties, religious and social.”¹⁵ This is the very idea forcefully expressed in Book 5 hymn 6 verse 8 of Rig Veda.

The degradation in their status came in the post-Vedic period. The historians place a number of reasons for this change. The most important social change that affected them was the caste system.

2.2 The Age of Dharma Sastras

Alexander’s invasion of India in 326 B.C. was an important factor that affected the Aryan society. The Greeks who came to India along with Alexander were mainly soldiers. They did not give much importance to high ideals like chastity of women. Due to this the custodians of Hindu religion began to enforce strict moral laws on their followers. They wanted to preserve their Aryan culture by codifying certain rules for the members of their community. This system of law was mainly based on the concept of Dharma

¹² Majumdar, *Ancient India* (New Delhi: Motilal Banarassidass, 1964), p. 47.

¹³ Jain, *Labour in Ancient India* (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1971), p. 83.

¹⁴ Indra, *Status of Women in Ancient India* (Banaras: Motilal Banarassidass, 1955), p. 69.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

which constitutes the privileges, duties and obligations of a Hindu.

Great changes occurred in the Aryan way of life between 500 B.C. and 600 B.C. In the post-Rig Vedic age there was a reaction against rituals. We get an idea of the post-Vedic society from the Brahmanas, Upanishads and the great epics. Another valuable book that throws light on the post-Vedic society of India is Kautilya's *Artha Sastra* which is assigned to 2nd century B.C. Since the great epics happen to have value as social documents, they have to be included in our study while analysing the position of woman in post-Vedic ages. At the same time we should not overlook the fact that there is an element of imagination in these great epics.

The world of Indian woman became much more restricted in the time of the Smrithi writers. During the time of Kautilya, she began to be treated as a chattel. She had no separate identity of her own. The scriptures as well as the Dharma Sastras favoured the patriarchal system, which marginalized the role of Indian woman. Nothing but implicit obedience or subordination was expected from her.

This culminated finally in the seclusion of women. The freedom that she enjoyed during the Rig Vedic age, was gradually taken away from her. By 200 B.C. pre-pubescent marriages became the order of the day. The general belief was that if women were given freedom, they would transgress the limits. The Smriti writers like Kautilya, Manu and Yajnavalkya began to favour seclusion of women.

The general belief is that the seclusion of women was introduced by the Mughals in India. But this was practised as early as the time of Ashoka. The earliest reference to it, is in Panini III, 2, 36, which yields "Asuryampashya Raja-darah" which means those who do not see the sun, that is, the wives of a king."¹⁶

¹⁶ Indra, *Status of Women in Ancient India* (Banaras: Motilal Banarassidass, 1955), p. 73.

The Dharmasastras are often used to denote the Smritis alone. The Smritis are the principal sources of lawyer's law. The complete codes of Manu and Yajnavalkya deal with rites, penance, true knowledge of Brahma and liberation. They also lay down rules which have to be observed by persons in the course of their life.

The social customs and traditions which were reinforced by the law-givers degraded women. There was no sense of equality or justice in these laws. That women had no recognized place in society was revealed in the laws pertaining to marriage, divorce, property rights and right of inheritance. A thorough discrimination is shown by these Hindu law-givers.

Moreover all these legislators were chauvinistic in their attitude. According to Romila Thapar, "...the law books are both a reflection of early Indian society as well as attempts at working out what was believed to be a perfect social system."¹⁷ With the best of intentions they visualized and virtually attempted to create an apparently perfect social system. And yet unwittingly, but not innocently, the steamroller-like stereotypes crushed the spirit of Indian woman by denying her the rightful place in society.

Society was based on caste system in which the brahmins occupied the top-most position. The proselytising sects like Buddhism and Jainism tried their best to establish equality among the people of India. But their efforts produced some negative results. First of all the Brahminical religion began to enforce strict moral codes on their followers. Secondly they began to encourage pre-pubescent marriages in order to detain women from joining the monastic orders. They felt that the ascetic ideals would destabilize society as well as family. The patriarchal family became very powerful during this

¹⁷ Romila Thapar, *Ancient Indian History: Some Interpretations* (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1966), p. 27.

period and it began to restrict the activities of women. The majority of women were “looked down upon as a temptation and hindrance in their march towards higher development.”¹⁸

This belief adversely affected the position of Indian woman. Her position in the family as well as in society became very low. There arose a tendency to picture woman as a weak-minded individual who is prone to all infirmities. Another idea which became popular during this period is that a woman needs protection and disciplining throughout her life. This is very well reflected in the writings of the ancient law-givers. These rules were founded on a very flimsy foundation, namely, the length of duration of their existence and these rules in fact had no references to the psychological and social realities and needs of the people. They failed miserably to embody any sense of social justice in them. Such “time-tested rules” merely pulled society backwards without ever giving women a chance for creativity, freshness, growth and development. All these so-called law-givers were men, who had male chauvinistic attitudes in their arbitrary prescriptions of rules which virtually degraded women for generations.

The pre-pubescent marriage, in fact, inflicted another curse on women. The child-widows were ill-treated by the society. They were forced to live a life full of restrictions, which marred them physically as well as mentally. They were excluded from all auspicious ceremonies and were looked down upon as ominous beings. The question of remarriage did not arise, as the law-givers prohibited widow remarriage from the 1st century A.D.

Kautilya's *Artha Sastra* which is a social as well as historical document reveals the status of woman in India. Kautilya considered woman as a child-bearing machine. Hence he encouraged pre-pubescent marriages. This type of marriage, which was imposed

¹⁸ K. M. Kapadia, *Marriage & Family in India* (1955; London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1966), p. 28.

on the child-bride, damaged her totally. Physiologically it was dangerous since she was not physically fit to conceive a child. Psychologically it burdened her with the many responsibilities of child-rearing, when she herself was a child. This evil practice unfortunately continues in many parts of India despite the passage of centuries.

The pre-pubescent marriage affected women in another way also. The young adolescent pregnancy, according to modern theories in medicine, carries higher risk due to toxæmia, cephalopelvic disproportion and uterine inertia. A few children of very young mothers show musculo-skeletal disorders or malformation.

Yet another risk involved with early pregnancy was polydactyly. Children born to mothers aged 15 or more had a lower risk of polydactyly than in mothers younger than fifteen years. Other disorders which affect children born to young mothers are CNS malformation (Central Nervous System) and CVS malformation which involves the cardiovascular system. Thus maternal age is a strong determinant.

Kautilya's *Artha Sastra* records the number of restrictions that were imposed on women. "According to him a woman who goes out during day time, to sports or to see a woman or spectacle shall pay a fine of six panas." ¹⁹

Most of these customs denied woman her primary rights as an individual. The freedom that she enjoyed was taken away from her and she became a caged bird. In fact her condition was like what Emily Dickinson ironically articulated in one of her poems: "They put me in the closet / Because they liked me still." ²⁰

The Indian woman began to identify herself as a subordinate individual, as a mere instrument of man. This reduced her level of self-confidence. Her roles began to

¹⁹ Indra, *The Status of Woman in Ancient India* (Banaras: Motilal Banarassidass, 1958), p. 74.

²⁰ *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed., Thomas. H. Johnson (Boston: Little Brown & Company, 1890), p. 302.

get stereotyped as an individual accepting for herself the composite daughter-wife-mother image. She began to suppress her real feelings and it became difficult for her to untangle her true self from the existing social roles. Over a long period of time, a firm-rooted belief among the majority of women that they were only capable of producing children and managing the household affairs, to the exclusion of all other socially useful activities prevailed. Thus she virtually became a caged bird.

The practice of payment of bride money had its own share of negative results, mostly psychological. Though it is an antithesis of dowry it treats woman as an object to be bought and sold. She gets stigmatized with a price tag on her body. As a result she might feel inferior to her possessor who is rightfully her owner. Conversely the owner's pride may play havoc with the woman's self-respect. Thus on the whole this practice dealt a heavy blow on the already damaged self-image of the Indian woman.

This reduced woman to a commodity to be bought at the bidders' choice, with the rich man buying off the bride of his choice. As years rolled by, women began to be regarded as chattels, and this had a far-reaching impact on the status of woman. She became "a caged bird displayed in the zoo." The restlessness arising out of this situation was mercilessly ignored. This must have increased the asymmetry that was already there in the man-woman relationship.

According to Romila Thapar, Manu cannot be held solely responsible for the oppression of Indian women. In a way it was done with the intention of preserving the caste system. Romila Thapar says that Manu did not favour intercaste marriages as that, he felt, would pollute the Aryan society. So, ". . . to avoid pollution, you must control birth . . . but you lose control over birth, if you lose control over women."²¹ Manu

²¹ Elizabeth Bumiller, *May You be the Mother of a Hundred Sons: A Journey Among the Women of India* (New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1991), p. 17.

visualizes the role of an ideal Hindu or Indian woman. He believes that woman is by nature, wicked, susceptible to passion and infirmities. Hence she should be controlled by a male who is supposed to be strong and superior to her. Therefore many historians call it the "age of transition" as this period reflects distinctiveness as well as deterioration in the status of women from the preceding ages. Manu's laws do express a corpus of beliefs about women which are still prevalent in India, obviously keeping Manu alive, unconsciously yet with disastrous results.

Manu approved only three forms of marriage such as Brahma, where the father himself invites a learned man of Vedas to marry his daughter, then 'Daiva' where the girl is married to a priest who conducts a sacrifice, and the Arsha where the bride groom offers a cow and bull or two pairs of the same to the father of the bride. Manu as well as Yajnavalkya condemned the Asura, Prajapatya forms of marriage. An exception was made in the case of Kshatriyas, who could marry according to Gandharva rites.

Marriage was sacred and it was indissoluble. Remarriage was allowed for men under certain conditions. If the wife was barren, or if she had only daughters, and if she was quarrelsome by nature, he would remarry without any delay. Manu even makes provisions for punishments of a woman by her husband, if ever she committed any faults. She should be beaten with a rope or a split bamboo. He never sanctioned widow remarriage. According to him a widow should remain faithful to her husband's memory. But a widower could marry again in order to conduct the sacrificial rites.

Pre-pubescent marriages were encouraged gradually. They must have thought that if given a choice most women would prefer to escape from the monotonous domestic life. As far as a widow was concerned even in Rig Vedic times she was denied the right of inheritance. But if she was a putrika, she could inherit her father's wealth. The system of niyoga was encouraged by the ancient law-givers where she was forced to

marry her brother-in-law to safeguard property rights. But Apastamba and Manu strongly reacted against this system.

Thus in that age the position of a widow in society became miserable. Although Buddhism permitted the widow to inherit her husband's property, the Smriti writers like Manu and Narada forbade a widow to inherit her husband's property. They gave the right of inheritance to sapindas or kinsmen.

The daughters in ancient India had some legal rights. In Vedic and post-Vedic ages, married and unmarried daughters had some rights of inheritance. But a widow, as well as a wife, had no claim over her husband's property.

As far as the treatment of daughters is concerned, Manu orders affectionate treatment. According to him "where women are honoured there the god's reside."²² But he disqualifies the putrika for marriage by saying that a prudent man should not marry a maiden who has no brothers. He also prohibits the custom of bride price and he emphatically says that the father accepting the cow and bull, during Arsha marriage, as highly improper.

Remarriage of discarded women was allowed after a certain period of time by Manu as well as Kautilya. She had to wait for three years before getting remarried. Manu also had definite views about man-woman equation. A husband, even if he is wicked, should be worshipped by the wife as her lord and master.

Despite Manu's commitment to the concept of a stable, secure and morally founded society, his strictures against women seem to be cutting at the root of fairness, equality and the resultant happiness. He seems to be thinking that a woman could be the sacrificial goat at the altar of male supremacy. The effects of Manu's commandments are found

²² Shakunthala Rao Shastri, *Women in Sacred Laws* (1953; Bombay: Bharathiya Vidya Bhavan, 1959), p. 84.

prevailing in Indian society even now. This is obviously the reason why even the educated Indian women of our times put up with the atrocities perpetrated on them by the so-called “gentlemen.”

Denying woman’s basic human rights is virtually like cutting the wings of a bird which would like to fly high to the empyrean heights of performance and fulfilment. Denial of the right to education, free choice in marriage, inheritance and other property rights, the right to remarriage, the right to social mobility and so on, has ultimately resulted in making the Indian woman a very unenviable entity devoid of, among other things, the highly necessary self-esteem which she always needs and deserves.

Marriage became compulsory for a Hindu. It was an unbreakable bond which united two individuals until death. Society did not consider it as a contract with conditions binding on both partners. So the majority of women were forced to comply with the existing norm. There was no law which granted divorce (except in Kautilya’s time) if the partners were unhappy. “The rules of marriage were rigidly enforced and marriage was primarily a social institution. The patriarchal system tended to keep the status of women at a low level, and the emergence of the joint family with special property rights for the male members reinforced male dominance.”²³

In course of time she began to identify herself as a subordinate individual and as a mere instrument of man. This gradually destroyed her self-confidence and in turn destroyed her self-concept. The roles began to get stereotyped. She began to suppress her real feelings and it became difficult for her to untangle her true self from the existing social roles. There arose a firm-rooted belief among the majority of women that they were only capable of producing children and managing the household affairs.

²³ Romila Thapar, *Ancient Indian Social History* (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1966), p. 32.

Thus the Rig Vedic concept of “Sahadharmini” or equal partner was slowly losing its relevance. It was in fact replaced by the ‘Pativrata Dharma’ or the duties of a chaste wife who would fulfill the wishes of her husband without questioning them.

The rules prescribed for “pativrata” prevented her from eating even with her husband. This custom prevails even now in many parts of India. Almost a master-slave relationship began to develop between the husband and the wife. She was in fact trapped in the “Pativrata image” and she continues to be trapped in this miasma. One is now reminded of Prachi Momin who articulates the pathetic condition of women in general:

Call me P-

W

I endure like a lamb

Spit on my back

I seek help from my heritage.²⁴

Most of the law-givers were against the dissolution of marriage, and divorce was not granted. The marriage and the vow that preceded it were sacred according to Vedic Aryans. This concept got a firm foot-hold in Vedic society, mainly due to the writings of the law-givers who were invariably males who used the customs as means of psychological and physical oppression.

In the family man began to assert his power. Violence was also used to secure this end. This made an average Indian woman a storehouse of fears and weaknesses. Her self-respect was torn into shreds and there was no escape from the miasma of discrimination. There was neither equality nor freedom.

In the post-Vedic period the right of choice of life partner was also taken away

²⁴ Prachi Momin, “I-Identity”, *Charting the Journey*, eds. Shabanam Grewal, Jackie Kay, et. al., (London: Sheba Feminist Publishers, 1988), p. 30.

from woman. Manu who belongs to 2nd century B.C, for instance, insisted that a woman should never be allowed any freedom. “Day and night women must be kept in dependence by the males of their families. Her father protects her in her childhood, her husband protects her in her youth and her sons protect her in old age; a woman is never fit for independence.”²⁵

This points to the deep rooted nature of civil customs binding Indian woman in a symbolic way. And “when a woman is transformed into a symbol by man, woman becomes a symbol of her social decontextualization, her silencing, the occlusion of her suffering, the suppression of her feeling.”²⁶ The perceptions of woman as property is central to the oppression of women in the family. The damage that was done continues even now. Physically she may not be confined to the house. She is free to pursue a career. But even now the concept of the majority of women remains the same, i.e., an ideal Indian woman is the one who is totally committed to her husband and family. “It is precisely this rootedness that has made it impossible for even the Indian feminist to challenge family as the single most oppressive institution.”²⁷

2.3 The Buddhist Interlude

The story of Indian woman’s self-respect and self-fulfilment has had numberless ups and downs, variations and vagaries, positive and negative vicissitudes. Her destiny has been formed by many forces working against and for her down the centuries. The Buddhist Interlude in India’s history witnessed a conspicuous change for the better, for the long-oppressed Indian womanhood. This period roughly ranges between 3rd century

²⁵ Swami Madhavananda and Ramesh Chandra Majumdar, eds., *Great Women of India* (Almora: Advaita Ashrama, 1955), p. 18.

²⁶ Arthur Power, “Conversations with James Joyce”, *Modern Fiction Studies*, 35, No.3, p. 411.

²⁷ Rehana Ghadially, ed., *Women in Indian Society: A Reader* (New Delhi: Sage, 1988), p. 15.

B.C. and 6th century A.D. It literally brought her a wide-sweeping draught of fresh air which swept away, at least for a short period, the stinking air of stagnation, discrimination, oppression and exploitation.

On analysis it is found that the essence of *Buddhist ideology* was kindness towards all living beings. Thus in its attitude Buddhism was much more liberal than Brahmanism whose religious practices had been sanctioned by the Dharmasastras. Buddhism thus came as a boon to the oppressed classes, especially to women who had only marginal importance in that society. The Brahmanical religion imposed on them more and more restrictions which denied them their freedom of the self.

Gautama the Buddha, was not a reformer like Raja Ram Mohan Roy. But Buddha had a solid faith in essential man-woman equality regarding the attainment of salvation. The widows and barren women were ill-treated by the existing *Brahmanical religion*. But Buddha felt that these women also deserved compassion of the deepest variety. Especially towards the last stages he felt that he should do something to improve the status of the Indian woman. This can also be considered as the net result of the efforts of the Therigathas and the alms-women. They tried their best to convince Buddha about the futility of the invidious distinction that existed between man and woman. But all these reforms were mainly due to the compassion of the great sage. But perceiving the matter from the angle of justice, we can very well conclude that compassion is not a solid foundation for the *emancipation of Indian woman*. What we need is not freedom alone but equality based on a sense of justice.

In spite of its defects, the Buddhist Age witnessed a series of changes which lifted woman out of her complacency. He made the adoption of daughters valid which went against the *custom of the prevailing Brahmanical religion*. This squashed the general

belief that the birth of a son was indispensable to attain moksha or salvation. Buddhism was effecting a radical change from that of the Vedic religions. Between 500 B.C. and 600 A.D. the Brahmanical religion began to favour the seclusion of women from social activities. Many followers of Buddha realised that it was one's own Karma that was important. We can very well conclude that it was Buddha's firm belief in compassion as a great virtue that resulted in his encouragement given to the adoption of girls. No wonder it failed to withstand the ravages of time and the onslaught of the Dharmasastras.

In its attitude Buddhism was much more liberal than the religious practice that was sanctioned by the Dharmasastras. Buddhism thus became a boon to the oppressed classes, especially women. Women were accepted as nuns in the Buddhist monasteries and were free to cross the boundaries of the country.

By the third century B.C. the influence of Buddhist ideology was strongly felt in most parts of the subcontinent. Gautama the Buddha believed in woman-man equality, as evidenced in his concept of marriage. According to him it was a contract between a mature man and a mature woman cutting at the roots of the pre-pubescent marriages which were encouraged by the establishment. In Buddhism women were allowed to marry men of their choice. The age at which a woman could marry was twenty. Pre-pubescent marriages were not encouraged by Buddhism, because the concept of child marriage was a negation of the idea of marriage as a contract between two mature and autonomous individuals. Secondly, child marriages were an offence against womanhood for the simple reason that the woman's consent was never sought or taken. This was indeed an insult to woman's concept of herself as an independent entity. "In its attitude to women, the Buddhist tradition showed greater liberality than Hindu tradition, as for

instance, permitting women to become nuns.”²⁸

The Vedic tradition of giving education to women was encouraged by Buddha. They received elementary education from their fathers, brothers or uncles. Those women who secured admission to the monastic order continued their education in the monastery. “The education given to female novices and nuns was not different from that imparted to their male counterparts. The nuns were initiated into the deepest problems of philosophy as also into the subtle mystical experiences attainable through intense meditative exercises.”²⁹

After the decline of Buddhism, the ineligibility for learning Vedas was encouraged by the Brahmanical religion. By 15th century A.D, most of the women in Indian society were uneducated. But the Buddhist impact certainly was there on the Kshatriya classes. The women belonging to the Kshatriya families were educated at their homes, with the purpose of enabling them to manage their affairs on their own.

Buddhism recognised the real meaning of the word “dampati” which etymologically meant “the joint owners of the house.” In order to emphasize this aspect Buddha gave the wife the right to inherit the husband’s property. According to him she was his helpmate as well as his companion who had equal authority, when it came to the matters of the household. Thus married women were treated with a lot of respect in Buddhism. They were allowed to attend the discourses of Buddha. They were also free to practise the eightfold path which assured salvation. Even though the family was patriarchal at this time, Buddhism tried its best to do away with the asymmetry that existed between the husband and the wife.

²⁸ Romila Thapar, *Ancient Indian Social History: Some Interpretations* (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1978), p. 33.

²⁹ Swami Madhavananda, *Great Women of India* (Almora: Advaita Ashrama, 1955), p. 254.

Buddhism also permitted divorce in exceptional cases. Divorce was granted if the wife was barren, or if a partner was guilty of adultery. A sick wife was to be looked after by the husband. Granting divorce to a certain extent eliminated the discriminatory status of a custom by which man enjoyed more power and held a superior position vis-a-vis woman.

Till then women were forced to occupy a secondary position in the social and domestic arena. The years of subjugation prepared them to accept their secondary role. Marriage was not a contract, but a sacrament which extended the relationship of the two persons for the life to come.

Divorce was looked down upon by the upholders of Brahmanical religion. According to them it was a negation of the very principle of sacrament. Another noticeable feature during this time was that these marriages did not have any legal constraints except customary norms. And people followed their social heritage without questioning the validity of the norms which permitted the abandoning of wives.

A group of Buddhist nuns called Therigathas (senior nuns) composed verses and were noted chroniclers of the time. They played an important part in propagating Buddhism. Thus the admission of women into the monastic order secured for them a religious status. Ashoka's own daughter Sanghamitra went to Ceylon to propagate Buddhism. Many women joined the order of nuns to pursue religious activities. In order to propagate Buddhism, they travelled from place to place. Some women even went to Burma, Ceylon, Nepal in order to spread the great teachings of their Master.

Buddha followed the Vedic tradition of legalising the daughter or putrika to inherit the father's property in the absence of a son. The unmarried daughters, were to be provided for by the father or on his death by their brothers. They could own a part of their father's property in case there were brothers. These laws, which gave them the right of

inheritance provided them economic independence. This also gave them freedom to choose between marriage and spinsterhood. The belief that “earthlier happy is the rose distilled / than that which withers on a virgin throne”³⁰ was slowly changing.

Buddha showed great compassion towards widows. In order to remove the prejudice that existed in society, he admitted them to the Sanghas. Through his discourses he tried to convince his followers that these women were not responsible for their husbands' death. Buddha also encouraged widow remarriage. But the only anathema that surfaced was the sanctioning of “Niyoga”, which forced a widow to marry her younger brother-in-law in order to continue the family line. This was encouraged for protecting the family's property and wealth. In the absence of children, a widow could inherit the property of her husband. The steps taken by Buddhism gave the average Indian woman a great sense of security. This stance by Buddha became an issue of debate among the law-givers of India. It was finally in twelfth century A.D., that the widow's right of inheritance finally was recognized.

The Buddhist social code with its emphasis on compassion, was kind in its treatment of prostitutes. Consequently prostitutes were admitted to Sanghas where they could lead the life of alms-women. Buddhism also gave a legal status to concubines if ever they got married and made their children legitimate. In this way the Buddhist interlude partially ameliorated the situation of the unprivileged section of the society. Instead of applying the canons of justice, the Buddhist society doled out heavy doses of social compassion, offering, in the process, a glimpse of social salvation and self-worth.

Though Buddha was more charitable than the Hindu Dharmasastras, the attitude

³⁰ William Shakespeare, “*A Mid Summer Night's Dream*”, *THE COMPLETE WORKS*, ed. Peter Alexander (London: The English Language Book Society, 1951), p. 199.

of the great saviour was to a certain extent prejudiced by the age-old values and traditions. The impact of these traditions can be seen in his many teachings. There were separate rules for women who wanted to join the Sanghas as nuns. In spite of being mostly conventional in his teaching and partly prejudiced against women, Buddha was large-hearted to welcome women to the Sanghas or the Buddhist monasteries. And yet he had two different sets of rules, obviously discriminatory, for men and women. This wouldn't do Buddha much credit. But a great fact remains that he was high-minded enough to reach out to the suffering women of society, and to raise their level of status as human entities.

The annual "Upostha Ceremony" that was there in Buddhism also reveals the prejudice against women. According to this custom an alms-woman should confess her sins before a monk and should receive absolution, from him, for all her sins. Another discriminatory rule is mentioned in *Sulla Vogga* according to which "the official admonition by an alms-woman is forbidden, whereas the official admonition of an alms woman by a monk is not forbidden."³¹

"The commentary *Manoratha Purana* on the *Angutta Nikaya* mentions a list of the foremost nuns (Theris), female novices (Shrameneris) and female lay devotees (Upasikas)."³² This classification, obviously discriminatory, may be justified on the basis of the fact that they came from different back grounds, sections of the society and social rungs. Moreover they had to be integrated through a process of synthesis spread over a long period of initiation, training and ascetic discipline.

According to *Angutta Nikaya* the most important woman in Buddhist hierarchy was Mahapajapati Gotami, who secured Buddha's consent for the formation

³¹ Indra, *Status of Women in Ancient India* (Banaras: Motilal Banarassidass, 1956), p. 222.

³² Swami Madhavananda, *Great Women of India* (Almora: Advaita Ashram, 1955), p. 63.

of the order of nuns. The next important Buddhist disciple was Kshema, the queen of Bimbisara. It was mainly the efforts of Mahapajapati and Therigathas that finally cleared the bias that seeped through Buddha. He finally realised that “one and the same self is present in all beings.”³³ This change in his attitude is clearly revealed in a passage in *Samyutta* (1-5-6): “And be it a woman, be it a man for whom / into Nirvana’s presence they shall come.”³⁴

The analysis of the data given above reveals very clearly that Buddhism exposed many flaws that existed in the Brahmanical society. The stress that had been laid on “dharma” or duties and privileges of a member of the community by the Brahmanical injunction stood at cross roads by the end of the era, as Buddhism convinced its followers that it was the individual that mattered more. This resulted in an upsurge of human dignity which had its off-shoot in the form of a raised level of female status.

In a way Buddhism improved the status of at least a section of women who embraced that religion. The majority of women at that time lived in abject subordination, under the restraints imposed by the Brahmanical religion. The protest registered by Buddhism was not long-sustained as Buddha was mainly concerned with salvation of his followers. The overall development in women’s life and work was soon eclipsed by the reassertion of Brahmanical religion resulting in yet another spell of darkness in this subcontinent.

Buddhism never tried to abolish the existing social order. The discriminatory feeling against women that was there in the minds of the majority of people remained unaffected. Thus the two major forces that joined hands in degrading women like the

³³ Giri Raj Gupta ed., *Family and Social Change in Modern India* (New Delhi: Vikas, 1976), p. 10.

³⁴ A.S. Altekar, *The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization* (1938; Banaras: Motilal Banarassidass 1959), p. 232.

joint family and the caste system, remained unalterables. Many customs and traditions were implicitly followed by the majority of people of India during this time, which certainly went against the interest of women in general. Buddhism made the adoption of daughters valid which went against the prevailing custom. This squashed the general belief that the birth of a son was necessary to attain moksha. Thus Buddhism was effecting a radical psychological change from that of the Vedic religion. On analysis it is found that Buddhism as prevailed in India at that time, wanted to have a solid faith in the essential man-woman equality. That religion had compassion as one of its prime postulates finding Indian woman deserving compassion of the deepest variety, Buddhism reached out to her as part of its journey towards glory.

But it is to be noted that Buddhism also failed miserably to understand the situation of woman from the angle of social justice. "If justice were to be really done mere laws are not sufficient. It takes a total re-orientation in judicial thinking and attitude, if gender justice is to be done" ³⁵ Even though Buddhism failed to achieve man-woman equality from the angle of legalistic perception it achieved a lot for Indian woman on the basis of its postulate of compassion which virtually took Indian woman much nearer to the goal of gender justice.

2.4 A Time of Stagnation

During the pre-medieval period which covers the span of time between 3rd century A.D and 12th century A.D. the status of women underwent further deterioration and they were regarded as equal to Sudras. The sphere of their activity was again confined to the home. Seclusion of women became very common even before the advent of Muslims, especially in the upperclass society, due to the rigidity of the caste system. The Smriti

³⁵ D.Nagasila and V. Suresh, "The Concept of a Hindu Wife", *The Hindu*, January 29, 1993. p. 11.

writers prohibited intercaste marriages. Especially for an upper caste woman it was strictly prohibited to marry men from lower castes even as the upper caste man retained his right to marry from the lower caste of his choice. As far as the Indian woman was concerned, social mobility, both vertical and horizontal had become a mirage which defied an easy solution.

In the 8th century the all-pervading influence of Adi Shankara was felt across the length and breadth of the Indian subcontinent. Yet his views on women's role in terms of worldly functions and spiritual services were strongly oriented towards an anti-woman posture.

2.5 The Position of Women during the Bhakti Movement

The Hindu religious revival namely the Bhakti movement which took place roughly around 11th century A.D. was the direct outcome of the proselytisation activity of the Muslims in India. The leaders and the propagators of the Bhakti cult were greatly impressed by the ideas of one God and universal brotherhood which were introduced by this great religion based on monotheism. The impact of the Bhakti movement lasted till the first half of the 16th century A.D.

The number of followers of Islam increased under the sultans. The non-Muslims had to pay a tax called *Jizia* — the military tax. The proselytisation was effectively carried on under the patronage of sultans and it literally swept through the poorer classes. First of all they were unable to pay this aforesaid tax. Secondly, there was persecution carried out by the Brahmanical injunctions.

The founder of the Bhakti cult was Ramanuja, a Vaishnava saint. Other teachers of the movement like Kabir, Namdev and Ramdev hailed from the lower castes. This itself shows that it was indeed a reformist movement which aimed at the abolition of the various discriminations perpetrated by the existing Hindu religion. The religious leaders

gave emphasis to the fact that there is only one God. In its attitude to women it followed the footsteps of Buddhism, ie. on the grounds of compassion towards the suffering multitudes of the feminine gender and also on the realisation that men and women are of equal significance before God. It also restored for the time being a religious status to women. They were encouraged to come out of their homes, to listen to the saints and to sing of God's glory in public. There were a few women saints who become very popular. Meera Bai was not only acclaimed as a saint but also as a poet of lasting significance. This clearly indicates the possibilities of artistic excellence lying dormant among the Indian women folk.

Even during this period of nascent glory the majority of women in India lived under abject subjugation. Their position was deteriorating rapidly. Except for a short while the conservative attitude of the religious leaders did not undergo any change, radical or otherwise. The ancient ascetic ideal which considered women as an obstacle in the path of achieving salvation continued to dominate. So after the initial success, it failed miserably to bring about any long term change owing to the lack of co-ordination among the cult leaders and also due to the absence of sustained efforts based on organisational structures.

We can very well conclude that the ideal of equality was misconceived by all these ascetically-oriented religious leaders. For them as far as women were concerned, equality meant a consideration arising from pity and not justice. They failed to comprehend the fact that they should "restore to half humanity its rightful place in human society."

2.6 Medieval India

As far as this study is concerned the medieval period is spread over four centuries from the 12th to the first half of the 16th century. The real history of India in the middle ages is a struggle for political power and economic supremacy between two systems

which were totally different in their outlook. The incursion of Muslims in India began with the Arab invasion of Sind in the beginning of the 8th century A.D. The large majority of Muslims who came to India were Turks, Afghans and Persians. "And thus for the first time in recorded history Indian religion and social customs were faced with a system which was equally formulated and definite."³⁶

The caste system became more rigid in the medieval period. Occupation now began to be determined by birth. Such a situation brought about a lot of conservatism in the Hindu society. Those who were low in the social scale of Hindu society found in Islam an opportunity to assert their dignity. The more sensitive among them were attracted by its democratic appeal. This is one of the reasons why Islam spread very fast in certain parts of India. Another reason was that two options were given to the Indian prisoners of war by Muslims: either acceptance of Islam or slavery. Obviously most of them preferred the first.

Dependence of women on their husbands or other male relatives was a prominent feature of this period. Devoid of avenues of any education, having lost the access to Streedhana or dowry, they virtually became the exploited class with disastrous results for themselves and the nation. Indian women were politically, socially and economically inactive except for those engaged in farming and weaving. This inactivity in a way contributed to their subordination. Most of the women accepted meekly the idea that the proper place for them was their home. This diffusive awareness which was ideologically stereotyped obviously on the wrong lines, was their undoing during this period of darkness, thus proving the veracity of the statement that "there are three dimensions to subordination of women — the political, ideological and the economic which may co-exist in different

³⁶ Humayun Kabir, *The Indian Heritage*, (1946; Bombay: Ashish Publishing House, 1955), p. 62.

balances with one another.”³⁷

Political subordination includes the exclusion of women from all important decision-making processes. With the advent of Muslims in India, the social movement of Indian women was restricted. They were prohibited to attend public functions and were not free to participate as men's equals in religious functions like yajnas, obviously indicating a degradation of her role as she was getting wrapped in isolation.

Another social evil that existed in society during this period was child marriage. These pre-pubescent marriages adversely affected the health of the girls. These child brides were denied all intellectual, physical and spiritual development. It virtually punctured the fragile psyche of Indian girl child. Her self-image was torn into shreds by the patriarchal family which denied her basic freedom. Indian womanhood was mercilessly locked in the echochamber.

Similarly most of the women made themselves believe that the ideal place for them was the home. Thus they were persuaded by circumstances to accept their inferiority and secondary position. Men being providers, women became dependent on them economically, for their subsistence except for the labour classes, where both men and women participated in subsistence farming and other occupations.

Many social evils like female infanticide, sati, child marriages, Purdah system or zenana, the seclusion of women developed during the middle ages, due to the political instability of northern India, especially due to various invasions. Muslims who came to India were mainly warriors and they did not give much importance to Hindu ideals like chastity and pativrata dharma. So the seclusion of women was encouraged mainly by the Rajputs and the other upper castes like Brahmins.

³⁷Quoted in Patricia Jeffrey, *Frogs in the Well: Indian Women in Purdah* (New Delhi: Vikas, 1979), p. 43.

Polygamy was the first reason which contributed to the subordination of women. Muslim rulers in India had large harems. Thus women came to be regarded as instruments of sensual satisfaction. Even among the Hindus there was no limit set to the number of wives a man could take.

Marriage in Islam is a contract. But a Muslim man can have as many as four wives. Thus even religion encouraged the abject subordination of women for the reasons best known to it. Islam also made husband the head of the family and insisted that a wife should obey all his commands and should serve him with utmost loyalty, whether he was worthy of it or not.

Another social evil that existed in medieval India was female infanticide. This particular system was prevalent among Rajputs and other high castes. Even among the Muslims this custom existed. The evil mainly originated from the belief that only the birth of a son could make salvation possible for parents. Only a son had the privilege of performing Samskaras. And lastly the son began to be considered as the maintainer of the race. So in most of the noble families the female child was killed either by poisoning or by burying her alive. Some of them were drowned to death. Even among the Muslims the birth of a daughter was ominous:

The mid wife who receives a son deserves a gold coin to
make a ring for her nose.

But you! Oh midwife! Deserve thirty strokes of the stick!

Oh! you who announce the little girl when the censorious are
here! ³⁸

Purdah gained popularity with the advent of the Muslims. Many writers feel that

³⁸ Liliane Landor, "From the Caribbean to the Arab World: the odyssey of one Dolores Quintero Or how do you write about food?" *Charting the journey: Writings by Black and third World Women* eds. Shabanam Grewal, Jackie Kay, et. al. (London: Sheba Feminist Publisher, 1988), p. 202.

the purdah system existed among Kshatriyas in the period of Dharma Sastras. But the Hindu women veiled only their face or sometimes only covered their heads with sarees or “dupattas.” But for Muslims it meant complete veiling. Purdah actually is a Persian word which means curtain. According to Patricia Jeffrey “Purdah is a part and parcel of stratification in India. It becomes the mental foot binding, the frogs in a well syndrome, the submissiveness of the young bride and the inability of adult women to cope with the world outside.”³⁹

Dowry system was a common phenomenon. It actually meant “Stridhana” which included gifts, ornaments, property, and cash presented to her by her father or her relatives. But in the medieval period the term acquired special significance. It meant money or “Dakshina” which was actually presented to the bride groom along with the bride. In Vedic times it ensured some sort of security for her. But during the middle ages she was not free to use it as it was owned by her husband and his kith and kin.

During the Middle Ages the term “Stridhana” acquired huge dimensions. The Hindus and Muslims favoured this custom of dowry. It could be paid in cash or kind along with the bride. During the Vedic ages it was given with the intention of providing security for women when a crisis occurs. She was free to make use of this “Dhana.” But the Middle Ages witnessed a sudden transformation. The Stridhana received by the groom belonged completely to the in-laws. The bride did not have free access to this wealth, which rightfully belonged to her.

Dowry system existed even among the Muslims, especially among the Shias. As years rolled by dowry became an integral part of the marriage ceremony. This in a way contributed to female infanticide, as it became a heavy burden on the poor. The birth of

³⁹ Patricia Jeffrey, *Frogs in a Well: Indian Women in Purdah* (New Delhi: Vikas, 1979), p. 174.

girls became a nightmare to the majority of the population. Another negative effect of the dowry system was that the Indian woman lost her importance as a worthy human being. She began to be regarded as movable and removable property by her husband.

Created by the so-called law-givers and upholders of religion in the medieval age it literally induced physical as well as intellectual damage on women in medieval India. It took away her fledgeling morale which was as expectedly delicate. Above all it resulted in the emotional break-downs and the traumas of a serious kind. Thus her self-concept received another lethal lash at the hands of the dark forces that ruled the roost.

The condition of the Hindu widows became more miserable during the medieval period. Rigidity of caste system denied them the right to freedom and social mobility. Inhuman treatment was offered to the widow. She was forced to lead a life away from worldly pleasures. A widow was also secluded from society as well as family. Another pre-requisite for a widow was shaving the head. She was thus humiliated mercilessly by contemporary society. The condition of the Muslim widow was slightly better owing to the fact that she could marry after a certain lapse of time following her husband's death.

The feudal society of the time encouraged "Sati" which meant self-immolation of the widow. By burning herself on the pyre of her husband, she proves her loyalty. Even the child widows were not spared from this gruesome ritual. According to Saroj Gulati "because of the continuous wars, there were chances of too many widows young and old, and a big question was how to accommodate them without bringing stigma to the family or creating problems for society."⁴⁰ And Sati was considered as the best course even though it was the worst crime perpetrated on Indian women from many angles of reason or humanity.

⁴⁰ Saroj Gulati, *Women and Society: Northern India in the 2nd and 12th century* (Delhi: Chanakya Publications, 1985), p. 150.

Prostitution became a recognised institution. The Devadasi system which was prevalent among the Hindus and the courtesans who adorned the court of Muslim rulers, degraded the status of women in society. Under the Devadasi system women were the brides of gods. But they were supposed to entertain kings, priests and even members of the upper classes. The fact that they were exploited by the existing male-dominated society is clearly revealed in the testimony of Alberuni: “the kings make them an attraction for their cities, a bait of pleasure for their subjects, for no other but financial reasons.”⁴¹

⁴¹ Quoted in Saroj Gulati, *Women and Society: Northern India in the 2nd and 12th Centuries* (New Delhi: Chanakya Publications, 1985), p. 226.

CHAPTER III

VARIED VANDALISATIONS OF WOMANHOOD

3.1 In the Chalkpit

The Mughal period in Indian history began with the battle of Panipat in 1526 in which Babur defeated Ibrahim Lodi. The Mughal empire was enlarged and consolidated by Akbar the great. Major parts of Northern India, for two centuries, experienced a high degree of unity and peace under their rule. The two religions while maintaining their individuality reached a sort of reconciliation. They absorbed and assimilated ideas and influenced each other, of course without undergoing radical changes.

The position of women further deteriorated. They suffered mainly from the oppression of patriarchal family, rigidity of caste system and the strict measures introduced by the Islamic faith, restricting the freedom of women in India. The purdah system and polygamy gained popularity under the Muslim rule. The birth of a girl was looked down upon by the Muslims. So female infanticide continued unhindered. The social evil Sati continued unabated.

The Islamic practice of marrying as many as four times had its impact on Hindu religion. The Rig Vedic practice of one-man-one-wife completely underwent a change especially among the upper classes. The Rajas, the Brahmins and the Zamindars, partook of these traditions of having many wives. This again adversely affected the status of women much more than before, under the guise of the imperial salvation.

As far as women were concerned no age limit was set by Islam for marriage. Pre-pubescent marriages with all their deleterious effects took place in Islam. It is interesting to note that both religions encouraged plurality of wives, while monogamy was the

rule for women. Thus from birth itself she was denied important social and legal rights while her male counter part acquired and enjoyed all these purely on the basis of his gender.

Against the dark scenario of this age a silver lining was visible to the Muslim women folk. Muslim women had some distinct advantages. After the death of her husband, she was allowed to remarry, after waiting for a period of three months which was called "idda." Another advantage was that "the Kuranic laws guaranteed the right to inherit and bequeath property. And it is the woman who gets the dower in Islam and no longer her guardian." ¹

The striking analogy between the two religions is that both institutionalised and confined roles of women in their concerned society by cushioning off the female world (the home) from the male world (public affairs). Obviously the major religions of those times vied with each other in extending the tentacles of oppression and seclusion. As a result, for a long period of time immediately preceding the Indian Renaissance, the females of the species were forced to live a less than human life for all practical purposes.

The Mughal society not only denied her rightful place but also atrophied her perspicacity, levels of consciousness and her effective actions. Her silent contributions for building up a civilization were over-looked by her male counter parts and she became virtually invisible in history till first half of the 19th century.

Education was also denied to women during this period. Among Hindus and Muslims, only certain classes of women received religious teaching at home. But education was also space and age bound as far as women were concerned. Education which stimulates all round progress was denied to them. Owing to this they lacked the focussed

¹ Barbara Freyer Stowasser, "The Status of Women in Early Islam", *Muslim Women*, ed. Freda Hussain, (London: Croom & Helen, 1984), p. 17.

consciousness to rebel against the injustices that were heaped upon them. This lack of awareness culminated in her timorous nature ie. accepting meekly her supposed inferior position in society. The Indian women thus became daughters of Echo, thus lacking a full independent and assertive voice of their own. It goes beyond doubt that this diffusive awareness dealt a heavy blow to her already tarnished self-image.

Muslim women were prevented from going to the place of worship. It was believed that the “the best mosque for women is their own house.”² Thus it denied her religious status. The condition of Hindu women was also not better. They also led a secluded life marked by self-pity and lack of confidence. They were not permitted to attend sabhas or assemblies as men’s equals. Thus they were controlled physically and psychologically by these coercive religious and cultural traditions and norms.

Thus oppression of Indian women during Mughal times was not only by the patriarchal family, but also by religion as managed by ‘ulemas’. But a disadvantage was that she could be divorced without any valid reason. This again affected the status of women in Mughal India as the right of divorce was completely vested in the hands of the male counterparts.

Thus till the rise of British supremacy in India, there existed a harmony between these two ideologically different religions. The main factor which led to the reconciliation, according to Havell, is that “. . . men and women of all castes who had suffered as much as human nature could endure, felt drawn together in a common bond of sympathy.”³ Thus the constant war and consequent suffering irrespective of caste and creed stirred the innate religious feelings of compassion of the people.

² Ibid., p. 11.

³ Quoted in H.L.O. Garret and Sita Ram Kohili, *A History of India: The Muhammadan Period* (Calcutta: Longmans Green, 1926), p. 137.

3.2 The European Connection

The discovery of the new sea route to India by Vasco da Gama opened new avenues of possibilities in commercial and social interactions. India became a beehive of European trade activity. The Portuguese, the Dutch, the English and the French established trade centres along the coast. These trading companies gradually tried to establish political supremacy. The French remained unbeaten till 1593 and later lost all its privileges and facilities to more powerful enemies like the Dutch and the English.

It was in 1608 that the British sailors came to carry on trade. The existing political situation in India was mainly responsible for their change in strategy. They had to protect their rights and privileges from other European traders. Finally the bitter hostility that existed between the English and others, especially the Dutch was unequivocally ended by the British Captain Robert Clive.

India, before the British supremacy, was politically, socially and economically a fen of stagnant waters. After the death of Aurangzeb, the Mughal dominion in India began to deteriorate. The religious persecution of Aurangzeb along with the economic instability of the Government weakened the central authority. Moreover it led to a series of invasions from Afghanistan and Persia. The great catastrophe which struck India during the early part of 17th century was the invasion of Nadir Shah of Persia resulting in blood baths.

Unity was unknown to the warring kings in India. Thus the integration which started with the Mauryans, effectively carried out by the Mughals was now in a cesspool. Michael Edwards opines that "when Mughals fell, there was no organised system to take their place. Forms of Government did survive, but they became tools of exploitation and

oppression. The scaffolding of law was distorted and destroyed”,⁴ resulting in the rigidity of caste and new sombre shadows on the already pathetic situation of the Indian woman. Owing to the fact that whenever the grip of the caste tightened woman suffered most in the absence of stability both vertical and horizontal.

The caste system became more oppressive and its organisational structure had an upper hand in subjugating the individual to the community. So this political situation did not give any importance to social values, particularly justice based on equality and hence degraded the position of women in India. “Any theory of women’s exploitation and violence in India should deal with the issue of caste.”⁵ With the advent of the British, the condition of Indian women, “. . . the country’s largest group of backward citizens”⁶ witnessed some radical changes. In fact the old order began changing, yielding place to new.

The first half of this rule witnessed a kind of impersonal administration which had only one aim, ie. to strengthen their position in India to exploit the Indian resources to the maximum. The introduction of Christianity and proselytisation activity encouraged by the Government itself was a part of their social superiority. To them the Indians who worshipped many Gods, offered sacrifices were heathens. In order to reform them they had to be brought closer to the monotheistic belief system. Thus the evangelical missionary activity aimed at freeing “the Indian mind from the tyranny of evil superstition, a sort of Indian counterpart to the European reformation.”⁷

⁴ Michael Edwardes, *British India (1772 to 1947)* (London: Sidwig & Jackson, 1976), p. 6.

⁵ John Desrochers, Bastian Wieleng et. al., *Social Movement Towards a New Perspective* (Bangalore: CSA, 1992), p. 151.

⁶ Elizabeth Bumiller, *May you be the Mother of Hundred Sons* (New York: Fawlett, Columbine 1990), p. 10.

⁷ Michael Edwardes, *British India (1772 - 1947)* (London: Sidwig & Jackson, 1976), p. 55.

Many travelogues and literary works written by English soldiers, sailors and historians point to the seclusion of the Indian woman. She was bound to her home, emotionally crippled and economically dependent through many restrictions placed upon her. She was exposed to many specific forms of violence such as female infanticide, wife beating, dowry system, Sati and Purdha system. Indian women were not allowed to live and function like an independent human being. "They are born, grow up and die oblivious of their rights as human beings and as citizens." ⁸

She was encased in a strong pyramidal, authoritarian and male-dominated society which gave her no identity of her own. The contact with western ideas, education, religion and culture produced a new consciousness among a class of women, which ignited the birth of women's movement in India. The part played by women in the out-break of sepoy mutiny supports this new consciousness. Sir Hugh Rose observed thus about Jhansi of Rani. "She was the bravest and best military leader of the rebels." ⁹

This contact with the West thus brought fundamental changes in the case of women. O' Mally says that "women revalued themselves as human beings in a new social order." ¹⁰ What actually ignited the era of transition for the "second x" was education. Devoid of education, they never realised that they were living in an unreformed world. It was the missionaries who came to India who took up the cause of education of Indian women. The Government was unwilling to interfere with the religious practices and beliefs of the colony. But the missionaries who came to India, realised that in order to reform people they had to be educated in the modern way.

⁸ John Desrochers, Bastian Wielenga et. al., *Social Movements Towards Perspective* (Bangalore: CSA, 1992), p. 128.

⁹ Man Mohan Kaur, *Role of Women in the Freedom Movement (1857-1947)* (New Delhi: 1968, Sterling Publishers), p. 3.

¹⁰ O' Mally, *Modern India & the West* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1941), p. 445.

The English education along with the contact with the West made Indians aware of the fact that their country needed a thorough purging of many bestial customs and socio-religious practices. They knew very well that if women were to be secluded from this socio-religious reform movement it would never be a success. At least the “progressives” among the reformers realised that “women are life enhancers, the *Virtuosae*.” If they were “invested with power as well as responsibility” they would definitely “incorporate a new conversion of Shakti and Streedharma. In the full sway of her sexual and spiritual powers woman regenerates and lights the way for human kind.”¹¹

The father of the Indian Renaissance was the “Protean figure Raja Ram Mohan Roy.” His English education along with his knowledge of Hindu scriptures, made him point his fingers at the social atrocities that existed at that time. In fact his knowledge of the ancient laws, scriptures and other religious and philosophical texts was his power. The most astonishing fact was that he did not accept any religion or faith. After much excogitation Ram Mohan Roy argued for “an ethical, monotheistic or unitarian Hinduism (which was also primitive, uncorrupted, Vedantic Hinduism) entirely different from the emotional idolatry that existed then.”¹²

Thus Raja Ram Mohan Roy founded the Brahma Samaj in 1856 with the intention of reforming Hindu religion and barbaric customs and practices. It took up the case of battered women, especially widows and women who did not have inheritance to fall back upon. Ram Mohan Roy championed the cause of women’s right to property. “In his pamphlet, *Modern Encroachment on the Ancient Rights of Female*, he pleaded for a

¹¹ Sara S. Mitter, *Dharma’s Daughter: Contemporary Indian Women and Hindu Culture* (USA: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1991), p. 178.

¹² Susie Tharu, et. al., *Indian Writing in English: The Indian Response to the ideology of Colonialism* (Hyderabad: CIEFL) p. 47.

change in the Hindu Law of inheritance so as to improve the lot of the Hindu widows.”¹³

The motto of Brahma Samaj was to reform the existing Hindu religion and the Hindu way of life. It was mainly with his efforts that finally, Sati was declared illegal by the then Governor Genral of India William Bentick.

Ram Mohan Roy was also an educationist par excellence. The Government was not willing to provide education for women. But Ram Mohan Roy and other social reformers pressed the issue forcefully. The missionaries who were working in India also supported female education. Thus William Adams, a British Officer, was asked to prepare a series of Reports for the Government on the State of Education in Bengal and Bihar in 1835. He commented that majority of Indian women were hopelessly ignorant about the exploitation and atrocities piled upon them. He also observed that many superstitious beliefs were propogated to prevent female education. A belief that prevailed during that time was that if a woman was taught to read and write she would become a widow soon after marriage.

The first Missionary School was opened for women in 1818 in Bengal. By 1823, the London Missionary Society had six schools. By 1854 about 8000 girls were attending Missionary Schools in Madras Presidency. The progress made in the field of education was comparatively slow as it had to deal with many traditional beliefs and customs.

The famous Woods Despatch of 1854 reported that there were 65 girls' schools in the Bombay Presidency with 3500 pupils, 256 girls schools in Madras Presidency attended over by 8000 girls and 258 girls schools in Bengal Presidency attended by over 7000 pupils. But in the rest of the country, there were very few schools for girls.”¹⁴

¹³ Kalpana Shah, *Women's Liberation and Voluntary Action* (Delhi: Ajanta Publication, 1984), p. 32.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

The purdah system continued without any let or hindrance. This was so deeply ingrained in the Indian feminine psyche that most of them who observed it, did not feel that it was a social deprivation. Gandhiji himself criticised purdah thus “Chastity is not house growth. It cannot be super imposed. It cannot be protected by the surrounding walls of the Purdah.”¹⁵

The protests registered against these customs like purdah, child marriage, Devadasi system failed to stir the majority of the masses. In fact as Frantz Fanon says, “ a custom is always the deterioration of culture.”¹⁶ Here was a culture, which was on the path of deterioration and the masses were ignorant about their predicament owing to the lack of education. “Still barred thy doors! the east glows, the morning wind blows fresh and free, should not be the hour that makes the rose Awaken also thee?”¹⁷ As Narasimhaiah points out the poem that Gosse quotes from is in fact by Aru Dutt, Toru Dutt’s sister, the two sisters being the heralds of Indian woman’s poetic creativity in the period of Indian Renaissance.

The Indian woman’s response to the Sepoy Mutiny, India’s first Independence struggle is noteworthy. In fact she awakened to the call of the hour and acted accordingly. It was in fact the reaction of conscious natives against alien power which was holding them in subordination. J.C. Wilson comments on the part played by women, especially of the bazar to trigger of this mutiny.

These women taunted the sepoys who accepted meekly the British General’s command to use the new cartridges. “The spark which fell from the female lips ignited at

¹⁵ M.K. Gandhi. *Women and Social Injustice* (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1945), p. 101.

¹⁶ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (Harmondsworth: Penguin 1967), p.180.

¹⁷ Quoted in C.D. Narasimhaiah, *The Swan & Eagle* (Simla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1969), p. 24.

once and the night of the May 10, 1857, saw the commencement of a tragedy never before witnessed since.”¹⁸ Rajput women and Muslim women fought for their cause against the British. Rani Lakshmi Bai of Jansi, Rani Tara Bai and Rani Jindan, participated actively in the mutiny against the British displaying the might of the spirit of Indian womanhood even as the alien power went about displaying its muscle power.

The other reformers who took up the issue of child marriage and widow remarriage were Behramji Malbham of Bombay, Lok Manya Tilak, Iswar Chandra Vidya Sagar, Keshab Chandra Sen and Ranade. Many institutions were set up to alleviate women's suffering. A new bill was finally passed into law as Act III of 1872 which fixed the marriageable age of girls as fourteen. This Act had far-reaching results. While it made polygamy penal, it sanctioned widow remarriage and intercaste marriages giving a semblance of self-respect and freedom to the Indian woman.

3.3 Out of her Depths

The setback of 1857 in fact was blessing in disguise. The uprising against the British was slowly gaining momentum and it permeated to all sections and classes of people in India. For the first time, the masses became conscious of their shadow-like existence. This conflict had a two dimensional effect on Indian woman. First of all, there was a deep awareness about the resurgence against the British holding them in an abject subordination.

The idea of her own self focussed mainly on a submissive wife, a mother who is ready to sacrifice anything for her family, a person who needs protection and shelter provided by the patriarchal family, through out her different stages in life. Maybe for the protection and shelter provided by the patriarchal family, she had to do something in

¹⁸ J.C. Wilson, *Moradabad Narrative of Events* (Official), dated 24 December 1858, p. 90.

return. This may perhaps cost her own personal freedom, aspirations and the freedom to exercise her will. Thus till then she was not able to see her own self and in fact she “plunged further into what Husserl’s pupil Heidegger called in a beautiful and utmost magical phrase, ‘the forgetting of being.’”¹⁹

This flame touched the hearts of many women at that time. For the first time they realised that like Mother India, they too were in shackles. The shadow-like existence actually denied them their identity. In fact the educated women found their existence choking. Thus when the nation was responding to the call of freedom, the Indian woman found herself responding not only to the call of nationalism, but also to the cries of personal freedom, equality, social justice which she had long been denying to her own self.

Secondly there was an acute realisation. The condition of Indian woman was more or less like that of the enslaved Indians. The ideals like fraternity, liberty and equality which were essentially supplied by Western culture penetrated deeply into Indian minds. The sparks produced by these factors did not burn out quickly as a fire among the thorns.

The national movement in a way helped women to get a footing. Here the words of Fanon are of significance. “When people undertake an armed struggle or even a political struggle against a relentless colonialism, the significance of tradition changes.”²⁰ In the case of Indian woman this is of great relevance. Till then she tried to live up to the traditional image by subjecting herself to her custodian namely the patriarchal order. For the first time a consciousness was there in her mind which categorically asserted that her

¹⁹ Milan Kundera, *The Art of the Novel*, 1992, (Delhi: Rupa, 1993), p. 3.

²⁰ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967), p.180.

efforts to satisfy the existing social order were as useless as chasing the winds. In other words she realised that she could not survive in a vacuum.

The women writers who were blessed with a more than ordinary sensibility were conscious of this fact. Toru Dutt's (1856-77) poem "Savitri" echoes this consciousness:

In those far off primeval days
Fair Indian daughters were not pent
In closed zenanas.²¹

After the sepoy mutiny the Indian womanhood was placed at cross roads. The illuminating effect of education and exposure to many doctrines made at least a few realise that they were mercilessly ignored by a nation who thrived on the silence of their women.

Here starts the psychological battle that she is fighting to choose between the self-image offered by tradition which projects woman as a paragon of virtue and suffering and the other new self-image which comprises a self marked by independence of mind, creativity and an optimum level of self-confidence.

We can of course say this awakening of the Indian woman, towards totality was partially triggered by the Swadeshi movement which had only one aim, ie. freedom from the British. Indian women, like their very nation, were completely controlled by the patriarchal system. The freedom fighters' decision to involve women in the struggle was actually the first step towards a radical change. This induction method actually made many intelligent women conscious of what they were missing out in life.

Contacts with the west along with religious movements which triggered many social reforms in Indian society produced a focussed consciousness among women in

²¹ Toru Dutt, *Ancient Ballads and Poems of Hindustan* (Allahabad: Kotabistan, 1941), p. 37.

general. Brahma Samaj, Arya Samaj and Theosophical society in fact forced Indians to go for an intellectual quest aiming more at self-knowledge and self-propellation.

The Rama Krishna Mission founded by Swami Vivekananda, Theosophical society founded by Annie Besant tried to eradicate many social evils like sati, child marriage and exploitation of women in general.

Arya Samaj which was established by Dayananda Saraswati, opened schools for girls and boys. It believed in the equality of the sexes and their motto was “back to the Vedas.” Many schools were opened by Swami’s disciple, Niveditha, for education of girls and to improve their conditions. The efforts producing many socially and politically awakened women who were conscious of their new role. Here begins the search for Indian woman’s identity.

This search continues even after more than a century. Initially it suffered a back-sliding, but now it has gathered new strength. The Indian woman is keen on concretising her new self-image which has been vandalized and tortured by many constricting forces. Standing on the threshold of the twenty first century many Indian women are tormented by these questions: “Are we really strong?” or “Are we vulnerable.?”

The real strength of Indian woman was proved categorically by her participation in Indian independence struggle. Her involvement in politics gave a new life to the freedom movement. The Indian National Congress was founded in Bombay in 1885 with the help of an English man Sir Alan Octavian Hume. “Within a few years of its establishment women came to attend the annual sessions as delegates. Mrs. K. Ganguli was the first women to speak from the Congress platform in 1900.”²²

²² Man Mohan Kaur, *Role of Women in Freedom* (Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1968), p. 84.

Women social reformers who illuminated the early part of the 19th century were Maharani Tapasvini, Pandita Rama Bai, Swaran Kumar Debi and Rama Bai Kanade. The most outstanding woman among these was Pandita Ramabai, who was always a rebel. She was an erudite scholar of the Vedas. No wonder she earned the title "Pandita." Ramabai also got an opportunity to travel far and wide. She was an educationist par excellence. Rama Bai also believed firmly that knowledge was power and hence championed the cause of women's education. She revolted against the caste system by marrying a Bengali gentleman of lower caste. Rama Bai also insisted that women should be given opportunity to study medicine. She started Sharada Sadan, Mukti Sadan to offer shelter for those shattered Hindu widows and girls expelled from society. Till her death in 1922, she worked assiduously for the upliftment of Indian women.

Another social reformer was Swaran Kumar Debi from Bengal. To her goes the credit of being the first Indian woman editor to attend the Indian National Congress as a delegate from Bengal at its sessions held in Calcutta in 1900.

Rama Bai Ranade, wife of Justice Ranade also championed the cause of education. She insisted that primary education should be made compulsory for girls. Seva Sadan Nursing Home and Medical Association were established for the first time. But only high caste widows and girls volunteered to work. Thus it was a partial fulfillment of a social dream which was beyond the reach of the Indian masses of the feminine variety.

The next phase of Indian woman's struggle is marked by the struggle for political rights and for getting adult suffrage for women. As a first step towards this, National Social Conference organised a separate section for the Indian women in 1904, which discussed women's educational programmes. In the 1905 Swadeshi Movement women actively participated. "The explicit connection which women made between women's politics and nationalist politics against the British was one of the major factors in reducing

opposition to the women's movement at this early stage.”²³

The part played by three English women Annie Besant, Margaret Cousins and Dorothy Jina Raj Dasa, are recorded in golden letters in the history of women's renaissance. The Theosophical Society came to India in 1879. Annie Besant, the president of the Theosophical Society, laid great emphasis on education of Indian women. Many schools were established for girls in India, under her initiative. Her monumental achievement was the establishment of the Central Hindu College at Benaras in 1898. Besant condemned the seclusion of Indian women and asserted firmly that the general progress of the nation, depended on the upliftment of Indian woman. She introduced the Home Rule movement and thus with her “genius for propoganda and organisation helped in raising the political barometers.”²⁴ Women's suffrage was gaining more and more importance in England. The Indian National Congress which was formed with the intention of achieving Independence till then was not keen on the participation of women in general.

It was with the support of British women in India, that the suffrage movement gained a footing in this country. Three women's organisations became the most influential in the women's movement Mrs. Margaret Cousins started the Women's Indian Association in 1917, with the strong support of Annie Besant and Dorothy Jinaraja Dasa. The National Council of Women in India was founded by Lady Tata and Lady Aberdeen in 1925. In 1927 Margaret Cousins organised All India Women's Conference at Poona and it was presided over by Maharani of Baroda. The women who attended the meeting were from aristocratic and wealthy business families. In 1928, the second conference was held at Delhi, but they concentrated mainly on woman's right to education. “It was in the third

²³ Joanna Liddle and Rama Joshi, *Daughters of Independence* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1986), p. 21.

²⁴ B.R. Warda, *Mahatma Gandhi: A Biography* (New Delhi: Allen & Unwin 1958), p.151.

conference which was held at Patna, a separate section for social reforms was finally introduced.”²⁵

The reforms hardly touched the masses of Indian women and the criticism of the reformer Swami Vivekananda on the general reform movements also applied to the woman’s movement. “Every one of these reforms only touches the first two castes. He recommended the first two castes.”²⁶

But all these reformers along with the Indian women activists did not stress the change of role models though they claimed equal rights. The women activists were also from the elite classes. The purpose of education itself was different as far as the Indian woman was concerned. It pivoted around the idea of refined and dutiful women who would offer stability to the family. Only women from the west were conscious of the possible gains behind the changed role models and they tried to change the existent views by suggesting professions and careers for women outside their homes.

But we witness by and large the power of that pativrata ideology which intercepted the growing awareness of many Indian women. They never realised that they were treading the same rocky path which arrests their progress towards betterment. They never questioned the ideology which actually offered them a potful of denials. The end result is “the belief system becomes hardened and objectified, seeming to have an unchangeable, independent existence and validity of its plausibility.”²⁷

Here begins the Indian woman’s fight not only for the new social identity but also

²⁵ Kalpana Shah, *Women’s Liberation and Voluntary Action* (New Delhi: Ajanta Publication, 1984), p. 32.

²⁶ Joanna Liddle, Rama Joshi, *Daughters of Independence* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1986), p. 22.

²⁷ Vanaja Dhruvarajan, *Hindu Women and the Power of Ideology* (New Delhi: Vistaar Publications 1989), p. 34.

for a new relationship between the sexes based on equality. This, to a certain extent, has been triggered off by a political exigency namely the freedom movement. Perhaps for the first time they were crossing the composite barriers, set by religion, myth, culture and tradition and were seeking freedom from male domination. They also realised the importance of claiming an autonomous identity which was not to be vandalized by various controls. She also realized that apart from the cultural role, she has to have a legally-sustained role, in order to prevent exploitation.

Article 14 of the Indian constitution guarantees equality and Article 15 prohibits discrimination on the grounds of religions, race, caste, sex and place of birth. But how far this equality is maintained especially in the case of women is yet to be seen. The women in contemporary times is not fighting to be labelled as a protected class or as a species which needs protection. The exploitation and violation that are effected by the coercive forces do not make them submissive, but embolden them to fight against these violations of human rights which are indivisible, on the basis of gender.

There have been changes in the Indian woman's movement since independence. It was after getting Swaraj that "the alliance between the national movement and the women's movement broke down on the personal issue both before and after the goal of the political Independence was attained."²⁸

The rise of the new middle class, benefits of education and exposure eventhough limited to a minority of women during the freedom struggle, the emergence of the nuclear family began to change the existing position of women. The economic opportunities which arose in the present century gave her a more secure position and Independence

²⁸ Joanna Liddle, Rama Joshi, *Daughters of Independence* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1986), p. 38.

from the existing social stronghold. The social class structure, which is slowly, gaining power against the structuralised caste hierarchies gave her a new self-image which goes against the traditional concept of woman as an object of sexuality and as an entity gaining significance only through marriage.

Maybe here we are reminded of Sarojini Naidu who said “one thing is unchangeable in this world, the indivisibility of womanhood.”²⁹ What Sarojini Naidu missed was a glimpse of the invincibility of Indian womanhood which is busy proving its inexorable nature in the present.

Some critics feel that Gandhiji never allowed women to cross limits and women always tried to control them. But this allegation raised by them loses relevance when we analyse his speeches, actions and various letters. They all clearly state that he did have a strong faith in women and always championed the cause of women. If ever he has tried to put any constraints, it may be perhaps because of the fact that the children without parents will definitely suffer and it would ultimately affect the future of the country. He also stressed the fact that with many men in jail, women could effectively fight the battle against the British supremacy and carry out the work of the Satyagrahis.

The period is significant as women for the first time exercised their vote in the election of 1926. But only very few women got the opportunity to vote. “Amongst the Indian states, Travancore was the first to give representation to women.”³⁰

The real calibre of Indian women was revealed to the world through their active participation in the freedom struggle. Suffering, violence, torture and punishments of the British government, more and more women participated in the freedom struggle

²⁹ Quoted in Basu Aparna & Barathi Raj, *Women's Struggle: A History of the All Indian Women's Conference 1927-1990* (New Delhi: Man Mohan Publications, 1990), p.10.

³⁰ Man Mohan Kaur, *Role of Women in the Freedom (1857-1947)*, (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1968), p. 163.

breaking the age-old conventions and restriction which chained them to the walls of their home. Perhaps the years of self-sacrifice and suffering strengthened her mind to oppose any form of injustice through passive resistance. In a way this idea appealed to women belonging to all classes and they were brought into the folds of Swadeshi movement.

Under Gandhiji's guidance women began to channelise their potential in a much more effective manner by organising meetings, picketing liquor shops and propagating the use of khadi and many women satyagrahis were sent to jail. They also visited the riot-affected areas and often succeeded in establishing normalcy in most of the places.

With the national movement gaining momentum, the form of control on women began to change radically. Most of the leaders realised that without getting the support and active participation of women, Swaraj will always remain as a Gordian knot. It in a way effectively minimised the male dominance and many women belonging to the middle class became aware of their rights and privileges.

While resisting imperialism they were also offering a stiff resistance to constraints offered by caste, tradition and customs. Gandhiji by making India self-conscious made a lasting contribution to the creation of self-image of the Indian women. He made them conscious of their identity, role, functional areas, inherent strength and efficacy as nation-builders.

Gandhiji's appearance in the freedom movement revitalized not only the movement but also gave Indian women a better opportunity to articulate their grievances in an effective manner. The idea of passive resistance and the theory of Ahimsa or Non-violence appealed especially to women who had much more moral and physical power to face suffering without losing their equanimity.

The woman who dominated the agitation was Sarojini Naidu, who was also a poet of the first order. She categorically proved that if given an opportunity, women

could traverse the same heights along with their male counterparts, in a more effective manner. She was an ardent disciple of Gandhiji and imbibed fully the meaning of Ahimsa. She sincerely participated in the Swaraj, Salt Satyagraha and all other activities initiated by Gandhiji, along with many others.

So the next face of women's movement from 1947 to the present has a totally different picture to present. They are relentlessly trying to prove to the world what Gandhiji had already remarked about woman. According to him woman is the companion of man gifted with equal mental capacities. She has the right to participate in the minutest details in the activities of man and she has an equal right of freedom and liberty with him. In a perceptive article on Gandhiji, Madhu Kishwar describes Gandhiji's contributions thus: "He gave women a new dignity in public life, a new confidence and a new self-view."³¹

Despite all these pronouncements the position of women did not receive legal guarantees till the point of time when the Constitution was adopted. Towards the last phase of the freedom movement we witness revolutionary activities at their height in India. This was mainly due to the political unrest which followed the second world war. There was a split in the congress. Some felt that the passive resistance initiated by Gandhiji would never bear fruit and so they resorted to arms to secure freedom for India.

Women actively took part in the revolutionary activities. Mahila Rashtrya Sangha and Nari Satyagraha played an important part in organising women for the freedom movement. They also worked for the removal of untouchability and purdah. The revolutionaries went to the extent of raiding the armoury of Chittagong. The leading

³¹ Radha Kumar, *The History of Doing: An Illustrated Account of Movements for Women's Rights and Feminism in India 1800-1900* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1993), p. 60.

revolutionaries were Kalpana Dutta, Pratilata Waddedar, Sumiti Binadass who were bold enough to resort to violence to secure freedom for our country and also making women conscious of their rights and potentials.

They were trained to use all the deadly weapons. They were given proper uniforms and were asked to observe strict military discipline. Even though they were unable to do the actual fighting it had a great impact on the female psyche, especially, when it questioned the existing sex role plans which were being traditionally followed for thousands of years.

Sarojini Naidu actively participated in the Civil Disobedience and Quit India Movements. Active participation of women led to their imprisonment, and the Government did not show any discrimination in meting out punishments especially for women.

Others who left a starry trail behind were Mrs. Durghabai Deshmukh who actively participated in the freedom struggle by basing herself in Madras, Satywati the granddaughter of Swami Sharadanda, Mrs. Motilal Nehru, Kamala Nehru, Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, Mukund Malavia and Mrs. Chandravat Lakhnupal. These women succeeded in mobilizing women effectively for the freedom movement and also making them conscious of their rights and potentials.

Sarojini Naidu's role was preciously phenomenal. No wonder she was elected President of Indian National Congress in 1925 in recognition of her meritorious services, potential and capacity to lead people inspite of ill health. She assiduously contributed her very best for freeing her mother country. After independence this nightingale of India became the first woman Governor of Uttar Pradesh, offering a grand finale to the relentless struggle of the Indian women down the ages against the heaviest of odds and difficulties.

CHAPTER IV

CONTEMPORARY INDIAN WOMEN

It is definitely after Independence that the Indian women gained considerable importance within their country in social and political spheres. At Independence the majority of women still remained ignorant but they did not allow the fire that burnt in their hearts to die. They took many progressive decisions such as organizing themselves to fight for a new set of goals. The goals were getting equality based on gender, job opportunities, reforming the existing laws which gave women only partial justice, and creating a society which did not oppress women intellectually, physically and emotionally.

Eventhough the efforts made by women activists and concerned organization were slow in getting a real break-through, despite the conservative outlook of their counterparts, they succeeded in creating a focussed consciousness among middle-class and upper-middle-class women at large. Slowly it spread to the lower rungs of the existing political setup. From then they have been desperately trying to evolve a new self-concept or a new self-identity which is totally free from the traditionally imposed one.

To assess the contemporary Indian women's position we have to analyse the women's movement after Independence up to the present. This will definitely include the different organizations and schools of thought which have evolved in India in the wake of Independence.

4.1 The Reawakening

The Indian women's movement unlike other movements has a definite beginning in a historical context. It began in the late eighteenth century with the Hindu social reformers of modern India and the missionaries. It was directed against the dead moral

reflexes and conventionalized life of Indians who marginalised their women and kept them under physical and mental servitude. It was also directed against the sacrosanct prejudices of that time. This was definitely the result of the contact with the West. And the most distinctive feature of the Indian women's movement was that it was introduced by the Western-educated Indian men. It was Raja Ram Mohan Roy and other social reformers who were thoroughly influenced by the European liberalism that initiated the upliftment of the Indian women.

The position of contemporary Indian women is a historical accretion of multifarious factors working out their solution to many kinds of problems thrown up by a dead and deadening past. From 1947 the Indian women's movement took a different path. It began to fight for complete freedom of women from the age-old shackles. Many women connected with the national movement became conscious of getting legal sanction for their rights and securing equality based on gender. They were first of all not happy with the provisions in the Indian constitution which gave them equality before law and equal rights. The main reason was that the so-called protection and measures to ensure equality based on gender never offered women a better status. The majority of women suffered despite provision for different rights enshrined in the constitution, statutes and the rule books of the State.

The activities of the modern women activists caused a rift between them and the existing conservatives in the Indian society. The modernists claimed equal opportunities for women in all spheres of activity. Their efforts culminated in the founding of the All India Women's Conference. "Thus the All India Women's Conference (AIWC) which had been established in 1924 had grown to become the single largest national voice of the divergent groups and political tendencies infusing all its old and new demands

with an equal-right perspective.”¹

Through the relentless pursuit of these enlightened modernists, education was extended to many, and so was secured the right to husband's income, pension for widows and the right to abortion. Securing the right to abortion shocked the conservatives but it actually provided an opportunity for women to take a decision to safeguard their health and to uphold their right of choice. It also jolted their stereotyped role as child-bearing machines and ensured them at least a limited amount of freedom. As far as family was concerned many middle class women found a place in the expanding services, educational sector and other professions.

Many women's organizations like National Federation of Indian Women (1954) the Samajwadi Mahila Sabha (1959) were formed to work for championing the cause of Indian women. Since the country was facing a social, political crisis after the British rule many demands of the women activists were not supported by the Government. But during this period from 1947, the Indian women got an opportunity to participate in confrontational politics.

By 1970 the political atmosphere began to change in India. Many leading political parties realized the importance of including women in their struggle for realising their objectives. It was partly on compassion and partly for securing their ends that they included women as a vanguard force.

But according to Gail Omvedt what is striking about women's movement in India is:

the most powerful pro-women themes and actions have come not
so much from the ranks of the nationalist movement or upper-

¹ Nandita Gandhi and Nandita Shah, *The Issues at Stake: Theory and Practice in Contemporary Woman's Movement in India* (New Delhi: Kali for Women 1992), p. 17.

caste moderate social reformers as from those of the radical anti-caste leaders who often found themselves in confrontation with the non-brahmins and the new dalit leaders — like Jotibha Phule, B.R. Ambedkar, E.V. Ramaswami “Periyar.”²

Thus the efforts of the early leaders like Jotibha Phule, B.R. Ambedkar, E.V. Ramaswami and the leaders of the later period like Sharat Patil, Sharat Joshi and Vandana Shiva not only intellectualized the women’s movement but also intensely motivated the Indian women by touching their inner core of consciousness. So this Indian women’s movement which “. . . existed as an emotion, an anger deep within us, has flowed like music in and out of our lives, our consciousness and actions.”³

The radicals began to introduce new revolutionary ideologies like Naxalism and communism to fight against the socio-political and economic inequalities that existed among the people of India. It led to a lot of political unrest and confusion. This period also witnessed the formation of many parties other than the Congress party. After securing Independence the first task for “the midnight’s children” was to place the country on the road to progress and development. The extremists were quite unhappy about the Gandhian constructive work and Ahimsa. The dissenters began to opt for communism and other totalitarian forms which ensured sudden progress. So a large section of women belonging to the middle class began to feel that the real freedom for women is possible only through communism which offered equal rights and equal participation of women along with men.

Another hallmark of the age was that it created a political and social consciousness

² Gail Omvedt, *Violence Against Women: New Movements and New Theories in India* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1990), p. 16.

³ Nandita Gandhi and Nandita Shah, *The Issues at Stake: Theory & Practice in Contemporary Women’s Movement in India* (New Delhi: Kali for Women 1992), p. 15.

among women. In many agitations that followed, middle and working class women participated in great numbers especially in cities.

In 1975, the Lal Nishan Party organized a joint women's conference which was well attended by women in Pune in Maharashtra. Similarly the communist party in India in 1975 organized a National Seminar which was attended by women in Maharashtra. The National Seminar for women held at Trivandrum in the same year was also well attended by women from all walks of life.

The well-known women's organisations which were formed during this time are the Stree Mukhti Sanghatana, the Stree Sangharsh and Mahila Dakshata in Delhi, Vimochana in Chennai, Baijja in Maharashtra, Pennurumai in Chennai. *The Feminist Network* in English and *Manushi* in Hindi were some of the first women's news letters and magazines to appear. The issues that they raise are rape, wife-battering, divorce, maintenance and child custody along with legislative reforms. This progressive outlook is indeed a by-product of the changing economic, social and political climate in the country. Thus the women's movement in India after Independence struggle not only strove for emancipation but also averred the need for creating a non-class socialist society where women can be completely free from apprehension and violence. The rumblings of changes, intermittent and sporadic at the beginning, began to be heard rather loudly from the middle of the 20th century.

The reforms, changes and challenges all reached a crescendo at the time of the Indian Independence in 1947. Since that point of time the strident voice has been ultra vocal and highly effective in forming and shaping a new image of Indian womanhood.

4.2 In the Shadows

cut my shadows. Deliver me from the

torture of beholding myself fruitless.⁴

In the late 60's the Indian women's movement felt a sense of rootlessness. Many were disillusioned by the economic crisis, social and political unrests both in urban and rural areas. But women participated in groups in the struggles that followed. Vibhuti Patel, a feminist activist, refers to the developments thus: "The crisis of the mind and late 1960's gave rise internationally as well as in India, a radicalization process of the masses, of the struggling working class."⁵

According to Vibhuti Patel it was during the Naxalite movement women belonging to West Bengal, Andhra Pradesh and Kerala were radicalized. Tribal women in Bihar and Madhya Pradesh participated in the struggle against landlords. Slowly these socio-political movements like anti-price rise movements of the early seventies agitated against "empty hearths."⁶ The famous Chipko movement which was basically an ecology movement created not only an awareness among middle class and rural women, but also enunciated a new theory that women should be given the right for self-determination. It also brought to the fore, the existing "shadows" in the socio-political structure as far as women are concerned. The Chipko movement also pictured women as being an exploited class along with nature, and any violence against nature began to be identified with violence against women. The lingering shadows in the life of Indian women can be classified as violence, oppression, socio-political inequalities, bride-burning, female infanticide, rape and dowry system.

⁴ Lorca, "Song of The Withered Orange Tree" *Lorca: Selected Poems*, ed. J.L. Gili (London: Penguin, 1960), p. 31.

⁵ Neera Desai and Maithreyi Krishnaraj, *Women and Society in India* (New Delhi: Ajantha Publications, 1990), p. 36.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

Violence against women has been the most pervasive theme of the new women's liberation movement in India since 1974. With the cases of Maya Tyagi, Mathura, Rameeza Bi, the problem of rapes also burst out of the shadows to stand as a symbol of women's oppression. Violence has been the most effective and powerful weapon used by men in controlling women. As far as women are concerned it has become ubiquitous, and it is the way in which the whole existing order controls her.

To increase the dependency of women, the existing social, political order has envisaged many ways. Patriarchal family, which is the single most powerful unit, denies her access to law, and keeps her property-less. It indoctrinates women with multiplicity of misconceptions regarding her gender and role in the society and family. This process of indoctrination has gained so much of power that we tend to relate it as natural:

Through the slow magic of time, such customs by long repetition become second nature in the individual. If he violates them, he faces certain fear, discomfort or shame; this is the origin of conscience or moral sense which Darwin chose as the most impressive distinction between animals and man.⁷

No wonder a working mother feels guilty when she leaves home for becoming economically independent. The father at the same time feels nothing unusual when he leaves home for work. So here too, even at the familial levels, women are tortured mentally, if not physically. The working mothers are also accused of neglecting their so-called "duty" towards children. The basic institution like family also gives emphasis to women's duty rather than to man's duty. Here too the equality of genders loses its

⁷ Will Durrant, *The Story of Civilization Part I* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1963), p. 36.

relevance and becomes more ambiguous when we consciously confuse it with biological differences that exist between the two sexes. "Thus it appears violence keeps women economically dependent and super exploited while economic dependence and exploitation render them unable to combat violence."⁸

The question why women become victims of such violence has always tormented women in general. Their vulnerability, their silence when brutally violated, has incurred a lot of criticism and has also provoked the resolute anger of many feminists since 19th century. They maintain that offenders and violators escape punishment. Elizabeth. A. Stanko substantiates this silence thus:

Women do resist, persistently, tenaciously, the effects of male violence; women are survivors. They have done so for hundred years. Our survival is our strength, our experiences the reminders there is so much to do.⁹

The new feminist theories expound that violence, exploitation and sexuality are the three factors which divide the structuring of women in society.

In the post-Independence era, the Indian feminist activists are sandwiched between traditional Marxism and Radical feminism which were contributed by the Western school of thought. Thus the third accepted form was liberal feminism. As far as Indian women's movement is concerned, these three forms do have a very significant impact.

The traditional Marxist theory focuses on production, exploitation and property. It stresses the removal of economic inequality that exists between the classes as the only solution to establish equality. Thus it is the wide chasm that exists between the haves and

⁸ Gail Omvedt, *Violence Against Women* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1990), p. 4.

⁹ Elizabeth A. Stanko, *Intimate Intrusion : Women's Experience of Male Violence* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985), p. 19.

have-nots in Marxism which actually mars the development of a nation. So it was easy for the oppressed and exploited women to fit into the large canvas of the havenots.

Engels in his *The Origin of the Family and Private Property and the State* has traced the origin of the exploitation of women. According to him there existed a basic equality between men and women in ancient times, though there was a gender division of labour. Men were basically hunters responsible for production while women were responsible for reproduction. So they had a high social status since reproduction was a crucial issue. Moreover in such an organised group the paternity of the child was unknown; so mother's right prevailed and therefore women had a dominant role.¹⁰

The fundamental Marxist theories believe that when the gap between the haves and have-nots ceases to exist, the exploitation will also come to an end. So they give importance to a collective consciousness among women which will definitely oppose patriarchy and violence in a bigger frame work. In the absence of collective work for equality, the old system by and large continues even in contemporary India especially in rural India.

4.3 Radical Feminism

It was in the late 1960's that Radical Feminism evolved. It pictured men as real enemies of womanhood and women's power. Shula Smith Firestone's *Dialectics of Sex*, Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* were the two books that evolved the Radical Feminists theory. Radical Feminism sees patriarchal family as the main oppressor of women. The main weapon used by the family to subjugate women is violence. According to radical feminists this power ideology which is androcentric, tears the capacity of woman

¹⁰ Friedrich Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property & the State*. (New York: International Publisher, 1971), pp. 118-119.

for self-determination into fragments. Radical Feminists feel that this conflict between the sexes existed in prehistoric times. They believe that all the existing ideologies have succeeded in marginalising women. So their main objective is to get recognised “... as individuals in their own right.”¹¹

They always stand for female self-determination and autonomy. Their goal is to create an egalitarian society which is free from all kinds of oppression and violence. Their motto is action and counter acting violence with violence. They also do not accept the biological distinctions and differences that exist between man and woman. According to them all major revolutions which stressed the basic human rights ignored the slaves and women. The right of self-determination was never extended to these two groups. Even now she is owned by “... medicine men, statesmen, churchmen and of course men in general.”¹²

The idea of saving the self, defending it from the so-called forces that stymies her development becomes an obsession for radicals. Maria Mies highlights the fact that “... the demand for self-determination was therefore a defensive one, based on the right to existence, the right to defend the self.”¹³

Perhaps it might be the same fear of man owning her and mercilessly denigrating her life force which led to their frenetic representation of all men as potential rapists. Other reasons which might have contributed to this outlook might be the Hegelian and Marxist concept of history and progress which acknowledges the de facto right of the stronger subjugating the weaker as a part of their struggle for survival. They also infer

¹¹ Sarah Delamont, *The Sociology of Women: An Introduction* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1980), p. 4.

¹² Maria Mies, “Self-Determination: The End of a Utopia”, *Eco-Feminism* eds. Maria Mies & Vandana Shiva (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1993), p. 218.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 219.

that a perfect relation can never be there between the sexes. The relationship is thus constantly under the threat of man using his power to exploit and violate women. But they totally overlook the fact that this is true even in the case of a relationship between a woman and a woman. Here also the threat of power and exploitation exists but a woman raping another woman is ruled out. It is perhaps this belief that a woman is capable of more tenderness and that there is no threat of reproduction might have contributed to this portrayal of all men as potential rapists. But the theory has not been validated with any sort of tangible evidence, statistical data or observation from any competent person who judges upon rape cases in different parts of the world. This extreme view of radicals stands condemned in contemporary India. But at the same time the Indian women are intensely aware of the fact their rights will be constantly and systematically exploited by men for want of self-assertion on the part of women. The dichotomy that exists in reality is quite obfuscating for women activists in India. On the same count lesbian relationships are not considered criminal in nature like rape, even though violence and subjugation are often in vogue.

Radical Feminism looks upon science as a liberator. In other words science liberates women from the so-called responsibilities or biological liabilities of continuous child bearing. Then another blessing cited by them is reducing her work load by providing effective machines in the homefront. This literally gives her freedom from the drudgery that is associated with housework and also time for intellectual pursuits. But many studies point out that modernization and scientific progress have always affected women adversely. Science which is synonymous with nothing but absolute truth which is impartial, which is free from all kinds of prejudice, according to other feminists, is just a utopian concept. It is flagrantly misrepresented by its male practitioners. The empirical method

of dissection and experimentation actually mutilates other objects in nature. The natural cycle is thus obstructed. The next argument placed by them is that scientific pursuits which contribute knowledge actually make the existing structure more powerful. This knowledge is misused by its male practitioner in getting power and subjugating the female. This is reflected mostly in the birth control programmes in which women bear the brunt. Automatically compulsion enters the framework which denigrates the essence of human beings especially women.

Thus legalisation of Medical Termination of Pregnancy (MTP) in this particular context becomes a sugar-coated pill as it can harm the female body in some ways. And the decision in this regard is mostly taken by the dominating males to suit their convenience rather than to preserve the dignity of women by means of self-determination. Thus the liberalisation of laws gives the state more freedom to intervene and to control. Thus, the “technological strategies of contraception have not eliminated this dominance nor led to the preservation and rebuilding of these living connections, but rather to further degrade and atomize women.”¹⁴

Here too the best logical conclusion we can come to is that if women are to experience real freedom, if they want their right of self-determination it can be reached only by resuscitating a healthy relationship between man and woman by completely re-fabricating the social and political structure and roles allotted by the former in a spirit of equality. This will definitely help women to conquer her many psychological fears that lay waste her powers of perceptions, her power to control and manage her life. This change, if whole heartedly supported by men, will have the power to alleviate

¹⁴ Maria Mies, “Self-Determination: The End of a Utopia” *Eco-Feminism* eds. Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva, (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1993), p. 229.

the psychological and social convulsions and to give perennial happiness to mankind.

4.4 The Liberal Feminism

The enlightened ideas of French Revolution brought another significant change in the status of women. The ideas of fraternity, equality and liberty along with the liberal philosophy of individualism made women conscious of the fact that it is the social processes that determine her life. This contributed to an intense dislike among women to these so-called tradition and culture. Freud justifies these developments thus:

If a society has not developed beyond a point at which the satisfaction of one group of its members depends upon the suppression of another, it is understandable that those suppressed should develop an intense hostility towards culture whose existence their labour has made possible, but in whose riches, they have too small a share.¹⁵

Liberal Feminism unlike its Radical counterpart strives to create freedom within rather than striving for freedom from. It stresses the need for more “female space” within the existing structure, without the least amount of confrontation. They overlook the question of sexuality by accepting the sex roles as decreed by the Establishment. But they question all the other forces that label women as inferior. They champion that the civil rights of women, like the right to education and all her civil rights, should be enforced as a legality. Liberals feel that a radical restructuring of society will never have the power to withstand the ravages of time. It may be forceful and effective but will not be productive, if not supported unanimously by a generation that has been convinced about the legality, validity and genuineness of such social stratification by consensus,

¹⁵ Quoted in Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1983), p. 161.

rather than by confrontation. So they believe in social, political reforms along with the improvement of social customs, institutions and laws within the family. Instead of conflict they prefer the process of adaptation and change in a liberal atmosphere with least injury to the existing social structure.

When we analyse “Feminism” or the new theories affecting women’s movement to re-weave their world, one thing surfaces very clearly. There is no unity between these divergent movements. Their end is the same but the means they use to achieve their goal is different. While radicals work for a complete restructuring of society based on gender-equality, the liberals accept the stratification, and fight for making women visible in history, and try to reclaim the significant role played by women in creating history. But the positive contribution of these movements to the Indian women is that she has become aware, though not very acutely, of the exploitation and violence that stymie her all round progress.

When we look at the contemporary social movements in India, the most powerful themes have come from the radical anti-caste leaders like Jotibha Phule, B.R. Ambedkar and E.V. Ramaswamy Naikker (Periyar). Phule’s earliest writings on women’s oppression trace caste system as the main oppressor of women. He strongly protested against the double standards that exist for women in society. He exhorted people for a system of life based on truth where no inequality or discrimination exists.

Sharad Patil, another leading feminist, fought against oppression within the anti-caste framework. Patil is quite conventional in his approach to the issue of gender. While opposing patriarchy and traditional caste system he doubts supporting the matriarchal system. Gail Omvedt aptly points out the reason:

This undoubtedly represents the great psycho-cultural fear

underlying the conception of the Stree Shakti in the Indian tradition, that is ultimately violent, deadly, distinctive and hence needs to be culturally bound and subordinated.¹⁶

Another drawback in Patil's theory is that he traces in the true Marxian way, economic inequality as the reason for women being a much-oppressed class. It definitely throws light on many issues of women, but they concentrate on production and social class. "They are sex blind as Hartmann notes, and thus unable to explain the position of women as women."¹⁷

Shetkari Sanghatana, one of the most powerful farmers organisation in Maharashtra, organised in November 1986, one of the largest gatherings of peasant women. The leader of this movement was none other than Sharad Joshi who wanted to incorporate into Indian women's movement, the rural women. In a way it was to squash the elitism of the educated middleclass women in the movement, thus making it more effective. Joshi played an initial role in making his party egalitarian, even though the main objective was political. It stressed, in many ways the prerogatives of rural women in India. Thus the Shetkari Mahila Aghati and the Stree Mukthi Sangarsh had many objectives as part of their agenda, like fighting goondaism, procuring sanitation and drinking water facilities. Another important aim of the organisation was to make the village Panchayat self-sufficient. Joshi was also able to procure the support of women in his fight against religious fundamentalism. In the south E.V. Ramaswamy Naikkar of Tamilnad and V.T. Bhattathirippad of Kerala spearheaded movements for uplifting women from the unenviable situation marked by social discriminations, ban on widow remarriage and

¹⁶ Gail Omvedt, *Violence Against Women: New Movements and Theories in India* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1990), p. 20.

¹⁷ Tuula Gordon, *Feminist Mothers* (London: Macmillan, 1990), p. 8.

such evils, during the 1930's and 1940's.

Eco-Feminism has given a new perspective to the sufferings of exploited Indian women. This is basically an intellectual movement which focussed on the amelioration of the condition of the Indian women as well as the improvement of the environment. Some Indian feminists have found that violence against nature and violence against women are interconnected. Especially for Indians, the identification of the feminine principle in nature becomes very self-evident. They believe that scientific development has polluted and exploited nature in many ways. It has also distanced man from nature. Similarly there is a change in his outlook. The man who looks upon nature with reverence and love now tries to dominate and manipulate nature through machines. In the same manner he distances himself from women and succeeds in creating submissive women who do not have the will to exercise their basic rights.

Vandana Shiva, the famous environmentalist and internationally acknowledged Indian feminist feels that feminism is not an expensive luxury but is synonymous with humanism, liberation and equality. She is known for her participation in the Chipko movement, the famous environmental resistance in India. According to Shiva the power to create does not have an effluvia. This creative power if channellised properly, will work against violence and destruction. She never pictures or looks at women as victims. On the other hand she visualizes women as possessing the power to create or as embodying the power to give life to, like nature. As Gail Omvedt says:

Thus her identification of the "feminine principle" is not a posing of women against men in which women are seen as biologically superior due to their productive and reproductive powers, but rather almost metaphorical way of stating an orientation to nature

and life in which women are seen as vanguard in liberation struggle.”¹⁸

¹⁸ Gail Omvedt, *Violence Against Women: New Movements and New Theories in India* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1990), p. 30.

CHAPTER V
DESAI'S FOCUS —
ON SOCIETAL BONDS AND BONDAGE

The Indian society's complexity arises from its composite culture, traditions and different religions which result in a melange of social stereotypes. This is again influenced by social class structures, subcultures and regional cultures and ethnic structures. These factors influence the individuals and their behaviour patterns.

5.1 Social Stereotyping

Rapid urbanization and scientific advances have resulted in society becoming replete with definite action patterns of the individuals. The action of the individuals in a society is thus shaped, appraised and evaluated by the cognition of the roles. Each individual constructs a meaningful world through cognitive work and social interaction. This world is very distinctive in its entity. Observation of people convinces us that the cognitive world of each individual is tremendously different from that of another. The cognitive world is synthesized through the individual's social interaction, the individual's view of himself or herself and also the attitude expressed towards him or her by others in the same social or psychological milieu. Thus the structure of the self varies according to the social system of which he is a part. The time factor also contributes and alters this process.

Culture definitely encompasses the social as well as the non-social world of the individual. Concatenation of individuals in a group or community has an effect on the behavioural pattern. To solve the common problems, they conform to a set pattern of behaviour. This will slowly emerge as the culture of that society. Culture thus

includes beliefs, attitudes and modes of action. This is transmitted to the next generation. The generalities thus employed focus upon certain issues and overlook the needs of a particular group — women in general. These imputations lead to stereotyping in society. In the words of Walter Lippman “stereotypes are pictures in our heads, beliefs that we hold regarding the members of a category.”¹ These mental pictures have no scientific relevance, as they are exaggerated views or pictures of a particular group. The traits of these groups are assigned to them. There is a tendency among people to attribute certain assumed qualities, behavioural patterns and sets of characteristics to a particular group of people. This is done sometimes consciously with a purpose and sometimes unconsciously without any purpose. The social stereotyping belongs to the first category. Social stereotypes are consciously produced with the intention of re-inforcing the existing social system. For example, in Indian society women are stereotyped as the weaker sex needing protection. Ideal women are to be submissive, unquestioning and self-effacing. This emphasizes how social stereotyping is done by the establishment for convenience and perhaps for the functioning of society without confusion. According to Secord and Backman “. . . the typing of people is almost inevitable, because of its functional usefulness. No one can respond to other persons in all their unique individuality. That form known as stereotyping is generally exaggerated typing and has been constantly attacked by social scientists.”²

Stereotyping is invariably linked with roles that are assigned to individuals in a society for its effective and smooth functioning. It is also linked with prejudice of a group towards another group. This prejudice is also traditionally passed on to the next generation. “Prejudicial beliefs and emotions sometimes become so intense that in the

¹Quoted in Jack Levin, *The Functions of Prejudice* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), p. 14.

²Paul F. Secord, Carl W. Backman, *Social Psychology* (Auckland: McGraw Hill, 1964), p. 20.

eyes of majority members, members of a minority totally get separated symbolically as well as physically from the rest of humanity.”³

This process is reversed in the Indian context when we analyze the position of Indian woman down the ages till the present century. We feel that it is the single largest group which has been exposed to intense prejudice and discrimination. The majority are victims of stereotyping and continue to live deplorable lives. They implicitly accept the roles that are assigned to them.

The growth of capitalism in India has reinforced patriarchal values. This is mainly because of the fact that capitalism is exclusively a male domain. The economically empowered male makes his female counterpart all the more dependent on him. In the field of work also stereotyping leads to disparity in payment. “More work and less pay” was the situation faced by many women workers. This is mainly based on the belief that woman due to her biological difference is not able to do the same amount of work as men. In the home front it is even worse. “No help and No pay” is the policy adopted by the family and she faces a plethora of demands placed by the changing society, her family and her work. The answer to the question, why women meekly accept this deprivation is that “A woman’s idea about herself is largely dominated by a system of demands and expectations on the part of society which are embodied in stereotypes, i.e., in images, which the women themselves come to accept and conform their behaviour to.”⁴ Thus stereotyping plays a powerful part in forcing women to converge to the roles created by society and family. The continuous enactment of these roles gives her an image which sucks the verdure of her self, her potential. If she goes against these

³ Jack Levin, *The Functions of Prejudice* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), p. 22.

⁴ K.N. Venkata Rayappa, *Feminine Roles* (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1966), p. 29.

stereotyped roles:

... She must walk in dread
 Steel gauntlets of traffic, terror-struck
 Lest out of spite, the whole
 Elaborate scaffold of sky overhead
 Fall racketing finale on her luck.⁵

It is against these powerful forces that the modern Indian woman is waging a battle. The barriers are set not only by patriarchal establishment but also by mass media which again projects the same stereotyped roles of Indian woman and encashes a profit out of it. "The accusation that advertising has contributed to the role stereotyping of women and ethnic minorities has been supported by several studies. In 729 advertisements appearing in 1970, none showed women in a professional capacity, whereas 35 of them so portrayed men."⁶ They insidiously create an urge to aspire for these roles that are portrayed by the media. From soaps to high-tech machines, these advertisements exploit the traditional image of Indian woman. Another negative role that is projected through most advertisements is the role of woman as an enchantress who not only attracts but also manipulates men using her physical beauty and charm. Very few advertisements project the new confident, educated Indian woman.

5.2 The Many Victims

Anita Desai portrays the existential insecurity created by stereotyping in a very powerful manner. According to Desai women feel that they are outcasts. They feel empty, threatened and depersonalized by family and society. Desai feels that this insecurity makes women

⁵ Sylvia Plath, *Collected Poems*, ed. Ted Hughes (London: Faber & Faber 1981), p. 332.

⁶ Rajeev Batra, John G. Myers and David A. Aaker, *Advertising Management*, (New Delhi: Prentice-Hall of India, 1997), p. 681.

vulnerable. The Indian woman, owing to this, experiences the risk of losing her identity and self-image in highly potentiated forms. Desai's novels graphically portray the existential anguish of Indian women, who are unable to forestall the danger of being sucked into the whirlpool of stereotyping. It is so powerful that it shakes the reader out of complacency. Through *Monisha in Voices in the City* Desai unveils the real drama of Indian woman's life, bordering on the tragic. She is swamped, impinged upon by the stereotyped role models, customs and traditions of the establishment. She feels that she lives to satisfy others. Monisha feels an outcast in the confines of her husband's joint family. She asks a question to herself "what is the meaning of life without freedom and equality?"⁷ It is a question existential in its anguish epitomizing the frustration of an average Indian woman stereotyped to play rather a meaningless and marginal role in life. The greatest trauma according to Desai is to exist alone, amidst the madding crowd, without any understanding and love. If the person is more conscious or aware of his autonomous self, the anguish is more. Monisha thus experiences her "separateness" in an intense manner. The trapped situation of Indian woman as evidenced in the case of Monisha is comparable to that of the caged dove which is unable to move freely. Monisha looking out through the barred window of the house brings home to us the domestic confines that really limit, handicap and even obstruct the personal development of Indian women. She oscillates between two extremes: either to completely submerge her identity or to impel her individual self forward, breaking all confines and then existing in isolation and preserving her autonomy. According to Desai the discrimination against women and the submissiveness of her sex have become enduring characteristics of Indian society.

⁷ Anita Desai, *Voices in the City* (New Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 1965), p. 121.

We find Desai's other heroines also more or less in the same situation. Monisha finds herself a victim of situations and ostracism in the domestic locale. She is cutting vegetables. She feels scandalized that women in the house without the least trace of sympathy, scornfully and even mockingly discuss her inability to have children. Monisha's trauma is revealed in these lines, "I can't leave these vegetables. I am cutting for them — that could create a disturbance. But I stop listening and regard my insides: my ovaries, my tubes, all my recess moist with blood, washed in blood, laid open, laid bare for scrutiny."⁸ The prejudice of the family has stressful and disorienting effects on Monisha. The familial environment totally fails to provide her anchorage and does not give her any sense of security. The oppressive atmosphere increases the cognitive and emotional uncertainties. She resigns to her plight meekly, and feels that there is no escape from the shattering and oppressive atmosphere of a tradition-ridden family. She feels as though she is chopped up by the stereotyping patterns and tradition-bound family even as she is chopping vegetables. Monisha would like very much to deviate from the accepted and acceptable social norms but owing to an impaired and inadequate self-image she feels frustrated and consequently changes the venue of her fight to her own inner self, where she is deeply entrenched in a cocoon of apparent safety. This is the case of most Indian women who happen to be very vulnerable in their life situations and "voices in the city" are the tremulous voices of many, many Monishas, who barter off their identity for the sake of safety. This feature of Desai's heroine has its obvious and reinforcing parallels in Bharathi Mukherjee's *Wife*. Mukherjee's heroine Dimple Das Gupta is also *undefined*. She represses many of her emotional needs. We see the essential "feminine characteristics" injected by the family restraining her own needs and desires

⁸ Anita Desai, *Voices in the City* (New Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 1965), p. 113.

and curbing her moves towards independence. Dimple, married to an ambitious engineer Amit Basu, feels overwhelmed when her husband denies her freedom of choice and decision which exists within herself. She feels: "his disapproval was torture; all her life she had been trained to please. He expected her, like Sita, to jump into fire if necessary."⁹

Monisha becomes a victim of intense prejudice when Kalyanidi, her sister-in-law, inspects and almost invades her wardrobe. Kalyanidi has absolute and unequivocal feelings of antipathy towards Monisha's passion for books. She is shocked to see Monisha's wardrobe filled with books. Her frustrations produce intense anger and hostility towards herself. She suppresses the aggressiveness towards her own self, towards Jiban's family and towards her husband very effectively by embracing silence. "This unnatural silence and obtrusiveness of hers, it seemed to emphasize the distance she had travelled from reality into a realm of still colourlessness"¹⁰ There is no way in which she can blow off her frustrations created by society's callously irrational stereotyping, except by means of masochistic suffering which works like a psychological mooring for her.

Kalyanidi represents the nonchalant passive conformity of Indian women in general. She, like many of her type, is afraid to deviate from the norms of expected behaviour whereas Monisha acts boldly and differently. Monisha on the contrary scoffs at the meaningless existence of those who conform to the dead habits of worn-out conventions, mostly using soliloquies and diary entries when she is in her elements. But Kalyanidi finds her security and resultant comfort in conforming to the death-dealing stereotyping to which she is exposed. What we notice is the old self-image of Indian women in contradiction with a new self-image which annuls and cancels out the

⁹ Bharathi Mukherjee, *Wife* (New Delhi: Penguin), p. 28.

¹⁰ Anita Desai *Voices in the City* (New Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 1965), p.146.

treacherous norms of social stereotyping to which they are exposed. The awakened minority of Indian women still fight the battle to recast their roles on the basis of equality and justice. It is to this ideal that Desai's heroines move at great cost and even at perilous stakes.

Roles are an integral or indispensable part of our life. The concept of the role has been borrowed from theatre and consequently social life gets reduced to a series of acts involving role-playing. In society each individual is assigned certain roles. These become a deep-grained part of the person's existence. According to E.E. Jones and H.B. Gerard, role is "... behaviour that is characteristic and expected of a person or persons who occupy a position in the group."¹¹ These roles thus impute fixed qualities and behavioural patterns to the genders. Historically speaking they are also influenced by the belief that man is superior to woman and that woman should be controlled by man. This belief forms the basis of many of our religious and moral laws, customs and traditions, which confine women to their homes or places of duty assigned to them. Roles thus contribute to the systematic labelling process called stereotyping. At times an individual is expected to perform different roles at the same time. The benefit accruing from stereotyping is that it ensures some kind of orderliness in society and as a corollary to it, role confusion is minimal.

The modern Indian women like most women elsewhere in the world carry the burden of many roles — the care of the children and the home front with implications relating to her roles as a cook, washer-woman, home-maker, entertainer of guests and so on. Most of these roles have been selected and assigned to them by the higher ups in society wielding a lot of power and clout. This is one major reason for the gender wise

¹¹E.E Jones & H.B. Gerard, *Foundation of Social Psychology* (New York: Wiley, 1965), p. 718.

opting for stereotyping. The individuals are not given any choice and are even constrained and crushed by the monolithic system. Prejudice, discrimination and exploitation are an inherent and inevitable part of these stereotyped roles. These “selected” roles become a burden for women even as they are obvious, and they “. . . learn that certain behaviour patterns are expected of them just because they occupy certain positions.”¹²

Role obligations take precedence and are of great importance in Indian society, especially in the case of women. According to Sara S. Mitter “no western culture places such potent, challenging and ubiquitous role models before the eyes of its daughters.”¹³

The ideal role models are placed before Indian women and they become sad victims of the steamrolling of stereotyping by the callous system. Thus the role enactment becomes mechanical and the true self gets fragmented. The so-called ideal Indian womanhood is a very powerful instrument used by the establishment in marginalising and suppressing women themselves.

The ideal woman should be chaste, submissive and should implicitly follow the duties of a *pativrata*. These roles are culturally and traditionally imposed, and in turn, result in negative stereotyping. But the establishment and the role models are so powerful that even the new generation of educated, liberated Indian women find it difficult to effect a radical change. The expectations and the attributes of the existing system actually create an inter-role strain as well as an intra-role strain on women in India. Inter- role strain means the strain in accommodating and adjusting the respective roles of individuals on the basis of their gender. Intra-role strain means the strain that is experienced by an individual in the performance of his or her assigned roles. When these

¹² David Kretch, et al. *Individual in Society* (Tokyo: Mac Graw Hill and Koga Kusha, 1962), p. 313.

¹³ Sara S. Mitter, *Dharma's Daughters* (New Delhi: Penguin, 1992), p. 67.

women with a new consciousness question the rationale of these conflicts and strains, they actually question their own selfhood, which is essentially a part of the nation's life. In India it is the powerful lobby of men that chains the womenfolk because basically in the case of men stereotyping is marked by unlimited freedom.

As an illustration of these dual strains the case of Sita in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*, Maya in *Cry the Peacock* and Bim in *Clearlight Of Day*, may be analysed. Desai through Sita depicts the estrangement of those Indian women from family and society due to psychological oppression. They suffer the loss or impairment of identity as the socio-political and familial framework forces them to perform certain roles for maintaining peace and harmony. The gain of the establishment is the loss of the Indian woman. She loses the freedom to choose, and this causes dual strains, within the self and with otherselves. The estrangement with one's own self causes estrangement with family, society and one's own space according to Desai. Sita typifies such kind of an estranged woman. She comes to Manori searching for her roots. She feels "she had come on a pilgrimage to beg for the miracle of keeping her baby unborn."¹⁴ She hopes for this highly improbable possibility to happen. Her husband Raman calls her a mad person. The lack of understanding between the wife and the husband forces Sita to seek refuge in this island, Manori, where she grew up. Sita is convinced that she cannot and should not bring her child to this chaotic world where there is no understanding, where we have violence, hatred and exploitation.

She loses her "control" when she becomes pregnant for the fifth time. She is forty and her three older children, feel ashamed of their mother's plight. Her "control" snaps when her husband too fails to understand her dilemma. She feels that she should break through the facade of the ideal wife-cum-mother. She shocks Raman who represents

¹⁴ Anita Desai, *Where Shall We Go This Summer* (New Delhi: Orient, 1982), p. 31.

a typical Indian patriarch by saying “children only mean anxiety, concern and pessimism, not happiness. What other women call happiness is just sentimentality.”¹⁵

Desai thus punctures the existing concept of motherhood and its glorification in Indian society. The first and foremost duty of a woman is to provide children for the sake of continuing the family. The majority are not given a choice in the matter of having children and it becomes an inviolable part of their duty.

There is always a powerful stigma attached to not having children and remaining unmarried. A childless family is an incomplete family as the existing image glorifies motherhood. Apart from this, the whole responsibility of nurturing and bringing up children is completely thrust on women. Desai places a powerful question before us through Sita: whether this sacrifice, this living for others at the cost of one’s freedom, and loss of self respect are superior to all other activities. We feel that.” . . . such glorification is like the sugar-coating on bitter quinine, and women for generations have fallen for this bit of sugar and accepted a role that has confined, suffocated and immobilized them.”¹⁶

They feel incapacitated as they are forced to “control” their natural instincts, fine sensibilities for the sake of family and society. To Indian women, self-control at any cost is an accomplishment. But at times this causes neuroses, character disorder and loss of identity. Too much of control or restriction of the natural impulses leads to inner conflicts. These conflicts create maladjustment, discontent, loneliness and marital discord. Yet the marginal fact remains that out of these negative results of “control” emerges a by-product which we call stability, on which is placed a high premium in the conformist Indian Society.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 14.

¹⁶ Kamala Bhasin and Nishat Said Khan, *Some Questions on Feminism and its Relevance in South Asia* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1986), p. 15.

Desai in her first novel *Cry, the Peacock* depicts very powerfully the conflicts in the mind of an average Indian woman, when she is forced to perform the roles that are given to her by patriarchy and tradition. The inter-role strain and the intra-role strain experienced by Maya, the heroine in the novel, *Cry, the Peacock* exemplifies the agony of an average Indian woman who has the power of thinking for herself. The role strains created by stereotyping are depicted in a subtle, but intense manner, through Maya's interactions with her empirical world. She feels suffocated in a world that prevents her from self-realization and fulfillment by forcing her to perform the duties of a daughter and wife faithfully. It is the fact that "... she forsakes her freedom and lets others make of her a stunted, although beautiful bonsai tree..."¹⁷ that subverts her sanity.

Desai uncovers the intense psychological strife produced by the stereotyping of roles. Maya's relationship with her father, husband, brother, and her interactions with other characters in the novel in the social milieu unfolds stereotyping of Indian women at various levels. From the beginning till the end the novel is replete with discourses and incidents which highlight stereotyping of women in general. Maya the protagonist in the novel idealizes her relationship with her father. But this is disrupted by her brother Arjuna's letter. To her horror Maya realises her father is also responsible for her sense of rootlessness and lack of self will. Maya's father extols the virtue of acceptance and tries hard to convince Maya that one has to accept everything meekly to experience wholeness. The very idea is revolting to her, but she, unlike her brother Arjuna, rebels against this not externally but internally.

Her sense of psychological deprivation becomes more intense when she gets married to Gautama who valorizes detachment and control of one's senses. According

¹⁷ Rose Marie Tong, *Feminist Thoughts: A Comprehensive Introduction* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), p. 16.

to him "He, who, controlling the senses of mind, follows without attachment the path of action, with his organs of action he is esteemed."¹⁸ Gautama's lack of understanding and detachment give rise to Maya's exacerbated sensitivity and she sums up her life thus: "It was a desert, without an oasis and I was tired of pursuing mirages."¹⁹ It is this sense of rootlessness, lack of understanding that shatters the self-worth of Maya in *Cry, the Peacock*. She becomes neurotic. "Most neuroses involve along with other complex determinants, ungratified wishes for safety for belongingness and identification for close relationships."²⁰ Maya with her intense sensibility and sensitivity finds it difficult to involve Gautama the detached, the controlled philosopher, in her matters, in her needs and cares, as he finds it tiresome.

Desai in this novel also highlights the stereotyped attitude of people having only girls. Mrs. Lal who is pregnant for the fifth time scandalizes Maya. The orange spotted lady's sympathetic remarks about Mrs. Lal having four daughters shows the stereotyped attitude in society. The prevailing attitude is that the birth of a girlchild is a burden to the parents. So powerful is this stereotyped attitude that it clouds the rational and sensible views of women in general. What surprises us is the fact that inspite of the reform movements and women's movement in India, the image of Indian woman and her proprieties remain the same. The female tradition that was established centuries ago remains unaffected to a large extent. The new awareness of the middle class tries to pillage this traditional and stereotyped role of women. But the mould will be indissoluble, if they do not have a solid self-image, backed by the realisation of their potentials which will free them from this social and political confinement. They have to achieve a clarity

¹⁸ Anita Desai, *Cry, the Peacock* (New Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 1980), p. 116.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 116.

²⁰ Abraham Maslow, *Towards a Psychology of Being* (New York: D Van. Nostrand, 1968) p. 21.

about their own self, which will empower the self in overcoming the potential-narrowness of all self-enclosed historicity and taking a leap into an expanding reality.

Maya's fractured self searches for fulfillment and wholeness. But she is hunted down by the lack of understanding and loneliness. Her bitterness arises mainly from the stereotyping that is done by society which is ipso facto patriarchal. "In this world there are vast areas in which he would never permit me, and he could not understand that I could even wish to enter them, as foreign as they were to me."²¹ Out of sheer helplessness she embraces silence and secrecy. She feels she is powerless to fight for her freedom and this disrupts her psychic schema. No wonder she is constrained to enter a world of hallucination and fantasy created by her much-deprived self. Maya's maenad shrieks for freedom as she takes the final plunge to meet death is definitely an anti-patriarchal strategy and a result of her extended awareness. According to Allen Wheelis "the extended awareness is both cause and effect of the loss of identity. It is a cause for the reason that identity is harder to achieve, if renegade motivations have free access to consciousness."²² Desai convinces us that it is the typed picture of woman as "home maker" and "traditions bearer" that impedes the progress of the female self. She is unable to renounce these roles supplied by tradition and culture and favour a role that gives wholeness to her true self and a firm sense of identity. "A firm sense of identity provides, both a compass to determine one's course in life and ballast to keep one steady. So equipped and provisioned one can safely ignore much of the buffeting."²³ It is this individuality, new emerging consciousness that accentuates the orientation of Desai's female characters. According to Usha Pathania, "Desai thus stresses the individuals

²¹ Anita Desai, *Cry, the Peacock* (New Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 1980), p.104.

²² Allen Wheelis, *Quest for Identity* (New York: W.W Norton, 1958), p. 21.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

and individuality. In her novels the protagonists desire and strive for a more authentic way of life than the ones offered to them.”²⁴ Maya’s tragedy is not an isolated incident, perhaps the common heritage of most Indian females who stress and strive for individuality which is the very antithesis of straightjacket stereotyping.

5.3 The Price they Pay

Another fictional case study of stereotyping has been made by Desai. Bim in *Clear Light of Day* displays a high level of autonomy. She protests strongly, at times tacitly, when her family tries to affix predetermined meanings to her behaviour. Dr. Biswas who attends on Raja (Bim’s brother) and Mira Masi gets attracted to Bim. He takes Bim home to introduce her to his mother. The mother extols the virtues of her son and Bim gets annoyed. Bim is not at all impressed by the stereotyped relationship between the mother and the son marked by the former’s possessiveness. She tries to opt out of this relationship. Her self-control snaps when Raja asks her, whether she has been approved by Dr. Biswas’s mother as her future daughter-in-law. Bim’s aversion and contempt for the stereotyped beliefs and customs in the family and society itself are self-defining. It is her realisation that “one is not born but rather becomes a woman”²⁵ that makes her different from others. It is this consciousness that makes her different from her sister Tara, who depends on the typified feminine ego ideal of the “suitable girl.” At a very early age, Bim renounces this “ideal” which is antithetical to the establishment of her autonomy, as a human person entitled to the right of choices. She tells her sister reaffirming her decision. “I can think of hundreds of things to do instead. I won’t marry. I shall work — I shall do things, I shall earn my own living — and look after Mira Masi and

²⁴ Usha Pathania, *Human Bonds and Bondages: The Fictions of Anita Desai and Kamala Markandaya* (New Delhi: Kanishka Publishing House, 1992), p. 12.

²⁵ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans., and ed. H.M. Parshley (London: Pan, 1988), p. 295.

baba and — and be independent.”²⁶ She wants to free herself from the marital cocoon in which women have limited space. Remarks made by Bakul about Bim also suggest implicitly that “she did not find it. She made it . . . she made what she wanted.”²⁷

The crucial question at the moment is why she is different from others, why she cannot conform, why she rebels, why she wants to retain her identity. The answer could be found in the psychology. Children’s sense of gender is greatly influenced by the parents. “Brauch and Barnett (1975) have found that many early differences between boys and girls reflect the treatment of the infant or small child as girl or boy. They show that girls are influenced away from autonomy and success, especially in a claustrophobic culture as that of India. Girls also identify with the mother, who is perceived by both boys and girls as being generally weaker than the father.”²⁸

To find the answer to the question why gender based stereotyping of roles exist society, we have to delve deep into the psychology of womanhood. The examination of psycho-social aspect of stereotyping questions the theory of Freud that biological aspects of women determine their essential feminine qualities.

The intensive studies in psychology throw light on how social roles are “created” for women and how they are prepared for these roles. They prove that feminine qualities “. . . are not inevitable consequences of women’s biology.”²⁹ The role that she plays demands certain kinds of work and qualities. These qualities are indoctrinated in her even as an infant using cultural and social conventions, behaviour patterns and allied

²⁶ Anita Desai, *Clearlight of Day*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981), p. 140.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 158.

²⁸ Quoted in Natalie Shaniness, “Antigone: Symbol of Autonomy and Women’s Moral Dilemmas” *The Psychology of Today’s Woman: New Psycho Analytic Visions* eds., Tony Bernay and Dorothy W. Canton, (London: Harvard Univ. Press, 1989), p. 104.

²⁹ Luise Eichenbaum, and Susie Orbach, *Understanding Woman* (London: Penguin, 1983), p. 4.

norms of conduct. Nancy Chodorow, Adrienne Rich, Nancy Friday and others contribute to the theory that the so-called femininity is constructed and sustained by patriarchal culture and society. They argue that "... a girl's personality, her psychology takes shape through her relationship with her mother."³⁰ The studies show that the mother's personality and interaction with the child are very important factors in constructing its personality. "She is the anchor, the mediator for the babies experiences."³¹ The mother's image is powerfully imprinted in the psyche of the child and it controls much of its future behaviour this conditioning results in the formation of feminineness at subliminal levels. Girls unlike boys are encouraged to retain the image of the mothers. They become an extension of the mother herself in due course of time.

The girl emulates her role model consciously and unconsciously. Lesser participation of the father in the domestic life again contributes to a greater intimacy between the mother and her. In the case of boys the mother insulates them against acquiring her (feminine) qualities from the very beginning, whereas the daughter is encouraged to eschew her personality and to emulate the ideal mother image. Thus from the very beginning while the male repudiates the qualities of the mother, the female conforms to the existing image of the mother. Thus a girl is deprived of realising her true self. So if she has to establish her identity she has to renounce this stereotyped role model. The main thing about gender is that it is transmitted very powerfully through individuals who actively, albeit unconsciously, shape the child's identity in accordance with the culture of their country.

It may be remembered now that Evelyn Fox Keller in her pioneering article of

³⁰ Ibid., p. 9.

³¹ Ibid., p. 15.

1978, "*Gender and Science*"³² supports Nancy Chodorow's theory of male and female personality structures. According to them gender roles have not given individuals any freedom. They have always created conflicts in the minds of males and females. These have also given rise to the fragmentation of the self and have resulted in gender dilemma. The gender conservatives feel that the recasting of roles of the females will endanger the stability of the family. The undue importance that is given to the stereotyped images distorts the natural unfolding of the self. This distortion of self-image is more in the case of women. It is mainly due to their negative socialization process. The Indian women especially have found it difficult to deviate from stereotyped feminine behaviour. The ruling element is of course a very damaging negative feeling which can be death-dealing in its impact, namely fear — the fear of society, fear of isolation in family and fear of not getting acceptance. In order to attain autonomy and a proper self image women may have to get rid of their multi-pronged fears.

Bim in *Clear Light of Day* is to a certain extent free from the so-called fears. So she never strives for the stereotyped image. The parental indifference and depressive atmosphere of the house make Bim a totally different woman. She also frees herself from mother and exists in a totally different plane. She is not the ideal mother who encourages daughters to become an extension of herself. Empowered by her reading Bim becomes self-willed, self-assertive and self-contained. She successfully maintains her autonomy in shaping her life, belief system, attitudes verbal and nonverbal communications. Bim tries to extricate herself from the filial bonds and bondages that implode her. Even when she is rejected by her family she is not weighed down by sadness

³² Reprinted in Sandra Harding and Merrill B. Hintikka, eds., *Discovering Reality: Feminist Perspectives on Epistemology, Metaphysics, Methodology and Philosophy of Science* (London: Reidel, 1983), p. 187.

or sense of loss. It is her powerful self-image that preserves her from disintegration and coercive value systems. She looks at the rejection by the family with a rare equanimity. “. . . Tara and Bakul and behind them the Misras, and somewhere in the distance Raja and Benazir — only to torment her and mosquito-like, sip her blood. Now when they were full, they rose in swarms, humming away, turning their backs on her.”³³ She surfaces into the clear light of the day from the despair created by her family’s rejection. She even consoles Baba, her mentally-retarded brother, by saying there is nothing to be afraid. Desai here projects a new self which is “. . . antithetical to an overcultivated, self-absorbed and feminised culture.”³⁴

In *Voices in the City* Amala and Monisha feel that their mother Otima is different. She is never the good wife or timid wife who meekly submits to the demands of the patriarch. Her husband constantly derides her and in retaliation she ignores him psychologically. He is always provocative and she distances herself from him. She never indulges her children emotionally. In her letter she claims that she loves them. But she never exerts her control over her children. The words of Nirode confirm the Chodorovian concept that the image of the mother is embedded psychically in each individual. He says “I see now that she is everything we have been fighting against, you and Monisha and I. She is also everything we have fought for. She is our consciousness and our unconsciousness, she is all that is manifest and all that is not manifest.”³⁵

5.4 Deprived of . . .

Sita in *Where shall We Go This Summer* is renounced by her mother in a mysterious way for reasons best known to the latter. Sita feels that “. . . she came into this

³³ Anita Desai, *Clear Light of Day* (Hammondsworth: Penguin, 1980), p.153.

³⁴ Peter Nicholls, *Modernisms* (London: Macmillan, 1995), p. 79.

³⁵ Anita Desai, *Voices in the City* (New Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 1965), p. 256.

world motherless and the world was crowded enough so.”³⁶ The question why her mother deserted the husband and the three children vandalizes her. No wonder she ends up with father fixation, eventhough it is a short reprieve. This sets her thinking as she offers her sympathy shortly though to her father who has been victimized by her mother’s actions. Secondly she has no alternate source of concentration or the semblance of a mental shelter. For these reasons she gets focussed on her father’s personhood.

Sita after her marriage tries to locate her mother who has gone away from home. She keeps on asking herself embarrassing questions about the bizarre behaviour of her mother. But no answers are found forthcoming. The vacuum resulting from this leads to a case of psychological abandonment and deprivation. This situation can be explained in terms of an observation made by two scholars Luise Eichenbaum and Susie Orbach. According to them “. . . unwittingly mother provides her daughter with her first lesson in emotional deprivation.”³⁷ This deprivation is replicated by Sita who fails to understand the trauma of her daughter Maneka. The key word here is “unwittingly.” The behaviour patterns that she keeps to may be considered highly personalized psychological reactions to the Bohemian and lecherous life style of her father. Since the reasons are not divulged she suffers all alone in a masochistic manner. Sita unwittingly passes this deprivation on to her daughter Maneka and tragically enough, Maneka feels in a compulsive manner being deprived of the mother’s benevolent protection and caretaking. All this happens at the hands of Sita who receives this psychological bequest “unwittingly.” This replication of Sita’s behaviour modelled on that of the mother may be labelled, with scientific accuracy “automaton conformity” a phrase coined by Erich Fromm. Yet we can’t help going beyond this since the ultimate cause of the situation is the behavioural aberration of Sita’s father

³⁶ Anita Desai, *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* (New Delhi : Orient Paperbacks, 1982), p. 84.

³⁷ Luise Eichenbaum and Susie Orbach, *Understanding Woman* (London: Penguin, 1983), p. 44.

who was a Promethean wielding unlimited power owing to the sinful, social structure which distilled the tyranny of a rare kind. Viewed from this perspective Sita's is a case of veritable victimization in which there is a conspiracy involving the patriarchal structure of society and helplessness of feminine entities. No wonder "Sita had been too incompetent a mother to know how to deal with her trauma, how to give her comfort."³⁸ The result is that Maneka feels alienated from her mother. The psychological concept of replay may be observed here as evidenced in the behaviour of Sita. The behaviour indicates the escape route from her sense of frustration, rejection, self-pity and helplessness. She is yet another victim of circumstances, thanks to a male domination which upsets her life style altogether.

The absence of the mother creates a psychological deprivation. This has contributed to inconsistencies in all her relationships. Sita, just as her mother escaped to Benares escapes to the island of Manori; the circle getting completed in a repeat action. Since she has herself experienced the agony of rejection, she takes her son Karan and her daughter Maneka along with her. Yet the inconsistencies may be made clear from the following citations. While she lived with Raman and his family:

the more stolid and still and calm they were the more she thrummed as though frantic with fear that their subhumanity may swamp her. She behaved provocatively — it was there that she started smoking, a thing that had never been done in their household by any woman and even by men only in secret — and began to speak in sudden rushes of emotion, as though flinging darts at their smooth, unscarred faces.³⁹

³⁸ Anita Desai, *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* (New Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 1982), p.108.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

Moses, the watchman of Manori contemptuously observes thus: “One day Miriam saw her sitting on the floor, playing with mud. Like a dirty brat. Playing with mud! An old woman like that! Mad.”⁴⁰ This deviant behaviour may be analysed psychologically. Unable to handle the present successfully Sita moves back in time, through the process of time. She imagines herself to be a little child enjoying herself playing with mud.

Sita’s inconsistencies result from the process of externalization. According to Karen Horney externalization is the “. . . tendency to experience internal processes as if they occurred outside oneself and as a result to hold these external factors responsible for one’s difficulties.”⁴¹ Another dominant tendency noted is to run away from the existing situation. Sita is always overtaken by a gnawing sense of despair and emptiness and consequently she devalues herself and even compares herself to a jelly fish.

Maya in *Cry, the Peacock* suffers like Sita, due to the absence of the mother in her life. She looks to her husband and his family for the missing connections in her life. Her inner sense of unworthiness increases and she loses cathetic flexibility, the ability to withdraw emotionally from roles and people. Her husband Gautama cannot help her through and fails to provide her an intimate empathetic understanding. This results in her masochism and depression. Maya feels that she lives in a persecutory world and kills her persecutor — her husband — Gautama. These persecutory feelings stem from over-dependence, lack of individuation, a profound belief that something is missing in her life and the internalized abuse of early childhood. Madhusudan Prasad observes thus: “Maya’s neurosis also denotes a collective neurosis which tries to shatter the very identity of woman in our contemporary society dominated by man in which woman longing

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 157.

⁴¹ Karen Horney, *Our Inner Conflicts* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1966), p. 115.

for love is driven mad or compelled to commit suicide.”⁴²

Anita Desai here highlights the human problem through Maya. Maya represents the predicament of ordinary mortals. We are not free to choose alternatives that come our way. This means consciously sacrificing certain potentialities for the sake of family and society. The application of moral rules in society creates a dichotomy in the individual between manifest and hidden traits, human proclivities and goals. This results in the strong feelings of alienation of the individual and the consequent death wish behaviour of Maya more or less resembles Dimple Sen Gupta in Bharathi Mukherjee's *Wife*. Dimple, like Maya, kills her husband. Here we can see a disgruntled and rebellious self which moves towards neurosis. Dimple, like Maya, feels alienated from her husband and family. She seeks fulfillment and even goes to the extent of committing adultery. But the feeling of guilt fragments her self completely. In a neurotically charged atmosphere she commits the murder like Sita and feels relieved. Mukherjee describes the murder thus: “She touched the mole very lightly and let her fingers draw a delectable spot, then she brought her right hand up with the knife, stabbed the magical circle once, twice, seven times, each time a little harder.”⁴³ But Mukherjee unlike Desai leaves the situation unresolved. Her heroine Dimple unlike Sita remains calm after the murder. Both the novelists very powerfully convey the fact that the neurotic conflicts in women arise due to continual oppression, physical as well as mental.

Nanda Kaul (*Fire on the Mountain*) and Mira Masi (*Clear Light of Day*) are victims of stereotyping in two different ways. Nanda Kaul, even though the reasons are of a different kind, unlike Mira Masi, is conscious of her exploitation and marginalized existence. Mira Masi, on the contrary, suppresses and internalizes all her disappointments

⁴² Madhusudan Prasad, *Anita Desai: The Novelist* (Allahabad : New Horizon, 1981), p. 3.

⁴³ Bharathi Mukherjee, *Wife* (London: Penguin, 1990), p. 212.

and fears. Nanda Kaul regrets accepting the exploitation and feels that this has left her barren and empty like Carignano, the place where she lives. Mira Masi faces “the empty nest syndrome.” When Bim, Tara and Raja become independent she loses her sense of belonging. This sense of belonging plays an important part in shaping ones identity since it is one of the primary emotional needs of all human beings. Both experience emotional barrenness that results from throttling of feelings.

In the case of Mira Masi the familial framework is the most important milieu. Her victimized position distances her completely from other important spheres of activity. Nanda Kaul is also a victim of the narrow ranges of value systems. This limits the interaction of the individual, and causes isolation, powerlessness and alienation. She is rejected by her husband and children and lives all alone in Carignano. It is to keep up the facade of the ideal family. When Nanda Kaul uses “distance-machinery” to protect her self-esteem, Meera Masi is inexorably driven by the need to get acceptance and approval of her family. It is her compliance that leads to her victimization in the family. She becomes a mute spectator. The subjectivity of these women convinces us that they are also enslaved by the existing stereotyped concepts of gender and role-performance. Patriarchy has fixed rules and regulations that women have to observe in the so-called familial framework. In this painfully real world “created” for women, the traditional gender-based role performance disrupts their personal autonomy and causes identity crisis.

To a large extent the gender roles become tools of social control and oppression. Desai highlights the fact through Mira Masi in *Clear Light of Day*. She becomes a widow at a very early age. Society holds her responsible for her husband’s death. The infernal effects of stereotyping, labelling that is done in society, is encapsulated thus: “She was turned out. Another household could find some use for her cracked pot, torn

rag, picked bone”,⁴⁴ as in the case of many other widows.

Mira Masi loses her sanity due to her repressed fears. Life has been a long series of “denials” for her. The dichotomy in her life is that she is denied everything, but she never denies anyone anything. It is not a voluntary action on her part. Her economic dependence never gives her any option in life. It becomes impossible for her to decide or deny. Like her stereotyped counterparts, she always tries to please others and neglects her own needs and never achieves autonomy. The manic fear that envelops her is the fear of disintegration. The well in which the cow gets drowned is symbolic of her unknown fears. She feels that “it is the navel of the world . . . secret and hidden in the thick folds of grass from which they all emerged and to which they must return, crawling on their hands and knees.”⁴⁵

Anita Desai depicts the contradictory nature of the roles of women in social and familial framework. The bonds created by society are absolutised by gender-based stereotyping. It has contributed to the wide chasm that exists between man and woman. We are drawn to the gilded cage of stereotyping by the rules of fixity. The words of Monisha in *Voices in the City* reveal the psychological roots of stereotyping in Indian society; “Lives spent in waiting for nothing, waiting on men self-centred and indifferent and hungry and demanding and critical, waiting for death and dying misunderstood always behind the bars, those terrifying black bars that shut us in, in the old houses, in the old city.”⁴⁶ The terrifying black bars that shut women of India are patriarchy and its acquisitive nature. Even the self-image of Indian women is sealed and fixed by the so-called socio-political imperatives that restrict their mobility and action.

⁴⁴ Anita Desai, *Clear Light of Day* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980), p.108.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, P. 120.

The enslavement of women of India continues to be a painful phenomenon even at this juncture of history. The scuttling of the Women's Reservation Bill itself confirm the fact that we are imprisoned inside the fortress of patriarchy. Syeda Saiyidain Hameed writes about this issue thus: ". . . the women's bill shattered and sundered lay on the floor, reminder of how women have traditionally been battered and fractured to some patriarchal design."⁴⁷

A proper concept of the self will definitely empower women to fight against the discrimination, and will definitely prevent them from falling into the traps set by patriarchal forces. The compelling nature of the so-called Establishment disallows the corrosion of socio-cultural boundaries which historically separate men and women. These boundaries cement the social bonds and bondages which marginalize women. The strength and clarity of women's identity is very vital in breaking these boundaries. A collective action will be feasible only if men and women work together, with a new understanding. The negative binding effects of stereotyping can be minimized by achieving autonomy of the self which strengthens identity.

Identity of Indian woman depends upon her self-concept and "her self-concept is framed in the context of her roles. She is not a person if she is stripped of her roles."⁴⁸ It is the nature of roles that should change. The roles should have more freedom and flexibility so that a better and healthier self-concept would emerge from this crucible of interactions and innovations.

The process can be explained with the help of two concepts from psychology such as *Assimilation* and *Accommodation*. The *Assimilation* and *Accommodation* of

⁴⁷ Syeda Saiyidain Hameed, "The Turning Point", *The Hindu Magazine* Sunday August 2, 1998, p. I.

⁴⁸ Rehana Ghadially, *Women in Indian Society: A Reader* (New Delhi: Sage, 1988), p. 139.

new beliefs and values will increase the flexibility of roles. The processes of Assimilation and Accommodation are functional invariants of intelligent behaviour. The solidarity and cohesiveness of the self depends upon the assimilation of external elements in to the evolving self or structures of organism. But this alone is not enough. The capacity of the self to adjust to a particular environment is also a very important factor. These two processes should take place simultaneously and play a crucial role in image building. The dominant perspective holds that in women the processes of Assimilation and Accommodation are not properly balanced and this distorts the self-image of Indian women which causes the imbalance is the powerful "idealized image" of Indian women. The so-called idealized image prevents her from realizing and accepting the fact that "to be oneself is enough." When an individual is pulled by two diametrically opposite images, it creates the so-called imbalance in the processes assimilation and accommodation. Karen Horney, observes thus: "The idealized image is a decided hindrance to growth, because it either denies shortcomings or merely condemns them."⁴⁹ So, the most important imperative is that the Indian woman should relinquish the self-stultifying and the stereotyped image and, in its stead create a realistic and realizable self-image, new and refreshingly rewarding, without the negative back load as found in the present. This new concept of the self will convince the Indian women of the validity of an introspective question: "... what other significance can our existence have than to be ourselves fully and completely."⁵⁰

This will enable the Indian woman to: "... chase away the army of darkness."⁵¹

⁴⁹ Karen Horney, *Our Inner Conflicts* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1966), p. 98.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 183.

⁵¹ Waman Kardak, "In the Darkness within Me", Trans., Jayant Karwe, ed., Eleanor Zelliott. *An Anthology Dalit Literature* (New Delhi: Gyan publishing, 1992), p. 96.

The new self-image will empower her and she will definitely realize it:

The light is in you

The light is in you

Be tomorrow's sun.⁵²

⁵² Ibid., p. 96.

CHAPTER VI

EXPLORING THE FEMININE PSYCHE

Desai's greatness as a writer revolves round her achievement in exploring the psyche of her characters. She plumbs the depth of the inner life of Indian women. The rewards are remarkable and deeply enlightening. The probing of the novelist always brings up innumerable conflicts, mostly psychological. They all point to the need for a new direction in the life of Indian womanhood. Bipin B. Panigrahi says:

The novels of Anita Desai depict extreme situations arising out of conflicts in the inner configurations of the individuals — the conflict between reason and instinct, the will and reality, involvement and detachment. These conflicts revolve round the interplay of the 'self' with others.¹

Desai has not only depicted these conflicts but also probed the reasons behind them. Even a casual survey of her novels brings out the fact that the existing gender inequality based on money, the dichotomy that exists between the public and private spheres of a woman's life, the male dominance in society and sex role stereotyping have contributed to the various kinds of conflicts — inter-personal and intra-personal in which the female self is tossed about, beaten, battered and even broken.

Desai "... summons the larger interest of a troubled country",² to a new examination and evaluation according to John. M. Gregory. The larger conflicts are

¹Bipin B. Panigrahi, "Self-Apprehension and Self-Identity in *Clear Light of Day*", *The New Indian Novel in English: A Study of the 1980's*, ed. Viney Kirpal (New Delhi: Allied Publishers, 1990), p. 74.

² John M. Gregory, Rev. of *Clear Light of Day*, *Commonwealth Novel in English* I, No.1, (Jan. 1982), p. 112.

mostly sociological. They present themselves in the form of trans-culture encounters with old traditions clashing with the new ones. They are also partly political. Religious belief systems of the old and new types contribute much to these conflicts. In a developing country like India there are many contradictory value systems which pull the self in opposite directions. These, according to Desai, contribute to many inner and outer upheavals.

6.1 Desai's Locale: As An Extension of The Self

Desai's critics unanimously agree on one point, and that is, she has successfully portrayed the Indian woman's world. There is definitely an inward-turning to convey what a woman is, what she says, sees, and does. It is the intimate world of the female self that is revealed in the majority of Desai's novels. But this concern for the private, intimate world does not neglect or reject the exterior world. In her novels the locale becomes an extension of the self. They are also inextricably bound.

In *Cry, the Peacock* through Maya, the locale of the novel is projected. The locale of Old Delhi with its pedestrians, bicycles, Red Fort area, ". . . Juma Masjid rising like muezzin's call to prayer into a sky of heavy gray tinged pearl and people lying asleep in the shade of trees on the ghost swept maidan . . .",³ become alive in her fictional canvas. Maya's tortured self, the psychic energy that emits from her merges with the intense summer of Delhi. Her anguish becomes excruciating as the summer becomes intense. She longs for her summer home in the hills of Darjeeling. The intensity of Maya's feelings is conveyed through this objective correlative, i.e., the locale. The locale embodies Maya's disappointments and fevered responses. It also passes and repasses through sudden climatic changes. The locale then becomes the conscious field of the

³Anita Desai, *Cry, the Peacock* (New Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 1980), p. 159.

identity of a person. Her helplessness, the discordant notes in her life and its innocuous disasters are projected on to the locale thus:

the garden and beyond it, the street, lay spread out, pinioned by the sun, like a great pressed flower, pressed so long ago that it was now quite, sapless, dry, fading fast to assume the colour and finally the nature of dust. Nothing could move. No leaf could stir, no blade of grass.⁴

We also see the outside world through Maya. The moments in Maya's consciousness pass one by one, just as the outside world changes, overlapping and tense moments vibrate to culminate in something tragic and terrible.

In *Fire on the Mountain*, Carignano symbolizes Nanda's isolated self. She has lived her life without any intimacy. Like her, Carignano also raises barriers or defences through its barrenness and emptiness. It is a secluded place among the rocks and pines of Kasauli. She has spent a great deal of energy, rebelling against herself, her husband and children. So she feels very comfortable in Carignano:

here on the ridge of the mountain, in this quiet house. It was the place, and the time of life, that she had wanted and prepared for all her life — as she realized on her first day at Carignano, with a great, cool flowering of relief — and at last she had it.⁵

Nanda Kaul was a withered, tall, gray and thin woman. Her image is projected by this locale. "Pine trees with charred tree trunks and contorted branches, striking melodramatic attitudes as on stage. Rocks arrested in mid-roll, rearing up, dropping.

⁴ Ibid., pp. 182-183.

⁵ Anita Desai, *Fire on the Mountain* (New Delhi: Allied Publishers, 1977), p.3.

Occasional tin roof tops, glinting.”⁶

Raka’s withdrawal is not fabricated. She is at peace with herself in Carignano unlike her grandmother. The child’s loneliness, and deprivation makes her a fugitive in the company of nature. The sense of pitifulness, aching restlessness and exasperation of the child is telescoped into the locale. Raka feels that:

there was something about it — illegitimate, uncompromising and lawless — that made her tingle. The scene of devastation and failure somehow drew her, inspired her. It was the ravaged, destroyed and barren spaces in Kasauli that drew her.⁷

In *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* Sita escapes to the island Manori. Manori, the island looks dark against the sky. It is like her self that is disillusioned by her meaningless existence. She, like Nanda Kaul, longs for isolation. Sita’s deprivation, long periods of boredom force her to seek refuge in this island which belonged to her father. She was running away from the “black drama in this crowd-theatre, murder, infanticide, incest, theft and robbery, all were much practised by these rough raucous rasping tatterdemalions.”⁸

The island becomes symbolic of her psyche, and reflects her irrational fears, her unuttered frustrations, and becomes the predominant motif of Sita’s life. “The island had been buried beneath her consciousness deliberately, for years. Its black magic, its subtle glamour had grown too huge, had engulfed her at a time when she was still very young and quite alone.”⁹

⁶ Ibid., p. 41.

⁷ Ibid., pp.90-91.

⁸ Anita Desai, *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*(New Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 1982), p. 38.

⁹ Ibid., p. 57.

Sita feels that unless she comes to terms with the polarities that exist in her past, she can never be at peace. So here is a quest for her real self, her identity. After experiencing many conflicts she realises her true self, which frees her from her emotional bondages. When a person becomes aware of his or her self, a reorganization is inevitable. And this is exactly that makes Sita appraise her world in an objective manner.

In *Voices in the City* Calcutta is the city of darkness, death and destruction. The city epitomizes the existential agony of Nirode, Amla and Monisha. Amla realizes that the city had changed Monisha her sister. She feels that it

seized the girl, turned inside out, giving her an eery unreality.

Something Amla saw had laid its hands upon her, scarred and

altered her till she bore only the faintest resemblance to the quiet

and subtly uncaring elder sister Amla had remembered.¹⁰

Monisha warns her sister that she should not allow it to oppress her. Nirode and Monisha rebel against the oppressive atmosphere of the city. Monisha tries to reach for her identity but feels that she has “no faith, no alternative to my confused despair, there is nothing. I can give myself to, and so I must stay Ah yes, yes, then it is a choice between death and mean existence and that surely is not a difficult choice.”¹¹ And her choice is the tragic end.

Amla, a young, career-minded girl, an extrovert unlike her brother and sister, also feels dejected in Calcutta. The city oppresses her and she exclaims to Nirode that “this city, this city of yours, it conspires against all who wish to enjoy it, doesn’t it?”¹² The three of them ask the fundamental questions about human existence and are

¹⁰Anita Desai, *Voices in the City*, (New Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 1965), p.142.

¹¹Ibid., pp.121-122.

¹²Ibid., p. 158.

confused about human nature. Monisha and Nirode speak about the inevitability of death and nothingness, and are victims of self-destructive urges. Amla on the contrary focuses on the positive features of anxiety, anxiety as the road to self affirmation.

Desai's Calcutta becomes a part of existential design of the characters in the novel. The disintegration of values in society force individuals to be inauthentic non-actualizers. Thus Nirode feels

like a man who has spent three years in jail and emerges to find he is afraid of the plangent and populated world. He folded his arms closely about himself and wished he had a bell to ring. I am a leper, he wanted to ring and call, leave me, do not come near. I am a leper, diseased with the loneliest disease of all.¹³

Thus the city not only symbolizes the existential agony, hostility, resentment and isolated existence of individuals but also assumes the status of the authoritarian form which oppresses and restricts the potential of human beings.

The *Clear Light of Day*, is set in Old Delhi. The changes that come over a Hindu family after independence are recorded. The house is old and does not change like its locale, Old Delhi. But the characters change within this milieu. Tara finds that Old Delhi and their house have never changed. Bim clarifies her sister's remarks by saying that "Old Delhi does not change. It only decays. My students tell me it is a great cemetery, every house a tomb. Nothing but sleeping graves. Now New Delhi, they say is different."¹⁴

There is monotony and boredom but it is not hostile. It is like Bim's mentally retarded brother Baba who is confined to his room. He never goes out. This symbolizes

¹³Ibid., p.61.

¹⁴Anita Desai, *Clear Light of Day* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980), p. 5.

the cultural decay, disintegration of values in society. The Misra women who were married and rejected, the idle brothers who exploit these hard working sisters symbolically represent Old Delhi that has become a fen of stagnant waters, the city that is torn apart by the riots of partition. "Swarmed and crawled with a kind of crippled, subterranean life that made Bim feel that this city would never recover from this horror, that it would be changed irremediably" ¹⁵ Bim feels wretched and miserable seeing violence all over the city.

Desai feels that the strong personal relationship will never be threatened by these communal riots. The Hyder Alis never come back to their house in Old Delhi. But Raja's relationship with them never changes. He in fact marries Benazir, Hyder Ali's daughter. Raja in fact has deep sympathies for Muslims in India.

Thus Old Delhi inspite of its decadence represents the concrete self, the actual self, which has the power to stand the ravages of time. The novel ends with Bim's realization "that soil contained all time, past and future, in it. It was dark with time, rich with time. It was where her deepest self lived and the deepest selves of her sisters and brothers and all those who shared that time with her." ¹⁶

Bye-Bye Blackbird is set in the England of "Dickens and Lamb, Addison and Boswell, Dryden and Jerome. K. Jerome . . ." ¹⁷ The black birds are the immigrants in England, especially people from India. The locale, known for its cold climate freezes the self of the immigrants and many become claustrophobic. England is known for its silence unlike India. Dev feels that the city is empty:

The English habit of keeping all doors and windows tightly shut

¹⁵Ibid., p.86.

¹⁶Ibid., p.182.

¹⁷ Anita Desai, *Bye-Bye Blackbird* (New Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 1985), p.10.

(fresh air fiends — wasn't that what he had been told they were?), of guarding their privacy as they guarded their tongues from speaking and their throats from catching cold remains in comprehensible to him.¹⁸

Dev feels that it is “. . . utterly silent deserted — a cold wasteland of brick and tile”.¹⁹

Adit on the other hand is completely enslaved to England. He loves the nice warm pubs and the organized life in England. But his attitude changes and he goes back to India in search of his roots. Dev, on the other hand is conquered by England.

. . . England's green and gold fingers had let go of Adit and clutched at Dev instead. England had let Adit drop and fall away as if she had done with home or that he had done with her, caught and enmeshed his friend Dev.²⁰

Here too the locale becomes a powerful motif of the existential agony of human beings. She is the (m)“other” who not only conditions but also modifies the self of the individual. Thus, milieu is inextricably bound with the self of human beings. It becomes a part of one's existence.

In *Baumgartner's Bombay*, Hugo Baumgartner, a German jew seeks asylum in Bombay. The main story takes place in Bombay. Hugo Baumgartner spends his childhood in Germany and a part of his youth is spent in Calcutta. But the novelist focuses her attention on Bombay. The atmosphere of the city is not only oppressive but also overwhelming. Hugo Baumgartner is shocked when he sees the families living on pavements and cattle stalls. “He knew the absolute degradation of their lives; he knew the

¹⁸Ibid., p.63.

¹⁹Ibid., p.63.

²⁰Ibid., p.261.

violence it bred — the brawling in the night, the beating, the weeping.”²¹ There was dirt and squalor all around him. Baumgartner felt that he was “an old turtle trudging through the dusty Indian soil.”²² Bombay metropolis swells into life with her shops in causeway, “. . . the cheap, readymade garments spread on the pavements for display . . . the fruit stalls and snack stalls decorated with red chillies, yellow lemons and lilac onion-rings.”²³

Lotte, Baumgartner’s girl friend, also feels alienated in this hostile country. She is apprehensive about their end. She tells Baumgartner about how they are going to die. “. . . dogs die like that, in the street. This is how we go, Hugo’, she wagged her head. ‘In the end — alone’ ”.²⁴ It is not the sophisticated, elite and middle class life that we encounter in Baumgartner’s Bombay. But it is misery, poverty, the battle for survival that the poor have to fight, their dehumanized existence that confront us in Desai’s Bombay.

Through Baumgartner, Desai asks the question:

was it not India’s way of revealing the world that lay on the other side of the mirror? India flashed a mirror in your face with a brightness and laughter as raucous as a street band. You could be blended by it. But if you refused to look into it, if you insisted on walking around the back, then India stood aside, admitting you where you had not thought you could go. India was two worlds, or ten. She stood before him, hands on her hips, laughing that blood-stained laugh: Choose! Choose!²⁵

²¹Anita Desai, *Baumgartner’s Bombay* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1988), p. 7.

²²Ibid., p.11.

²³Ibid., p.19.

²⁴Ibid., p.73.

²⁵Ibid., p.86.

India is as complex as the individual according to Desai. The composite culture, traditional beliefs and value systems make life intriguing. The diversity of the country itself is overwhelming to any outsider. Baumgartner is murdered brutally by his own guest. Desai feels that in a country where contradictions exist, it is difficult for the individual to choose. Baumgartner never got an opportunity to choose in this land of contradictions.

Mirpore is the locale in Desai's *In Custody*. Desai also brings back the stifling atmosphere of Old Delhi. "Mirpore, its solid anonymity its ahistory, its unproductivity and its petty mercantile ethos forms a grim backdrop against which Deven's aspirations look absurd".²⁶

Deven is impoverished as Mirpore. Deven sometimes feels that it was "... a cruel trap, or prison, as well, an indestructible prison from which there was no escape".²⁷ People in Mirpore never ventured out. They lived and perished in this same town. There were Hindus, Christians and Muslims. Temples were numerous and there was only one church which was very small. Deven feels trapped by his marriage, by his friends and by the poet he idolized. He feels that the whole milieu subsumed his self and defeated him.

He searches for freedom, for a draught of fresh air. He looks up:

...at the dusky pelt of the sky for some chink that promised, or assured, escape, but even the stars were smothered in murk. No message came whispering on a nocturnal breeze; every leaf on the neem tree hung still, lifeless.²⁸

Thus the locale or milieu becomes a commanding centre in the novels of Anita Desai.

²⁶ T. Vijay Kumar, "Exploring a New Seam", *Indian Book Chronicle*, Nos. 1&2, (September 1985), p.287.

²⁷ Anita Desai, *In Custody* (London: Heinemann, 1984), p. 19.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 131.

She renders effectively perceptions, thoughts and feelings as they occur in the minds of the characters. These characters of Desai are definitely a part of the locale, which reflects, expands and transforms their identity. It is not possible to free ourselves from this social milieu which is an integral part of our psychological milieu.

6.2 Conflicts Galore

Desai has portrayed these intense conflicting drives which virtually sabotage the self of the Indian woman. In a structured society, when transition occurs due to focussed consciousness or awareness of individuals, conflict arises between societal interest and individual interest. The intensity of the conflict will be more when the interests of the individual are subversive or are thought to be subversive. The societal forces circumscribe the powers and potentials of individuals for "maintaining" equilibrium. This is more so in the case of women in a country like India where culture, law and societal belief systems marginalize them. Conflicts which are thus inevitable, become an integral part of society.

Participation of women in the independence struggle contributed to a symbiosis of rationality with the search for self-sentience. This contributed to a systematic, methodical and continuous pursuit of reasons which lead to the repression of women. This very naturally resulted in a process in which conflicts surfaced in many forms with lived realities coming to the force. Desai took these up and dealt with conflicts galore in her novels in one form or another. Desai said, "whoever is interested in the subject, will have to research for them himself."²⁹

Desai's critics unanimously agree on one aspect and that is the fact that she has presented the problems of Indian woman in her novels using the stream-of-conscious-

²⁹Ramesh K. Srivastava, "Anita Desai at Work: An Interview", *Perspectives on Anita Desai*, ed. Ramesh K. Srivastava (Gaziabad: Vimal Prakashan, 1984) p. 224.

ness technique more than any other narrative style. Desai feels that the social milieu is not so important as the inner life of the individual marked by a variety of conflicts. Desai says, "I am just aware that every human being's territory is really very, very small. And all you can explore is a very tiny section of this territory, and this is a more interesting technique than covering a large area."³⁰ The stream-of-consciousness technique can be described as "the inward-turning to convey the flow of mental experience"³¹ According to William James, who coined the phrase, the technique denotes continuity or flow of thoughts, the innermost feelings, perceptions, memories and associations. The intimate world of the self is revealed through this technique. The main focus is the inner landscape of the individual. One advantage of this technique is that the author has the full freedom to intercept this "flow" at any point of time and can continue with the narration as she/he wants. Desai exploits this " . . . technique for viewing the world through the eyes and the mind of a particular character . . ." ³²

Desai skilfully documents the conflicts of the self, especially those of women whose life is the thematic focus of this writer. She powerfully interrogates the conflicts that fragment the self. She pinpoints the psychological processes of sex-role stereotyping that is done with the intention of marginalizing women. The ontological insecurity, estrangement, sense of loss, withdrawal, regression, the widening gap that exists between the sexes and the neurotic entanglements which generate severe kinds of hopelessness that lie deeply buried in the psyche of human beings are effectively brought

³⁰Quoted in Jasbir Jain, *Stairs to the Attic : The Novels of Anita Desai* (Jaipur: Printwell Publishers, 1987), p.14.

³¹Mary Burchard Orvis, *The Art of Writing Fiction* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1948), p. 135.

³²Erwin. R. Steinberg, "Sounds of the Stream", *The Stream-of-Consciousness Technique in the Modern Novel*, ed. Erwin R. Steinberg (London: National Univ. Publications, 1978), p. 36.

to life by her. "Anita Desai is a great analyst of the human mind, a creator of brilliant characters and an astute interpreter of life." ³³

In *Baumgartner's Bombay*, *In Custody* and *Bye-Bye Blackbird* the conflict between the individual and society is clearly revealed. In *Baumgartner's Bombay* Desai deals with the life of a German Jew Hugo Baumgartner who is dispossessed not only in Germany but also in India. During the war he is battued in India by the British and imprisoned for six years in a British internment camp. After the war Baumgartner is released. He comes back to Bombay. But life in Bombay is empty, bleak and meaningless. He is known to his friends as a mad man and "Dumm Kopf." But for his friend Lotte, his business partner Chimanlal and the cats he is a firanghi, à foreigner. Desai sums up the reasons for his conflict thus:

Accepting — but not accepted that was the story of his life, the one thread that ran through it all. In Germany he had been dark — his darkness marked him the Jew, *der Jude*. In India he was fair — and that marked him *firanghi*. In both lands, the unacceptable.³⁴

After living in India for fifty years, Baumgartner was a stranger, an alien in this land. Talking of the immigrants Desai says that life, like "a grey and lazy sea rose and obliterated them, draining them of colour and substance."³⁵ The conflicts that take place between Baumgartner and his immediate environment lead to his isolation, his complete alienation. He feels odd with himself and the world. The living styles of Indians alienate

³³ Usha Pathania, "The Filial Ties — A Bane *Fire on the Mountain*", ed. Ramesh K. Srivastava *Perspectives on Anita Desai* (Ghaziabad: Vimal Prakashan, 1984), p. 167.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

³⁵ Anita Desai, *Baumgartner's Bombay* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1988), p. 20.

and suffocate him. "Baumgartner found no joy in the streets where he walked aimlessly, compulsively in order to put off going back to his room."³⁶ Here going back to his room is suggestive of the ontological conflicts that alienate him from his real self. Baumgartner is vandalized by the sense of loss of identity. In Bombay the environment is not only coercive but also hostile. Baumgartner lacks the will to preserve his identity. This is evident in his acceptance of the chaotic atmosphere of Bombay. The accumulating dirt and debris in the street and the polluted atmosphere of Bombay stifle him. He tries to ignore them. He longs to go back to Calcutta to the inn named 300 and the clubs Prince's or Firpo's where he could find his old acquaintances. But he knew it was an improbable possibility. And "... life and that time was a closed book or like a pack of cards — finite in number."³⁷ This longing confirms the fact that he wants to have an identity of his own and that can take place only in an environment which will recoup his self-hood and his self-confidence.

The cultural conflicts Baumgartner experiences shatter his identity. He is alienated from his environment. He feels that he is the "... indigestible, inedible Baumgartner. The god has spat him out. Raus Baumgartner out. Not fit for consumption, German or Hindu human or divine."³⁸ This distantiation unsettles his identity and this is indeed the reason why Baumgartner feels like a paravail when he attends the funeral of his friend and partner Chimanlal. Chimanlal's relationship with Hugo Baumgartner transcends culture, class, caste and creed. Here is a relationship in which there is perfect understanding and trust. Chimanlal loved Baumgartner like his own brother. But to Chimanlal's son he was a parasite, a firanghi, a mad man and a billie-wallah sahib. The

³⁶Ibid., p.171.

³⁷Ibid., p.172.

³⁸Ibid., p.190.

anguish that is raging inside his tight-lipped rectitude is voiced in these lines:

Baumgartner joined the mourners at the cremation, standing at the edge of the crowd, all of whom shrank away from him, horrified by the presence of a foreigner, a firanghi, at such an intensely private rite Baumgartner too wished he had not come, shuffled away.³⁹

The motif of conflict is deployed to highlight the fragmentation of his identity. Baumgartner's quest for attaining wholeness never materialises in this environment. The outcome of trans-cultural conflicts experienced by Baumgartner is that he withdraws into his own world. He never tries to resolve his conflicts himself at the intrapsychic level. The total repertoire of Baumgartner's behaviour centres around the fact that he continues to battle with anxiety and this is finally channelized into regression. What causes regression is elucidated by Elaine Y.L. Ho thus: ". . . crisis of identity is reconstructed as a rediscovering of self. History — his own and as the collective experience of diaspora — has cast Baumgartner as outsider, a marginal ."

⁴⁰

His real self abandons at times the matured path of gratification and behaves like a child. In a state of regression Baumgartner asks Lotte, his girl friend for more chocolates like a child; " 'No chocolate?', he whined. 'No chocolate even Lotte?.' "

⁴¹ This regression gives him an infantile mode of satisfaction. His consciousness moves from the unpleasant present situation to early childhood experiences. While he is with Chimanlal in the members' enclosure to see the horse race his mind goes back to his

³⁹Ibid., p. 206.

⁴⁰Elaine Y. L. Ho, "The Languages of Identity in Anita Desai's Baumgartner's Bombay," *World Literature Written in English*, 32, No. 1 (Spring 1992), p. 100.

⁴¹Anita Desai, *Baumgartner's Bombay* (Harmondsworth: Penguin), p. 136.

childhood. He is transported into another world which is more real to him than the present situation.

That was how he remembered the scene now, and also remembered his body rolled into a ball at the bottom of his dark, damp bed, while he clutched his right foot and his right hand with his left, and muttered like a wizard, Mick- muk - mo, make it so.⁴²

The protagonist's regression has many causes. Of them one stands out. As a boy he desperately wanted his father to take him to horse races. But his father never took him. And Baumgartner rebelled against this rejection in a violent manner. But now, thirty years later, he was watching the horse races in a country that rejected him. He tries to philosophize and seeks reasons: "... they all fell away from him into abyss."⁴³

Desai's Baumgartner holds himself aloof from external happenings. In a large gathering he finds himself lonely and utterly lost. With Chimanlal and Lotte he is warm because his safety is not mocked at. This novel pursues the identity theme realistically in its descriptions and symbolically in the chronological passing of time. The lines "... his war not their war. And they had their own war. War within war. Everyone engaged in a separate war, and each war opposed to another war,"⁴⁴ highlight the conflicts that are manifest in society. There is no way in which one can escape this conflict. Baumgartner is all alone in confronting the burden of loneliness, anxiety and guilt of leaving his mother alone in Germany, when Hitler was unleashing terrorism. Baumgartner sees his identity in terms of an outcast, a *firanghi* and thus he loses himself. Desai successfully

⁴² Ibid., p. 193.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 216.

⁴⁴ Anita Desai, *Baumgartner's Bombay* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1988), p. 173.

portrays Hugo Baumgartner's desperate attempt to preserve his self and identity through psychological insight of the artistic kind.

Sarah in *Bye-Bye Blackbird*, like Baumgartner, is a victim of alienation but in her own country. She marries Adit, an Indian immigrant in England. She suffers from trans-cultural conflict. The systems in society are so powerful that they generate conflicts which fragment the identity of the individual. Desai deploys the stream-of-consciousness technique to reveal the forces which war on self. How Sarah's identity is threatened by her marriage is brought out in the scene, where she reacts to Adit's accusation that she is filthy in allowing her cat to smell the rice that she has cooked. She retorts: "I don't think I could live in a house without pets somehow."⁴⁵ Her loneliness, anxiety, guilt in marrying against the wishes of her family all have their cumulative effect on her behaviour. A microscopic slight is treated as a proof of deep ill-will. Her mother's letter brings out all the subdued conflict between her existence and essence and her inability to relate fully with the asocial and egotistical attitudes of society. She lashes against the vacuity of her existence:

Don't you treat me the way she always does — as though I am not an individual with my own life to lead, but just — some appendage to them, with nothing but duties and responsibilities instead — instead of rights.⁴⁶

She reasserts her identity, unlike Baumgartner who forfeits it, in the hostile land. Thus Desai reaffirms the fact that only the individual can conquer the self-defeating conflicts by realising his or her personal worth and by sorting out the discrepancies that exist between the two selves — the real self and the pretentious social self.

⁴⁵ Anita Desai *Bye-Bye Blackbird* (New Delhi : Orient Paperbacks, 1985), p.50.

⁴⁶Ibid., p. 270.

A major function of the self-image is to bring consistency in behaviour. When the individual has a stable mental picture of himself or herself, it becomes the source of inner cues for consistent behaviour and thus resolves the conflicts. As evidence of it Sarah moves towards achieving a unified self: But Baumgartner's story is different. His plight reminds us of Milan Kundera's lines in *Life is Elsewhere*:

But I
subdued myself
getting my heel
on the throat
of my own song.⁴⁷

Baumgartner's diminishing faith in his self-worth contributes to his withdrawal and renunciation of the world in which he lives. The anxiety that is generated by these conflicts blindfolds him and leads to self-aggrandizement. Here Baumgartner becomes an inauthentic man and so his self does not fight his battles or resolve them. He feels relieved that . . . he had never been a part of the main stream. Always, some how he had escaped the main stream ."⁴⁸

Adit and Dev in *Bye-Bye Blackbird* experience the post-colonial and cultural dilemma of Indian immigrants. The trans-cultural and ideological conflicts along with the feeling of "secondariness" cause alienation in them. Jawaharlal Nehru expresses the same trauma thus: "I cannot get rid of that past inheritance or my recent acquisitions . . . I am a stranger and alien in the west."⁴⁹ Adit like any other immigrant is completely enslaved to the western culture. He praises the English culture, history and their ideas of liberty. He indulges in invective denunciation of immigrants who are

⁴⁷Milan Kundera, *Life is Elsewhere* (New Delhi: Rupa, 1987), p. 168.

⁴⁸Anita Desai, *Baumgartner's Bombay* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1988), p. 211.

⁴⁹Quoted in K.N. Panikkar, *Culture, Ideology, Hegemony: Intellectuals and Social Consciousness in Colonial India* (New Delhi: Tuleka, 1995), p. VIII.

conscious of their “nativism” and secondary status. Adit feels that it is the typical ‘Bengali Babu’ attitude that causes this alienation and unhappiness. He from the beginning tries to interrupt Dev’s diatribe of Englishmen’s treatment of Indian immigrants. Dev is shocked when the boy at the bus stop calls them “Wogs”. According to him the English cannot delitescence their prejudice towards Asians. His conflicts stem from the opposing forces of atavistic slavishness and his strong sense of post-colonial identity. Albert Memi suggests that “. . . the pathology of this post-colonial limbo between arrival and departure, independence and dependence has its source in the residual traces and memories of subordination .”⁵⁰

Adit is enamoured of England. He confesses that he hardly notices “. . . the drawbacks.”⁵¹ But the residual traces and memories of subordination alienate him completely in the end. A long weekend in Sarah’s country house completely changes his outlook. He feels trapped in an alien country. Adit feels useless, absurd and lost. Desai brings out the subaltern trauma of Adit thus:

sometimes it stifles me — this business of always hanging together with people like ourselves, all wearing the label *Indian Immigrants*, never daring to try and make contact outside this circle It’s so stifling — all the time, all the damned time — being aware of who one is and where one is. God, I’m fed up.”⁵²

Adit finally resolves his conflict by taking a categorical decision of going back to India. Dev on the other hand gets a job as salesman in Foyle’s book shop. He was slowly coming to terms with his “Indianness” in this alien country. Two hundred years of

⁵⁰ Quoted in Leela Gandhi, *Post-Colonial Theory* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press, 1998), p.6.

⁵¹ Anita Desai, *Bye-Bye Blackbird* (New Delhi : Orient Paperbacks, 1985), p. 188.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 188.

enslavement has its own impact. The language, inspite of regionalism and intense nationalism, survives as the language of the middleclass and elite circles in India. It is language that has colonised the self of an educated Indian. Dev's communings with English landscape reveal it:

... this was the England her poets had celebrated so well that he, a foreigner, found every little wild flower, every mood and aspect of it familiar. It was something he was visiting for the first time in his life, yet he had known it all along — in his reading in his day dreams — and now he found his dreams had been an exact, a detailed, a brilliant and mirror life reflection of reality. English Literature! English Poetry! he wanted to shout and, instead, raised his arms to the sky, clasped them in pagan worship, in school boy excitement.”⁵³

Desai is apparently an artistic alter ego of the author whose affiliation to the English language and literature remains invincibly intact. Desai has mentioned in one of her interviews that she has personally not experienced any racial discrimination. But she feels that the language she chose to express her creativity is at best an immigrant in India. It has no tradition. So she says that “... a writer has rather a fearful time of it, picking and choosing his way amongst thorns, pot-holes and booby - traps.”⁵⁴

Desai throughout emphasizes the suffocating repressiveness of conflicts. The dynamic organization of the self is threatened by these conflicts. *In Custody*, charts the journey of Deven a young lecturer who works in Lala Ramlal College, Mirpore. Deven's

⁵³Ibid., p. 170.

⁵⁴Anita Desai, “The Indian Writer's Problems” *The Literary Criterion*, 12, No. 4, (Summer, 1975), p. 13.

conflicts bring out the trauma of a middle class Indian intellectual pitted against a consumerist, acquisitive culture which corrupts and exploits.

The chaotic familial and social situation of independent India, the frightening and bewildering aspect of rootlessness are perceived by Desai. Only a coherent self-image can solve the conflicts according to her. Deven is crushed by the proprietorial demands of society, family and culture; "The tedium of it settled upon him like a grey, crumbling mildew. He felt aged and mouldy."⁵⁵ Desai has used specific terms to suggest the alienation of Deven from his environment. "He feels as if he were a stranger, and an interloper"⁵⁶ Deven's wife Sarala is a disappointed person. There is no understanding or intimacy between Sarala and Deven. The social, familial and economic pressures drive them apart. Sarala's resentment stems from Deven's thorough neglect. To Deven Sarala is ". . . plain, penny - pinching and congenitally pessimistic."⁵⁷ To us she is ". . . the abandoned wife."⁵⁸ Both feel trapped by the hostile environment.

Deven faces the patches of meaningless existence. The ambivalent attitude of others around him along with familial and social obstacles create an excessive detachment from life. He feels that

every effort he had made had ended in defeat: most of the poems he had written and sent to Murad had been rejected, his monograph never published, his wife and son eyed him with blatant disappointment; nor had he won the regard of his colleagues or students. The inherent weakness in his father that had made him

⁵⁵Anita Desai, *In Custody* (London: Heinemann, 1984), p. 66.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, p. 66.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, p. 66.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, p. 66.

an ineffectual if harmless, teacher and house holder had been passed on to him. He felt it inside him like an empty hole, one he had been staring at all his years, intimidated by its blackness and blankness.”⁵⁹

Deven is “framed” in a society where the socio-political conditions restrict and limit the development and expression of personality. The estrangement of Deven from his environment is suggested in these lines:

*And that was all he was — a trapped animal Marriage, family and a job had placed him in this cage, now there was no way out It was only a kind of zoo in which he could not hope to find any freedom, he would only blunder into another cage inhabited by some other trapped animal.*⁶⁰

The repetition highlights the emotional trauma of an alienated person. Deven’s alienation and the resultant conflicts move him away from people. The compulsive nature of conflicts manifests itself on the self as neurosis. Deven feels defenceless and alienated. Alienation is self-destructive as it causes the paralysis of one’s mental prowess. Social identification has always been an important stage in the development of the self. When the self is uncomfortable in the ethical world, it generates conflicts.

These conflicts in turn lead to social and psychological separation of the self from the ethical world. So the thrust in alienation is given to three aspects. That is the self’s inability to identify with the social and ethical world around it; secondly the inability to assert its individuality and freedom and finally the awareness that it is a circle

⁵⁹Ibid., p. 128.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 131.

without a solid firm centre. The centre, of course, is a strong cohesive self. Its totality and intrinsic worth contribute to self-actualization or in other words make the circle complete with a centre. When this centre or nucleus of a person is at stake, he feels alienated from his environment. This is exactly what happens in the case of Deven, Hugo Baumgartner, Adit, Dev and Sarah. Desai points out the insurmountable conflicts faced by the modern man. When the conflicts become “insurmountable” the person can neither fight nor appease, justify or they cause an automatic drifting of the individual from the environment. Deven, like a typical alienated human being, becomes conscious of his unworthiness, and hence falls into the abyss of self-contempt and defeatism. When confronted by many conflicting drives Deven feels victimized. He feels that, like him, his wife Sarala too is a devocalized victim of many unresolved conflicts.

He understood because like her, he had been defeated too; like her, he was a victim. Although each understood the secret truth about the other, it did not bring about any closeness of spirit, any comradeship, because they also sensed that two victims ought to avoid each other, not yoke together their joint disappointments.⁶¹

After coming back from home Sarala finds Deven’s passivity unbearable:

She began to get irritated by his inaction. She wanted to get on with the cleaning of the house. She got up and went to fetch the duster, shouting from the kitchen, ‘how could you let the house get so filthy? Why didn’t you call for the sweeper to come and clean?’⁶²

The deteriorating relationship between the husband and wife, the regular occurrence of

⁶¹Ibid., p. 68.

⁶²Ibid., p. 194.

spousal disturbances are looked at, psychologically by the author. The distrust between the two also contributes to many conflicts. Deven's failure to accommodate his wife's needs and Sarala's inability to voice her suffering throw light on the negative aspects of stereotyping that exists in our society. They are rooted in the psyche of individuals and they manifest in their attitudes and behavioural patterns of the individuals. Even an offhand reaction is coloured by stereotyping. We here stumble over one potent question, and that is: how can we resolve these conflicts between man and woman? We can resolve them by recasting the "roles", and redefining the "roles", by stabilizing the shaky identity and recouping the crushed self-worth of the "second x".

Deven is conscious of his wife's repressed state. But he is afraid to do anything that would free her from her marginalized existence. Deven treats his wife in a traditional manner. He is very sure about his wife's submissiveness. Perhaps that is the only thing he is sure about, in his life. Even education, his wide reading and finer sensibility have not changed the stereotyped attitude of Deven towards his wife. In support of this the authorial voice speaks:

Sarala never lifted her voice in his presence — countless generations of Hindu womanhood behind her stood in her way, preventing her from displaying open rebellion. Deven knew she would scream and abuse only when she was safely out of the way, preferably in the kitchen, her own domain.⁶³

The behaviour of Deven marked by conflict may now be analyzed. Deven feels that by reaching out to his wife he might lose his control over her. He also feels that his non-masculine overture may not be to her liking. Since she would consider it a degrading act

⁶³ Anita Desai, *In Custody* (London: Heinemann, 1984), p. 145.

on his part. The inner conflicts of Devan run on parallel lines with those of Sarala. Like a typical Indian wife she is a regular practitioner of the act of repression with its negative and disastrous consequences. Karen Horney points out that

quite often the repression of aggression against the male drains all her vital energy. The woman then feels helpless to meet life. She will shift the entire responsibility for her helplessness on to man, robbing him the very breath of life.⁶⁴

So it is the fear of losing one's pedestal position, the power to control and "own" her completely that contributes to his deviant behaviour. Deven, like the majority, is enslaved to "... an idea which is at first a *modus res considerandi*, a way of regarding becomes a form which strikes its imprint upon the insight. We begin to regard things typically: in types, then stereotypes."⁶⁵

The inherent rhythm in Desai's narrative movement transforms the lived experiences into artistic reality. Here she uses the process of psychologizing or seeing through:

Psychologizing goes on whenever reflection takes place in terms other than those presented. It respects an interior, not evident intention; it searches for a hidden clock work, a ghost in the machine, an etymological root, something, more than meets the eye; or it sees another eye. It goes on whenever we move to a deeper level.⁶⁶

This is what is done by Desai. Desai brings to light the highly contradictory values,

⁶⁴Karen Horney, *Feminine Psychology* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1967), p. 111.

⁶⁵ James Hillman, *Re-Visioning Psychology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), p. 144.

⁶⁶*Ibid.*, p. 135.

divergent ways of living and powerful circumstances that keep the individual “in custody”. We are reminded of the lines by Narendra Patil:

Circumstances
 have slapped down a suit
 on burning thoughts
 in my minds!
 They’ve put all burning mind
 in custody.⁶⁷

The patriarchal ideology is in a way responsible for keeping women in custody. The root of female oppression and the resultant conflicts is traced back to this ideology. The woman becomes ‘angst’-ridden when she is kept in custody by an ideology that allows her no freedom. She becomes claustrophobically inactive and her self is buffeted by emotional conflicts and mordant pessimism. The denial of rights and privileges, unfulfilled desires and the re-contre of her two selves lead to the decentering of the self. The edgy moments of the self, its longing for a tangent to achieve wholeness and the turbulence created by the internalized inferiority feelings of the female self are adequately mirrored by Desai. There may be imperfections in this mirrored world, but the most important and fundamental thing is to convey the warp and weft of mind with all its sincerity. What one feels is that conflicts are the main connecting thread running through every novel of Desai. These conflicts take on extra significance because of their psychic territoriality. We are duly reminded of Jung’s famous saying that “. . . the human psyche is the womb of all the sciences and art.”⁶⁸

⁶⁷Narendra Patil, “Exhalation”, trans., Shanta Gokhale, *Poison Bread: Translations from Modern Marathi Literature*, ed. Arjun Dangle (Bombay: Orient Paperbacks, 1992), p. 23.

⁶⁸C.G. Jung, “Psychology and Literature”, *Twentieth Century Criticism*, ed. David Lodge (London: Longman, 1988), p. 175.

6.3 Losing Battles

Most of Desai's novels deal with conflicts created by the stratification of men above women. This power over women down the ages has created a powerful image of man as a patriarch, law giver or a "boss" or a person who is in charge of women's life. With a new awareness penetrating the minds of women, their attitude towards the existing socio-familial environment becomes polemic. The appetitive need for a new self-image and the recurrent trope of transformed women are the direct results of conflicts according to Desai.

In *Cry, the Peacock*, Desai in a very subtle manner brings out the conflicts created by patriarchal ideology. She implies very effectively that there is no hope of woman achieving wholeness and self-actualizing if she subscribes to patriarchy. Maya is the victim, the deprived woman in this novel. Her father and her husband Gautama represent the patriarchal order. Maya's conflicts generate an all consuming resentment against these two "masters" in her life: The conflicts become very intense when her awareness gains a focus. Her life has become "a world no longer in control of itself. A force existing in another sphere had taken it over, was altering it into something fierce, strange" ⁶⁹ This force is the byproduct of this new awareness which shakes her out of her complacency. She makes an attempt to disengage herself from the psychic burden of dread, anguish and nausea. "The pressure was tremendous, suffocating. My feet dragged and my body pushed against the resident atmosphere, as though I were wading. Wading out of my depth. It was all strange, deathly strange." ⁷⁰

She is unable to swim forcefully against this depressive cognitive schemata

⁶⁹Anita Desai, *Cry, the Peacock* (New Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 1980), p. 184.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 184.

influence. She is victimized by the so called plastic passions of guilt, anxiety, bitterness, frustration and resentment. They make women passive. Maya feels entrapped in a loveless marriage. "Had there been a bond between us, he would have felt its pull, I thought of him so deeply. But of course there was none."⁷¹ The low self-esteem along with non-understanding husband causes depression and helplessness in Maya. She becomes psychotic. She loses her sense of self and is uncertain about her values and choices. She feels that he is her persecutor and if she wants to survive he has to be killed. In a psychotically charged atmosphere she kills Gautama. Under emotional stress, she not only commits murder but also commits suicide.

Maya's soliloquy bears testimony to the fact that she tries to substitute her mother for Gautama, like a person who is psychotic:

And so there was gratitude amidst all my other feelings when I turned and saw him comeback, pulling a fine muslin shirt over his bathed body, his face set in a frame that was remote, reflective and yet not without a tenderness that come from relaxation. Tenderness. At that moment, I felt it for him, deeply in a rush.⁷²

There is a powerful motivation among these women to use these men as substitute mothers. In other words it is a caricature of femininity which develops under the influences of cultural forces, particularly male domination. General studies indicate the fact that depressed individuals show enhanced encoding of negatively toned information to positively toned information. This can even make a person hysteric. Hysteria was often confused with demonic possession. It was derived from the Greek word hyster, meaning uterus. Psychological studies have categorically proved that hysteria is a women's effort

⁷¹Ibid., p. 108.

⁷²Anita Desai, *Cry, the Peacock*. (New Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 1988), p. 202.

to maintain her relationship with man, often in a sexually provocative manner. Maya is forebodingly silent at times when she interacts with Gautama. Gautama's inability to understand her trauma makes her feel that

... I am there Alone
 Forlornly, Silently
 Play in the evening garden
 Myself with me⁷³

It is Maya's obsession with self-defeating conflicts that finally contributes to her tragedy. We are reminded of what Albert Camus once said that the art of suicide is prepared within the silence of the heart as in the great work of art. The integration of all our emotions take place in amygdala in the brain.

The Electro-encephalogram (EEG) Electro-oculogram (EOG) and Electro-myogram (EMG) record electro chemical changes that take place in the brain when neurosis occurs. A normal person screens the incoming sensory stimuli and he is able to match them against the information stored in the memory. But in a depressed person there is distortion and misinterpretation of incoming sensory stimuli. So the self-image will be defective as it is based on false precepts. Most studies have demonstrated a reduced number of 3H-imipramine-binding sites in depressed patients. "All mental activities (behaviour, thoughts, feelings) are paired with biological events in the brain."⁷⁴

Adverse experiences in childhood also make a person prone to delusion in adult life. Maya feels that the "mnemonic" words from her childhood haunt her. She hallucinates:

⁷³Walter De Lamaire, *Poetry: 1870 to 1914* ed. Bernard Bergonze (London: Longman, 1980), p. 102.

⁷⁴Jack. A. Grebb, "Neural Science", *Comprehensive Text Book of Psychiatry* ed. Harold I Kaphan, Benjamin J. Sadock (Baltimore: Williams & Welkins, 1989), p. 1.

. . . I conjure up odours and temperatures out of the air, seeking to recreate the world I have lost, and succeeded in summoning up a host of visions, so brilliant, that they sear me and annihilate me, my body and surroundings, and I am torn between two worlds — the receding one of grace, the approaching one of madness. My body breaks in the battle.⁷⁵

“The receding one of grace” definitely signifies the empowered self, the real self, that will give her actualization.

Shashi Deshpande like Desai has traced the alienation and splintering of the female psyche under the rubrics of sexuality. Like Desai’s heroines Deshpande’s heroines too, struggle for self-actualization. Like Maya in *Cry, the Peacock*. Jaya in *That Long Silence* feels trapped in her marriage. Jaya says that they are “. . . two bullocks yoked together” and that “it is comfortable for them to move in the same direction.”⁷⁶ Desai’s Maya reveals her anger, frustrations and bitterness openly in front of Gautama. Jaya on the other hand feels she cannot display her anger openly. She confesses to Kamat, her friend that “. . . there is no space for anger in my life, no room for despair either.”⁷⁷ Like Maya, Jaya also becomes neurotic. Both have an obsession about death. Jaya hallucinates that her husband is dead. She fabricates the death scene in her imagination.

Perhap’s he’d fallen out of the train . . . Perhap’s he’d had a heart attack . . . Perhap’s he’d been runover. They would bring his body home and then carry away again. *Raam naam satya hai* they would chant as they took him away. And I would lie down

⁷⁵Anita Desai, *Cry, the Peacock* (New Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 1980), p.177.

⁷⁶Shashi Deshpande, *That Long Silence*, (New Delhi: Penguin, 1990), p. 11.

⁷⁷Ibid., p. 147.

here and watch shadows move along the walls, the ceiling: *Ram
naam satya hai.*⁷⁸

But Maya not only contemplates the death of her persecutor but also makes it a possibility. She feels that only her husband's death can "free" her from the boiling pot of her miseries.

Shashi Deshpande, like Desai, feels the sex-role training is given in the Indian society from the beginning. This is endorsed in many ways. The myths, epics, folk tales, and customs and belief systems force women to remain in a subjective position. From childhood itself they are made conscious of their limitations — of the limited space that they should occupy. It is always hinted that one who crosses the boundary will always be rejected socially. Shashi Deshpande highlights this fact through Mira, in her novel *The Binding Vine*. Mira's poems unravel the powerful indoctrination of these values: Mira writes about the advice given to the girls when they get married:

Don't tread paths barred to you
obey, never utter a 'no',
Submit and your life will be
a paradise, she said and blessed me.⁷⁹

It is this submission that is perpetuated by the dominant ideology. Urmila, Mira's daughter-in-law, probes the misery experienced by the latter. Mira's son Kishore also typifies a patriarch. His step sister Vaana is also forced into patriarchy's straight jacket. This fact is revealed by Urmila's criticism about Harish's behaviour. She vehemently tells Vaana to force Harish, so that he helps her in cleaning the house:

Urmila: Why can't Harish help?
Vaana : He comes home so tired . . .'

⁷⁸Ibid., p. 137.

⁷⁹Shashi Deshpande *The Binding Vine* (New Delhi: Penguin, 1992), p. 83.

Urmila: 'You know Vanaa, what you're going to become, coping with everything, the way you are?'

Vaana : 'What ?'

Urmila: 'A super woman'

Vaana : Good ! And doesn't that make Harish a super man?'

Urmila: 'No, a super brat'.⁸⁰

Urmila feels suffocated by this attitude of Vanaa. She feels that only by asserting oneself, one can escape from being exploited. The evil connotations of patriarchy has its breeding ground in self inflicted emptiness and powerlessness of Indian women.

Deshpande's *That Long Silence* also probes the issue of patriarchy. Jaya, the heroine in the novel is a writer. She feels helpless before the constraints of society and family. Her anxiety is compounded by her repressed anger against the objectless existence of women in general. She feels that, how to achieve sovereignty will be a timeless question as "... the real picture, the real 'you' never emerges. Looking for it is as bewildering as trying to know how you look. Ten different mirrors show you ten different faces."⁸¹

Here the "mirror" gains added significance. Luce Irigaray is a psycho analyst who has given a wider feminist perspective for the mirror. She uses the word speculum (a concave mirroring medical instrument) to bring forth the importance of woman mirroring her own self and not the self that is fabricated by the patriarchy. According to her a woman even when she looks in the mirror, reflects the image created by man, a defective image which gives emphasis to what she lacks, compared to men. Luce Irigaray goes to the extent of saying that "where woman does not reflect man, she does not exist and will never exist until the Oedipus complex is exploded and the "feminine feminine" is

⁸⁰Ibid., p. 81.

⁸¹Shashi Deshpande, *That Long Silence* (New Delhi: Penguin, 1989), p. 1.

released from its repression.”⁸² It is this a new self-concept, which is entirely free from the traditional constraints that women need for becoming actualizers in life.

Sashi Deshpande brings forth conflicts through dialogues. The whole theme, and the perspectives of the novelist are expounded through dialogue. When Deshpande creates a scenic form of life through powerful dialogue, Desai uses iterative narration to bring out the essence of life. These two writers point out that patriarchal ideology is powerful because of their systematic indoctrinations of the fact that woman needs someone to protect her, marriage can ensure her safety and that she is inferior and weak. The family, more than any institution, perhaps woman herself, has encouraged patriarchy. How Desai and Deshpande have brought forth this particular issue can be scrutinized. Sita in *Where Shall We Go This Summer* feels alienated from her husband. But her rejection towards the end gives way to “. . . a positive cyclone of feminine instinct a mental reckoning . . .”⁸³ at the sight of her husband Raman. She feels that “neither the sea nor the sky was separate or contained — they rushed in to each other in a rush of light and shade impossible to disentangle”. In *Voices in the City* Otima, the mother who loses her daughter Monisha is described thus: “She no longer needed him, nor her other children. She was a woman fulfilled — by the great tragedy of her daughter’s suicide — and it was, he saw, what she had always needed to fulfil her:

Tragedy. Her life so far had been a dazzling sketch but incomplete without a back ground, for oh, the background provided by a slack, sprawling drunkard, absurd in his too tight silk coat and a flimsy glass of liquor trembling in his hand, it

⁸² Rose Marie Tong, *Feminist Thought: A Comprehensive Introduction* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), p. 227.

⁸³ Anita Desai, *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* (New Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 1982), p.129.

had never fitted, she had preferred to do without it.⁸⁴

Her daughter Amla confesses that her parents' marriage must have been something of a financial settlement. Otima, Monisha's mother, is subsumed by this ideology. But she who had suffered so much allows her daughter to be "moulded" or "fixed", just the way the ideology wants her to be. Right from childhood, marriage is posed the be-all and end-all of woman's life.

Dr. Bhaskar Jain in Deshpande's *The Binding Vine* asks Urmila why Shakutai, the much oppressed and tortured woman in the frame work of marriage longs for her daughter Kalpana's marriage. Through Urmila, Deshpande interprets the psychology of an average Indian woman:

Urmila : 'One always hopes one's children will get more out of life than one has. And women like Kalpana's mother do find something in marriage'.

Bhaskar: 'What?'

Urmila : 'Security. You are safe from other men.'

Bhaskar: 'Oh come on . . .'

Urmila : 'It's true, Even if it hasn't worked out for her, it usually gives them that guarantee of safety. It takes much greater courage to dispense with a man's protection.'⁸⁵

Bharathi Mukherjee in her novel *Wife* highlights the fact that woman herself is responsible for exacerbating her oppression within the family. Mukherjee portrays how this indoctrination affects the female psyche through Dimple Das Gupta. The Novel begins thus: "She fantasized about young men with mustaches, dressed in spotless white, peering into opened skulls. Marriage would bring her freedom, cocktail parties

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 153.

⁸⁵ Shashi Deshpande, *The Binding Vine* (New Delhi: Penguin, 1993), p. 88.

“... on carpeted lawns, fund-raising dinners for the noble charities. Marriage would bring her love.”⁸⁶

How tortuous it is for the female psyche to be crushed by this ideology, is pinpointed by Nayantara Sahgal in her novel *Storm in Chandigarh*. Dubey remarks that it can be very suffocating for two totally different individuals to be bound forever in marriage. He feels

that can happen only in a country like this which produces people of such vastly different traditions. And a thin veneer of Westernization succeeds in fooling people that they come from the same past. Get two people unlike together in marriage and every effort at growth on the part of one can look like an act of betrayal to the other.⁸⁷

Desai stands apart from her contemporary writers as her characters display a rare intensity and psychological depth. In her fictional canvas characters dominate. The action is thus subordinate to the psyche of the character. Even the minutest feeling of the character is traced with all its sincerity. Her focalization is character and it evokes not only a visual sense but is broadened to include, cognitive, ideological and philosophical orientations. We feel that “... the metonymic relation between external appearance and character traits has remained a powerful resource in the hand of many writers”,⁸⁸ especially Desai. For examining and attacking the prejudices and exploitation of women, Desai has obsessively created fiercely independent, docile and neurotic

⁸⁶Bharathi Mukherjee, *Wife* (London: Penguin, 1992), p.3.

⁸⁷Nayantara Sahgal, *Storm in Chandigarh* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1969), p. 166.

⁸⁸Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* (London: Methuen, 1983), p. 65.

women characters. She feels that there should be an authentic space and original female tradition for women. There is an intensity about the characters that stands apart. Desai is able to perceive that the cure for immured female self lies in the new self-concept, and self-realization. The author has carefully sewn together the irreconcilable contradictions of gender and stereotyping, the cultivated accents of acquiescence, “. . . the dailiness of women’s lives. . . ”⁸⁹ and the changing parameters of her life. The unique thing is that she reminds us of the importance of integrating women’s potential. In her writings “the truths we are salvaging from, the splintering open of our lives are the connecting links, the nexus in which experience is transformed into meaning, into a way of knowing.”

All these women novelists have encapsulated the conflicts galore experienced by Indian women. They have delineated very powerfully the “coping mechanism” used by women. The relationship is unbalanced and hence generates conflicts. No matter how much development or progress we achieve the plight of women will remain the same unless the psychological aspect of patriarchy is altered through education and annihilation of the psychological role-slots in which men and women are locked.

6.4 Battles Fought and Unfought

In Indian society the patriarchal voice of judgement prevails in every aspect of a woman’s life. It assigns asymmetrical values to male and female. It affects adversely a woman’s ability to signify. She stands on the battle-field on the conflicted ground — where she has to battle against her traditional self-image and against the irreconcilable contradictions of “dis-eased” and infected patriarchal value system. Sheela Rowbotham a socialist feminist suggests that

. . . in order to create an alternative, an oppressed group must

⁸⁹Bettina Apteker, *Tapestries of Life* (Amherst: Univ. of Massachusettes Press, 1989), p.37.

alone shatter the self-reflecting world which encircles it, and at the same time, project its own image on to history. In order to discover its own identity as distinct from that of the oppressor, it has to become visible to itself.⁹⁰

We feel that repression indeed is the most powerful weapon that is used against women. This has been instrumental in their disillusionment as it constantly shattered their self-worth. Indian woman clings on to the false image which is inscribed in her psyche. The psyche experiences loss and feels that

... the daily life constantly reminds us that gendered subjectivity is a fragile construction, a gossamer web that weaves and reweaves itself. We live with (often painful) awareness that subjectivity is demanding and requires constant negotiation against heavy odds. We are surprised and frustrated at the gaps between what we want to say and what we can say, at the grandeur of our desires and the poverty of our accomplishment.⁹¹

Anita Desai is a root worker, who excavates and projects the many battles that are fought and unfought against the subjectivity of women. Her women characters are all caught up in this repressed vacillation of gender or the instability of identity. In spite of rigid compartmentalization and slotting, the relationship overlaps and intercepts in many ways generating powerful conflicts, within the existing system. Women are caught in the strangling grip of conflicts as the real nature of woman, her true self is distorted or repressed within the existing frame work. According to Desai in patriarchal societies

⁹⁰Quoted in Helen Diner, *Mothers and Amazons*, (New York: Anchor Press, 1965), p. 11.

⁹¹Shari Benstock, *Textualizing the Feminine: on the Limits of Genre*, (Norman: Oklahoma Univ. Press, 1991), p. 195.

the emotional conflicts become “ . . . a great monster, ennui, as a kind of primal melancholy, a compensation of apathy and boredom which is rendering the subject claustrophobically inactive, also brings painful hypersensitivity and nervousness”.⁹²

Desai has highlighted the fact that the potential forms of resistance against traditional femininity contributed to emotional conflicts. This resistance has also generated distrust between the sexes. The subjectivity of women is partly due to their exclusion from socio-political set up. Man’s inability to control women, and his distrust of the other sex is rooted in sexuality. According to Karen Horney:

man’s fear of woman is deeply rooted in sex, as is shown by the simple fact that it is only the sexually attractive woman of whom he is afraid and who, although he strongly desires her has to be kept in bondage.⁹³

In psychoanalytic theory subjectivity of the female is defined in terms of lack and the women are then tied to the age old concept of femininity. Undue importance is given to this “lack” or “defect” in woman from childhood itself. In *The History of Sexuality* Foucault says that sex is the focal point in society through which individuals assert their power and control their counterparts. To the marginalized, the inequalities that exist in society may appear natural as they relate it to the rational product of sexuality. This is the reason why boys and girls from a very early stage are given different social and psychological orientation. In other words:

. . . the day to day practice of education and socialization constitutes differences in strength and skills between girls and boys,

⁹²Peter Nicholls, *Modernisms: A Literary Guide* (London: Mac Millan, 1995), p. 7.

⁹³Karen Horney, *Feminine Psychology* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1967), p. 112.

endowing individuals with specific perceptions of their identity and potential, which appear natural to the subjected individual, rather than as the product of diffuse form of power.⁹⁴

This also contributes to many conflicts in the minds of girl children. Desai draws our attention to this particular conflict in *Clear Light of Day* and *Cry, the Peacock*. In *Clear Light of Day*, Bim and Tara are curious to know why Raja is so different from them. Bim, especially envies his freedom and wants to know what exactly gives him so much of freedom. Wearing Raja's trousers Bim feels that

great possibilities unexpectedly opened up now they had their legs covered so sensibly and practically and no longer needed to worry about what lay beneath ballooning frocks and what was so imperfectly concealed by them. Why did girls have to wear frocks? Suddenly they saw why they were so different from their brother, so inferior and negligible in comparison: it was because they did not wear trousers. Now they thrust their hands into their pockets and felt even more superior as if in simply owning pockets one owned rushes, owned independence.⁹⁵

The question “why should a girl wear frock?” definitely throws light on the boundless power sexuality has on children. We also feel that women are defined in terms of their relationship with men. The sex role stereotyping is rooted in the family. The roles are defined and fixed in advance and are made to appear natural. This leads to self-effacement in some, with no focussed consciousness. But in some with more

⁹⁴Chris Weedon, *Feminist Practise & Post-Structuralist Theory* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), p. 121.

⁹⁵Anita Desai, *Clear Light of Day* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980), p. 132.

than ordinary awareness it triggers many conflicts. Bim searches for an answer while Tara her sister accepts it as a natural process. Maya in *Cry, the Peacock* envies her brother Arjuna. She is very much conscious about the “difference” between them. Desai uses the metaphor of kites to bring forth the effects of this doctrination. Maya is pruned by her father for playing the traditional role whereas Arjuna is free like a hawk, who always fought against oppression. The following extract confirms the afore-said argument, “Mine were awkward kites and they never lost their earth bound inclination. Arjuna’s were birds — hawks, eagles, swallows in the wind.”⁹⁶ This emphasizes the unlimited freedom enjoyed by men in general.

Maya meekly submits to the conflicts. But Bim fights against them with a purpose and that is the purpose of achieving wholeness. Maya’s neurosis can be traced back to her implicit sexual orientation that disrupts the potential of the female. According to Michel Foucault, “the family was the crystal in the deployment of sexuality: it seemed the source of a sexuality which it actually, only reflected and diffracted.”⁹⁷

Feminist discourses have always tried to find out whether this sexuality is biological or psycho-sociological. “Is sexual difference biological?” was the question that challenged feminists. Freud was the first one to give it a psychological perspective. The androcentrism of Freud culminated in pronouncing women as constitutionally weak and inferior. He completely overlooked the importance of gender identity and the fact that gender and sex are closely connected to a person’s image building. The term gender was first used by Stoller. Psychoanalysis began to probe the relation between individual and society. Erich Fromm and Reich who used socialist principles for research concluded

⁹⁶Anita Desai, *Cry, the Peacock*, (New Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 1965), p. 135.

⁹⁷Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction*, trans., Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), p. 111.

that the family was responsible for derogation of women and that sexuality is not natural.

Most of the feminists along with psychoanalysts and psychologists feel that the pattern of gender relation is social rather than biological. It exploded Freud's theory that woman's inferiority was due to the biological "lack" and that the subjectivity of woman is but natural. Lacan gave importance to the mirror stage in which the child strives for a false sense of mastery and wholeness.

The Lacanian theory rests on this two part assertion that the infant subject although born with recognizable biological sex characteristics becomes a gendered sex only when it takes its place as a "she or he". The only signifier for sexuality is the phallus.⁹⁸

Lacan concludes by saying that woman can only be written without the definite article. Thus he too denies woman a universal status. Derrida's law of genre operates psychically. The difference between the sexes is a difference within the gender and it is contaminated by the genre. So there is conflict between subjectivity and autonomy. There are many kinds of sexual exclusivity that are imposed on women socially and psychologically. Psychoanalysis has made many valuable contribution in this field. Stoller makes an emphatic distinction between sex and gender. According to him sex is biological, gender psychological and so, a part of acculturation process. Gender is a term that has psychological and cultural connotations rather than biological. If the proper terms for sex are "male" and "female", the corresponding terms for gender are masculine and feminine. The latter may be quite independent of biological sex. Kate Millet in her *Theory of Sexuality* argues that our social circumstances along with asymmetrical value systems very powerfully influence gender identity. She says that:

⁹⁸Shari Benstock, *Textualizing the Feminine: On the Limits of Genre* (Norman: Oklahoma Univ. Press, 1991), p. 14.

while we may niggle over the balance of authority between the personalities of various households, one must remember that the entire culture supports masculine authority in all areas of life and outside of the home — permits the female none at all.⁹⁹

The cultural policing that is done contributes to the double standard that exists in society. This has permeated in to all spheres of activity and contributed to male superiority and the reification of the female. Woman is hence denied an equal status, rights and privileges. Down the ages till the beginning of the 19th century she was looked upon as an object of sensuality. Michel Foucault feels that repression has indeed been the fundamental link between power and knowledge and sexuality since the classical age, it stands to reason that we will not be able to free ourselves from it except at a considerable cost”¹⁰⁰ And repression was felt more by women than men in the established structure. Great philosophers, law givers and writers gave her an image that centred around nothing but subjectivity. Demosthenes, Xenophon and Solon, have all, according to Foucault, tried to tie women indissociably to the confines of home. Demosthenes in *Against Neera* says that men can keep mistresses for the sake of pleasure, “concubines for the daily care of our persons, but wives to bear us legitimate children and to be faithful guardians of our household. ”¹⁰¹

Women were inevitably bound by social and juridical status. To homogenize, to interpret the complex ensemble of psycho-social relations which marginalize women becomes an ordeal for feminists and women activists. Women writers articulate the

⁹⁹Kate Millet *Sexual Politics*, (New York: Doubleday, 1970), p. 31.

¹⁰⁰ Michel Foucault , *The History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction*(New York: Vintage Books, 1990), p. 5.

¹⁰¹ Michel Foucault, *The Uses of Pleasure, Volume II: The History of Sexuality* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), p. 143.

misery of these oppressed and silent women. The penetrative imagination of Desai has etched the battles that are fought within the “conjugal cell”.

Desai’s views regarding the role of woman in marriage has a psychoanalytic perspective. The focus will be on that which causes the conflict between men and women in this particular frame work? What are the battles that are left unfought and why are they so . . .? Desai seeks an answer by highlighting the psychological facet which concerns self and the emotions. She focalizes on the cognitive and emotive orientation of women. When we vocalize our “difference” the battle ensues. Tradition has always insisted on women to embrace silence and docility to make their marriage successful. They have to reach wholeness through their husbands, rather than achieving their own identity. But when marriage becomes a “conjugal cell” for oppression, her self is shattered to pieces. Monisha in Desai’s *Voices in The City* is obsessed with the “dailiness” of her life. “The concept of dailiness is a structuring principle in woman’s life according to Suzanne Juhasz.”¹⁰² It emphasizes the spatial and temporal arrangements in a woman’s life. The monotony of dailiness is voiced through Monisha. Monisha is immobilized by this dailiness. Monisha feels that if one meekly submits to the existing system, one will survive. Those who wage war are “beaten down, spurned, turned away into an anonymous solitude . . .”¹⁰³ She is rejected by her husband Jiban who is enmeshed in a power structure. Monisha in fact echoes the feeling of many repressed women who interiorize that “anatomy is destiny”.¹⁰⁴ Being a woman she is to be secluded, confined and delimited in her movements. Her husband Jiban’s indifference and lack of understanding subjects her to the inexorable silence. Monisha fights her battle, in silence. She

¹⁰²Helen Diner, *Mothers and Amazons* (New York: Anchor Press, 1965),p.60.

¹⁰³Anita Desai, *Voices in the City* (New Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 1965), p.128.

¹⁰⁴Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One*, trans., Catherine Porter et. al., (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press), p.71.

is forced to resubject herself to the slavery in the family. Desai gives a gripping account of the oscillations and diremptions through which Monisha's consciousness passes, seeking wholeness, an identity of her own. Monisha's battles are fought within herself. The encounter is between her aspirations for getting autonomy and the primordial consciousness that compels her to abandon her search for autonomy and self-certainty. Monisha's monologue before she commits suicide epitomises the thwarted agony of a self's long peregrinations of consciousness towards an adequate self-concept. The internal thrust of the thwarted emotions manifests in her suicide which becomes ominous and ineluctable. Monisha's conflicts are revealed in these lines:

I am different from them all. They put me away in a steel container, a thick glass cubicle, and I have lived it all my life, without a touch of love or hate or warmth on me. I am locked apart from all of them, they cannot touch me, they can only lip-read and misinterpret. Similarly I cannot really hear them.¹⁰⁵

The very interiority of the image, "thick glass cubicle" and "steel container" its apparent fixity, the mirage of coherence and the turbulent sensation it evokes fall in the psychoanalytic tradition. Here the essential self is always at war when it confronts the hostile milieu. The demands of the rigid, real life situations thwart the self's entire cognitive development. According to Freud neurotic conflict will not be resolved unless the psychic drives are completely brought into harmony with the outer world. Desai suggests that

femininity is a role, an image, a value imposed upon women by male systems of representations. In this masquerade of feminin-

¹⁰⁵Anita Desai, *Voices in the City* (New Delhi: Orent Paperbacks, 1965), p. 239.

ity, the woman loses herself, and loses herself by playing femininity.¹⁰⁶

The ineludible battles are fought by women who are capable of re-vision — the act of looking back or of seeing with fresh eyes what a woman is and what her prerogatives are. It is finally the woman's sense of herself embattled, possessed with a new consciousness that generates dynamic energy that creates a new self-concept. The battles fought by these "revisionist women" focuses on uncertainty and indeterminacy experienced by women within the marital framework. Desai captures very well the hurt, humiliation, distrust, cheating and temperamental incompatibility of the husband and wife. Monisha tries to defend herself but fails and that it generates self-destructiveness that subsumes her self. Caught up in the frightening acceleration of disappointments and existential agony she ends her conflicts thus:

terrible heat seared her eyeballs — a great fog enveloped her, not the white one of her dreams but black, acrid, thick — and god the pain! Here it was, on her eyes, her face, here it came — there, all over — with her arms she wrestled with it, she fought it, it was not what she wanted — she screamed No! No! No!.¹⁰⁷

This is a situation arising out of specific psychological oppression. Monisha who wants to experience desire, to experience feeling which is real and authentic, feels defeated.

According to Lacan desire is a function central to all human experience. There are two kinds of desires — desire experienced in the conscious, which belongs to the other (internalized cultural and social values) and the desire of the impossible organized

¹⁰⁶Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One* trans., Catherine Porter et.al. (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press), p. 84.

¹⁰⁷Anita Desai, *Voices in the City* (New Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 1965), p.240.

around a primordial lack, a longing for wholeness or completeness, that the subject feels can be fulfilled. Desai, the author, is definitely re-enacting a psycho analytic situation where the protagonist “recognizes unnameable unassuageable desire.”¹⁰⁸ Lacan interprets the situation thus:

We can distinguish desire - which belongs to the Other, is experienced as “alien” and whose “discourse” is the unconscious — from “desire”, which belongs to conscious life but cannot perceive its relation to desire. Blinded to the other side of desire, the subject wants to see itself in command of its attachments to objects and people. This second kind of desire participates in transference, seeking an “other” with whom to establish a relationship which is complementary. The transference is doomed to failure (it is known by its failure), precisely because no other can assuage Other’s Desire.¹⁰⁹

Monisha’s suicide can be explained as a search for the “other space” or “New Space” which exists outside the realms of patriarchy.

¹⁰⁸ Shari Benstock, *Textualizing the Feminine: On the Limits of Genre* (Norman: Univ. Oklahoma Press, 1991), p. 11.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p.11.

CHAPTER VII

TRANSEFFECTING IDENTITY

According to Desai it is the overarching conceptualization of patriarchy that should change. It should integrate a positive attitude which will encourage women to achieve their identity. Desai implies how important the co-existence is for man and woman:

. . . closeness, the other's presence, living side by side, are presented not simply as duties, but as an aspiration characteristic of the relationship, that should join husband and wife. They may each have their roles; there is no question of their doing without each other.¹

It should unlock the social and familial system that keeps men and women in echochambers.

Maya longs for this coexistence, and her bitterness against the disintegration of her identity is revealed in these lines. "Don't ask me, Gautama—you can make me tell, you can talk me into anything. You can force me into anything you like if you just keep talking and questioning long enough. But don't drive me Gautama, don't drive me".² The nearly volcanic heaving of Maya's consciousness is due to this ceaseless displacement of her real self within the patriarchal structure. She struggles over an explicit and habitual trick of silencing that is done by the existing system. Desai feels that "women and men function as mutual signifier and signifieds".³ The disintegration of

¹Michel Foucault, *The Care of the Self, The History of Sexuality*, Vol. III, trans., Robert Hurley (London: Penguin 1984), p.160.

²Anita Desai, *Cry the Peacock* (New Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 1965), p. 169.

³Carolyn G. Heilbrun, *The Representation of Women in Indian Fiction*, ed. Margaret R. Higonet (London: The John Hopkins, Univ. Press, 1983), p. xviii.

the self is but an inherent part of the struggle for cohesiveness and self-recognition. For Maya extremity is a familiar condition and she swings wildly from one clutched emotion to another. She is impaled upon the cross of psychosis which topples her into a primitive, and utterly neurotic person. Her pain and incredible agony are drawn in these fevered lines. Desai's Maya becomes a Janus-faced creature combining in her terrible anxiety intellectual courage and emotional cowardice. Vivian Gornick feels that:

caught as we are, thrashing around inside a skin, that wishes simultaneously both to conquer existence and simply to walk away from it, we are driven ever more deeply into ourselves. It is the true direction of life; to penetrate that circle, to get to the heart of it all, to free ourselves by struggling inward. To be defeated by the effort. To lose the battle on a grand scale. To go mad much more than suicide, madness in the symbolic illness of life. And fighting so much harder, travelling from so much further a distance toward that magical centre, women — more than men — go mad. Madness is in the female vein.⁴

This is exactly the predicament of Maya. Like Maya, Monisha too longs for love. Both feel that it is the very essence of life. Monisha feels that she and her brother fear love as they induce attachment that enslaves one's self. She longs for a different kind of love. "If only love existed that is not binding, that is free from rules, and obligations, complicity and all stirrings of mind or conscience, then — but there is no such love."⁵

⁴ Vivian Gornick, "Woman as an Outsider" *Woman in Sexist Society: Studies in Power & Powerlessness*, eds. Vivian Gornick et. al. (New York: Basic Books, 1971), p.74.

⁵ Anita Desai, *Voices in the City* (New Delhi: Orient Paperbacks 1965), p.135

Maya also longs for this love that is culturally transmitted and inscribed in a woman's psyche. *Cry, the Peacock* symbolizes for Maya, the cry of a fragmented self that strives for wholeness. And the wholeness can be attained only through love, that subsumes the self. Love, Maya realizes like Monisha is full of imperfections. It has the negative markings of patriarchy. Love is valorized and it is the only emotion that can give woman wholeness. Her existence can be signified only through love. This is the concept on which femininity thrives. It is not education, knowledge and awareness that can give women an identity, but love. It is the concept that divides the self of woman and causes much dilemma. Maya is conscious about the negative aspect of love. Desai uses powerful images to illustrate that man's love is like a shadow, "a net" which entraps women down the ages. It assures protection but provides none, but catches her:

... surely as a giant fisherman striding through the shallows of moonlit seas, throws his fine net with one brief, expert motion and knows, as it settles with a falling whisper upon the still water, that he will find in it a catch: I had not escaped. The years caught up, and how the final, the decisive one held me in its perspiring clasp from which release seemed impossible.⁶

Like Nanda Kaul and Ila Das in *Fire on the Mountain*, Sarah in *Bye-Bye Blackbird*, Sophie in *Journey to Ithaca*, Sita in *Where Shall We Go This Summer* is also a victim of this so called "love" that dehumanizes women. Sita is unable to make an existential choice in the arbitrary ground of patriarchy which binds her to her family. She struggles against the "character armour" that is placed on her. She is thoroughly dissatisfied and feels that all her life she has relegated her autonomy and freedom.

⁶Anita Desai, *Cry, the Peacock* (New Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 1965), p.95

According to J.G. Masilamani there are two protests that she registers:

One is a protest against society and its violence . . . the other is her personal protest against the role her husband and children had designed for her — a breeding machine, a broody hen, an incubator.⁷

Sita's escape to Manori seems to be a flight from the constraints of traditional womanhood. She becomes acutely aware of her Oedipal relations. She is convinced, more or less, that the traditional family infantilizes women and they never achieve adult ego. "She saw the island as a piece of magic, a magic mirror — it was so bright so brilliant to her eyes after the tensions and shadows of childhood. It took her sometime to notice that this magic too, cast shadows".⁸

Sita's father literally owned the island. The islanders worshipped him. He was an icon, for whom anything was possible. His "Jeevan Ashram" offered the islanders sustenance. Sita too suffers from father fixation. She is a "Freud's woman" in the beginning. She is like Electra, fixated on her father as there is no mother in the offing. But her awareness transforms her and she becomes indecisive as to what to do. So she escapes to Manori. Sita's father fixation ends when she realises that her father was also responsible for her mother deserting them. The painful realisation that her father was cheating the islanders also frees her from her father worship. She feels that the unresolved Oedipal complex will choke her, enslave her. So "she had to struggle to free herself from the chain or she might have spent her life in cold meshes, regarding the enigma of her father, slave to his undefined magic".⁹ Her decision to free herself, to

⁷J.G. Masilamani, "Feminism in Anita Desai", *Kakatiya Journal of English Studies*, 3, No.1, 1978, p.28.

⁸Anita Desai, *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*, (New Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 1982), p.63.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp.87-88.

relinquish her father fixation, shows her emerging new self-concept.

But Sita's battles with Raman become more intense when she becomes pregnant for the fifth time. She is weary, forty years old and this pregnancy impinges on her, her limitation, powerlessness and subjectivity. Her physical condition again drags her back to the feared overwhelming femininity from which she is "in flight" to use a phrase of Karen Horney. She feels trapped. Sita becomes a victim of panic anxiety. Raman scorns Sita's escape to *Manori*, her eccentric behaviour and feels that she is emotional, illogical and impetuous. He feels that a woman's happiness is in the house of her husband.

Self-abnegation is not looked at a sacrifice or compromise, but as a virtue. Raman is shocked when she tells him that the only happy moment in her life was when she saw a man and woman in a very intimate way, in the Hanging Gardens. He feels angry and ashamed of their relationship. He desperately tells that

any woman — any woman one would think you inhuman. You have four children. You have lived comfortably, always in my house. You've not had worries. Yet your happiest memory is not of your children or your home but of strangers, seen for a moment, some lovers in a park. Not even of your own children".¹⁰

This outrage to a certain extent reveals the psychological abuse of a wife in the marital framework. She is always placed within the value frame work. These values become integrated in systems and they endow women with an "object status" — objects endowed with a significant function and that is to become a mother, a wife and also an

¹⁰ Ibid., 147.

object of sexual gratification. Levi Strauss writes: "The reciprocal bond basic to marriage is not set up between men and women, but between men and men, by means of women, who are only the principal occasion for it".¹¹ The patriarchal marriage cannot satisfy women's need for autonomy and connectedness. They long for connectedness with their identity. For this connectedness we require empathy, which is central to an understanding of the aspect of the self that involves "we-ness", transcendence of the separate disconnected self . . . without empathy, there is no intimacy, no real attainment of an appreciation of the paradox of separateness within connections".¹² This lack of sympathy generates struggle between Raman and Sita. Raman towards the end realises his mistakes and is ready to change. This realization makes him say in the end with a lot of warmth, in an empathetic manner: "It wouldn't be bad to give up the factory and come to live here. Do some farming. I'd like that".¹³

Thus the battle between Sita and Raman is resolved. Sita feels that she had enough of emotional drain, battling against her husband, her family. She realises that they are also victimized by the so called ideology. No wonder inspite of her alienation she was inextricably bound to them, through anxiety and guilt.

Her relationship with her daughter Menaka triggers off many conflicts. The daughter is hostile towards her mother and the mother is shockingly indifferent most of the time. Menaka's actions are aimed at Sita, and the intention is explicitly clear — to hurt. Menaka obeys her mother against her angry thoughts and feelings. Menaka tears to

¹¹Quoted in Juliet Mitchell, *Psycho-Analysis & Femininity* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974), p. 373.

¹² Jordan & Surrey, "The Self in - Relation", *The Psychology of Today's Woman: New Psycho - Analytic Visions* eds. Tony Bernay and Dorothy W. Canton (London: Harvard Univ. Press, 1989), p. 85.

¹³ Anita Desai, *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* (New Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 1982), p.151.

pieces a painting of hers, that is appreciated by Sita. She also dislikes her mother's visit to Manori. She feels cheated, lonely and is apprehensive about her admission in the Medical College. All her frustrations are directed at her mother, Sita.

7.1 Fighting for Space

According to Herman and Lewis there are three important stages in which daughters angrily reject their mothers: "The Oedipal, pubertal and young adult periods of life".¹⁴ The child experiences two kinds of power — the nurturant power of mother and the dominant power of father. The girl child especially feels scandalized when she realises that her mother (whom she regards as all powerful) is inferior to her father. It is this awareness to a certain extent that compels her to be different from her mother. Sita's conflicts with Menaka can be explained in terms of psychoanalysis. The daughter challenges Sita's "fabricated peace" with the world. Sita is never at peace with herself or with the world that fragments her identity. Menaka always acts according to her will. She never subjects herself to her mother. Sita, who never had such freedom, to do what she wants. She feels rejected, depressed and terrified by her daughter's self-sufficiency and autonomy. "The more dissatisfied a mother feels with her own life, the greater will be her worry that her daughter might repeat her "mistakes" and the more difficulty she will have tolerating her daughter's attempt to arrive at her own decisions".¹⁵ Sita is terrified by her daughter's action and choices. Sita realises that she cannot remain an outsider for long or live in exile.

Her anguish is the ultimate anguish of women who are smothered, deprived and

¹⁴ Herman and Lewis "Anger in the Mother - Daughter Relationship", *The Psychology of Today's Woman: New Psycho Analytic Visions* eds. Tony Bernay, Dorothy W. Canton (London: Harvard Univ. Press, 1989), p.149.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 156.

manipulated by patriarchy. Atma Ram observes that this novel “describes in artistic terms the tedium and monotony which haunt married women in their later years. It dramatises a powerful struggle between life-denying and life-affirming impulses with a view to achieving harmony in life”.¹⁶

Sita tries to achieve harmony in life but not in the traditional manner, but by creating a “new space” for her. Her true sense of self, her new awareness empowers her with an understanding of her position in the family. It is because of this new understanding that she is able to see Raman in a different perspective. When she resolves her inner conflicts. She conquers the fears that alienate her, that make her an “outsider”.

Nanda Kaul in *Fire on the Mountain* moves away from people. Her self-estrangement is again common to all neuroses. She fights her instinctive drives with a fierce determination. The objective is of course not to get “involved”. All her life she was “involved” whether she wanted it or not. All her life, she was exploited and cheated by her husband for whom she was nothing but an ornament. She feels her children did not have any genuine affection for her. She too wears the character armour and is a product of repression. She feels that she is self-sufficient and resourceful. In Carignano she hopes to get privacy and her independence. But both elude her.

“All her life she wanted was to be alone, to have Carignano, to herself, in this period of her life when stillness and calm were all that she wished to entertain. All her life she longed for stillness”.¹⁷ But she could not, as she was bound to the traditional roles of a wife and mother. To avoid friction, confrontation, she never questions her husband’s affair with Miss David. Nanda Kaul feels threatened and so escapes to Carignano for

¹⁶ Atma Ram, “A View of Where Shall We Go This Summer?”, *Response: Recent Revelations of Indian Fiction in English*. (Bareilly: Prakash Book Depot, 1983), p.246.

¹⁷ Anita Desai, *Fire on the Mountain*, (New Delhi: Allied, 1977), p.17

self-preservation. She avoids commitments and responsibilities. It creates intense conflicts in her. The freedom she aches for is achieved at the cost of self-alienation. She becomes a recluse out of vengeance. Nanda Kaul's alienation brings with it apathy, despair and dejection.

Nanda Kaul feels empty inside, isolated from other men and women. But she tries to fight the vastness and complexity of problems that confront her by resorting to regression. In order to pacify the trauma of the self that feels abandoned, she tries "reconstructing, block by block, by block, of the castle of childhood".¹⁸

She idealizes her father and in fact this is the only thing that comforts her in her solitude. She battles in vain to defend herself against the futility of her existence. Nanda Kaul tries to repress the conflicts of a person who is rejected by the family.

The final confrontation is with her real life situations. It is the arrival of her great grand daughter Raka that precipitates the intense conflicts. Raka was a natural recluse. It was not imposed on her by anyone (unlike her grandmother). It is this realization that shatters the facade of self-sufficiency and independence of Nanda Kaul. All her defence mechanism crumbles when she experiences Raka's indifference, self-sufficiency and autonomy. It threatens her sense of being. According to May:

the overwhelming threats then recede into our unconsciousness.

But through these manoeuvres we deny our own freedom to make choices. We shrink from our responsibilities and reject our own potentialities".¹⁹

Thus Nanda Kaul's behaviour, her isolated existence, according to Desai is largely

¹⁸ Ibid., p.116.

¹⁹ Quoted in Richard. M. Ryckman, *Theories of Personality* (New York: D. Van Nostrand, 1978), p. 367.

based on her previous experiences and due to the hostile environment. She starts the “disowning process”. This disowning process is the disintegration of the pretentious social self when confronted with a crisis. The process gets completed when she takes in the news of Ila Das’s murder. She is unable to withstand the battle between the two negative valences. The two kinds of negative valences she encounters are in the falsity of her existence and her failure to reconstruct her self-hood in isolation, in moving away from people. This isolation was only a mask worn by Nanda Kaul to conceal her longing for utter dependence. The ultimate result of this repression of natural inclination culminates in her death. Ila Das’s murder becomes a tangent and it also dismantles the inauthentic self-hood of Nanda. Modernists consider the dismantling of self as “the way for a new self-at-play” and it also suggests that “the centre cannot hold, may ultimately be resolved into an educated reaffirmation of self-hood, as ‘Look We’ve come through!’”²⁰

Nanda Kaul embodies the predicament of women who are cast away by their families, who are driven to neurosis due to the sinister effects of pessimistic terror. The intensity of emotions which she experiences contribute to her complete breakdown. The already wounded self fails to surface into the clearlight. The tragedy becomes complete when Raka sets the forest on fire. The fire on the mountain symbolizes the inner fire that rages in the heart of lonely, repressed and exploited women who are betrayed by the existing structure. Paul Sharrad observes about the tragedy of Nanda Kaul thus: “When her personal equilibrium is upset, there is nothing for her to fall back on. The gap remaining between transcendent forces and individual cares is so great that only something

²⁰ Dennis Brown, *The Modernist Self in Twentieth Century English Literature: A Study in Self Fragmentations* (London: Mac Millan, 1989), p. 13.

dramatically tragic can fill it".²¹

Another character who wages her battle alone is Ila Das, a friend of Nanda Kaul. Her life itself was a battle, a battle for survival. She is described "as an old animal that has been made to run before the hounds".²² Her family's decline becomes complete, when her brothers squander the family fortune. Not a penny is given to the two sisters, Ila and Rima. Ila is also given the responsibility of looking after her bed-ridden mother. She herself tells "I have had to go from pillar to post, trying to earn fifty rupees here and fifty there, with not a room to call my own most of the time, and it's grown worse".²³

But she was a born fighter. She never tries to escape from the harsh realities of her life like Nanda. It is again her presence that reminds Nanda of her unhappy past and that she was incapable of fighting her battles unlike Ila. In order to keep up her self-deception Nanda Kaul rejects Ila Das. It is again this feeling that she could have averted the tragedy of her friend who trusted and loved her that kills Nanda.

Ila is brutally raped on that particular night, after her visit to Carignano. Preet Singh rapes her in order to take revenge. He tries to get his seven year old daughter married to a very old man for a quarter of an acre of land. Ila bravely fights against this and foils his plan. Preet Singh retaliates in a brutal manner.

Her eyes still swivelled in their sockets, two alarmed marbles of black and white and quickly left the ends of the scarf, tore at her clothes, tore them off her, in long screeching rips, till he came to her, to the dry shrivelled, starved stick inside the wrappings and

²¹ Paul Sharrad, "Tradition and Tragedy: Anita Desai and R.K. Narayan", *The Commonwealth Review*, 2, No.1-2, 1990-91.p.186.

²² Anita Desai, *Fire on the Mountain* (New Delhi: Allied, 1977), p.1.9.

²³ *Ibid.*, p.125.

raped her, pinned her down into dust and the goat droppings and raped her. Crushed back, crushed down into the earth, she lay raped, broken still and finished. Now it was dark”.²⁴

“Every year more than 4000 cases of rape are registered in India. According to an article, every two hours a rape occurs somewhere in India. This means a total of 4,380 rapes per year”.²⁵ The undue importance that is given to the chastity of women has its own psychological repercussions. So once violated or degraded they become untouchables or outcasts. The society looks down upon the rape victims. Caste and class related rapes also exist in Indian society. They are powerful weapons used to silence women.

Desai here presents the hostile environment which humiliates and batters the self of Indian women. It is the most painful ordeal for women to be tortured physically and mentally. Rape is an ultimate physical act of violence against women to control them, to dominate them. It sometimes becomes an act of vengeance. Incidents of rape, abduction and battering of women are increasing in India. They are not isolated incidents. Rape is used to maintain the inequality that exists within the power structure.

Women activists and organisation have raised their voice against rape and other violence against women. The battles are fought not on equal terms and unless women take radical action against this violence, this victimization will continue. The psychological trappings have become so powerful that it requires systematic counter conditioning to empower the self. All the preconceived notions about her position, her role in the family, and in society need change.

²⁴ Ibid, pp. 142-143.

²⁵ Sohaila Abdulabi, “Rape in India: An Empirical Picture”, *Women in Indian Society. A Reader*, ed. Rehana Ghadially (New Delhi: Sage, 1988), p.196.

Desai, through Raka, brings forth the marital violence. Tara, Raka's mother is the helpless victim. She is physically and mentally persecuted by her husband who is an officer in the Indian Foreign Service. Nanda Kaul's daughter accuses Tara of being incapable of making adjustments; women themselves are partly responsible for this atrocity. The parents also force them to conform, to meekly accept their predicament. Raka carries the scars of her mother's victimization. Even when she is far away in Carignano she could visualize "... her father, home from a party, stumbling and crashing through the curtains of night, his mouth opening to let out a flood of rotten stench, beating at her mother with hammers and fists of abuse".²⁶

It is the utter dependence of woman and her lack of awareness that contribute to battering of women. According to Wilhelm Reich:

a repressive society thus automatically produces repressive people; the only way of breaking through this and setting this conflict the other way is by loosening the character armour and releasing and satisfying the sexual instincts. We always get back there in the end.²⁷

The passive nature of woman towards violence is mainly due to the societal and familial suppression. These battles are thus fought on old grounds, but a growing awareness among women has contributed to the essentialist notion of having a mind of their own, a true identity. In *Bye-Bye Blackbird* and *Journey to Ithaca*, Desai has delineated the battles fought by two foreign women. Sarah in *Bye-Bye Blackbird* and Sophie in *Journey to Ithaca* suffer from temperamental incompatibility. Sarah, married to an

²⁶ Anita Desai, *Fire on the Mountain* (New Delhi: Allied Publishers, 1977), p.71.

²⁷ Juliet Mitchell, *Psycho-Analysis and Femininity* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974), p.186.

Indian husband finally resolves her conflicts by deciding to accompany her husband to India. The compromise she makes emboldens her; she does not transfer her sovereignty, her independence, to another person. Her words to her husband “Don’t sally me” confirm the fact that she has achieved autonomy, concretized her identity. She feels empowered to live in an alien country. She doesn’t have any false expectation about her life in India, as revealed in these lines:

. . . She could hardly believe her, to a land where she would regain warmth and personality. If she was to come to life there again, she was sure it would be as a new, a different personality. Perhaps this would make it all easier for her, for Adit, for everyone.²⁸

To Emma she confidently says “I think when I go to India, I will not find it strange after all. I am sure I shall feel quite at home very soon”.²⁹

Matteo and Sophie in *Journey to Ithaca* come to India to share the adventure. Sophie accompanies Matteo “. . . to stay together, to recover their unique and essential love”.³⁰ But in India she realises that the gulf was becoming wider and wider because of Matteo’s neurotic obsession with spiritual enlightenment. She thinks that he is enslaved to the book by Hesse *The Journey to the East*. His search for a guru finally takes him to the ashram in the hills. The guru is a ‘Mother’. Matteo is completely convinced about her power to give him enlightenment. Matteo feels that “she contains — she is the container of a power that gives the world this heightend and illuminated quality”.³¹ He

²⁸ Anita Desai, *Bye Bye Black Bird*, (New Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 1998), p.221.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 219.

³⁰ Anita Desai, *Journey to Ithaca* (London: Heinemann, 1995), p.77.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 141.

goes on raving to Sophie that, “when I leave her, I feel I am falling down, down into darkness. No, no darkness but greyness, flatness, emptiness. When she appears everything comes to life, it flowers, it brightens”.³² This contributes to the main conflict between Sophie and Matteo. Matteo’s rejection of Sophie’s love, calling it mortal, transient, shatters Sophie. “She felt herself caged in a zoo, or person, forced into surrendering her freedom and privacy”.³³ Unable to bear she goes back to her parents’ home in Frankfurt.

Sophie tries to live her life without Matteo. But the telegram which arrives to say that Matteo is sick and he is in hospital, brings her back to India. Back in India, she tries her level best to fight against the odds, to break the spell of the Mother. She undertakes a journey to find the roots of the Mother. She is overwhelmed by the striking similarity in the life of the Mother and Matteo. She resolves her inner conflicts by finding the truth about the Mother in the “Abode of Bliss” who enslaved her Matteo. She is determined to find Matteo and settle their conflict. So in Sophie we can find a woman, who is fully conscious of her potential, who is not to be disappointed or dejected by hostile situations, but who is bold enough to fight her battles alone. Desai has finally created a woman who squarely confronts both her femaleness and the negative forces that atomize her self-hood. Sophie realises finally that

I must be the bridge to nowhere

But my true self

And then

*I will be useful.*³⁴

³² Ibid., p. 141.

³³ Ibid., p.148.

³⁴ Quoted in Helen Diner, *Mothers and Amazons* (New York: Anchor Press, 1965), p. 27.

She not only decides to act as a bridge between Matteo and the mysterious past of Matteo's "Mother", but also stresses that woman herself has the power to reach out to the trapped self.

In *Clear Light of Day* Bimla like Sophie fights her battle alone. She is rejected by her sister Tara and brother Raja whom the former idolizes. B. Das remarks that, "it is a novel that with its controlled pacing — between the past and the present — reveals characters not so much in action as in the process of acquiring increased self-awareness as in Proust or Virginia".³⁵

Bimla's struggle to survive, her reconstruction of the past events, her struggle against the haunting loneliness in the old house in Old Delhi, where nothing happens at all. Bakul, Tara's husband, admires Bim's qualities. He feels with her qualities of decision, firmness, resolves. She is definitely superior to Tara. But it is again the absence of these qualities that makes him marry Tara. The stereotyped attitude towards women is highlighted. He wants his wife to be submissive, timid and clinging.

Tara feels that Bakul has never recognized her as a person. She feels her existence has become hopeless. She feels that "she had followed him enough, it had been such an enormous strain, always pushing against her grain, it had drained her of too much strength, now she could only collapse, inevitably collapse".³⁶

Unlike Tara, Bim rebels against "A woman's place". She feels that society along with their ideological reimportation relegates a secondary status to woman. She is terribly moved by the suffering of Mira Masi and the fate of Mira's sister who were discarded by their husbands.

³⁵ B. Das, "Controlled and Sensitive", *Indian Book Chronicle*, May 16, 1981. p. 185.

³⁶ Anita Desai, *Clear Light of Day* (London: Penguin, 1981), p. 18.

Tara's visit brings back the old memories which she had buried long ago. Bim loses her control when Tara mentions about the reconciliation with Raja. To Bim he was always a deserter, who did not care for them. She feels

. . . exhausted — by Tara, by Baba, by all of them. Loving them and not loving them. Accepting them, not accepting them. Understanding them and not understanding them. The conflicts that arose inside her with every word they spoke and every gesture they made had been an enormous strain, she now felt, leaving her worn out.³⁷

But her strong sense of self successfully coordinates her thoughts, her intense emotions and she emerges with a clear thinking. She achieves an inner unity and has a clear mental picture of what she wants to do with her life. So towards the end she freely forgives Raja. It is her consistency that leads to the emergence of a new self. "Bim thus becomes symbolic of forces that sustain and support life against all those positive and creative forces which ensure permanence in change, continuity in discounting".³⁸

Shashi Deshpande, Nayantara Sahgal, Bharathi Mukherjee and Sobha De have all portrayed the emotional battles fought by women. They have all pinpointed that oppression of woman is rooted in sexual segregation. The established belief is that if her sexuality is not controlled, it will contribute to the downfall of man. Her identity is also "fabricated" on this ground by patriarchy, so as to avoid a social, familial and political confrontation. The existing identity gives emphasis to her subservient position,

³⁷ Ibid., p.166.

³⁸ G. Rai, "The Soil and The Roots: A Study of the Novels of Anita Desai", *The Indian Novel in English: Essays in Criticism*, eds. Ravi Nandan and R.K. Sinha (Ranchi: Ankit Publishers, 1987), p.103.

encourages her tight-lipped rectitude, and emphasizes the baseless fact that being a female, one is powerless, weaker than man. The social and psychological conditioning of a woman is based on conjectural assumptions which do not have any plausibility. Slowly these conjectures acquire the status of truth.

In Sashi Deshpande's novel *The Binding Vine* Kalpana is raped by her uncle. Shakutai, Kalpana's mother is reluctant to report it to the police. She laments thus:

If a girl's honour is lost, what's left? The girl doesn't have to do anything wrong people will themselves point a finger at her even if it is true, keep it to yourself, don't let anyone know of it. I have another daughter, what will become of her?³⁹

So honour or chastity is the most valuable thing for women. If one loses it, the ignominy earned will haunt not only the person but also the whole family. Sobha De in her novel *Starry Nights* brings out the exploitation of women in the field of films. Asha Rani, the actress is exploited sexually from a very tender age. She becomes emotionally anaemic towards the end. Her mother, out of sheer helplessness, sells her daughter for money. How a woman's sexuality is transformed into a marketable commodity is highlighted by Sobha De. Akshay, the superstar, accuses Asha Rani's mother thus:

You can't call yourself a mother — you are a scum. A wretched exploiter of your own child. You think you have made your daughter a big star — but it is her life you have ruined! How do you sleep at night? Doesn't your conscience kill you?⁴⁰

³⁹ Shashi Deshpande, *The Binding Vine* (New Delhi: Penguin, 1992), p. 59.

⁴⁰ Shobha De, *Starry Nights* (London: Penguin 1991), p.70.

We can very well conclude that Sobha De is textualizing the feminine situation. It is a woman's sexuality that makes her vulnerable to exploitations. She focuses relentlessly on the dark fate that awaits women in a society where gendered subjectivity exists. Asha Rani is benumbed by her exploitation. She closes her mind to everything.

All she wanted was to be a carefree, seven-year-old again and lie down in amma's lap. While she rubbed hot coconut oil into her dry scalp she wanted to cry. For what she asked herself. She felt so weary, physically and emotionally drained.⁴¹

The majority of roles that are given to women in films are meant to give men sexual pleasure or scopophilia. The traditional man-woman roles are also highlighted and exploited by the medium.

Sobha De has also dealt with theme of marital disharmony. Akshay the super star in *Starry Nights* is never faithful to his wife. But the wife suffers her heartbreak and chooses to stay with her husband. She blames Asha Rani for corrupting her husband. She blurts out:

. . . we women should sort out matters between ourselves. We should not involve men. Poor Akshayji — bechare — what can he do if women like you throw themselves at him? He is only a man.⁴²

This shows the impact of a deep rooted prejudice against — woman as an enchantress, woman as a temptress. So the blame falls entirely on her.

Shashi Deshpande, through Urmila in *The Binding Vine*, brings out the emotional battles women have to fight . . . No human being wants to be dominated. The most

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 73.

⁴² Ibid., p.49.

important need is to love. From the moment of our birth we struggle to find something with which we can anchor ourselves in this strange world we find ourselves in. Only when we love, do we find this anchor".⁴³ But she emphatically says that this love cannot be confused with sex, as it gives only transient pleasure. It is the love that Desai qualifies in *Journey to Ithaca* through Matteo and Sophie — love that is redemptive, love that is free from obligation, love that is unconditional and not binding.

Bharathi Mukherjee in her novel *Jasmine* conveys the final transformation that should take place within us. "Adventure, risk, transformation: the frontier is pushing in doors through uncaulked windows. Watch me reposition the stars".⁴⁴

This exploitation can be broached in the light of that image that exists for women. Self-restraint is to be found more in women than in men. So it culminates in blocking all the spontaneous expression of instinct. They are repressed and incarcerated within the female psyche, if she crosses the space that is barred to her. The grim reality is that the female is forced to conform to the norms and regulations of forbearance.

All these women novelists are concerned with the emerging consciousness of women. In Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence*, Jaya when accused by her husband feels that ". . . she could say nothing. I was in my place, pinned to it by his anger, a monstrously huge spear that went through me, excruciatingly painful, yet leaving me cruelly conscious".⁴⁵ It is this new consciousness that gives her confidence to break her silence, to see life differently.

It is ironic that, rape, domestic violence, dowry deaths, wife battering coexist

⁴³ Shashi Deshpande, *The Binding Vine* (New Delhi: Penguin, 1992), p.137.

⁴⁴ Bharathi Mukherjee, *Jasmine* (New Delhi: Penguin, 1990), p. 240.

⁴⁵ Shashi Deshpande, *That Long Silence* (London: Penguin) pp.120-121.

with a popular ideology of romantic love. The women novelists in post independent India have highlighted the fact that woman's liberation requires a revolution within the woman herself. In most of her novels, Desai has traced the patterns of gender relation in family and society. But more than any writer she has focussed on the interior landscape of woman. She has portrayed the pain, confusion, anger, disillusionment of female psyche. There is a new emerging self-concept that comes out of these battles that are fought internally as well as externally. The significance and the power of her writing stems from the fact that Desai "... is a writer who writes for herself"⁴⁶ and to quote her own words "... all my novels, it is rooted in experience and the least literary derivation".⁴⁷

There is definitely an inward turning to convey the flow of experience. In Desai more than any other writer, this other becomes identifiable. Desai focuses on the total awareness and emotive experiences of the individual. There is a never ending flow of emotions, sensations, memories, associations and reflections of the characters in the novel. The images in her novels are related to the psychic personality of her characters.

Desai focuses on the inner reality of things. It is inevitably the intimate, private world of the self that is highlighted by Desai. The emotional energy displayed by the characters and the emotion packed passages confirm that she has judiciously used this technique for simulating reality and for conveying truth. In other words Desai's stream of consciousness technique tries "to convince the reader of the privacy and the actuality of the mind being represented . . . [and] to stand for ideas peculiar to that mind".⁴⁸

⁴⁶Atma Ram, "The Novelist who Writes for Herself", *The Journal of Indian Writing in English*, 5, No.2, (July 1977), p. 40.

⁴⁷Ibid., p. 40.

⁴⁸Erwin. R. Steinberg, *The Stream-of-Consciousness and Beyond in Ulysses* (London: Univ. of Pittsburg Press, 1973), p. 58.

7.2 Transeffecting Identity

The literary form and identity of characters are inextricably linked. All literary forms are the sum total of the individual's creative process, his or her perception and experience. Literary forms evolve from human experience, thoughts and powerful feelings. In other words they revolve round the life of man, his relationship with the empirical world. In novels especially the unique presence of human beings is felt. The psychological novels especially deal with unique self of human beings, its disintegration, transformation, its adaptative powers, its dynamism and its powerlessness. In this particular form, character predominates more than the plot. It becomes essentially a certain character's story, and their view of the world around them. In psychological novels the self and its interior and outer landscape become very significant.

Desai's novels are basically psychological. The story is revealed through the states of mind of characters. The self and its identity is the focal point of attention. It is through the character that the aspects of identity are brought out. The aspects of the self, its disappointments, frustrations, its capacity to overcome fragmentation are brought out through the form of the novel. In Desai we can see the self of Indian woman at very close quarters. The fundamental truths about her existence, the battles that are fought and left unfought, the many conflicts in her life and her new emerging identity can be traced in Desai's novels. Janette Turner Hospital says that

Desai's people have been sustained and driven by passion for some sense of individual significance in the teeth of poverty, loneliness, the grind of obligations, the intrusive press of family and city. In quietly triumphant ways they have found it. The meanings of their lives may be ambiguous, but they have arrived at a meaning,

they have won it, they plant it before themselves in triumph,
like a banner”.⁴⁹

The identity of women in India is at cross roads. The search for a new identity and how to achieve it are major areas of research among women activists. The traditional identity or concept of the self has many virtues and weaknesses. The Indian woman’s identity is slowly changing due to education, new orientations and also due to the work of women’s groups. The women writers have also contributed to this very effectively and meaningfully.

Indian society, which is patriarchal, thrives on the concept of females as submissive, timid and totally dependent on men. The traditional role models are placed before them — Sita who follows Rama, who becomes the embodiment of sacrifice, Savitri, whose chastity and unique love gets back her husband’s life, Kunti, Gandhari, Panchali, and many others, who obey and “worship” their husbands. The recorded history of India never gives women any place except a few. The values, beliefs misconceptions about sex and gender obstruct the development of the female psyche.

Women writers after Independence, especially were interested in presenting the change that was slowly enveloping the Indian womanhood. Anita Desai has traced the evolution of this new self in her novels. According to her those women who became aware of their oppression, circumscribed existence, were labelled as mad or neurotic. Some others were driven to the point of self-destruction. Most of her life-energy or life instinct which helps her to build a strong sense of the self is wasted, due to many conflicting situations in her life. Her conscious intelligence is always veiled by the voice of

⁴⁹ Janette Turner Hospital, “The Heroic Outsider”, *The Toronto South Asian Review* (Winter 1989), p.66-67.

societal and familial responsibility. The conflicts arising out of this are repressed. So the Indian woman never achieves the “Adult ego stage” as visualised in Transactional Analysis an interesting branch of psychology. She shifts continuously between the Child and Parent Ego States. According to Adler “. . . women have a harder time asserting their masculine will to power, they have more neuroses”.⁵⁰ Desai’s female protagonists break the traditional concept of women meekly accepting their fate, for the sake of family. Those who cannot withstand these intense conflicts commit suicide.

In *Transactional Analysis* three ego states are available to any person such as the Parent, the Adult and the Child. The Adult ego state is the ideal state which propels the self to actualization. In this state the self is mature, reasonable, rational and logical. In the Child ego state, the childhood of a person is preserved. The Parent ego state is actually imitated or copied from the parents. In the absence of a balance in these the personal starts crumbling as shown by Desai.

In *Cry, the Peacock* Maya when interacting with Gautama, responds as a child. The novel begins with the death of Maya’s pet dog Toto. She reacts like a child. Gautama always maintains the Adult ego. He says: “I sent it away to be cremated It is all over. Come, won’t you pour out my tea?”. ‘Tea!’, she cried, looking up. “But!”⁵¹ Then she cries and helplessly runs to see if the bed of Toto is still there. His coaxing falls on deaf ears and he leaves her alone in her misery.

The psychological game played by Maya is “Why Don’t you, Yes. But.” The problem of her “messaging up” becomes the centre of focus. The root of this “messaging up” can be traced back to her childhood engagements. “Engagements are of two types:

⁵⁰ Quoted in Eric Berne, *A Lay Man’s Guide to Psychiatry and Psycho-Analysis* (London: Pocket Books, 1947), p.255.

⁵¹ Anita Desai, *Cry, the Peacock*, (New Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 1965), pp.6-7.

pastimes and games. A pastime is defined as an engagement in which transactions are straight forward. When dissimulation enters the situation, the pastime becomes a game”⁵² A pastime is a natural mechanism used by the person to ward off guilt, or to ease one’s desperation.

The thrust is given to “Why do I do this”. Maya throughout her life is harassed by this question. She is father fixated, a victim of the black and evil prophecy of the albino. The albino’s prediction that after four years of marriage, either Maya or her husband will die of unnatural causes disrupts her psychic schema. She is, from then on, living under its constant threat. She herself confesses “My father, with his quiet words, would have done nothing to allay my fear or dispel my conviction, but merely underlined the power by asking me however sadly, to accept it, ‘for it must be so.’ ”⁵³ Maya’s is a tragic script that is based on fears resulting from child abuse. So the fears recur throughout her life. The Adult in Maya is subsumed by her Child ego state. Maya fantasizes about the death of her husband. She feels that only the death of her husband can free her from the fear of the prophecy that was made. Once she makes this decision to survive she feels relieved:

It is relief, I called back to the Gods who mocked in the dark wings, it is only relief at having survived, at having regained the will, and the decision to survive. It is only relief. I promise you, you shall see — I swear — survive”.⁵⁴

In *Clear Light of Day* Tara, Bim’s sister, carries some disappointments of her childhood. When she sees a snail in the Rose walk in her house, her Child ego state is activated. She claps her hands and cries. Bim her sister maintains her Adult ego state.

⁵² Eric Berne, *Transactional Analysis in Psycho Therapy* (Canada: Castle Books, 1961), p.98.

⁵³ Ibid., pp.53-54.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p.190.

“As Tara performed the rites of childhood over the handy creature, Bim stood with lowered head, tugging at the hair that hung loosely about her face as she had done when she had sat beside her brother . . .”⁵⁵ But in Bim the Child ego state is not activated. She feels strongly that in order to maintain her psychic equilibrium, she had buried her painful past. She remarks that “. . . one is too young to know how to cope, how to deal with that first terrible flood of life”.⁵⁶ Bim immediately forces Tara to regain her Adult ego response. But Tara does not respond and she plays the game by asking “How could I?”. Tara’s script contains three principal roles — Tara as a child, Tara as a wife, and Tara as a sister. It is when she interacts with her sister (who consistently maintains the Adult ego state) that her Child ego is activated. At times, even with her husband Bakul, she interacts like a child. When she discusses Bim with her husband, her Child ego is again activated. Tara is upset when she sees Bim in an aggressive mood. But Bakul says that he hadn’t noticed it. Tara reacts like a child “ ‘Haven’t you?’, cried Tara in that voice of the anguished sparrow chirping”.⁵⁷

Bim on the other hand, is always moving towards self-actualization — “Becoming” a new woman. “Becoming” is a word coined by Allport to signify self-realization.⁵⁸ From her early childhood, she displays an organized behaviour. In school and college, she performs admirably. While Tara was always a victim of inferiority complex. She lacked the vigour and energy of her sister Bim. She never comes out of this slough of despondency. The teachers and everyone with whom she interacts compare her with her dynamic sister Bim. Tara shrinks back to her shell like a snail:

⁵⁵ Anita Desai, *Clear Light of Day* (London: Penguin, 1980), p.2.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 159.

⁵⁸ William J. Devlin, *Psychodynamics of Personality Development* (New York: Alba House, 1964), p.38.

To Bim, school and its teachers and lessons were a challenge to her natural intelligence and mental curiosity, that she was glad to meet. Tara, on the other hand, wilted when confronted by a challenge, shrank back into a knot of horrified stupor . . .⁵⁹

It is Bim's substantial self that endows her with potential abilities. Emotions influence her intellectual processes, but she conquers them objectively with her supposit self. Her ego maintains a harmonious balance between the id and superego. And so she is able to maintain her Adult ego.

In *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*, Sita can also be analysed using the script. A life plan evolves when a transaction takes place between mother, father and child. In the case of Sita there is only the father in the past. Her mother's desertion shocks Sita. She comes to the island which was an integral part of her childhood. In Bombay, in her flat, she tries to rescue a wounded eaglet from the crows. She tries to keep the crows at bay, using Karan's toy gun. She ignores her child who falls and cuts his chin. Her Child ego is activated, "Tatterdemalions all in tantivy. She laughed and shot at them again and again - - pop! pop! whoosh, they whistled and shrieked, veering off to their other buildings" ⁶⁰

Sita, when she interacts with her husband also vacillates between Child and Adult ego. When she meets Raman for the first time after her father's death she clings on to him like a child. "My father's dead — look after me". Sita when she is about to leave for Manori is stopped by Raman he is alarmed by her decision. Even in this situation her Child ego is activated. Raman exclaims "Don't be silly. Sita don't behave like a fool, think of your condition," Sita angrily retorts:

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 123.

⁶⁰ Anita Desai, *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* (New Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 1982), p. 40.

What do you know about my condition? I've told you — I've tried to tell you but you haven't understood a thing" and hurled slippers, papers, and nightgowns. Raman tries to prevent her once again by rationalizing the situation "you can't go to the island in the middle of the monsoon. you can't have a baby there".⁶¹

But Sita agitatedly says thus: "But I don't want to have the baby", she cried. "I've told you".⁶²

But over the years, she changes and is in the process of "Becoming". In the final confrontation between the husband and wife, Sita's Child ego is activated. Sita feels betrayed when Raman tells her about Menaka's letter, pleading with him to come. She reacts thus, 'Ah'! she exclaimed with the very theatricality her husband feared, her children loathed and she could not control."⁶³ Raman looks at her in disbelief. He sees the face of a woman loved, a woman rejected.

She feels messed up, she resents her life and wants to get away from it. But in this island, in isolation she unmask her self through the process of reflection. Through reflexive consciousness she builds a new self-concept. Her operational personality is activated and she achieves Adult ego. It is because of this, that she becomes conscious of her emotions, drives and gets a deeper insight into herself. From then onwards she learns to handle her problems. Her words " 'Wait! I'll explain — I can explain everything now', and the words of explanation clamoured inside her mouth".⁶⁴

In *Voices in the City* Amla like Bim, achieves the Adult ego stage unlike her sister

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 33.

⁶² Ibid., pp. 33-34.

⁶³ Ibid., p. 13.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 151.

Monisha. Both experience an unhappy childhood — an alcoholic and abusive father, and a mother who becomes the victim of his aggressiveness and malice. Monisha and Amla were deeply hurt by the unpleasantness of their home in Kalimpong. Amla tells Dharma that Monisha takes after her father. “She has his silence and a touch of his malice — Oh, bleached, refined, purified to just a pale shade of it, harmless to anyone but herself, but the shape, the design of it remains in her eyes and on her mouth, Dharma”.⁶⁵

Monisha is completely enslaved to the Voices Introject which culminates in her self-destruction. She retreats into a shell of silence, moving away from people, retreating into a world of her own. Amla tries to draw her out of her silence. Amla thinks that Monisha is self-sufficient in her silence. She doesn't need any one to make her feel whole. The conversation can be analyzed using transactional analysis:

Monisha: ‘One must have someone who reciprocates, who responds. One must have that — *reciprocation* — I think’.

Amla: ‘Must?’

Monisha: ‘If one could be offered that alone, by itself, silent, discreet, pure, untouched, untouchable — then, I suppose, yes. . .’. But what if it were offered to you all sticky with threads and strings and labels glued to it? Demands, proprietoriness, obligations, extortions, untruths, bullying? Would you take it then?⁶⁶

Why Monisha retreats into her cocoon is very clear from her conversation with Amla. Here she responds in an Adult ego state. But she is too much oppressed by her husband's narrowminded and traditional joint family. Her husband is also “. . . . a rotund, minute-minded utterly predictable person”.⁶⁷ Amla feels that they are

⁶⁵ Anita Desai, *Voices in the City* (New Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 1965), p. 203.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 197.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 198.

poles apart and are like two parallel lines that will never converge to a point. Monisha lacks the courage to go in the opposite direction. So her behaviour becomes a mask. Monisha does not fight against the conflict which arises out of their polarities. The conflicts are repressed deep into her unconscious and they are not discriminately solved by her ego. Her Child ego state is activated and she experiences intense fear which drives her to commit suicide.

Her own words clarify this inference:

And it has been my own fault, because I gave up the quest for it too soon, never seriously believed in it, abandoned before it truly began, thinking it not worth my while to search a treasure that would cost me endless devastation. I chose to stand aside and allow it to pass by, and now when it returns to terrify me with its window. I do not recognize anything in it but the terror”.⁶⁸

Her terror arises out of her self-awareness, which makes her conscious of her deplorable existence, chained and framed by the patriarchy of her milieu.

Amla on the other hand fights against these hostile situations boldly. She has the courage to go in the opposite direction. At times she also responds in the Child ego state, when the city oppresses her. Monisha’s death upsets her equanimity and at the sight of her mother, her Child ego state is activated. “She flew up to meet her, crying so hard that she did not at once notice that her mother barely glanced at her and was in fact, about to walk past her”.⁶⁹ The tragedy never upsets her mother’s Adult ego state. She is a woman who has suffered much, but in suffering she concretizes her identity. One would feel that she is desensitized by this stable self which has emerged out of many conflicts. It is

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 239.

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 254

the unboundedness of her personality that enables her to maintain her equilibrium. Nirode in an emotionally charged atmosphere tells Amla about their mother:

she is not merely good, she is not merely evil — she is good and she is evil. She is our knowledge and our ignorance. She is everything to which we are attached, she is everything from which we will always be detached. She is the reality and illusion, she is the world and she is Maya.⁷⁰

The final analysis is of Nanda Kaul, lovely, cast away on the mountain of Kasauli. She is withered by the turbulent and chaotic life. Raka, her great grand daughter's presence was suffocating. She is reluctant to get involved in the world of the child. "She was doing her best at avoiding the other but found it was not so simple to exist and yet appear not to exist".⁷¹

When she interacts with Raka, her Child ego state is projected. She recreates her perfect childhood for Raka. Nanda Kaul creates a perfect father figure who travelled to Tibet and brought many beautiful treasures home. She tells Raka about her idyllic childhood. But the child never accepts her story and her lips get "pinched" in repulsion. With the arrival of Ila Das, Nanda Kaul's Child ego state is once again activated. Raka observes thus: "It seemed the old ladies were going to play all afternoon, that gave of old age — that reconstructing, block by gilded block of the castle of childhood, so ramshackle and precarious" ⁷²

Ila Das's tragedy shatter's Nanda's will to live, even the unconscious wish to survive. She tries to preserve her self by clinging to her false self-image of self-suffi-

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 256.

⁷¹ Anita Desai, *Fire on the Mountain* (New Delhi: Allied, 1977), p.46-47.

⁷² Ibid., pp. 116-117.

ciency and self-willed detachment from society. But this weak self is incapable of withstanding the devastating flurries of empirical reality. Nanda like Monisha is terrified by this awareness of decay, exploitation and degeneracy in a woman's life.

The radical changes that permeate the behaviour patterns of Desai's female characters point to great possibilities in the process known as "from being to becoming". The back-log of socio-cultural burdens gets off loaded and characters grow out of the trammelled situations. They have new insights into new possibilities and have glimpses of a brave new world marked by gender equality, personal dignity and a posture exuding confidence. The identity of the Indian women is changing fast and the new self-concept has in it the powerful ingredient of a psychological renaissance. Desai looks for, finds, and highlights this prototype in her novels. The new horizons she visualizes are indicative of the transeffecting of Indian woman's identity. This great leap is from stagnation to dynamism.

CHAPTER VIII

CONCLUSION

The purposive and formative tendency inherent in man is the spontaneous expression of his goals in life and awareness about the self. There are two aspects to the expression of a dynamic personality. An individual grows, develops and slowly builds a concept about his or her self. "This process of image-making, which takes place on the deepest level of the unconscious, is actually the psychological side of the life process by which the human organism grows towards the form and goal of his individuality."¹ This study enquires into how Anita Desai has developed, and established the fact that there is a new self-concept emerging, which is slowly becoming immanent in the Indian woman's psyche. This new self-concept is profound in its impact, creative in its achievement, enlarging the scope of the empowerment of women. When this new self-concept is integrated into the personality, it gives women great funds of operational energy to move towards wholeness and self-actualization.

8.1 Wounded Dreams

Anita Desai is a writer who makes her readers "... understand and feel what it is to be woman, know how a woman thinks and feels and behaves."² Desai depicts the story of Indian woman, the various forces that are working against her, the unalterable life situations which trap her identity. The dark and foreboding nature of oppression used against women, the traditional value system and culture that deny woman her freedom

¹Ira Progoff, *Depth Psychology and Modern Man* (New York: Julian, Press 1959)p.125

² Anita Desai , " Indian Women Writers" *The Eye of the Beholder Indian Writing in English*, ed. Maggie Butcher (London: Commonwealth Institute, 1983) pp. 54-55.

are realistically portrayed by Desai. Due to these sabotaging forces, life itself becomes so heavy for woman that her identity trembles on the verge of collapse. The frightening possibilities confronted by women are innumerable fears, disillusionment and imminent defeatism. The elusive procrastination according to Desai is not a solution. She feels that by rediscovering one's identity and by establishing it, one moves towards self-actualization. Desai as a modernist pinpoints that, for this new self-concept to emerge our psychological needs have to be fulfilled. The preconditions necessary for the satisfaction of these needs include the freedom to speak, freedom of action, freedom to express oneself, freedom to seek information and freedom to move around without fear. Only an impartial and robust society can provide fulfilment of these needs. It almost sounds like a utopian concept in the case of Indian women. Then what are the ways open to a woman to achieve wholeness? If the preconditions are highly imbalanced, how can a woman satisfy her psychological needs? How can she achieve an identity of her own? What is it that will give her a voice and an image of her own? These are the questions that are being debated, evaluated, subtly and partly in Desai's fictional masterpieces. The modernist in Desai has definite answers. But she does not become didactic nor assumes the status of a social reformer. She presents life in its infinite variety, exposing the darker and brighter sides of existence. Desai is a committed writer who believes in the well-being of all humans, male and female. She interiorizes the sufferings of people, especially Indian women. Desai's novels present the dichotomy that exists in the life of Indian women, the dangerous duality that is propped on the two notions about selfhood — noumenal self and essential self. The conflict generated, results in the fragmentation of the self and it wounds the psyche of Indian woman. To quote Milan Kundera:

“Terrible are the wounds / of a murdered dream.”³

The Indian women definitely carry the wounds of their murdered dreams. The manner in which, culture, ideology, and dogmas engendered many contradictions and conflicts in the life of women is presented in her novels. This contradictory nature is an integral part of our historical process. According to Raji Narasimhan:

Few Indian writers have surpassed Desai in respect of psychological delineation of the protagonist. Each of Anita Desai’s novels tries to tackle the central aesthetic problem of the modern writer — the problem of rendering complete human personality . . . in an age of lost values , lost men and lost gods.⁴

This contributes to many ambiguities in our life and causes existential trauma. Nirode in *Voices in the City* echoes the agony in searching for one’s identity, one’s destiny. “All this fighting to carve out a destiny for oneself — it’s nothing compared to the struggle, it is to give up your destiny, to live without one — of either success or sorrow. But it’s a greater victory, because it brings you in the end, silence and solitude, and those are the two most powerful things of all.”⁵

The majority of Indian women think that silence and solitude give them the so-called wholeness. They implicitly believe that by their resilience, forbearance and patient suffering without voicing their protests, they could attain fulfilment. This belief forces them to give up their struggle to carve out a destiny, to silently endure all the injustices meted out to them. Through Monisha, in the same novel, Desai establishes the boundless power of dogmas over women. “Even the women in the quiet hall upstairs would never

³ Milan Kundera, *The Life in Elsewhere* (New Delhi: Rupa 1987), p. 165.

⁴ Raji Narasimhan, *Sensibility Under Stress: Aspects of Indo English Fiction* (New Delhi: Ashajanak Publications, 1976), p. 12.

⁵ Anita Desai, *Voices in the City* (New Delhi : Orient Paperbacks, 1965), p. 185.

have dared destroy their safe ideal of life of subdued emotion, by admitting that such things as love and betrayal . . .”⁶ ever exist.

This safe ideal is provided by the patriarchal society to restrict women into subordinate positions. This, according to Desai, is so deeply ingrained in the psyche of women that they fail to see it as exploitation. The popular belief becomes very forceful here. Being a woman, she is frail, weak and there is a limit to what she can achieve. That physically and mentally a woman is weak, is the effective patriarchal stand that is used against women. This belief is also endorsed by myths, popular stories, epics like the Mahabharatha and the Ramayana. The ancient law-givers and religious heads have given her a “role” to enact. There are certain “duties” allotted to her through these roles. It becomes her “karma” and she feels morally bound to perform her duties. Only by doing her duties sincerely can she attain the exalted position of “pativrata” or the “ideal wife.” This ‘karma’ becomes her ‘dharma’, her religion, her modus operandi. Sacrifice and self-less service for the family become her “karma” and “dharma”, binding her, enslaving her to the patriarchal family. These values are as important as social values and they are to be observed by women without fail. Thus her traditional identity is moulded by these values, which do not have any sense of justice. The quality of womanhood in India depends greatly in performing these roles.

According to Desai a woman’s self is “colonized” by these values. They also lead to passivity of women. The helplessness of a woman trapped in a love-less marriage is the theme of her first novel *Cry, the Peacock*. Maya’s marriage denotes the stereotyped marriage in the Indian family. Identity and temperamental compatibility recede to the background. No opportunity is given to the girl to voice her opinion. The way to the

⁶ Ibid., p. 238

“sacred altar” becomes her way to confinement in patriarchy. In Maya we can see the new awareness emerging. She reflects about her marriage thus: “It was discouraging to reflect on how much in our marriage was based upon a mobility forced upon us from outside and therefore neither true nor lasting. It was broken repeatedly, and repeatedly the pieces were picked up and put together again, as of a sacred icon with which, out of the pettiest superstition, we could not bear to part.”⁷

Monisha in *Voices in the City* silently contemplates and longs for a change:

To pretend to have forgotten, to pretend to believe in these trivialities, these pettinesses of our mean existence — is that right?

To sort the husk from the rice, to wash and iron and to walk and sleep, when this is not one believes in at all? What force of will does it require to shed, as I believe my brother has, at least to an extent, shed, the unnecessary, the diverting, and live the clean, husked, irreducible life? If I had religious faith I could easily renounce all this.”⁸

Here again Desai powerfully strikes at the fact that religion too plays a dominant role in subjecting women. Religion silently sanctions the repression of women for stabilizing the patriarchal structure. They also support the traditional gender difference. These values are indoctrinated in women. They generate powerful conflicts when women discover contradictions and inconsistencies in their life. Through Monisha, Desai depicts the powerful conflicts that are generated in the minds of women who have an awareness or focussed consciousness. Once this focussed consciousness emerges, women realize

⁷Anita Desai, *Cry, the Peacock* (New Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 1965), p. 40.

⁸Anita Desai, *Voices in the City* (New Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 1965), pp.121-122.

that they lead a restricted life and that there are no opportunities for mobility and fulfilment. Desai's protagonist Monisha wages her wars in "silence." But her "silence" is powerful enough to shake women out of their complacency. According to Geetha Ramanathan "perhaps the most empowering aspect of these texts is that they do not domesticate women's rage. The name of silence is the violence that is "spoken through", whether the legacy of the maternal violence is inevitably transposed is not the point; what we take with us is a cultural script that bears the mark of that violence."⁹

Desai writes in the Modernist perspective. She depicts the uncertainties of the self, the anguish of circumscribed existence and how it should be empowered, so as to determine and choose the roles appropriate to oneself. She establishes the fact that there is an obvious transition that is slowly taking place in the minds of women. This transition is painful for those who do not have a strong identity. She translates the frustrations of these women who are sandwiched between two worlds. She offers a way out of this imbroglio. This appears in the form of a pack of feminist strategies in her novels.

Most of Desai's women characters project the battles that are fought and left unfought. The psychological battle is fought against traditionally defined womanliness. In *Maya* it culminates in neuroses. Monisha commits suicide, unable to negotiate and reach a compromise with the existing value system. She registers her protest by committing suicide. This mode of protest continues to have its validity even now. Tavleen Singh reports in *Manushi*, about Kanchan Mala Hardy, who committed suicide in the bathroom in Tagore Garden, New Delhi. Hers was a love marriage. "Both her mother-in-law and her husband maintain that, though they were in the house, Sunil sleeping in a room only

⁹ Geetha Ramanathan, "Sexual Violence / Textual Violence: Desai's *Fire on the Mountain* and Shirazi's *Javady Alley*", *Modern Fiction Studies*, 39, No.1, (Spring, 1993), p. 25.

five feet away from the bathroom, they did not know Kanchan was killing herself and arrived too late to save her.”¹⁰ This clearly indicates the fact that Desai has depicted the evils that exist in society and the violence that is perpetrated on women by the patriarchal order even now. Through Ila Das, Desai again brings in physical violence used against women. Ila Das’s rape is not an isolated incident. It has become the prerogative of men to oppress women. Rape, the most humiliating and horrifying experience for women, is used as a powerful weapon to silence them. This also stems from the stereotyped belief that for a woman honour is more valuable, perhaps than life itself. Our enquiry has led us to the core issue. When violated physically, women are put on the precipice of fear. It is by creating fear in the minds of women, that the patriarchal structure controls her. Continual suffering, physical and mental oppression, shakes her identity out of shape.

Violence against women is one of the commonest crimes in the world, which most often goes unnoticed and unpunished. Men use violence to control and subjugate women. It forces women to toe the line and accept her inferior position. Wife battering, rape and other forms of violence bring home to us the terrifying conviction of male power in its unquestioned right to control woman or child, vulnerable to it. It also ensures that the recipient always lives in fear of it.

Dee Dee Glass defines domestic violence as “anything threatening when used by those with power (invariably men) against those without power (mainly women and children).”¹¹ Thus violence is used to control, assert authority and extract obedience. The history of sexual segregation and a strict division of labour has a long tradition in

¹⁰ Tavleen Singh, “All for Love - of Money”, *In Search of Answers: Indian Women's Voices from 'Manushi'*, eds. Madhu Kishwar and Ruth Vanita (New Delhi: Horizon India Books, 1991), p.176.

¹¹ Quoted in Visa Ravindran, “Understanding Vulnerability”, *The Hindu*, Sunday, February, 14, 1999, p. II.

India. It definitely means the seclusion for one sex (women) and freedom for the other (men). French critic Michel Zeraffa says that “with the novel society enters history and history enters into society.”¹² In Desai’s novels it is woman’s contemporary history that has entered society.

Desai has punctured the so called ideal Indian woman hood. In her women-centred novels *Cry, the Peacock*, *Voices in the City*, *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*, *Fire on the Mountain* and *Clear Light of Day*, she has depicted the intensity of psychological conflicts experienced by women, when confined within the framework of the so-called ideal womanhood. Desai has conceived the psychical and social conflicts it produces in women. The psychic is inextricably bound to the social. This so-called ideal of womanhood which is construed by society, seriously affects the identity of women. The psychic defence mechanisms that women take to escape the pain are realistically portrayed by Desai. Maya’s psychosis and her suicide, Monisha’s self annihilation, Nanda Kaul’s withdrawal to the isolated Carignano, Sita’s escape to the island of Manori, Bim’s isolated existence in the Old House in Delhi, and Amla’s dejection when she comes to know about Dharma’s daughter, give evidence to the fact that this so-called ideal womanhood generates conflicts.

The psychological pressures felt by women to fulfil the demands placed by this ideal, culminate in withdrawal, regression and suicide mania. The role obligations become cankerous, eating into women’s identity. Desai uses very meaningful words to describe the circumscribed existence of a woman’s life. Sita finds it frustrating to live with this “so-called ideal.” She feels “. . . she could not inwardly accept that this was all there was to life, that life would continue thus, inside this small, enclosed area, with these few

¹² Michel Zeraffa, *Fictions: The Novels and Social Reality* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), p.11.

characters, churning around and then past her, leaving her always this grey, dull lit, empty shell.”¹³ This supposedly ideal womanhood of course insists that a woman should be submissive and domestic. Sita reacts to this in a negative manner. She takes a stand against the tradition bound “womanliness.” She leads a disorderly life, resorts to smoking as she cannot tolerate “. . . their vegetarian complacency . . .”¹⁴ According to Desai, this ideal womanhood gives women a false sense of security, denying them their operational energy which enhances as well as assures more satisfaction and confidence. Women who become aware of this, are victims of natural confusion. The result is an identity crisis which produces different reactions in women.

Sita’s provocative behaviour is symptomatic of the confusion she is passing through. No wonder she feels suffocated by their “vegetarian complacency.” Very specifically Desai points out the negative aspects of accepting this ideal meekly. The negative attributes are very clearly mentioned — anxiety, resignation, frenzy, grimness and fear. Desai’s modernistic perspective and her consciousness about the grim realities that surround a woman’s life are revealed here.

Sita hopes for:

. . . a revolution of the world to alter, in one mighty swing that would fling them all, tiny grey sand-lice, into icy space? Somewhere such indiscretions, inspiration, and force. But, till she came to it, she would live on, smothered by this endlessly damp, soft grey sand, and it seemed that these years of her life were dyed, coloured through and through, with the colour of waiting.¹⁵

¹³ Anita Desai, *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*(New Delhi: Orient Paperbacks 1965), p. 54.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

Nanda Kaul in *Fire on the Mountain* projects the loneliness experienced by women in old age. Nanda Kaul is also a victim of this so-called ideal of womanhood. Her life itself is a series of role enactments. As a Vice Chancellor's wife, and as a mother, she has many duties and obligations in her life. Desai highlights the mental agony and anxiety of Nanda Kaul, living alone in Carignano, "now to bow again to let that noose slip once more round her neck that she had thought was freed fully, finally."¹⁶

"The noose slip" is definitely "the role" that is allotted to her by the patriarchal society. Desai goes on to say that Nanda was totally stifled by her life. "The old house, the full house, of that period of her life, when she was the Vice-Chancellor's wife and at the hub of a small but intense and busy world, had not pleased her. Its crowding stifled her."¹⁷ She feels that her grand daughter Raka is "... an intruder, a mosquito flown up from the plains to tease and worry."¹⁸

This shows the mental aberrations that a woman has to suffer due to the repression of instinctual urges. Since she cannot vent her emotions on anyone, she directs it to her own self. She is denied the opportunity of displacing the emotion to some other object. Displacement is an effective mechanism to resolve conflicts. Thus the frustrations in the fulfilment of her basic urges give rise to conflicts.

Desai in her interview to Jasbir Jain, says "... I don't think any of the major characters in my book are taken from real life. They are entirely imaginary or an amalgamation of several different characters."¹⁹ But they very truly represent real life

¹⁶ Anita Desai, *Fire on the Mountain* (New Delhi: Allied, 1977), p.19.

¹⁷ Ibid. p.29

¹⁸ Ibid.p.40.

¹⁹ Jasbir Jain, *Stairs to the Attic: The Novels of Anita Desai.* (Jaipur: Printwell Publishers, 1987), p. 10.

characters. Desai's female protagonists are harbingers of a new change that has come over Indian woman. We notice a shift from "Being-for-others" to "Being-in-itself." The Indian woman's traditional concept of the self gave emphasis to "Being-for-others", in which one's self exists for the benefit of others. Thus it involves a series of perpetual conflicts. It is from these conflicts a new identity, a new concept of the self emerges. Bim in *Clear Light of Day* is a "Being-for-others." She nurses her sick brother Raja, who deserts, her, looks after her aunt Mira Masi and mentally retarded brother Baba, single handedly. But she never gives up the fight. The conflicts do not stymie the progress of her self towards actualization. Tara's visit brings back the painful memories from the past. Bim's conflicting emotions finally make her very aggressive. "All afternoon her anger swelled and spread acquiring demonic proportions. It was like the summer itself, rising to its peak, or like the mercury barometer that hung on the veranda wall, swelling and bulging and glinting."²⁰ She finally confronts Baba and tries to elicit some response. Baba never answers. But his silent anguish terrifies Bim and this finally pacifies her conflicts. A new realization dawns on her. She feels that "... her love was imperfect and did not encompass them thoroughly enough and because it had flaws and inadequacies and did not extend to all equally. She did not feel enough for her dead parents, her understanding of them was incomplete and she would have to work and labour to acquire it..."²¹ Bim achieves equilibration, which is the highest level of cognitive function. It is an integral part of a strong identity. According to Hans Furth, "... at every level of development, the equilibration mechanism is operative in furthering adaptation, but as development proceeds towards the highest level of cognitive functioning, equilibration

²⁰ Anita Desai, *Clear Light of Day* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980), p.163.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 165.

becomes progressively more adequate in enabling the organism to adapt to a wider range of internal and external disturbances.”²² Piaget’s notion of intelligence is bound to an individual’s intelligence, rationally sorting out his or her problems or being adaptive. When one functions intelligently the being-in-itself is activated. Thus in Bim her scheme of actions is modified by the external world in a positive manner by stabilizing her operational self. Such an individual establishes a strong sense of the self and forms a healthy mental image which is the net result of the coordination between Adaptive intelligence, Assimilation and Accommodation. Amla and her mother Otima in *Voices in the City* also achieve equilibration, after Monisha’s death. Amla feels “. . . that she would go through life with her feet primly shod, involving herself with her drawing and safe people like Bose.”²³ Otima the mother maintains her equilibrium, faces her daughter’s suicide without any emotional outbursts which women are synonymous with.

To establish the fact that there is a new self-concept of Indian woman, emerging from the novels of Anita Desai, the historical position of Indian woman down the ages is analyzed in Chapter II. It mainly deals with the compromises that women had to make from the period of Dharma Sastras. In the Rig Vedic period women enjoyed equal status. She had freedom of movement, and restrictions were comparatively few. Education of women was given a lot of importance by the Aryans in Rig-Vedic time. It seems that they were not conscious about gender, stereotyping and other prejudice based on female sexuality. No wonder the age witnessed erudite women scholars like Visvavara Apala and Ghosha. There was no rigidity of caste system. Women also enjoyed economic

²² Stanley. J. Green Span, John F. Curry, “Piaget’s Approach to Intellectual Functioning” *Comprehensive Text Book of Psychiatry* Volume I, eds. Harold I Kaphan, Benjamin J. Sadock (Baltimore: William & Wilkins, 1989), p.256.

²³ Anita Desai, *Voices in the City*, (New Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 1965), p. 248.

independence to a certain extent. So our inferences point to the fact that Education, Social mobility and Economic independence (“ESE” factor) gave them equal status in society during the Rig-Vedic period.

The Brahmanical religion imposed on them more and more restrictions which denied women freedom of the self. The caste system compartmentalized society and women especially suffered a lot. The Dharma Shashtras favoured the patriarchal system which marginalized the role of Indian women. The prejudiced view towards woman’s sexuality became very powerful from this period onwards. They were looked down upon as a temptation and hindrance. Her roles began to get stereotyped as an individual accepting for herself the composite daughter-mother-wife image. She was confined to the four walls of the house. The law givers were not at all humanistic in their treatment towards widows. Violence was also used against women. Thus her self-image was torn into shreds during the post-vedic periods.

The Buddhist interlude roughly ranges between 3rd century B. C. and 6th century A.D. It really brought her a wide sweeping draught of fresh air, which swept away, at least for a short period, the stinking air of stagnation, oppression and exploitation. It was Buddha’s solid faith in man-woman equality that forced him to do something to improve the status of the Indian woman. The efforts of the Therigathas and the alms women also contributed to a better position of women at that time.

Buddha tried to bring back the essence of vedic marriage which was based on man-woman equality. He recognized the real meaning of the word ‘Dampati’ which etymologically meant the joint ownership of the house. Marriage was considered to be sacred and it was a social contract. The education of woman was not neglected and Buddha showed compassion towards widows. The most noteworthy factor is that he

convinced his followers that these women were not responsible for the death of their husbands. But the two main drawbacks of Buddhism were, one: it supported the patriarchal system and did nothing to change the existing order. Two: it completely depended on one man's personality.

From 3rd century AD to 16th century AD the position of women deteriorated. With the advent of Muslims, caste system became more rigid. Avenues of getting education did not exist. With no awareness, Indian womanhood was mercilessly locked within the confines of the home. Many social evils like female infanticide, sati, child marriages, polygamy, purdah system, zenanas which secluded woman became rampant in society. Sati became very popular during this period.

The Bhakti movement which took place around 11th century was a reformist movement, but that too failed to restore woman's position. It tried to give women social mobility, but did not succeed completely. Patriarchy was becoming more and more powerful and women were becoming more and more dependent. They became indissociably tied to the order of household. Marriage did not give them any benefit but assured two things. It imposed sexual exclusivity on women. A certain set of rules were to be strictly followed by women, especially after their marriage. Men did not have any such restrictions. Here we can see social stereotyping or labelling process which adversely affects the identity of women becoming very powerful.

The relationship became non-egalitarian as it gave man the right to govern his wife. For woman it was a self-delimiting existence. She invariably started losing the ability to "*techne tou biou*" (take care of oneself). Since the Indian marriages are based on monopolistic principle, the status of woman deteriorated considerably. We can very well conclude by saying that her "identity", her "womanliness", was tailored to fit men's

needs. A high value placed on virginity of woman is definitely a part of this monopolistic principle.

From a very early age girls are trained for the roles of wife and mother. They fail to realize that this submissive self-sacrificing role allotted to them is highly exploitative and robs them of their identity and self-respect. The terrible sense of loss and helplessness that they build around their lives adversely affects their self-concept. Self-concept is the solid foundation on which the life of the individual is built. If we want to use our full potential, we have to have a solid self-concept. It is definitely the prerequisite for an all-comprehensive and powerful life. Women are mercilessly denied this opportunity to build a new self-concept. This distorted self-concept is so often responsible for a woman's more frequent mental illnesses such as neurosis, psychosis, depression and hysteria. In Indian society women thus become useable and useful commodities.

With the advent of Christian missionaries, education gained more impetus. The contact with the West and education that she received, ignited the birth of a new consciousness among a particular class in India. The reform movements started by Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Mahadev Govind Ranade, Keshub Chandra Sen, Akshay Kumar Dutt and Sayyid Ahmad Khan were directed against the decaying elements in tradition and culture. But they did not reject the traditional values altogether and so reformation became a tool to bring in a radical change.

This age heralded an intellectual transformation of India. The starting of the first missionary school in Bengal for women in 1818, thus becomes a landmark in the lives of Indian women. Spreading of education heralded the beginning of a new era for women. In ancient times the disempowerment of women was done by denying education. The general belief was that if a woman was educated, she would become a widow. There

were many areas which were barred to women. And there were many lingering shadows in the life of Indian women, like purdah system, female infanticide, illtreatment of widows, devadasi system, child marriage and Sati. Surprisingly, when we stand at the beginning of new millenium, we still find the one thread of that tradition which suppresses women winding its manacles around them in a vice like grip, strangling their essence. Even today we carry the unconscious ego ideal transmitted by tradition, creating an intense conflict and depression in the minds of women who strive for autonomy. Only a new self-concept and a sense of competence can empower them to relinquish the false sense of guilt and shame when they deviate from this so called ideal ego state. This was the main task of women activists in India during the 18th and 19th centuries.

The awareness against the British supremacy in India helped women to get a new footing. Participation in the Swadeshi movement brought in radical changes. Here starts the psychological battle to choose between the self-image offered by tradition emphasizing women as a paragon of virtue and the other self-image which comprises a self marked by independence of mind, creativity and self-confidence. The Ramakrishna Mission and the Brahmosamaj gave importance to the upliftment of Indian women. Women social reformers like Maharani Tapasvini, Pandita Ramabai and Swarnakumari Debi championed the cause of women. Pandita Ramabai was an erudite scholar of the Vedas. She believed firmly that knowledge was power, and only through knowledge could women liberate themselves from patriarchal tyranny. Thus the female psyche became "... the site where the opposing forces of femininity and feminism clash by night."²⁴ This clash had many positive results.

²⁴ Kaplan, C, "Pandoras Box: Subjectivity Class and Sexuality in Socialist and Feminist Criticism", *Making a Difference: Feminist Literary Criticism*, eds., Gayle Greene & Coppelia Khan (London: Methuen, 1985), p. 154.

The first one was of course the consciousness among women to organize themselves to fight against the injustices meted out to them. Another important landmark was the establishment of the Central Hindu College at Benares in 1898 by Annie Besant. She introduced the Home Rule movement in India and the women's suffrage gained more and more importance.

Margaret Cousins started the Women's Indian Association in 1917, which marks the beginning of organized women's movement in India. But one drawback was that majority of women remained illiterate, powerless and under the clutches of patriarchy. The reawakening of these masses became a herculean task for women reformers and activists.

Gandhiji also championed the cause of women. Many feel that he was also enslaved to that so-called ideal womanhood. But in spite of all the controversies we have to admit the fact that he was indeed a man who stood for truth. And, a crusader of truth, will never violate or manipulate another truth, and that is the equality between man and woman. So if ever he seemed restricting woman's activities he had his own reasons. Gandhiji by making India conscious about the importance of a strong civic identity made a lasting contribution to the creation of a self-image of Indian woman. Thus she was slowly overcoming the depasement of the traditional identity. It made her conscious of the fact that her upliftment needed sedulous attention. Thus this apathetic populace manacled by gross need and squalor were slowly put on the path of liberation and self-actualization.

When we analyse the history of Indian women's movement, we can infer that it gained power and strong footing after independence. The progressive decisions were taken to fight for a new set of goals. These goals were getting equality based on gender,

job opportunities, reforming the existing laws and creating a new self-concept among women so that they will not be intellectually, physically and emotionally exploited.

From 1947 the Indian woman got an opportunity to participate in confrontational politics. Women's organisations like National Federation of Indian Women (1954) the Samaj Wadi Mahila Sabha (1959) were established to fight for the cause of Indian women. Revolutionary ideologies like Naxalism, Marxism and Communism had their own impact on Indian women. The participation of women in these movements contributed to a social consciousness among them. The radicalization process of women took place under the Naxalite movement. Women belonging to Kerala, West Bengal and Andhra Pradesh participated actively in many socio-political movements like the Chipko movement and anti-price rise protests. These lingering shadows in the life of women existed inspite of this reawakening. Rape, aminocentesis, dowry system, bride-burning, battering of women and prostitution exist even now. In spite of the measures taken by women activists women still are harassed and chained by the patriarchal family and other value systems. They are very much becoming conscious of the atrocities perpetrated on them. Feminism in India has become not only popular, but also very powerful in combating women's issues. Women's Studies is the intelligent arm of Feminist movement which probes the reasons for the subjectivity and enslavement of women. This period also witnessed the branching out of feminism. The main reason for this is the ideological differences that exist in these divergent movements. Radical feminism sees patriarchy as the main enemy and oppressor of women. Their main objective is to get recognized in their own right. The idea of saving the self becomes an obsession for radicals. Only self-determination can save woman according to them.

Liberal Feminism strives to create freedom within, rather than striving for freedom

from. It strives for a “female space” within the existing structure. But inspite of the many flaws and weaknesses, they have successfully contributed to the emergence of a new self-concept of woman in India.

Science has liberated woman to a certain extent. It has saved her from the liability of continuous child bearing. The mechanisation process in the homefront gives her more leisure time which can be used for pursuing what she likes. But other Feminists feel that this has only succeeded in subjugating women, as in the birth control programmes it is women who bear the brunt.

Eco-Feminism gave a new perspective to the suffering of Indian woman. Violence against nature and against women are inter-related. Especially in India the identification of feminine principle with nature has its own relevance. The main inference focuses on the fact that the Indian woman is slowly forging her way to achieve self-actualization and fulfilment, inspite of antagonistic forces. Only self-determination and a sense of equality will help her to conquer her many psychological fears that vandalize and torture her.

Over the years, the conflicting tendencies and the strongly polarized climate of the 1990’s have intensified the need for very effective measures to fight against women’s oppression. This study establishes the fact that the gender inequality and stereotyping form the key elements in holding woman in societal bonds.

8.2 Female Scripts for Power

The most significant contribution of the reform movement was the emergence of women writers in India. Here was a new powerful way in which they could express their hopes, fears, experiences strength and weaknesses. Women in India, especially the educated middle class started writing about their experiences. Twentieth century

witnessed a revolutionary change in the field of writing. Susie Tharu and K. Lalitha's voluminous work entitled *Women Writing in English: 600 BC to the Early Twentieth Century Vols. I and II*, highlights how women all over India responded through their creative writing, to this new awakening and social orientation. The inequalities, restrictions, denials and limitations experienced by women are voiced in their writings. This was one way of breaking their silence. Novels, poems, manuscripts, short stories, drama and critical analysis were deployed by women. They were slowly in the process of building "a literature of their own" a phrase coined by Elaine Showalter. Most of the women writers at the beginning formulated their thoughts and writings on the existing model of male tradition. But slowly the emergence of a female subculture along with new self-awareness led to the establishment of a different female literary tradition.

Women writers were interested in capturing the subjective world of women. In the beginning with their limited mobility, and limited exposure, they could write only about the world they knew intimately. Novels especially became a very popular genre through which they could effectively express their views and experiences. The form was very flexible and it could be easily manipulated by those educated middle class and upper class women. The contact with the west also influenced this setting of a female literary awakening in India. Now "... the feminine values relegated by sexual division of labour to the private realm are now returning to transvaluate the ruling ideologies themselves, the feminization of discourse prolongs the fetishizing of women at the same time as it lends them a more authoritative voice."²⁵

Women writers in India are using the scriptures for voicing their powerlessness and for getting a new image. They are convinced about the power of writing and

²⁵ Terry Eagleton, *The Rape of Clarissa* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1982), p.13.

are using their discourses to create a “new space” and a new self-image. The value, force of expression and the power of writing have been ingrained in the women writers. They have realized that it has more power and sharpness than steel. This female literary awakening to a certain extent focalizes the dichotomy that exists between their real world of women and the represented world. It has finally arrived at a stage where it reciprocates powerfully against the violence and oppression in the existing system. The Feminist network in English and *Manushi* in Hindi were some of the first women’s news letters and magazines to appear. They raised the issues of violence against women and very effectively tried to raise a new awareness among women.

The Indian writing in English is very popular and powerful, as English is the lingua-franca of our country. The birth of this form is definitely connected with a moment in history and that is the British supremacy in India. During the colonial period itself, Indian writers in English evolved a style of their own. Novels especially became very popular. The pioneers of modern novels in India namely Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand and R.K. Narayan, in their novels they depict the Indian life with all its complexities. They discuss socio-political and cultural issues. The women novelists also more or less, modelled their novels on their male counterparts. The novels of Ruth Praver Jhabvala, Kamala Markandaya, Nayantara Sahgal, Anita Desai, Bharathi Mukherjee and Sashi Deshpande have become very popular not only in India, but also in the west. They mainly focus on the social, political and psychological struggles that women undergo. The many victories, defeats, frustrations, sense of rootlessness, dailiness of their lives and the evolving consciousness of women are integrated in their novels. The significance of Anita Desai lies in the fact that she is the first Indian woman writer to experiment in psychological novels. In Desai the main focus is the individual especially the Indian

woman. Reaffirming it she says that “to a novelist it is the individual and not the anonymous multitude that is important”²⁶

Anita Desai’s female protagonists are victims of those inequalities resulting from social stereotyping. Indian women who constitute half the population are forced into subjugation by patriarchy. Desai in her novels depicts the different kinds of oppression and marginalization that exist in society. Due to sex-role stereotyping women unconsciously experience guilt and shame when they deviate from the roles assigned to them.

The most powerful stereotyped belief that curtails women in the Indian context is the belief that women are constitutionally weak and they need protection. The action of the individuals in a society is shaped, appraised and evaluated by the cognition of roles. The rapid urbanization, education and job opportunities have changed the status of women in India to a certain extent. Women are vocalizing their rights and their privileges. Feminist groups do try to make women more aware of their oppression. Non-Feminists are also becoming conscious of the exploitation that exists in society. But social stereotyping is the most powerful weapon used by patriarchy in making women submissive. Desai in her novels has dealt with victimization of women due to stereotyping. Desai establishes the fact that women with a new concept of the self is fighting the battle against their exploitation. Only by stabilizing our self and by establishing a new identity can we achieve success.

Desai feels that the ontological insecurity makes women vulnerable to many mental illnesses. They are depersonalized by the patriarchal system. Maya in *Cry, the Peacock* is shocked at the way in which a woman’s body is exploited. When she sees the

²⁶ Ketaki Sheth, “Anita Desai Talks to Ketaki Sheth about Her Life, Her Work and Indian Writing in English in a Rare Interview”, *Imprint*, June 1984, p.58.

cabaret girls she feels that “on their costumes of black net, they wore bright spangles and each spangle was a price tag, each price proclaimed the price of their breasts, their rumps, their legs. The spangles were bright, the prices were low.”²⁷ Maya’s reaction typifies the reaction of a woman who can identify the exploitation of her body. She vehemently lashes out at Gautama who is influenced by the stereotyped belief that “. . . they are merely physically aberrant women of small ambition who think it a compliment if men leer at their thighs.”²⁸ But Maya says that they must have been victims of sexual exploitations. Here Desai very powerfully depicts the impact of social stereotyping. Maya, Monisha, Sita, Nanda Kaul, Mira Masi are all victims of stereotyping. Monisha’s suicide makes us think about the root cause of woman’s marginalization within the family. According to Desai when women develop a new self-image she is isolated by society and family. Monisha feels “different” from others in Jiban’s family. Monisha reacts thus to this new awareness in her. “It brings me to the edge, again and again catches me up and draws me to the edge, I am plunged down into something too intense to be borne or caught back and rebuffed, at the last and most urgent moment. Utter humiliation and desolation.”²⁹ Roles thus to a certain extent contribute to many conflicts. In the Indian context roles take precedence in the case of woman. The most important role she has to perform is the role of the mother. Desai punctures the concept of motherhood and its glorification. The commitments it ensures stifle Sita in *Where Shall We Go This Summer* Nanda Kaul in *Fire on the Mountain* and Bim in *Clear Light of Day*. Otima, Monisha’s mother, Bim’s mother, Sita as a mother are portrayed in a different manner. They are first of all “Being-in-itself” and then a mother. Thus she takes

²⁷ Anita Desai, *Cry, the Peacock* (New Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 1965), p. 85.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

²⁹ Anita Desai, *Voices in the City* (New Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 1965), p.122.

a firm stand against the patriarchal concept of motherhood. Syed Aman uddin says that “writing for Anita Desai is a process of discovering truth — but this truth for her is not metaphysical reality, nor is it the superficial reality.”³⁰

The intensive studies in psychology support Desai’s view that these roles are created for women and that the indoctrination takes place at a very early stage. Bim in *Clear Light of Day* never strives for the stereotyped image. Sita relinquishes her conformity after marriage and Amla moves on to a new space after the death of Monisha. Nanda Kaul, Maya and Monisha are victims of the voices introject. They live in frustration, rejection and self-pity. The ill-treatment of a widow is depicted through Mira Masi in *Clear Light of Day*. Desai’s description of her loneliness and neurosis haunts the reader:

A drudge in her cell, sealed into her chamber. A grey chamber woven shut. Here she lived, here she crawled, dragging her heavy wings behind her. Crawled from cell to cell, feeding the fat white canvas that lived in the cells and swelled on the nourishment she brought them. The cells swarmed with them, with their little tight white glistening lives. And she slaved and toiled, her long wings dragging.³¹

Desai establishes the fact that the bonds created by society are absolutized by gender based stereotyping. Even the self-image of Indian woman is battued by the so called socio-political imperatives that restrict their mobility and action. Only a proper concept of the self will have the power to fight against the establishment .

³⁰Syed Amanuddin, “Anita Desai’s Techniques”, *The Fiction of Anita Desai*, ed. R.K. Dhawan (New Delhi: Bahri Publications, 1989), p.155.

³¹Anita Desai, *Clear Light of Day* (London: Penguin, 1980), p. 89.

Desai is “. . . the authentic cartographer of inward terrain”³² and this is what which makes her unique among the women writers in Indian writing in English. In Chapter V, Desai’s psychological perspectives are highlighted. She uses the stream-of-consciousness technique to depict what is going on in her character’s mind. It is not merely a string of words but it attempts to present the inner most feelings of the characters. Thoughts and feelings which are the intimate part of the self are projected on to her fictional canvas. We see through their eyes and hear through their ears. “Her novels are not political or sociological in character but are engaged in exposing labyrinths of the human mind and in indicating the ways to psychological fulfilment.”³³ Desai uses the stream of -consciousness technique to probe the inner most recesses of the mind. Using this technique she analyzes the human mind, its intricacies, its mysteries and the way in which it is modified by the empirical reality.

Her critics unanimously agree on this point. R.S. Sharma considers Desai’s *Cry, the Peacock* as “the first step in the direction of psychological fiction in Indian writing in English.”³⁴ Asnani feels that the success of Desai is mainly because of her “exploration of the interior world, plunging into the limitless depths of the mind, and bringing into relief the hidden contours of the human psyche.”³⁵ According to Meena Belliappa, Desai has a rare ability to capture the atmosphere of the mind, and directly involve the reader in the flow of a particular consciousness.”³⁶

³² Ramachandran Nair N, “In Custody: The Road not Taken”, *Indian Women Novelists Set I, Vol IV*, ed. R.K. Dhawan (New Delhi: Prestige Books, 1991), p.78.

³³ Jena Seema, *Voice & Vision of Anita Desai* (New Delhi: Ashish Publishing House, 1989) p.13.

³⁴ R.S. Sharma, *Anita Desai* (New Delhi: Heinemann, 1981), p.24.

³⁵ Shyam. S. Asnani, “Desai’s Theory and Practice of the Novel”, *Perspectives on Anita Desai*, ed. Ramesh. K. Srivastava (Ghaziabad : Vimal Prakashan, 1984), p.5.

³⁶ Meena Belliappa, *Anita Desai: A Study of her Fiction* (Calcutta: Writers Workshop, 1971), p.1.

In Desai's fictional canvas the individual is more important than social and political milieu. But she qualifies the individual by connecting it with the physical environment and that is the locale of her novels. The locale in Desai's novels also assumes a lot of significance. In other words it becomes the objective correlative of the emotions displayed by the character. "One important ingredient of her art is that in her novels, Desai paints ornate, engrossing portraits of the outer world with its rich peripheral details, projecting the turbulent chaos of the inner world of the protagonist" ³⁷

In *By-Bye Blackbird* the beautiful as well as unwelcoming English countryside is beautifully described. It merges with the character of Dev who does not like England and Adit who loves the English countryside. Chakradhar Prasad Singh says that the passages describing the beautiful countryside of London " . . . display the capacity of the novelist to render common place scenes and sights with a rare poetic touch. One of the main sources of attraction of the novel is this richness of imagery" ³⁸

This creates a two dimensional effect and the private world of the self assumes a special significance when it merges with the locale. All senses of the readers are activated by this unique technique. The happy and carefree childhood of Bim and Raja, the closeness between the brother and sister is described by Desai thus:

There were still those shining summer evenings on the banks of the Jumna when they went together, Bim, and Raja, bare foot over the sand to wade across the river, at that time of the year no more than a sluggish trickle, to the melon fields on the other

³⁷ Madhusudan Prasad, *Anita Desai, The Novelist* (Allahabad: New Horizon, 1981), p. 44.

³⁸ Chakradhar Prasad Singh, "The Visitor and The Exile: A Study in Anita Desai's *Bye Bye Black Bird*", *Response: Recent Evaluation of Indian Fictions in English*. (Bareilly: Prakash Book Depot, 1983), p. 238.

bank to pick a ripe, round one and cut it open with Raja's pen-knife and bite into the juice-suffused slices while the sun sank into the saffron west and the cannon boomed into the city to announce the end of the day's fast in the month of Ramzaan³⁹

The whole landscape comes to life by this description. The pure and simple pleasures of childhood are set against the back drop of the banks of Jumna. The painful experiences of Bim are contrasted against her happy childhood days in the company of Raja. Prema Nandakumar says, "sombre are the shadows, no doubt in Anita Desai's world of imaginative fiction, but snatches of sunshine, the sudden revealing and guiding lights, are not wanting either."⁴⁰

This study establishes the fact that there is a new self-concept of the Indian woman emerging from the novels of Anita Desai. The self-concept of Indian woman has suffered many setbacks. The revolutionary changes that swept over the socio-cultural framework generated many inter-conflicts as well as intra-conflicts among women. The self of the Indian woman is caught up in the winds of change. But there are still the residues of patriarchal oppression, violence and other negative forces which affect the self in an adverse manner. According to Desai the coexistence of these two polarities generate anguish, trauma, frustrations and sometimes they result in mental illness. Desai asserts the fact that there is a new awareness among women that gives them courage to go in the opposite direction, to finally arrive at the stage of "being-in-itself." This new self-image will ensure consistency in behaviour and woman can resolve many of her conflicts. It solves many intra-conflicts and inter-conflicts. These conflicts that are portrayed by

³⁹ Anita Desai, *Clear Light of Day* (London: Penguin, 1980), p.121.

⁴⁰ Prema Nandakumar, "Sombre the Shadows and Sudden the Lights", *Perspectives on Indian Fiction in English* ed. M.K. Naik (New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 1985), p.198.

Desai are discussed in detail in Chapter VI. Since conflicts are a part of growth out of conflicts a new awareness arises, which propels the self to wholeness.

The female psyche experiences intense conflicts when it is framed within the traditional family. "Anita Desai's narratives not only give shape to separateness and connectedness that emerge from a family saga, but dramatize the way in which the self receives wounds, which are either aggravated or healed by the socio-cultural matrice, which is its soil and sustenance."⁴¹ Chapter VII focuses on the various wounds received by the self, when engaged in many battles and when they experience intense emotional conflicts. The tool for analysing the conflicts galore are psycho-analysis, psychology, socio-psychology and Transactional Analysis. Battles fought and unfought are analysed in order to prove that there is a new self-concept that emerges from the novels of Anita Desai.

Desai deals with the chaotic fabric of human life. The stream-of-consciousness is used to depict the various kinds of conflicts experienced by the self. "She stresses the individual and individuality. In her novels the protagonists desire and strive for a more authentic way of life than the one offered to them."⁴² Thus all her female characters rebel against their destiny. They do not accept life meekly in the traditional manner. What is it that causes conflicts? we ask ourselves. Desai gives us an answer. If one meekly accepts the "Being-For-Others" there is no conflict. But when she moves into a "Being-in-itself" conflicts are generated. Desai's protagonists are all women with more than ordinary sensibility and they search for their real self or authentic self. She focuses "... on how women in the contemporary urban milieu are bravely struggling

⁴¹Rajendra Prasad V.V.N, "Anita Desai and the Wounded Self" *Indian Women Novelists Set. I Vol. II*, ed. R.K. Dhawan (New Delhi: Prestige Books, 1991), p.148.

⁴²Usha Pathania, *The Fiction of Anita Desai and Kamala Markandaya* (New Delhi: Kanishka Publishing House, 1991), p. 12.

against or helplessly submitting to the relentless forces of absurd life.”⁴³ Desai through Baumgartner depicts one negative aspect of depression and that is regression. Baumgartner’s Child ego state is activated when he is emotionally disturbed. G.R. Taneja feels that Baumgartner’s Bombay “is the study of the humanity’s need to find sustenance within itself. It is a story of love that binds, sustains and ennobles, love that draws human beings to one another . . .”⁴⁴ The alien land generates an intense conflict and existential agony in man. The agony in searching for one’s roots, one’s identity is also analysed in Chapter VII.

The negative aspect of alienation is effectively brought to light by Desai. The alienated move away from people. Nanda Kaul, Sita, Monisha and Deven feel defenceless and hence try to live in isolation. They are victims of patriarchal power structure and traditional belief system. Desai brings out through Deven, Gautama, Raman, Bakul, Dharma, Jiban and Nirode, the stereotyped attitudes towards women. Deven never recognizes Sarala as a “being-in-itself.” For him she is always a being-for- others. Sarala is also not happy with her marriage and hence they live in conflicts. The battle fought by Sarala is ineffective as she does not have the power to vocalize the frustrations of a wounded psyche. Jiban (*Voices in the City*) is partly responsible for his wife’s death. He also fails to treat Monisha with an understanding. He never communicates with her. A.V. Krishna Rao remarks that “Jiban Monisha’s husband, is the prisoner of a conventional culture . . .”⁴⁵ Gautama, Maya’s husband, is a distanced,

⁴³ Madhusudan Prasad, *Anita Desai, The Novelist* (Allahabad: New Horizon, 1981), p.140.

⁴⁴ G.R. Taneja, “Anita Desai’s Baumgartner’s Bombay A Note” *Indian English Literature: Since Independence*, ed. Ayyappa Paniker (New Delhi: The Indian Association for English Studies, 1991), p. 38.

⁴⁵ A.V. Krishna Rao, “Voices in the City: A Study” *Perspectives on Anita Desai*, ed. Ramesh K. Srivastava (Ghaziabad: Vimal Prakashan, 1984), p.169.

serious person with whom Maya cannot adjust. Maya reacts in the Child ego state and Gautama behaves like an Adult. Maya is very much aware of the negative aspects of stereotyping, but the lack of coordination between her behaviour and the body results in psychosis. She murders Gautama and then kills herself.

Desai uses the technique of psychologizing or seeing through to establish that there is a new self-concept emerging from the novels of Anita Desai. According to Desai it is the stratification of men above women in the patriarchal framework that contributes to the conflicts between man and woman. In Maya negatively toned information is encoded more powerfully than positively toned information which results in her neurosis. Pathological verifications also categorically prove that in depressed individuals the self-image will also be defective.

The main reason for a defective self-image is hence analysed here. Bitter experiences in childhood, the absence of a mother or father, the irresponsible fathers, physical or mental abuse are the factors that cause mental illness. Death wish is also a part of their hysteria and neurosis.

Marriages are more or less settlements according to Desai. Her female characters with more than ordinary sensibility fight against the constraints placed on them. It is the lack of a strong identity that places women in these psychological role-slots. Using the psycho-analytic theory subjectivity of woman is analyzed. Girls are conscious of their 'lack' from the beginning and the 'lack' imprints a sense of weakness in them. The biological lack is transformed into natural weakness. The gender-based discrimination creates a lot of conflicts. Bim with a new self-image achieves wholeness while Amla decides that she will not marry in haste and victimize herself.

To find out whether woman's oppression is rooted in sexuality, the theories of

Freud, Karen Horney, Kate Millet, Lacan, Derrida and Michel Foucault are used. We come to the conclusion that femininity is “acquired” due to “cultural policing.” The biological differences do not make women weak. The “so-called frailty and feminine weakness” are construed by patriarchal society to suppress women. This is the main reason for the oppression of women. A striking similarity exists in the texts of Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Demosthenes, Solon, the Greco-Roman philosophers and the law givers, during the time of Dharma Shastras. May be, it was ignorance on their part that made them frame laws of such kinds which lead to the marginalization of women. To homogenize and to interpret this complex ensemble of psycho-social relations which marginalize women, has become an ordeal for feminists and women activists. The psychological battles between man and woman in Desai are thus grounded in sexuality and gender based subjectivity.

The marital conflicts in Desai’s novels are analysed in the light of the psychological facet which concerns self and emotions. Desai has deeply probed the cognitive and emotive orientation of women. The results of quantitative psychological tests, psychiatric interviews and researches have concluded that “brain is the organ of the mind.” Piaget the genetic epistemologist, is his theory of “Constructivist Structuralism” has spelled out in detail the nature of interactionist position of the self in relation with brain. The origin of mental structures is to be sought in the interaction between the self and the environment in which the self strives to adapt using the processes of Assimilation, Accommodation and Equilibration. They are automatic processes which are programmed or structured in the brain to help the self to interact with the environment. Assimilation and Accommodation are functional invariants of intelligent behaviour, at every level of intellectual development, from infancy to adulthood, they are operative in the over-all

process of adaptation. A full development of the self must hence include not only the influence of stimuli on respondents (S →R) but also the influence of the responding organism on incoming stimuli (S←R).

Assimilation is thus the conservative side of intellectual development. It is the process which helps the self to draw environmental events towards itself. This ensures coherence and continuity to the mental structure. Accommodation is the outward tendency of the inner structure of the self to adapt itself to a particular environment. And equilibration is a dynamic system which establishes a balance between Assimilation and Accommodation.

The cognitive structure of higher intelligence is referred to as Operation. In an Adult ego it is the operational self that is always activated. At this level the cognitive ability serves the function of the evaluator, the coordinator, the integrater, the motivator and the appraiser. At this level the self achieves totality. It is the ideal situation when the intellect and will are not enslaved and all sensory abilities are integrated. The unique organization of a person's experience is influenced by the conscious and unconscious elements. The self-image of a person is thus the sum total of all these processes. The self-image is directly connected with *Drawing* which is a semiotic function which starts appearing at about 2 or 2 1/2 years. Mental or self-image is the product of perception itself. It is not directly given by the perceptual input alone, but is constructed by the processes of Accommodation.

Cora Dubois and F.C. Wallace have demonstrated through projective testing and interviewing that even small societies, with relatively homogeneous culture do not have a basic personality. Culture and tradition through their norms, restrict the personality development to a certain extent. It provides opportunity for their expression in a limited

manner. Cultural policing that is done in the case of women, the indoctrination of femininity, sex-role stereotyping can be explained in this light. It proves that these fundamental constraints on individual action, especially in the case of women, do not have any scientific relevance but they are contrued by the patriarchal structure with a definitive purpose.

In the light of these findings Desai's novels, especially her female protagonists, acquire a special significance. Very appropriately she pinpoints the root cause of female oppression. In the Indian context, the repressive measures are used by family, patriarchy, tradition and culture. People in socially disadvantaged positions have shown higher rates of psychiatric disorder than their more disadvantaged counterparts. The English sociologist George Brown has documented that "lower class people have less confidence than those in the middle class and this contributes to their vulnerability to undesirable life events."⁴⁶

In community surveys of psychiatric stress women are between two and three times as likely as men to report a history of mood (affective) disorders. Women for the past few decades have been in a very disadvantaged position relative to men because their "typed roles" expose them to very chronic stress. Desai's female characters, Maya in *Cry the Peacock*, Monisha, Amla, Otima, Aunt Leila in *Voices in the City*, Sita in *Where Shall We Go This Summer*, Nand Kaul, Ila Das and Raka in *Fire on the Mountain*, Bim, Mira Masi, Tara Misra Sisters in *Clear Light of Day*, Sarala in *In Custody*, represent the Indian women who are in a deprived and disadvantaged position. But these women have an awareness, a focussed consciousness, about their false image that is imposed on them. This definitely attributes to their deviant behaviour. They are not

⁴⁶ Quoted in Ronald. C. Kesler, "Sociology & Psychiatry", *Comprehensive Text of Psychiatry Volume I*, eds. Harold I Kaphan, Benjamin J. Sadock (Baltimore: Williams & Wilkin, 1989), p. 302.

ready to converge to the so called idealized image, to wear the mask, that is placed on them by patriarchy. This establishes the fact that there is definitely a new image, a new self-concept, of woman emerging from the novels of Anita Desai.

To establish that there is the presence of Operational self, the Adult ego state in these female protagonists, is analysed using the tool of Transactional Analysis. This is used to assess the psychic structure, the cohesiveness of the self, its organization and potential. The self, once it is stabilized through conflicts, and as it secures a strong identity, will move towards actualization. The emotional pressures will not disrupt the sense of cohesiveness and the psychic schema of the self. Freud has substantiated that neurotic conflicts can be resolved when the psychic drives are completely brought into harmony with the outer world. The female protagonists are analysed using “game” and “script.” Bim, Tara, Sita, Amla after regressing into Child ego state move forward to the Adult ego state. This establishes the fact that the identity of Indian woman is changing from “being-for-others” to “being-in-itself.” The new self-concept will definitely help her to fight the ineludible battles that exist in the patriarchal society.

Only women with a new self-concept will be capable of re-vision — the act of looking back or seeing with fresh eyes, what a woman is and what her prerogatives are. In these “revisionist” women it is the Operational self that is activated.

Once new self-concept emerges, man and woman relationship itself will change. The change within her will be projected or transferred to the person with whom she interacts. The man and the family that infantilizes her, that prevents her from achieving Adult ego, will also change, as she has the power within her to transeffect an identity, not only hers, but also of her male counterpart. Desai’s Sita, some critics feel, makes a compromise with her life. But the objective analysis here proves that her husband

Raman also changes. He is willing to come and live in Manori, as he says at the end.

Women, according to Desai, accept the false security offered by the patriarchal structure which will never give them wholeness or self-actualization. The mother-daughter relationship is also analysed using theories in psychology. The main inference that we evolve again, establishes the fact that it is the mental aberration of the mother that is reflected in the daughter. The daughters are extensions of their mothers. The fractured self will always project negative feelings or Voices introject, which will sabotage one's self. It results in the thwarted aspirations and goals in a person's life. In order to overcome this trauma we have to have a solid self-image, a strong identity which will enable us to establish "real peace" with the environment. The disowning process of the pretentious social self will not cause a crisis of the real self. The negative valences will be powerless against this authentic selfhood. It is this reaffirmation of self-hood that propels Bim to freely forgive Raja and enables her to move towards self-actualization. According to P.M. Nayak and S.P. Swami "Bim rejects Aurangzeb as an example of ego-centricity, and in disowning him attains self-awareness. Rejecting her fake self and its obsessive perversions, she moves towards the realisation of an emerging self. Bim, that 'mothering presence' owns all, identifies with all."⁴⁷ It is the same transformation that Sita, Amla and Otima undergo. Thus this thesis establishes the fact that there is a new self-concept of Indian women emerging from the novels of Anita Desai.

This study also establishes the fact that a woman's identity is not related to her "assigned roles" of patriarchy. Education, Social mobility and Economic independence will give woman the right to self-determination. This ESE factor will make a person

⁴⁷ P.M. Nayak and S.P. Swain "From Alienation to Identification: A Study of Anita Desai's Novels", *Commonwealth Quarterly*, 19, No.47 (December-March, 1994), pp.30-40.

realize that gender is learned, indoctrinated and it is not to be confused with biological difference. The new self-concept will definitely empower women to negotiate with value systems that exist in a structured society. When woman intelligently starts analysing value systems she discards what is harmful for her. Her strong sense of identity will help her in choosing the right values. The allegiance to right values will help her to achieve goals set in her life and will give her freedom to choose. This self conscious choosing of one's values will definitely precipitate positive changes — personal as well as social. Anita Desai the writer conveys the same message that is given in the Upanishads. "The way is long; it is as it were, walking on the sharp edge of a razor, yet despair not. Awake, arise and stop not until the goal is reached."⁴⁸

Anita Desai through her fictional canvas proves that the tendency towards the reification of the female which makes her more often a sexual object can be resisted by women themselves. What she requires is a dynamic self-concept which will save her from the pernicious effects of social beliefs, ideology and tradition. Her characters become role models for us to emulate and thus they help us to break our silence and the taboos in our life. Desai does not offer an improbable possibility like the post modernist writers but she presents a probable possibility that can definitely take place within the minimal conditions, but it implies enormous social and political changes. It is not a radical imagination which will carry us beyond our place, beyond our struggle, that we see in Desai, but a penetrative imagination which gives us lucid recognition of our possibilities and the course to strive for, for a better self-image rather than remaining resigned to our deplorable predicament. Desai as a writer fulfils what Mayaumi Oda has expressed in

⁴⁸Kamala Roy, *The Concept of Self* (Calcutta: Firma. K.L. Mukhopadhyay, 1966), p.305.

her poem "*Seito*" (*Blue Stockings*):

Women, when you paint your own portrait

Do not forget to put a golden

dome at the top of your head.⁴⁹

Desai has definitely given the Indian womanhood a "golden dome" and that is the new self-concept.

⁴⁹Quoted in Helen Diner, *Mothers and Amazons* (New York: Anchor Press, 1965), p. 151.

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