CONCLUSION

Feminist Literature in English has been there ever since perspectives on life were recorded in the medium of literature, though it certainly has come to its own, of late, of recent origin again as the feminist perception of literature. Feminism in the Indian context is more or less a by-product of the Western liberalism in general and feminist thought in particular. The indigenous contributing factors have been the legacy of equality of sexes inherited from the freedom struggle, constitutional rights of women, spread of education and the consequent new awareness among women. The Indian woman caught in the flux of tradition and modernity saddled with the burden of the past, her attempts to liberate herself and to redefine herself to establish her female identity constitute the crux of feminism in Indian literature. In literary terms it precipitates in a search for identity and a quest for the definition of the self.

The feminist perspective on literature – creative or critical – whether in the third world country or elsewhere has had to confront issues of similar persuasion; male chauvinism, sexist bias, psychological and even physical exploitation, hegemonic inclinations in not merely the male but also the female sections of society, the utter disregard for the female’s psychological, cultural, familial and spiritual quests. This has been discussed in the introductory chapter with a note on the Feminist Schools of the West.

Desai deals with the mind and soul of a character, her inner workings and hidden thoughts rather than her outer realities in her novels and prefers to
use the stream of consciousness technique and interior monologue accordingly to reveal her characters. Shobha De as a writer is gifted with extraordinary ability to take up sensitive aspects of human life in her novels. Like Desai, she has the gift of exploring the subdued depths of women psychology in her novels. She believes that a man’s personality can be judged in the right perspective only when one goes into his interior more than his external behaviour. She is frank and straightforward in narrating incidents in her novels. The way she narrates each and every aspect of human relationship in general and man-woman relationship in particular, is really admirable. The orthodox people in India may criticise her for her open discussion of sexual matters in her novels. She is a writer who believes in a very frank narration of shocking incidents and absolute open-heartedness. The sexual exploitation of the female is described vividly in her novels to show how the patriarchal society treats women badly and brutally. As a result her fiction has got tremendous response not only from several European countries but all over the world. In fact, as a writer she differs considerably from the other Indian women novelists writing in English. This has been dealt with at great length in the study of her themes.

De burst upon the literary scene with her best-seller Socialite Evenings in 1988, which was followed by Starry Nights in 1990, Sisters and Strange Obsession in 1992, Sultry Days in 1994, Snapshots in 1995, and Second Thoughts in 1996. The popularity of Shobha De’s novels lies in her mastery over the art of storytelling, and her use of the language. Shobha De claims to be
a pioneer in the field of ‘popular fiction’ writing. She also claims to be among
the first to explore the world of the urban woman in India. She debunks the
patriarchal hegemony in her novels by throwing challenges to men. Woman’s
significant difference underlies her sexuality, and it is from her sexuality that
most of her problems arise. This is also illustrated in the preceding chapters. As
Jardine puts it,

The putting into discourse of ‘woman’ as that process diagnosed
.... is intrinsic to modernity; indeed, the valorisation of the
feminine, woman, and her obligatory, that is historical,
connotations, as somehow intrinsic to new and necessary modes
of thinking, writing, and speaking. (25)

Any sensible analysis of a literary work from the feminist point of view
will do well to bear this fact in mind. It is this factor that lends authenticity to
Shobha De’s treatment of women’s problems in her novels.

An interesting feature of Shobha De’s feminist narrative stance results in
the use of witty and interesting dialogues with ironical undertones. For instance
the following passage in the *Starry Nights* illustrates this:

We have to pretend. All wives pretend. All wives have to pretend……..A wife is acting all the time - this is the world’s best
kept secret but I am telling you, act, act, act that is what she has
to do. Boost his ego, making feel like a king even when you
really want to spit on him. (50)
The presentation of female sexuality not only challenges the accepted notions of essential female nature, supposed to be docile and submissive, but also becomes an active agent to provide a specific structural design to different narratives. The different forms of sexuality that finds expression in her novels include heterosexuality, lesbianism, homosexuality and mechanical sexual behaviour. Shobha De’s fiction seems to be directed to perform the function of uncoding, decoding and deconstructing the established images of women (Neb N.K. 243). The female characters in Shobha De’s fiction are dominated by cruel, self absorbing men who pretend to be humble, honest and harmless.

Interestingly Shobha De’s fictional world has aroused curiosity and interest on the one hand and denunciation on the other. In the beginning her novels evoked hostile reviews and harsh criticism for her explicit portrayal of characters. Educated and attractive, confident and assertive socialite women in her novels define marriage afresh, in which mutual fidelity is replaced by sexual freedom. Marriage to them is hardly more than a convenient contract to lead a comfortable and promiscuous life, which can be terminated at any time depending upon the whims of the partners. A study of her characters brings to light how they think and act differently in defiance of the old order. This has been brought out in the study of themes and characters of the novelist.

Marriage is no longer regarded as essential in the fictional world of Shobha De. In Sultry Days, Deb says: “Who knows about marriage-sharriage . . . . . I am happy as I am” (27). There is also a reference in the novel to
“Typical Bombay marriage” in which “She goes her way and he goes his” (183-84). This incompatibility of the partners may be the chief reason of their dissolution. As one of them confides, “we tried it. But he wanted to walk counter clockwise. And I prefer clockwise. ... We both wanted to go in different direction” (185). Constancy and faithfulness are absent in marriage causing marital discord. Their sexual behaviour turns out to be amoral and in many cases even abnormal. To Anjali of Socialite Evenings, an illicit love affair is a dream come true “this is the most beautiful thing to have happened to me,” she declares, “This is the experience I’ve been waiting for” (23). This kind of expedient relationship, devoid of caring and sharing, emotional warmth and mutual fidelity, very often breaks down, resulting ultimately in divorce or dissipation.

On the other hand the archetypal Indian man in Shobha De’s novels has been portrayed as betrayers and exploiters. Malini, in Starry Nights, opines that “Men are all the animals, and we women such fools” (50). Men in Snapshots are no exceptions. Rashmi is convinced from her own experiences that most men lead “petty, self-obsessed lives”. As for their worth, she asks: “But was any man [worth a woman’s love]? She hadn’t met one she genuinely felt like sharing her life with. ... They preferred flirts and flatterers. Even manipulators” (49). When Pip leaves her suddenly, she takes it in her stride. This is replicated in the case of Younes also. She tells her son: “Intrinsically, instinctively, intuitively dishonest” (49). So she asks: “So bloody what? Was being manliness
such a shame?” (50). Men may come and men may go, “Float in and out of her life like wispy cotton balls on a summer day,” (50) but she can go on for ever with her independence and way of life.

These men are not only insensitive to women’s individuality, aspirations and feelings but they can also aggravate women’s problems in their own ways. For instance, Karuna, in Socialite Evenings, comes to realize that she had “married the wrong man for the wrong reasons at the wrong time” and that her husband was just an average Indian husband who does not understand her genuine feelings. She sums up the average Indian women’s marital life as “an exhausted generation of wives with no dreams left, “marriage to whom is “like a skin allergy, an irritant all right” (65). Shobha De has created characters that suit her themes in order to focus the peevish treatment meted out to women in India. She does not present them for any idealistic purpose or aesthetic effect. Like Deb in her Sultry Days, she herself might declare: “I am what I am – take it or leave it” (4).

Anita Desai, her counterpart has similar concern for women in the patriarchal society and takes up themes to present the women’s issues in her novels. Her novels reveal her genuine concern with the themes of anxiety, anguish and psychological adaptation necessitated by the threats to the individual’s identity and relation to reality. Many of her characters find the real world too harsh, difficult, unpleasant and complex. They withdraw from the reality into their inner world and search for ways and means of living through
this hostile world. Her characters are unique who want to exercise their freedom, make a choice and refuse to conform or compromise. Their persistent search is for an authentic existence by bearing the sole responsibility for their decisions rather than by appealing to the authority of custom or even their own past patterns of thought. The protagonists are torn between their search for authentic existence and the limitations of the human situation that prevent them from such realizations. All of them find marital life monotonous and disgusting. They refuse to see themselves as a part of an impersonal mass of mankind at large. They believe that they have individual potentialities of their own. To achieve an authentic existence they distinguish themselves from the mass and exercise their choice. The novelist affirms this in an interview:

I am interested in characters that are not average but have retreated, or been driven into despair and so turned against the general current. It is very easy to flow with the current, it makes no demands, it costs no efforts. But those who cannot follow it, whose heart cries out ‘the great No’, who fight the current and struggle against it, they know what demands are and what it costs to meet them (The Times of India, New Delhi, April 29, 1979).

In an existential mode their main concerns are the quest for meaning, alienation, despair, death, anxiety, boredom, responsibility, freedom and unfulfilled emotional life. Anita Desai emphasizes certain other aspects, such as interpersonal relations, the ultimate reality, general futility of life,
nothingness and worthlessness. Their awareness of nothingness and futility of life burdens them with a tragic inability to relate to others in a spirit of love and mutual understanding. This has been discussed in the previous chapters.

Almost all her characters experience psychoneurosis, feelings of isolation, frustration and insecurity. The study reveals that in Anita Desai’s fictional world, each character faces a unique pattern of adjustment. Each individual’s psychological attributes, social pressures and expectations from self and society place the character in unique circumstances to fight against which she finds her ill-equipped. They feel as if their self-worth were under attack, and consequently face a threat to their existence. The success of the novelist lies in her poetic and psychological portrayal of the hidden depth of the protagonist who is haunted by various nostalgic events of the past. Talking of her psychological portrayal of characters the Anita Desai observes in her interview, “Replies to the Questionnaire”:

My novels don’t have themes – at least not till they are finished, published or read, do I see any theme. While writing I follow flashness of incidents, I veer away from or even fight anything that threatens to distort or destroy this inside, and somehow come to the end and look back to see the pattern of footprints on the sand. (1)

Owing to temperamental polarities, Maya cannot derive satisfaction and happiness with Gautama and adjust to his way of life and thinking. Nirode and Monisha feel that everybody is hostile, bent upon humiliating them. Sarah and
Adit are the victims of racial prejudices in an alien land and feelings of loss of identity and non-belongingness disturb their psychic equilibrium. Raka and Nanda Kaul live amongst selfish, inconsiderate and insensitive relations. They feel discarded and disowned, and find the world of human-beings, charmless and insipid. Sita’s neighbours are callous, violent, and hungry like orphans in the street. She cannot live with those, who do not understand her emotional needs. Anita Desai’s novel *Cry, The Peacock*, neatly divided into three sections illustrates Desai’s ability to closely interweave the form with the content. The first section describes tension and conflicts between two characters of opposed temperaments. The last section presents an ironic view of the world of common sense, a world in which the protagonist has no place. The large middle section which is rendered in the first person narration presents the tragedy of the central character.

In this section, the novelist presents an event – the death of a pet dog- and its effect on the two major characters in the novel, Maya and Gautama. This device enables the novelist to build up a tense mood. The novel begins with the description of the body rotting in the sun. The novelist succeeds in evoking the hot and humid atmosphere of an April afternoon. The writer builds up the atmosphere and the tension through a carefully detailed description of things, both big and small, which appear to be so important to one character and of no consequence to the other. Although Anita Desai’s sympathies as a writer are with Maya, she maintains a distance from her character so that the reader is able to see the character in all its complexity and richness.
Anita Desai adopts a slightly different technique in *Voices in the City*. She employs the more conventional third-person mode of narration in the novel. The novel presents the bewildering variety of sights and sounds of the city of Calcutta. In the opening pages of the novel, she describes the chaos and confusion on the railway platform. In *Bye-Bye, Blackbird* the hustling life in the city of London is very vividly recreated. Bim in *Clear Light of Day* is angry and disillusioned because she thinks that her brother and sister have betrayed her. Deven Sharma in *In Custody* is unhappy as he has notions of a grandiose self and deserves, in his own opinion, a better deal in life.

In her novels Anita Desai shows how the human relations are seriously affected by some acute breakdown of communication. Marital, parental, social, and communal relations are locked in a kind of meaninglessness, empty rituals observed for the sake of convention, not leading the characters to any personal fulfilment or development. Maya, Monisha, Sita, Nanda Kaul and Bim, seriously question the validity of social relations, the purpose of life itself. The study of the themes of her novels reveals that the women protagonists of Anita Desai are pursued by a sense of hollowness and futility. Anita Desai’s characters are constantly under the pressure of a growing inner feeling of vacuity and meaninglessness. Their awareness of the dimensions of the time and space as basic constituents of their existence creates greater conflict within them, as they feel unable to mould these dimensions according to their ontological perceptions. The female protagonists of Anita Desai are further
burdened with the awareness of their feminist consciousness. They wish to know, along with the other ontological issues, the psycho-biological significance of their being female persons.

In *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* Anita Desai presents once again the theme of conflict between the two individuals; Sita and Raman. The novelist presents a series of incidents to draw attention to the theme of marital tension in her novels. In an interview, Anita Desai says that “the main theme of the four dimensional piece” (Khanna 123) of *Clear Light of Day* is time as preserver and destroyer and the effects of the bondage of time on her characters. There is a movement in the novel, a movement in time, from the past to the present and present to the past. The canvas is crowded and the novelist presents a larger number of characters than she had done ever before. The characters are treated with the usual mixture of satire and sympathy, of detachment and insight. There are innumerable descriptions, poetic and evocative, of persons and places, of flowers and plants, birds and animals. Tara, the younger sister, unsuccessfully attempts to win the forgiveness of her sister for her childhood act of betrayal, and Bim, the elder sister changes a little. She becomes less rebellious and more resigned. It is interesting to note that the novelist employs the same technique for purposes of narration, evocation and description.

But in the novels of Shobha De, the age-old institutions of marriage and family are under tremendous strain. The neo-rich Indians in her novels,
particularly educated, beautiful and attractive and competent, confident and assertive women seem to define marriage afresh, in which fidelity in married life is replaced by sexual freedom. To them marriage is not the union of minds. Women in her novels symbolize the overpowering materialism and they try to take shelter in different identities for momentary solace. Girish, the great art film maker, exhorts Karuna to take life more seriously and commit herself to some serious thing like cinema – “But life is about more than just goofy kids surf – boards. I want you to get involved. Commit yourself. Get into the mainstream “The mainstream of what? Cinema? Life? I find all that very complex” (Socialite Evenings 255). Helene Cixous observes- A male privilege can be seen in the opposition between activity and passivity. Traditionally, “the question of sexual difference is coupled with the same opposition; activity/passivity” (288). Anjali throws off the traditional conventions of moral values. She enacts a marriage of her choice with Abe. Karuna too discards conventions and she has an extra – marital relationship with Krish. Even she dares to restrain her husband from a week long sexual orgy with Krish Kukherjee in Rome. When Karuna’s husband comes out with a ‘package’ deal containing an assured income and all the luxuries which she had hitherto been enjoying, Karuna’s only remark is “(the package) sounds sweets” (222). Similar is the case with Anjali, her second marriage to the homosexual Kumar is nothing but an exchange for “the Porches emeralds, holidays in Biarritz, shipping along the champs – Ely sees, a villa in Oaty, parties every night, unlimited champagne
and the choice to pick my own bed – mate but only discreetly” (*Socialite Evenings* 217). Ritu exploits her sexual breakthrough, her female potentiality to keep her husband within her reach, within her control: “Make them feel you have done them a favour by marrying them – make them feel insecure. Let them think you’ll walk out on them if they don’t toe the line. That’s what keeps them in their place” (86).

The only thing which these emancipated women can do in a fit of boldness is to abuse men in order to assert themselves. Karuna abuses her husband: “Listen Asshole – Don’t give me your fancy lines. You are nothing but cheap male whore. Why don’t you leave Ritu alone?” (*Socialite Evenings* 112) Also, she thinks she has become one-up and vindicated herself as a woman by abusing her husband verbally when he comes with the proposal to remarry her:

> And you waited all this while to tell me. Just get the hell out of my house and life. I don’t ever want to see you again. I let you in this time ... but never again I’ll call the cops if you try and invade my home in future. You are even more of a worm than I thought. You deserve Winnie – I hope she’s got a wax doll of yours. I’ll send her some extra pins to stick into it. Now take your frigging pipe and out!!? (264)

To Anjali marriage becomes a necessity because it provides her security, status and luxuries and it also enables her to indulge in adultery, for adultery is
possible only within marriage. It might begin as a possible escape from a ‘meaningless marriage’ as happened in the case of Karuna’s affair with Krish but once it is discovered she is advised against going on guilt-trip by Anjali. Despite these facets of a woman’s personality, in *Socialite Evenings* Karuna fights her way up after her divorce, gets recognition in advertising and television productions and becomes financially independent and emancipated woman. Some of her characters are lesbians and they are the least bothered about marrying and settling in life.

To Anita Desai, the creative art is a secret art. However, in spite of this instinctive distrust of talking about her own practice as a writer, she has commented on the suppleness and remarkable flexibility of the English language. For her, English is “the language of both reason and instinct, of sense and sensibility. Since in India the English language is an immigrant, without roots and tradition, an Indian writer in English has to depend upon his own intuition and individual vision” (Thomas, O.J 177). These remarks illuminate one major aspect of Anita Desai’s fiction - her ability to use language in an intensely poetic fashion to project the states of mind of her protagonists. The verbal texture of her fiction embodies the deeply personal vision of the writer and her protagonists.

Anita Desai employs the language of the interior to delineate the inner tensions and crises in the lives of her characters. The problems of her characters are existential, not political or social. She herself confesses that she
has not written the kind of social document that demands the creation of realistic and typical characters and the use of realistic and typical dialogue. She says in an interview that “a writer does not create a novel by observing a given set of theories but follows flashes of individual vision” (Ram 100). For her, Literature is a neither means of escaping reality nor a vehicle for expressing political, social and religious ideas, on the other hand, it is an exploration and the enquiry. She discusses in her novel the problems of temperamental incompatibility, conjugal chaos and inharmonious man and woman relationship. She evokes the necessary mood and elicits the right emotion from the reader through the series of objective description. She employs the language of the interior to portray the compulsions and tensions of her characters, most of who suffer from emotional and psychological problems. By virtue of her distinct thematic concerns and technical innovations, Anita Desai occupies a unique position in the world of Indian writing in English.

One of the most important aspects of her work is her ability to fuse form and content. This becomes clear when we contrast her with other Indo-English novelists. Mulk Raj Anand lays more emphasis on the subject matter of fiction than on its form, whereas Anita Desai is more concerned with the form and technique, even though she has her own distinct thematic concerns. However, in her novels one senses the presence of a pervasive and controlling artistry fusing the different parts of the work into a unified vision. Form becomes a mode of discovering the content. Chauhan comments that Anita Desai’s
narratives emanate from neurotic protagonists and invariably cast a distorting
gloom upon the world where they carry out their designs (354).

It is clear that man-woman relationship is to be of particular interest to
her for in most of her early novels she writes on this theme. Her treatment of
man-woman relationship is both artistically moving and psychologically sound.
Father daughter relationship is the leitmotif of Cry, The Peacock and Maya
suffers from father fixation. Her neurosis is the result of her love-wish which
she transfers from her father to her husband and which remains unfulfilled. Her
neurosis is further heightened by her awareness of her horoscope and the
macabre prediction of the albino astrologer, which leads to her killing Gautama
and her committing suicide. If Maya suffers from psychological alienation and
Sarah from cultural alienation, the sense of alienation experienced by Sita, in
Where Shall We Go This Summer?, is of different kind. Sita, a married woman
in her forties, a mother of four children, pregnant for the fifth time, lives in a
flat with her husband Raman, an upper middle class factory owner. Her
quixotic wish is that she should keep the baby safely in her womb and prevent
it from being born into this wicked world. Her husband Raman is pragmatic
and outspoken whereas Sita is an introvert. She suffers from an existential
predicament. The temperamental incompatibility between Raman and Sita is
brought out through a number of incidents in the novel. Sita suffers from an
existentialistic predicament and wonders if the world is worth living and if
there is any meaning for life. Sita wishes to escape the mundane reality of her
existence in the company of her husband and her four children and tries to
discover peace in her childhood home in the island of Manori. She expects a
miracle that will keep her child unborn during her stay in Manori. Sita was
always lonely and she did not enjoy the company of her father, brother, sister
or her children. This predicament of Sita is the leitmotif of the novel.

The study reveals that the novel *Fire on the Mountain* is pervaded by an
overpowering sense of loneliness and isolation in the life of the protagonist,
Nanda Kaul and her great-grand daughter Rekha. It portrays a reverberating
and pathetic picture of old age through the protagonist. She is living in an
atmosphere of self-imposed exile at Carignano and Rekha’s arrival at
Carignano is a threat to Nanda Kaul’s consciously guarded privacy. Nanda
Kaul’s alienation with her husband is the most unpleasant fact of her life which
she deliberately suppresses in the subconscious mind. Mr. Kaul was madly in
love with a Christian lady whom he could not marry. Nanda Kaul endures all
the sufferings in her married life patiently. The married life of Nanda and Mr.
Kaul appeared quite attractive, at the beginning. For Mr. Kaul, a wife is a non-
entity. Even her children were alien to her and that was why she was living
alone. Rakha, too, loves a life of loneliness: “Rakha wanted only one thing – to
be left alone and pursue her own secret life amongst the rocks and pines of
Kasauli” (48). There is a similarity between Nanda and Rakha but with a
difference as well. Nanda Kaul was “a recluse out of vengeance for a long life
of duty obligation and her great granddaughter was a recluse by nature, by
instinct” (48).
Violence and death seem to form an aspect of the theme of loneliness in the novels of Anita Desai: In *Fire on the Mountain*, she exploits the situations of Ila’s murder and Nanda’s death to highlight the problems that confront women in a male dominated society. Exploration of this theme is the central focus of the novel. Nanda too suffers the psychological shock or rape and feels, like Ila, that her womanhood is defined and insulated. She realizes the helplessness of women in the world. Anita Desai seems to suggest that loneliness is the psychological problem for all women – girls, spinsters as well as married women – and death alone serves as release from such loneliness.

Anita Desai may not be a Radical Feminist, in the real sense of the term but then, given the context, Anita Desai, the woman – novelist presents the woman’s problems with such an understanding that she is feministic, to say the least. In the novels taken for discussion, Sarah is the only girl with an employment and that too, that of a teacher. The other women are housewives. By presenting the stereotype woman and her problems in an understanding and sympathetic way, she makes everybody realize the predicament of the woman, in a male-chauvinistic society. She is a perfect artist in narrating her stories effectively in her novels. She is neither a propagandist nor a satirist. She does not have the vision of a reformer. Socio, psycho, philosophic dimensions in her novels are quite impressive. She is essentially an artist in treatment of her themes and narrating her stories. Solanki rightly observes:
As a consummate creative artist, Anita Desai shows tremendous potential and vitality. In her writings she not only offers an exposure of human life in its shocking shallowness or outward show, but also provides, down deep, a philosophical probe or basis to sustain our life, she emerges neither as a downright pessimist nor an incorrigible optimist. All along, her earnest endeavour is to hold a mirror to life, and in the process, to unravel the mystery of human existence. (185)

In the process she does present the plight of the woman, the marginalised and that makes her a Feminist. The central image of the novel *Cry, The Peacock* is the confrontation between life and death. Maya’s world is a world inhabited by animals; it is a close, cosseted world where pity and fear mingle to become terror, not compassion - where the emotional fears she experiences cloud her sensibilities. She never grows up, and never learns to live or to love: merely to destroy and depend, she is pure “instinct” (18) without the necessary accompaniment of wisdom. In this novel though the central section is narrated through Maya’s consciousness, it attains objectivity in its narration of events, and her relation to other characters. In *Voices in the City*, Nirode is first presented in his own right by the narrator but in the succeeding parts one sees Nirode through other eyes, through Monisha’s through Amla’s and finally face to face with Mother - a relationship which he no longer has any courage to reject, but a tie which is snapped outside his own will. It has a multilayered
design. In Fire on the Mountain, the three sections of the book represent the relationship of the three characters to reality. Nanda Kaul wants to shut out the world with a conscious effort at retreat. She is unable to relate to it any more, while Raka has never desired to establish any equation. Ila Das lives in a world of fantasy and hope and is finally destroyed by them. In this juxtaposition of the past and the present, relationships with the parents emerge in a clear light. Maya has been over protected and has never entered an Adit world. Nirode who had been close to his mother and at odds with his father is embittered and estranged from her after his father’s death. He is caught in an unbearable love-hate relationship with her, wanting her love and his independence at the same time. His resentment is against the possession and sensuality of love and the way it destroys people instead of liberating them. He tells Amla:

Ask her about the love that makes her perch on her mountain top, waiting so patiently and surely for retirement and tedium and the last wormy twisting of lust to send Major Chadha! - into her open arms (190).

Amla questions the premises of her parents’ choice of Jiban as a husband for Monisha and wonders:

Was it merely because Jiban was so unquestionably safe, sound and secure, so utterly predictable? Or was it because fathers did, unconsciously, spite their daughters who were unavailable to them? (198).
This relationship is not so dominant in *Fire on the Mountain*, though it does exist in a subdued manner. Nanda Kaul builds an imagery world round her father and the family and the fantasy she weaves reflects a desire to relate and to communicate; it also reflects her dissatisfaction with her own family life. Raka’s silence is the direct result of a long chain of events – it is the result of her mother’s nervous breakdown and her grandmother’s ‘heartless’ exuberance. Caught between the two extremes, her natural instinct is to perfect her withdrawal. The imagery of prey and predator is continued in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* Sita’s whole abhorrence of life in Bombay is triggered off by the violence around her. “Her adult life contrasts sharply with her childhood faith that death could be dispensed with” (53). Now she sees the destructive element in her children’s behaviour, she watches Menaka crumble a sheaf of new buds and unable to bear the sight of such “unthinking destruction” she calls out to her. Menaka had done it unconsciously, had not really meant to destroy anything at all. Sita’s despair is related to this for “destruction came so naturally; that was the horror. . . The creative impulse had no change against the overpowering desire to destroy” (30).

In *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* Sita is upset by the sight of the crows feeding on a young, wounded eagle and tries in vain to protect it from them. This pursuit of the prey by the predator is horrifying enough even in the animal world, where perhaps it satisfies the need for food, but it acquires a new terror when transferred to the human world. When the young boys chase Ila
Das (*Fire on the Mountain*), they not only destroy her dignity but also expose her extreme vulnerability and their own thoughtless aggression. They underline the hostility which comes to them so naturally.

There are other images which echo the theme of human vulnerability and the conflicting demands of protection and independence in her novels. In *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* it is the island, and in *Fire on the Mountain* it is the Carignano which reflects this image. Sita looks to the island for protection, but all that it has to offer her is a hostile, cold welcome with the islanders wary of talking to her and the palms “hissing and clattering their dry leaves together harshly, like some disturbed, vigilant animals” (*Where Shall We Go This Summer?* 23).

Also, Anita Desai seems to comment, on the violence and aggression between men and men and between men and women through her central characters. She also comments on the narrow growing vision which blinds mankind and on the confrontation between inner and outer reality. Her primary preoccupation remains with the absurdity of human life, with the existential search for meaning in it and the inability of men to accept a religious solution. It becomes, in the ultimate instance, a question of reason versus unreason. Reason in itself is inadequate – therefore men turn to unreason.

Anita Desai is perhaps the only Indo-English novelist who lays stress on the landscape and co-relates it with the psychic states of her protagonists; she has a rare gift of suggesting things. In order to throw clues to the action of the
story, the novelist employs various devices such as flashes, asides and painting landscape. Her technique is her natural outcome of her pre-occupation with the individual’s psychology combined with her vivid awareness of the external world. She is always primarily occupied with the subjective experience of her characters, their sensations in the presence of one another, and at the same time she is aware how she looks from the outside of their tone and manner, the setting in which they play their parts, and that which gives them an objective reality. It is, therefore, impossible for her to maintain strictly the point of view of any character, keeping to the subjective aspect of things. Regarding her vision she had once declared:

> All my writings is an effort to discover, to underline and convey the true significance of things – Next to this exploration of the underlying truth and the discovery of a private mythology and philosophy is its style that interests me most – and by this I mean the conscious labour of uniting language and symbol and word rhythm - one must find a way to unite the inner and outer rhythms, to obtain a certain integrity and to impose order on chaos. (Interview with Dalmia 4)

Anita Desai’s novels have been examined as the manifesto of female predicament. *Cry, The Peacock* discusses the mind of Maya in a feminine framework. Maya and Gautama are opposed to each other and both of them represent the extremities of feminine and masculine principles. Maya feels
destabilized because even after four years of marriage, Gautama has failed to fecundate. Maya’s remarks on Kathakali dancers reveal her hatred of the masculine.

The novelist gives her readers valuable insights into the feminine consciousness through her memorable protagonists. Monisha dies, screaming for life, for the first experience of real feeling of pain awakens in her a desire to live. In Where Shall We Go This Summer?, there is aching void in the life of Sita as a woman, a wife and a mother. Anita Desai’s fiction inextricably fuses the tension between the tradition and modernity, individualism and social unity, convention and innovation and determines the dimension and direction of the themes. The plot is replete with symmetry and harmony pervading the events of the story.

The novelist prioritizes the predicament of women and visualizes life for a woman as a series of obligations and commitments. Her young characters crave for women’s liberation. Maya in Cry, The Peacock complains of being treated as a wild beast on a leash which induces in her a humiliating sense of neglect. Maya is shocked by having a far-fetched difference between her lot and that of her brother, Arjuna, who is set free and enjoys liberty like “a young hawk that could not be tamed, that fought for its liberty” (Gajendra Kumar 64). Similarly, Monisha in Voices in the City longs to thrust her ‘head out of the window’ but the bars are closely set. The entire novel is littered with meaningful suggestions about Monisha’s identity crisis. “I am all exterior” and
“I am done with most things” (111). “Traceless, meaningless, uninvolved – does this not amount to non-existence?” (138) she says. Sita in Where Shall We Go This Summer? wishes to have freedom and it is manifested in her fascination with the foreigner whom she meets on the roadside. Sita always has the feeling of being tied with a chain, which can only throttle, choke and enslave.

In her probing examination of the theme, Anita Desai shows that power and sex are the two well-known aspects of interpersonal relationships. The novelist focuses on the inner experience of life in her novels and expresses a uniquely Indian sensibility.

Generally ‘feminism’ means the movement which advocates women’s complete equality with men in all spheres of life – political, social, legal, economic, familial, cultural, academic, etc – and the Feminist Movement is an organized effort for achieving such an equality and rights for women. Charlotte Perkins Gilman was the first woman who stressed for the economic independence of women. De Beauvoir raised her voice against the sexual oppression of the patriarchal society. A common contemporary issue facing every country is the question of woman whether in Western or Indian literary tradition; the women are seen as launching themselves for their identity. The new woman today challenges the traditional notions of angel in the house and sexually voracious image. The new woman is essentially a woman of awareness and consciousness of her low position in the family and society. The
protagonists in the novels of Shobha De belong to this category. Interestingly, the feminist literary criticism has developed as a component of the women’s movement and its impact has brought about a revolution in literary studies. Some post-modern feminists claim that traditional forms on female oppression still exist in the modern society and that feminist politics cannot be abandoned prematurely. Now-a-days women have a greater share in social responsibilities and also infinite number of opportunities open before them. Are they liberated in the real sense of the term in spite of all? Moi states rightly, “In a non-sexist, non patriarchal society, feminism will no longer exist” (Singh, Sushila 77). Anita Desai herself asserts:

> Literature cannot be torn away from the fabric of life as though it were a decoration or an excrescence - it is woven into it, inextricably. Virginia Woolf said of the working classes: ‘Genius is not born of labouring, uneducated, servile people’ and that is what all women have been in Asia for a very long time. (78)

Being an optimist, Anita Desai sees life as steady and as a whole. In fact, her final vision of life seems to dictate: “Live Naturally”, which certainly means that adaptability to one’s environment is the surest way to survive and also maintain human sensibility. In an interview, Anita Desai admits, “Of course I do write of the contemporary scene and therefore the characters must contain the modern sensibility” (Ram 24-25). In fact, in all her major novels, Anita Desai has dealt with the feminine sensibility more emphatically than the
description of the man and his exploits. Consequently, Anita Desai’s *Cry, The Peacock, Voices in the City, Where Shall We Go This Summer? Fire on the Mountain, Clear Light of Day* and *In Custody* – all are replete with a powerful description of feminine sensibility. Not only this, even in her short-stories the central theme is certainly the theme of feminine sensibility.

Anita Desai’s novels offer us a rewarding study not only in the domain of socio-psycho activities but also in semantics and syntax. Her novels, synoptically speaking, offer a view of the long-smothered wail of lacerated psyche of woman. They, of course, tell us the harrowing tale of blunted human relationships. The fate of Maya, Monisha, Sita and Nanda Kaul reminds one of Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay in Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*. Maya in *Cry, The Peacock* is married to an older man, a detached, sober, industrious lawyer, who is unable to recognize and understand the female sensibility. The following passage in the novel is a telling predicament of the likes of Maya and the total disregard for their existence:

> How little he knew my suffering, or of how to comfort me.
>
> Telling me to go to sleep while he worked at his papers, he did not give another thought to me, to either the soft willing body, or the lonely wanting mind that waited near his bed. (69)

Anita Desai’s novels have been studied and interpreted in a number of ways. Some have interpreted them from the standpoint of social criticism, whereas others from that of economic and cultural crisis. Some have traced
linguistic inventiveness in them, whereas others find psycho-moral delineations. Basically Anita Desai is a novelist and her novels naturally offer a wide variety of social, cultural and psychological interpretations. However, the objective of this thesis is restricted to study her feminist concerns and other related issues connected to them. If a deeper analysis of Anita’s novels is made from the standpoint of feminine sensibility, then one may arrive at a stage where all the issues are related directly or indirectly to the crisis of conscience and values.

Adit and Dev, Sarah, Emma Moffit and Christine Longford are the chief exponents of the East-West concord and discord in Bye-Bye, Blackbird. Ila Das in Fire on the Mountain tries to rise to the higher planes of life notwithstanding her glaring pitfalls; for, “her screeching, horrid, anti-social sound was such as no human being should have possessed as it sent shivers down the spines ...” (127). In Clear Light of Day, Bim has many qualms of conscience.

Primarily interested in exploring the psychic depths of her female characters, Anita Desai portrays them as individuals facing single-handed, the ferocious assaults of existence. Carefully avoiding being associated with any particular Feminist Movement, she makes it clear that her concern as an artist is with the individual man and woman. Sincere to her convictions as an artist, Anita Desai, in her novels, seizes upon that incomplete and seemingly meaningless mass of reality around her and tries to discover the significance by
plunging below the surface and plumbing the depths then illuminating those depths till they become a more lucid, brilliant and explicable reflection of the visible world. The aspects of theme and technique in Anita Desai’s novels are not isolated elements. They are inter-related at many levels of structure and texture. The theme serves as the skeleton incorporating the whole life-perspective of the novelist through situations and scenes that are peculiar to her alone.

It is interesting to note that Anita Desai is the novelist who lays stress on the landscape and correlates it with the psychic state of her protagonists. Her technique is the natural outcome of her preoccupation with the individual psychology combined with her painter’s eye, her vivid awareness of the external world. She is always primarily occupied with the subjective experience of her people, their sensation in the presence of one another, but at the same time she is aware of how they look from the outside of their tone and manner, the setting in which they play their parts, what they think, say and do; of all that gives them objective reality. Also, the novelist uses human gestures and feelings with equal skill in her novel Fire on the Mountain. Rakha hears the call of the cuckoos, but “instead of beautiful domestic birds”, they are demented birds that rave and beckon Rakha onto a land where there is “no sound, only silence, no light, only shade and skeletons (kept) in beds of ash on which the footprints of jackals (flower) in grey” (90).
The scene of devastation and failure draws her and inspires her. It is the ravaged, destroyed and barren spaces in Kasauli that keep on attracting Raka. The novel *Fire on the Mountain* also assumes a symbolic significance. It stands for the funeral pyre that ultimately consumes and annihilates everything. The dark and dismal fictional world is consumed by the ultimate reality that eludes average human sensibility. It is in making the reader acutely conscious of this reality where Anita Desai’s greatest strength as a mature artist lies. The imagery used by the novelist in this novel highlights Nanda’s longing for seclusion and stillness. “A tree trunk could not harbour irritation, nor a pillar annoyance. She would imitate death, like a lizard, no one would dare rouse her ………” (23).

*Cry, The Peacock*, is a novel with a focus on the heroine’s psyche. Since Maya, the protagonist of the novel is a childless woman married to an unsympathetic, rational, down-to-earth man, it is but natural that she is lost in her own world, seeking solace in her childhood memories and recollecting her secured, cozy and pampered childhood. It is also a psychological novel, probing the workings of Maya’s psyche, and the narrative is not chronologically straight. There is a constant to and fro movement between the past and the present in the mind of Maya. The novel begins with the death of her pet dog Toto but thereafter the reader is taken from the present of the novel to the past of the heroine’s life. Because of her lonely existence, childlessness, emotional deprivation, and want of reciprocity of feelings, she is almost on the
verge of neurotic breakdown. She does it by making use of the weird animal imagery which suggests her disturbed state of mind.

Again, the novel *Voices in the City*, makes use of symbolism specially in the context of the city of Calcutta and how it affects the lives of the characters. Monisha, like many of Anita Desai’s heroines, is sensitive and a victim of ill-matched marriage. She is an example of a maladjusted woman who is introvert by nature. In the novel *Bye-Bye Blackbird* it is her descriptive prose and use of rhetoric that is significant from the point of view of technique. Dev’s harangue, when he is proselytizing about the reversal of the historical fact of cultural colonisation, is an example of Anita Desai’s rhetorical use of language. The conversation among Dev, Sarah and Adit illustrates this point:

Dev interrupted her. ‘Have you forgotten how he treated Gandhi?’ Gandhi – he was probably another incarnation of Jesus Christ – and Churchill sneered at his clothes, called him a ‘naked fakir’. Why, Sarah, he – he’s the man that ordered the miners of Tonypandy to be shot. He had no heart. He was no human. He was a statue – a statue made of tobacco. If anyone tells me I should admire Churchill. I’ll just, I’ll. (160-61)

Another interesting observation is that almost all the titles of the novels of Anita Desai have their own significance. The novel *Cry, The Peacock*, might be a reference to a woman’s longing for conjugal love and happiness. The title *Voices in the City*, might be a reference to the voices of city dwellers - a story
of a brother and his sister caught in the cross-currents of changing social values. *Bye-Bye Blackbird*, explores the lives of the outsiders seeking to forge a new identity in an alien land. *In Custody* has its implications. There are authorial comments about the title meaning that Nur’s poetry would be in safe custody of Deven but the irony is that he is in the custody of Nur’s personality and his unending irrational demands as though Deven were responsible for every trouble in Nur’s life. The novel also makes use of poetry but ironically none of the poem is quoted by Nur. The novel has an open ending which suggests the eternal troubles in the life of this insignificant teacher. Her novel *Baumgartner’s Bombay*, has the theme of the plight of a displaced person. Hugo Baumgartner, the protagonist of the novel is a Jew who is advised to leave Germany at the rise of Nazism and he comes to the British India before the Second World War to begin his new life. The novel uses the flashback technique through which the readers are informed of his childhood. There are several German songs and poems used in the novel justifiably since he is a German. Some of these poems belong to his childhood days which he recollects with nostalgia. The German patriotic song, sung by German citizens imprisoned with him, has greater significance in that even though he is a victim of Nazi Germany, yet he has to sing along with others.

On linguistic level the novel effectively transcribes different varieties of English as spoken by Indians, and the British. Certain Hindi words are also used in the novel to give a realistic effect; for example when he is being taken
on a train to Ahmed Nagar one hears the calls of “Garam Chai”. In order to present the submerged psychic truth she employs various linguistic devices. Carefully chosen clusters of images, symbols and myths figure most prominently amongst the devices deployed by her. Apart from them, quite often she makes use of fresh collocations, deviations and parallelisms to render the uniqueness of the psyche of her characters. She exploits even phonological patterns like alliteration, assonance, consonance and rhyme, sometimes different levels of semantic interpretation and they become significant for the presentation of her characters. Meenakshi Mukarjee is of the view that Desai’s novels do not create a pan-Indian identity although the characters are culturally defined by the location, attitude and memory (Westerly 66, 72). In the hands of the novelist, imagery becomes a very powerful mode to represent the perception of a character. The following lines illustrate this:

In this din, a tonga had driven up and disgorge a flurry of guests in their visiting saris, all to flap their palm-leaf-hand-fans as they sat in a ring about her – the wives and daughters of the lecturers and professors over whom her husband ruled ….her eyes flashed when she heard, like a pair of back blades, wanting to cut them, crawling grey bugs about her fastidious feet. (Fire on the Mountain 18)

Expressions like “disgorged”, “crawling grey bugs” and “eyes flashed … like a pair of black blades” give a specific shade to the image and suggest
Nanda’s withdrawal which is based on hatred and awareness of meaningfulness of the so called normal routine life (K Goel 257).

In his dark room at the temple gates, where the central ‘lingam’ was painted bright, vicious red, as though plunged in sacrificial blood, and light burned in a single lamp from which oil spilled into a large spreading pool (Cry, The Peacock 28-29).

It is a typical Indian scene of a temple, and a foreteller examining the horoscope of a young girl still to be married. These referential details have been given hardly any significance in comparison to the depiction of the impression of these objects on Maya’s psyche. “There are a great number of adjectival and adverbial phrases portraying not so much the objects themselves as the subjective way Maya views them” (Goel 257). Generally the symbols used by Anita Desai are a part of the circumstantial details of the narrative. They acquire significance because of the appropriate correlation between the object and its symbolical meaning.

The houses in Fire on the Mountain, Where Shall We Go This Summer? and In Custody are essential parts of the created world. The house Sita comes to live at Manori, after a gap of twenty years, in the novel Where Shall We Go This Summer? is evocative of her desertion of normal routine life and objectifies the fear that is harboured in her heart. In Bye-Bye Blackbird this symbol is judiciously related to Sarah. When Adit for the first time announces his decision to leave England and declares that his son will be born in India,
Sarah finds her in a psychic turmoil, but soon having overpowered the storm in heart she announces: “Let’s have a cup of tea” (204). If symbols, generally through their extra semantic impositions, help the novelist objectify the nuances of a character’s subjective world, at times, also by only half revealing the truth, they enable the novelist to delineate the psychological depth of the characters. For instance, in *Cry, The Peacock*, Anita Desai suggests the subconscious decision of Maya to murder Gautama through the dust symbol. In this novel, the repeated references to a peacock as a brain fever bird, a reminder of death and ill-fated lover are contrary to the traditionally popular image of the peacock. Its dancing image in the rainy season has been associated with love, romance and beauty and not with fighting, mating and dying. By presenting the peacock in her arbitrary symbolical colours, Anita Desai attempts to depict Maya’s mental predicament – a profound love for life with a sure knowledge of death to follow.

Myths have also been deployed by Anita Desai, which with all their religious and traditional associations lay out the psychological depths of characters. They serve as powerful instruments to suggest what cannot be expressed denotatively. To cite an example, the mythological Sita, in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*, reveals the ironical shades of the portrayal of the protagonist who suffers in her exile not from the memories of intense love for her husband, but from alienation.
A character’s speech is highly effective in throwing light on his temperament. In Anita Desai’s hands it becomes a powerful instrument. For example, in *Voices in the City*, when Amla comes to Calcutta she invites Jiban and Monisha to tea at her aunt’s place; the few sentences that Jiban speaks at this informal, intimate gathering are highly suggestive of his formal, unfeeling personality, and of highlighting the cause of his alienation from Monisha who is a highly sensitive, emotional and sincere person. While going home back he tells his niece Bun, “I trust you have thanked your aunt and great aunt for this most enjoyable evening spent under their auspices” (198). The highly formal tone in this informal gathering shows that Jiban has learnt only one role to play in his life and that is of the formal, rigid and apathetic officer. It is no wonder then that he miserably fails in his relationship with Monisha. *In Custody* when Sarla, cannot utter any word to vent her anger against her husband and just sulks and retires to her kitchen, the novelist says: “It was only when she had disappeared into this narrow, cluttered fastness of hers and could be heard freely rattling and clattering there that it occurred to Deven…. ” (127).

Anita Desai is remarkably successful in portraying the psyche of her sensitive, emotional and sensuous characters. Anita Desai in her novels presents not only of the tumult of the human soul but also of its depth, its poetry and pathos, its beauty and compassions. It is through “the quality of mind and soul alone” (Iyengar 343), that Anita Desai’s novels would be a major contribution to literature. That is why the existential predicament in her
novels has the unique touch of the universal. In dealing with the thoughts, emotions, and sensations at various levels of consciousness, she seems nearer to the technique of D.H. Lawrence, Virginia Woolf and William Faulkner in delineation of her characters. Anita Desai employs the stream of consciousness technique in some of her novels, particularly, in her first novel, *Cry, The Peacock*. R.S. Sharma, comments that this is “the first step in the direction of psychological fiction in English” (127). Very few Indo-Anglian novelists have paid so much attention to form and technique. Prof. Srinivasa Iyengar rightly observes this:

> Since her preoccupation with the inner world of sensibility rather than the outer world of action, she has tried to forge a style supple and suggestive enough to convey the fever and fretfulness of the stream-of-consciousness of her principal characters. (16)

This inner world of sensibility rendered through splendid poetic prose gives a “peculiar poetic quality” to the novels of Anita Desai (Sharma 14). Anita Desai resorts to the stream-of-consciousness technique which serves as an experience of the private inner world. She “probes deep into the inner recesses of the psyche of the character and delves deeper in a character or a scene rather than going round about it” (Jain 68).

Though alienation is basically a western concept, to Anita Desai it is more related to the emotional and mental moods and attitudes of her characters than to their moral or ethical temperaments. The alienated self in Anita Desai
experiences the pangs of emotional isolation, not any spiritual or intellectual angst. The struggle of the alienated self in Anita Desai is more similar to the Kafka protagonist than to the Camus hero. Anita Desai’s protagonists never dodge the harsh reality of existence but encounter it single-handedly. Like the Kafka protagonist, the protagonists of Anita Desai too, encounter the distressing conflict between external and internal obligations. Maya’s conflict in *Cry, The Peacock* is between her obligations to the dead Toto and her biological obligations to her husband; Nanda’s in *Fire on the Mountain* is between her filial obligations to Rakha, her grand-daughter and to her unrequited psycho-emotional urges for self-isolation; Sita’s in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* is between her external life on the island and her emotional life as a housewife. Anita Desai’s women characters do not cut themselves off from the familial and social ties but remain within these orbits and protest against monotony, injustice and humiliation. In dealing with the problem of the alienated self, Anita Desai has adopted a realistic mode of writing. Dr. Madhusudan Prasad attributes alienation in Anita Desai’s novels to temperamental incompatibility of the characters. The feeling of alienation in most of her characters is psychotic and psycho-neurotic. It is neither the alienation of Savitri in R.K. Narayan’s *The Dark Room* nor that of Madeleine in Raja Rao’s *The Serpent and the Rope*. It is the alienation of a psychically malformed character in quest of an authentic selfhood.

Surprisingly, the names of her women characters like Maya, Sita and Raka are suggestive of their epic and mythic parallels. Even Nirode’s attitudes
are also partly governed by the Greek Myths and contemporary Western philosophy. To Raja Rao, myth is a legend, to Narayan it is a social reality, but to Anita Desai, it is a psycho-emotional reality.

Her novels do not deal with the theme of exile: “….exile has never been my theme” (Ram 107) says Anita Desai. Her main thematic concern is how people cope with society, alien or not alien, without losing their sense of self-identity and individuality. In Mukherjee, it is people and cultures in collision but in Anita Desai, it is people and people in collision, in Mukherjee, it is cultural confrontation but in Anita Desai, it is psychic confrontation. The protagonists of Anita Desai are emotional by nature and they hail from fractured families. Delineating the pitiable and awful plight of the alienated self in her novels, especially of housewives, facing single-handed the torments and tortures of their insensitive and temperamentally callous husbands, Anita Desai has shown her feministic concerns and rendered a new dimension to Indo-Anglian fiction.

Anita Desai denies the importance of theories in the shaping of artistic imagination. According to her a work of art should grow from within, from the writer’s inner beckoning and compulsions:

A writer does not create a novel by observing a given set of theories … he follows flashes of individual vision, and relies on a kind of instinct that tells him what to follow and what to avoid, how to veer away from what would be destructive to his vision. It
is these flashes of vision, and a kind of trained instinct that leads
him … not any theories. (Swain 107)

The study reveals that literature is neither a means of escaping reality
nor a vehicle for parading political, social, religious and moral ideas to Anita
Desai. Anita Desai imparts no messages, preaches no morals. Yet her novels
have intensity. Anita Desai projects the enigma and dilemma faced by post-
independence urban Indian women caught in a milieu of confusion attempting
to tread in a middle path in a chauvinistic male dominated world where she is
expected to be an amalgamation of a traditional housewife and a modern
liberated mistress.

Beginning from Cry, The Peacock right up to Baumgartner’s Bombay,
Desai’s fiction reveals a regular pattern in the sense that themes focus around
alienation of the female protagonists resulting in frustrations and psychosis,
though in the later novels socio-psychic analysis occurs more frequently.
Thematically Anita Desai’s Fasting, Feasting appears to be a partial sequel to
Journey to Ithaca, a novel immediately preceding it. Journey to Ithaca
stipulated a sort of deflection from the existing thematic pattern of Desai’s
novels in the sense that instead of focussing attention categorically on feminine
existentialism in the neo-colonial Indian scenario, it endeavoured polarisation
around the quest for female identity through spiritual understanding. Anita
Desai believes that literature should deal with the most enduring matters, less
temporary and less temporal than politics. She is not interested in delineating
contemporary or documenting socio-economic situations. Unlike Narayan and Malgonkar, Anita Desai does not believe in a pre-conceived plot. This is true of Shobha De also. Anita Desai does not believe in its linear movement in terms of exposition, conflict and resolution. For her, the plot is just an idea occupying one’s subconscious mind, a fragment of her imagination and a flash of her vision.

In *Cry, The Peacock*, it is the character of Maya and in *Voices in the City*, the voice of the metropolis, Calcutta that smothers other voices and lend an organic unity to the novel and sensitivity to the isolation of the characters. Anand, Narayan and Bhattacharya are writers with social consciousness, and hence they chose characters from amongst the socio-economic strata of life. Anita Desai, on the other hand, is concerned with the delineation of psychological reality, and hence prefers such characters that are peculiar and eccentric to general and commonplace. Anita Desai conceives each character as a riddle to unravel this mystery. Her characters are almost sick of life and listless playthings of their morbid psychic longings. Most of her female protagonists are abnormally sensitive and unusually solitary to the point of being neurotic. They are longing for love and affection from their husbands and they are disappointed when they are neglected. Maya in *Cry, The Peacock*, Monisha in *Voices in the City*, Sita in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* and Nanda in *Fire on the Mountain* are such women.
Anita Desai employs imagery as the sole ingredient of her art. Her images are literal, metaphorical and frequently symbolical. Imagery in her novels, besides articulating the estranged sensibility and the changing moods of her introverted characters, reflect their mental isolation. Besides using the botanical, zoological, meteorological and colour images she employs certain stray images which move along the periphery of her works but are nonetheless important to the theme of alienation. Of all the contemporary Indian English novelists, Anita Desai is avowedly the most powerful imagist novelist in whom images give a poetic and lyrical colouring to the problem of the alienated self.

Her counterpart Shobha De adopts her own novelistic technique to narrate her story in her novels. Though one can find similarities in their art there are striking differences in their style. In the use of language, Shobha De seems to be breaking new grounds. Mulk Raj Anand has already shown in his writings how Punjabi abusive terms and swear words could be effectively translated into, English, so as to give a local flavour to Indian English. Shobha De goes one step further by using words from the Indian languages and particularly the very Hindi words without translating them into English. Shobha De breaks the shackles of linguistic discipline by boldly employing what would normally be considered highly objectionable language, thereby liberating the language also from the male hegemony. For example she uses words like “fuck you”, “Chickening out”, and “Holy shit” to establish her stance. On the other hand Anita Desai does not use such words in her novels.
Shoba De’s use of language including creation of new idioms from Indian languages to English adds to the charm of the novel. The narrative holds our breath for sensuous opulence and subtlety of variation and the result is that the novel becomes popular. Another interesting feature of her novels is that she employs liberally Indian English constructions particularly; the present continuous form where a simple present tense is needed.

I’m knowing everyone in the industry. What is your good name?

Is your beti knowing dancing? Actually I’m knowing everybody – dance directors, music directors, camera men …. all big big producers, hero-log, heroines, everybody. These days demand is good. South Indian girls are good. Nokhit-pit, no faltu nakhras. In Bombay all are like South Indian girls too much, maybe I can get a baby role. . . . (Starry Nights12)

Shobha De’s ironical description of her characters in her novels is also interesting and arresting: “Even before their honeymoon was over Akshay had betrayed her trust at least half-a-dozen times. He was an indiscriminating womanizer. And a champion hypocrite” (68).

Shoba De does not mince words in matters related to sex. Her narratives are explicit and shocking – a trait found in modern woman novelists.

Malini hated sex. Or perhaps she hated sex with Akshay who did tend to have a sadistic streak. Akshay loved watching Swedish blue films – especially the more sado-masochistic variety. She
knew Akshay often masturbated in bed and even that put her off.

What was he-some kind of insatiable monster? Could he think of nothing but sex? (71-72)

The modern malady of ennui is graphically portrayed in the following lines through Aasha Rani’s hatred for her mechanical life:

Well, I’m fed up of being your money machine. I’ve done enough for everybody-you, Sudha and the others – now, I want to live for myself and enjoy life’. Amma glared at her, eyes blazing, ‘Ungrateful wretch! (183-84)

The birth of her daughter gives her rays of hope: “She is like a lovely little primrose’, Jay said tenderly, stroking Aasha Rani’s hair” (220).

Shobha De uses the city Calcutta as a metaphor for freedom in her novel Second Thoughts. The novel Sultry Days is autobiographical to some extent and the entire story is told by the heroine-narrator Nisha. What emerges is a multiplicity of points of view. The novelist has faithfully portrayed the diversity of characters, both male and female, and their individual approaches to life and the challenges. The narrator in Shobha De’s novel not only delineates the plights of all other important characters, which she closely knows and most of whom confide in her, but also voices occasionally the views and philosophy of the novelist herself. Her mélange of themes, variety of characters, startlingly captivating thoughts, all forcefully and bluntly expressed, lend a fascination for her readers. Also there is a lot that is amusing,
outrageous, thought-provoking and even shocking. The novel *Second Thoughts* demonstrates a candid study of a woman’s imbroglio in the contemporary Indian metropolitan society while she struggles between tradition and modernity. In scintillating language and bold style, Shobha De emphatically manifests how in an effort to adjust, to cultures especially in the matrimonial set-up, the Indian woman faces inner fragmentation psychic disorder, nervous breakdown and in some cases becomes a schizoid.

Shobha De in *Second Thoughts* raises the burning issue of women’s freedom in contemporary India where the protagonist finds herself in a complex human situation aggravated by social, historical and cultural changes. Though her efforts at new ways of self-determination led by the logic of cultural transition fail, yet she survives the spiritual claustrophobia by surrendering her “will” to the prevalent social mores.

A careful study of Shobha De’s novels shows the novelist’s perceptive portrayal of the secret depths of the human psyche; her accurate characterization; her racy and captivating style which invokes vivid images and compels the reader to identify herself or himself with the characters and situations. In short, Shobha De exposes the moral concerns of modern society in which a hapless and forsaken woman longs for pleasure and freedom. She is an established novelist of the twenty-first century who has taken on many roles, a super model, journalist and best-selling author. In fact, most of the women characters depicted by Shobha De are economically independent and socially
uninhibited who are conscious of their self-respect. The women in her world are enterprising, bold, innovative and ever ready to accept challenges. She seems to be the right evaluator of a woman’s existential dilemma because she exhorts women to fight for their rights, to be economically secure and simultaneously to be aware of her social responsibilities without neglecting, in anyway, her familial duty. Her works reveal the trauma, insecurity and agony that lie beneath the opulence of such women’s lives. Her writings seem to be a definite attempt to drive home the fact that the trials and tribulations faced by these women are no less if not greater than the pangs of the comparatively economically weaker women.

Both the novelists Anita Desai and Shobha De share between themselves certain common features. They portray the psyche of their sensitive, emotional and sensuous characters in their respective novels. Their main concern is not with the society or social forces but the individual psyche and its interaction with social values. Both of them are prolific writers who have much concern for women in their novels. The family relationship in their novels is very much affected by problems such as incompatibility in marriage, maladjustment and lack of understanding causing psychic tensions.

One of the major reasons of Shobha De’s popularity as a writer is her intimate understanding of the psyche of women and her problems. Her treatment of the contemporary urban women’s position and the challenges she faces is not without significance. Shobha De admits that she has a great deal of
empathy towards women without waving the feminist flag. She feels very strongly about the woman’s situation and records her protest against any exploitation of women in all her novels. It seems that her feminism is not modelled on any feminist school of the West but based on her affinity towards Indian women. Sudhir Kumar is of the view that Shobha De follows the vamp brand of feminism. Rita, a character in the novel *Starry Nights* has her feminist fears and frankly warns Malini to shut her eyes and part her legs, whether she likes it or not because if she doesn’t, some other woman will (50). Her indictment of marriage is evident when she tells Malini:

> Most women hate their husbands - it’s a fact. They hate marriage.
> That’s also a fact. But what else can they do.... The only way to make a marriage work is through sex - and most women hate that too. But the day a man feels that his woman has lost interest in sex, and therefore in him, the relationship is finished and he starts looking everywhere........ A wife is acting all the time – this is the world’s best kept secret. Everything is decided by the bed. On the bed. No woman should be foolish enough to be honest with her husband where sex is concerned. (50)

The novelist exposes the hollowness and hypocrisy inherent in marriage through the character Rita in *Starry Nights*. Karuna, Anjali and Aasha Rani protest against the massive oppression and exploitation carried through various patriarchal ideological constructs manifest in history, philosophy, culture and
arts. They try to break the shackles but cannot liberate themselves completely and are victimised in one way or the other (Kumar, The Fiction of Shobha De 196). Karuna’s comments on the Average Indian woman’s marital life is shocking. It is an exhausted generation of wives with no dreams left. “Marriage is like a skin allergy, an irritant all right” (Socialite Evenings 65). Largely speaking, Indian fiction depicts three kinds of women; first the poor women, belonging mostly to the rural class, portrayed by writers like Kamala Markandaya and secondly the middle class women, especially the educated and employed, depicted by writers like Nayantara Sahgal and Shashi Deshpande; and thirdly, the neo-rich aristocrat women depicted by writers like Anita Desai, Namita Gokhale and Shobha De. Pathak in his article “Feminist Concerns in Shobha De’s works,” comments that the novels of Shobha De seem to be the modern version of picaresque novels of the eighteenth century. The picaroon in this case is a woman but she, too, is avid of experience, in search of which she goes from place to place.

The study reveals that Shobha De’s novels are thematically highly complex. They offer sufficient stuff to the critics to interpret them in varied ways. Sarbani Sen discusses the domain of cultural politics in Shobha De’s fiction and concludes that Shobha De gives a vivid picture of the culture of the high society of contemporary India in her novels. Eminent Italian scholar Alessandro Monti evaluates her fiction in terms of the making of modern India. Shobha De has been referred to in the most number of multilingual gossip
columns; she was a clue in a noted crossword puzzle; she is considered to be
the most reactionary novelist and three of her novels have been chosen by the
reputed School of Oriental and African Studies of London as course material. It
is also because her fiction portrays the contemporary reality more distinctively
than that of other writers. She has developed for her use a curious brand of
English, which may be called Shobha De’s Hinglish, which helps her
immensely in presenting her narrative with an unsparking transparency.

Notwithstanding all the achievements, Shobha De remains a popular
writer though she frequently uses abusive words. There is no such accusation
against Anita Desai. A.G. Khan observes: “In fact I would regard her entire
acrobatics as an attempt to reduce ‘fiction’ to ‘fucktion’ ”, (Fiction of the
Nineties, quoted by Madhumalati Adhikari 284). One may disagree with him
for making such a statement. The novelist has viewed the conflicts and
contradictions of human existence from multiple angles and thought it
necessary to portray sex to expose the cruelty of men against women. In fact,
pornography in her novels becomes a major symbol of the female’s defiance
against sexual harassment. The pornographic details in fact, are meant to bring
out the sexual harassment and exploitation of women by men. Though the
details seem to be shocking, they reveal the stark reality of sexual exploitation
of women. Her women characters are generally devoid of genuine love and
affection from their husbands and they face a hostile society with guilt and
resentment. Under these circumstances the women characters of Shobha De are
forced to cast off the conventional sense of morality and sometimes reveal in
the erotic celebration of the body. Her female protagonists like Karuna and
Anjali in *Socialite Evenings* and Aasha Rani in *Starry Nights* unabashedly
unleash an attack on the male-chauvinism. With a disconcerting penchant for
the pornographic details in her fiction, Shobha De seems to foreshadow the
form of feminism in India of the twenty-first century. Her novels have often
evoked hostile reviews, in spite of their grand sales. They might indicate the
arrival of an Indian woman novelist in society with a rebellious defiance
against the well-entrenched moral and orthodoxy of the patriarchal social
system. The women inhabiting De’s fictional world struggle hard to challenge
male superiority and assert their position in society. The failure of these
women’s efforts points out a basic drawback in their understanding of women’s
existence and the direction the efforts for women’s freedom should take. In
*Socialite Evenings*, a young socialite woman Anjali, has suffered much owing
to her incompatible marriage and indifferent and oppressive attitude of her
husband. Instead of encouraging Karuna to fight against the set norms, Anjali
advises her: “Look at it this way—he was quite a catch. You lead a comfortable
life - He doesn’t drink and he doesn’t beat you. You should consider yourself
lucky. Now, don’t go and ruin it all with funny expectations” (68). The words
of advice show how the patriarchal system of thoughts work to make even its
victims accept the status quo.
A close examination of the novels of Anita Desai and Shoba De reveals that they are trying to expose the moral and psychological concerns of the modern society in which an unfortunate woman longs for genuine love and real freedom. Both the writers explore the women psychology and analyse the complex human relationship in the male dominated society. The study also throws much light on their feministic concerns and their attitudes towards the society.

The study of the novels of Anita Desai and Shoba De reveals that they have feminist concerns and their novels bear witness to them. Though the protagonist of Anita Desai are victims of male chauvinism, they do not cross the boundary and indulge in extra-marital relationships. In this sense they are neither rebels nor liberated women. The protagonists of Shoba De are liberated women and they make protests against male domination and sexual exploitation by men. They challenge the society by their acts, thereby proving that they are not docile and dependent on men. In this respect, Shoba De seems to come closer to western feminists. She is basically an Indian Novelist with an Indian sensibility and she does not seem to suggest that lesbianism is an alternative to marriage. These novelists emerge as writers who have treated woman’s longings and aspirations against the backdrop of male dominated society. While the protagonists in the novels of Anita Desai feel a sense of isolation in human relationship, the protagonists in the novels of Shoba De try
to assert their individuality and are even ready to take up challenges of life in order to establish their identity.

There are differences between these writers in their novelistic techniques and in their use of language. Nevertheless, this study reveals that there is a certain common pattern running through all of them. The general pattern seems to be that of the protagonist as a victim of the patriarchal order who fights against various forces in order to resolve the issues in her own ways. The search of their protagonists is mainly for love, understanding and recognition and identity. It is hoped that this dissertation will provoke fruitful discussion on the novels of the two Indian women writers and bring to light several new aspects of their novels for further research, such as Search for Self Identity, Revelation of the Inner Self, Stylistic Analysis, Alienation and Dehumanization, Psychological Disorder and so on.