COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES IN THE NOVELS OF ANITA DESAI AND SHOBHA DE

The tyranny of male culture and the marginalisation of women are presented through the woman characters in the novels of both Anita Desai and Shobha De. Shobha De does not portray her women characters as slaves or mere helpmates at home. She strives to undo the distorted image of woman who longs for freedom and equality which are denied to her in the patriarchal world. Women are also presented as sexually liberated and free thinking ‘New Women’ in her fiction. A study of the novels of Anita Desai and Shobha De reveals that they have great concern for women in the patriarchal set up and chosen women characters accordingly to concretize their themes in their respective novels.

An article entitled “Feminist - New Style” in Harper’s Magazine declares the newly-evolved modern woman to be a composite figure, a boyish girl who combines the flapper’s physical freedom, sexuality, and stamina with feminist self-assertiveness and traditional domestic femininity, a woman who can happily combine pleasure, career and marriage. This new woman seems to be the perfect companion - fearless, bright and eager to participate in work, in play and in marital sex. Shobha De, in fact, attempts to portray a new woman differently, in her novels, Socialite Evenings, Strange Obsession, Sisters, Second Thoughts and Sultry Days. Her female protagonists are remarkable for their extraordinary courage. In her novels, she attempts to show how the
marital discord seriously affects the lives of the characters. It is often painful and destructive for them to be together. Marriage does not bring them happiness they seek but lands them into difficult situations.

Shobha De’s women are daring and some of them even establish extra-marital affairs in order to get rid of their marital ennui. They are not hesitant in using sex as a strategy to gain social and financial gains. Marriage for them is a ritual and a camouflage against social aloofness. For instance, the protagonist Karuna in Socialite Evenings is a new woman in every sense who declines to adopt the traditional path of etiquette and manners. Her marriage is a failure since it is devoid of love, joy and mutual trust. To Karuna, “marriage is nothing to get excited or worried about. It is something to get used to” (68). Karuna voices her protest against her futile and meaningless marital relationship:

I think our marriage was over the day our honeymoon started.

We’ve got nothing going. I don’t love you – never have. As for you - I really don’t know to this day why you chose to marry me.

I don’t think you even know who you married. (185)

There is a complete emotional void; only silence, compromise and maladjustment seem to prevail between the two. This marital disharmony leads her to establish an affair with Girish. She is happy to express even to her husband without any hesitation her sexual urge for a man. She makes an ingenious declaration about her inner thirst in the following words: “I love this
friend of yours, and I will feel thoroughly disillusioned after that. Maybe he will have some truly foul personal habits that will disenchant me” (186).

It appears that Karuna has no real intimacy and understanding with her husband. Similarly Shobha De’s women who are unmarried express their need for sexual liberation. In her novel *Sisters*, Alisha first goes to Naveen for sexual gratification and later it continues to sway her to Dr. Kurien. Dr. Kurien who has sex with Alisha, says: “All the rich women are the same – you want more all the time, nothing satisfies you. Here, take it all ... it’s free” (186). It is not only Alisha but her sister Mikki too accepts the demands of flesh. She flirts with Shanay.

Karuna in *Socialite Evenings*, Mikki and Alisha in *Sisters* appear to be rebellious who challenge the orthodoxy of sexual and social taboos. They challenge the traditional set up of the society. In the course of breaking social traditions and conventions, they do not mind in having sexual relations with other men without any feeling of guilt. Shoba De’s women are far more assertive, domineering than their male counterparts. Transparency in man woman relationship constitutes the mind fabric of *Sultry Days* in which the novelist has portrayed a variety of women belonging to different strata of society and has shown their diverse attitudes. God’s mother adopts a reticent view of life. Mrs. Verma, Nisha’s mother is emotionally shaken when she discovers her husband’s extra marital relationship with a Sindhi divorcee. Nisha does not care for her parents. She wants to find out a suitable groom for
her. Nisha’s portrayal in the novel throws light on the psyche of single woman. The novel presents the world of glamour, affluence, advertising models, film stars and so-called people belonging to high society. In the novel *Sisters*, Mikki, takes over the business after her father’s death. Ramankaka, one of her father’s inmates and a confidant of her father’s business complexities, suggests to her that he be consulted in all her decisions about business transactions. It is actually Mikki who holds the key to decisions and gets an obvious victory. Mikki is not emotional, subdued or weak, like traditional women but very assertive, pragmatic and strong. Here, Mikki challenges the usual orthodox vision of society. She is a tough woman who easily and without any sense of guilt breaks off her engagement with Naveen, when he fails to respond to her wish. When the actress Aasha Rani in *Starry Nights* finally decides to quit films and live with Akshay, her Amma tries to dissuade her from doing so. Aasha Rani boldly pronounces: Well, I’m fed up of being your money machine. I’ve done enough for everybody – you, Sudha and others – now, I want to live for myself and enjoy life” (106). She finally decides not to be a plaything at the hands of her Amma and others. When Akshay is hesitant about the whole affair between them and not ready to consult his solicitor as he might disclose the whole affair to Malini, his wife, she triumphantly reacts: “I’ll handle everything. I’ll talk to someone. We will find a solution. You wait and see” (107). This shows her confidence and optimistic outlook. She suggests that they convert to Islam. Akshay does not approve of her plan. She finally blasts at him: “I thought it could work because I wanted it to. But you couldn’t
care it less. You’ve just taken me up again because your career is in doldrums, and you’re scared shitless of your wife” (108). Here Aasha Rani seems to be more assertive than Akshay. She designs a code of conduct for herself which is free of the prescribed gender roles and sexual restraints of the traditional society.

Thus, Shobha De’s women are more mature than their mates. Men seem very passive in response to women: either they are indifferent or insensitive, unwilling or unable to take action or to accept responsibility for, the way things turn out. Though in the Indian society, women are marginalized, Shobha De’s women are certainly different and have the ability to detest the indifferent and callous attitude of their husbands who often keep themselves busy in drab monotonous activities like reading business pages of the newspapers. Karuna in Socialite Evenings can realize how Indian women have been assigned a subordinate role, as she says: “We were reduced to being marginal people. Everything that mattered to us was trivialized. The message was our priorities. It was taken for granted that our needs were secondary to theirs” (69).

Karuna is able to recognize how Indian women are made to listen and tolerate and are denied to live as autonomous beings. When her husband tries to impose his superiority over her, Karuna states: “He brainwashes me constantly. I’m made to feel obliged and in debt. It’s awful but even my insistence on working and contributing to the running expenses of the house has become a battleground” (69).
Men in Shobha De’s novels are traditional and stereotyped and they are not the ideal husbands as they are incomplete and inadequate. Shobha De has presented men resorting to several defence mechanisms against their self-confident and self-reliant wives but most of the time they fail. In *Strange Obsessions*, Meenakshi Iyengar (Minx), the lesbian sex-monger, chases Amrita and causes her deep anxiety. After the fire accident, when Amrita inquires from Ms. Iyengar whether Minx’s moves and attitudes do not bother him as father, he answers thoughtfully: “I was always afraid of her ... scared of her rage, unsure of what she might do if I reacted . . . But my men, the few I trust kept an eye on her most of the time. But Meenakshi outwitted them also” (79). To Minx’s father she was an extremely clever and manipulative girl. He is terribly upset by her ways and unable to control her action. Karuna’s husband accepts Winnie’s power and says: “She is a very strange and powerful woman. I feel ashamed to admit this but I’m scared of her. I can’t do anything because I know she will destroy me. She has that power” (264).

This statement by Karuna’s husband exposes subdued position in the event of her superiority. Karuna has successfully achieved the novelist’s vision which clearly aspires to belittle the male prominence. The husband feels powerless and threatened by his wife’s strange and domineering position. In fact, Shobha De’s women clearly assert their superiority over their male counterparts. For this they may have to resort to any kind of feminine and at times even masculine ploys. Ultimately, it is the woman in Shobha De’s works
who holds all the trump cards up her sleeve. She can easily checkmate and outplay all her male counterparts with a strategy which looks beyond the male comprehension. It seems that Shobha De has a definite feminine perspective in presenting her characters. Her female characters are endowed with a vision that penetrates human psyche. They outplay their male counterparts with a better control and placidity in their attitude, desire and expression.

Anita Desai’s main pre-occupation is to study the complex human relationship, human existence and human predicament, her exploration being a quest for self. She is the novelist dealing with the psychological problems of women and her themes illustrate this. The main issue that Anita Desai focuses in her novels is the institution of marriage – particularly in the novels where woman is the protagonist. When a woman is caught in the trap of marriage, she has only one way left that is to languish in misery. Every attempt the woman makes to redefine herself inevitably ends up in lack of communication. This leads to the theme of alienation and each novel of Anita Desai is progressively a search of the self for a heightened female awareness. She turns her eye inward and writes about the flickering psychic reactions. She remarks in the course of an interview that her themes are original and different from those of the other Indian writers writing in English as she is engaged in exposing the labyrinths of the human mind and indicating the ways to psychological fulfilment. She records the dilemmas faced by the Indian urban individuals. Her treatment of theme begins as a simple personal story of an individual
woman gradually developing into a wider conflict for her identity and ends up exploring possibilities of transition in the tradition bound Indian society residing in metropolitan surroundings.

She brings about a new dimension to the Indian novel by drawing upon the troubled sensibility of a woman in an absurd world. The novelist finds the existentialist theories compatible to her themes. Her characters - Maya, Sita and Nanda Kaul are lonely, anxious and estranged, and suffer from a sense of both physical and psychic alienation. Their estrangement stems from a lack of companionship and a feeling of insecurity. She explores the inner working of her protagonists’ minds unfolding the inner recesses and revealing the fundamental human condition by placing the individuals in situations of extreme tension and mental agony. She has an innate ability to peep into the inner recesses of the psyche of her characters rather than the outer spectacle of action. She has enormously contributed to the growth of Indian fiction in English by incorporating psychic aspect of her female characters who have suffered privations and humiliations, neglect and silence, aloofness and alienation. Alienation has been the thematic motif that organically connects Anita Desai’s fiction and this makes her exceptionally a unique novelist.

Anita Desai’s first novel, *Cry, The Peacock* presents the story of a young sensitive girl obsessed by a childhood prophecy of disaster, whose extreme sensitivity is rendered in terms of utter loneliness. The very beginning of the novel highlights the theme of alienation of husband and wife by
unfolding the relationship of Maya and Gautama. Her second novel, *Voices in the City* is a tragic exploration of personal suffering, which arises out of the feverish sensitivity of this young intellectual who has lost his way in contemporary India. It explores in a convincing way the innate climate of youthful despair and is permeated by the existential angst. This novel, *Voices in the City* continues the theme of maladjusted marriage with a wider aspect. It is not only the husband and wife who are faced with this existential predicament but the impact is also felt on their children, relations, friends and even acquaintances. The maladjustment between Raman and Sita in the novel, *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* is based on the clash of values, of principles, of faith even, or between normal, double social standards and the iconoclastic attitude of uncompromising honesty. The marriage of Mr. Kaul and Nanda in *Fire on the Mountain* is based solely on physical lust and circumstantial convenience of the husband, who lives his double life without any commitment either to his spouse or his mistress. Nanda becomes the victim of forced motherhood, producing umpteen unloved, unwanted children.

Like her counterpart Shobha De has also shed significant light on important issues pertaining to matrimony and gender bias. Women in her novels are victims of male chauvinism. For example, Karuna in *Socialite Evenings* rejects her mother’s suggestion to marry and settle down in life because marriage does not offer any solution.
But, Mother Why does security rest with a man? I feel confident now that I can look after myself. I am earning as much money as any man. I have roof over my head. I don’t really have any responsibilities. I am at peace with myself. I am not answerable to anyone… I can’t make any sacrifices-not now. (276)

Karuna rejects the values of male hierarchy. Her statements express her desire for the affirmation of a feminine self. It is in fact a search on her part for the genuine female self in a male centred phallicentric world. She takes up a non conformist stance, and adopts a radical feminist point of view all agog to “destroy the sex/gender system-the real source of women’s oppression-and to create a new society in which men and women are equal at every level of existence” (Millett 62).

Karuna is the modern woman independent in every way. Her breaking of the bonds of matrimony and finding her feet into a profession of her choice make her a liberated woman. The novel *Starry Nights* is a faithful portrayal of the film world with all its perfidies, crimes, lies and deceits and sexual exploitation. Anita’s Desai’s novel, *Bye-Bye, Blackbird* is an authentic study of human relationships confronted by cultural encounters. The novel captures the confusions and conflicts of alienated people. It has rightly been maintained that in the novel the tension between the local and the immigrant blackbird involves issues of alienation and accommodation that the immigrant has to confront in an alien and yet familiar world. In the novel *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*
she returns to the theme of alienation and loneliness in married life. The marital discord results chiefly from the dichotomy between the two irreconcilable temperaments and diametrically opposite viewpoints represented by Sita and her husband, Raman.

In fact, the novel *Fire on the Mountain* is the story of marital unhappiness personified. The novel *Fasting, Feasting* is a story about an Indian family that deals with the theme of marriage. While Aruna the sister of Arun lives a good married life, her brother Arun who is studying in America, is affected by the alien culture. The characters in the novel have their own individual dreams and desires but in the journey of life some of their dreams are fulfilled and many of their dreams remain only as dreams. The novel, *Clear Light of Day* deals with the theme of time in relation to eternity. Explaining the theme of her novel, Desai says that her novel is set in Old Delhi and records the tremendous changes that a Hindu family undergoes since 1947. Though this novel does not seem to have a tangible story, it throws significant light on the discord at various levels dealing with the theme of maladjustment in marriage on a more realistic way with a social concern. The marital disharmony takes its cue from the chronic physical ailment of a diabetic wife that suffocates the whole family.

In her two novels *In Custody* and *Baumgartner’s Bombay*, Desai explores the psyche of a male protagonist outside the circumscriptions of familial ties and obligations. She makes a departure from her earlier obsessive
pre-occupation with the interior landscape of hypersensitive and neurotic women. In fact, *Baumgartner’s Bombay* belongs to the genre of the novel of the ‘absurd’ and it is about Baumgartner, a wandering Jew in quest of roots. With the bitterness of a neglected childhood, the horror of being hunted and hounded out of his own country, exposure to an outlandish ambience in an alien land, forever condemned to the life of an exile, he moves from one existential dilemma to another. The novel focuses on the absurdity of his existence both in Germany and India. Strangely, in Germany he is a Jew, alienated from the mainstream of life; in India he is dubbed as unwanted. The novel *Journey to Ithaca* is a compassionate portrait of people struggling to find a spiritual home and it delineates Matteo’s alienation and the concomitant quest for spirituality. Her novel the *Zig - Zag Way* narrates the story of Eric Browse, a graduate scholar who takes on a long journey to locate his roots and goes in search of identity. The novelist has departed from her usual theme of marriage and deals with the theme of search for identity in this novel.

The novel *In Custody* deals with individual human nature and the relationship of the individual to society. The artist protagonist, Deven, in *In Custody* is endowed with a different kind of sensibility. Anita Desai has delineated in most of her novels the problems and plights of alienated individuals caught in the crisis of a changing society. She excels particularly in describing the miserable position of highly sensitive and emotional women, disturbed by a humiliating sense of neglect, of loneliness and of desperation.
The existential problem of the alienated self finally emerges as the central theme of her novels.

Anita Desai’s characters often pass through a state of psychological crisis that damages their value system and psychic equilibrium. With the exception of Hugo in Baumgartner’s Bombay, all others belong to the upper middle class, well-educated and fairly well-placed in society. However, they are prone to fears, anxieties and tensions which push them towards despair. In their search for identity, authenticity and ideal love-relationship, they move to a state of alienation where “aloneness alone is the sole natural condition, aloneness alone the treasure worth treasuring” (Voices in the City 23). All this makes a mental wreck of most of them, thereby, rendering them incapable of finding a meaning and rationale behind human existence. Maya, Monisha, Nanda Kaul and Hugo Baumgartner are such characters. Maya, in the Cry, The Peacock is a sensitive young woman, suffering from neurotic fears and anxieties caused by her pet’s death. It reminds her of the albino astrologer’s prediction about the possible demise of Gautama her husband or herself. In Voices in the City, the novelist presents a fascinating account of the turbulent psyche of three siblings, Nirode, Monisha and Amla. These young, sensitive women are the victims of a pernicious home environment where the parents are altogether indifferent to each other and oblivious of the emotional needs of their daughters.
Anita Desai’s characters can be divided into two groups, the major characters representing elite of defiance and suffering and the minor characters standing for the dull and anaemic individuals who live meaningless and senseless lives. Nirode feels that the letter from his mother is “like a warm, enveloping succubus, in the shape of a bright winged butterfly” (37). Nirode, Monisha and Amla are sharply contrasted with these victims of conformity. They are all presented as rebels constituting an aristocracy of suffering and non-conformity. Their problems are existential. As rebels they seek ways and means by which they can protect their individuality against the pressure of conformity.

Adit and Sarah in *Bye-Bye Blackbird*, face an acute sense of loss of identity, alienation and humiliation. Sarah loses her identity as an English woman by marrying an Indian. Adit is tired of living the artificial life in England and yearns for the Indian scene. On account of marrying Adit, an Indian, Sarah has become a nowhere woman. She fails to realize as to which group she does really belong to. The novelist has described this inner struggle of Sarah in these words:

Who was she – Mrs. Sen who had been married in a red and gold Benares brocade sari one burning bronzed day in September, or Mrs. Sen, the Head’s Secretary …. They were roles – and when she was not playing them, she was nobody. Her face was only a
mask, her body only a costume. Where was Sarah? .... She wondered .... (36)

While Dev decides to stay in England, Adit becomes homesick and continues to dislike England. He looks forward to seeing “anything different in colour, tempo, sound, flavour, anything individual and eccentric unruly and unplanned, anything Indian at all” (78). He realizes that his weakness for England is just pretence and decides to go back to India where his son would be born. The last chapter of the novel depicts the return of the blackbird to its permanent nest. On the other hand, Sarah lives the life of a cultural exile in her own country worried about the loss of her identity in her own society. The novelist rightly brings out Sarah’s agony in the following lines: “She had become nameless, she had shed her ancestry and identity and she sat there staring, as though she watched them disappear” (47).

Sarah has a real and perfect understanding of Adit who lacks it. She has a great fascination for India and she will construct the dream of India silently. She reveals her maturity when Adit passes through frenzy. In spite of her sincere efforts to prove herself a faithful wife, she feels miserable to note that the members of her family are highly critical of her. She performs all her duties with utmost sincerity and hopes that all her efforts will in the end be crowned with success. Sarah is presented as a lonely and helpless woman in the novel. This novel deals with the problem of immigration and racial discrimination but the underlying theme is one of loneliness. Madhusudan Prasad rightly
comments that though the novel is ostensibly concerned with the lives of Indian immigrants in England, it mainly explores the existentialist problems of loneliness and hollowness, adjustment and belonging that torment them.

Sarah’s sense of alienation is different from the rest of the other characters. For all other characters, alienation is a part of their personality, their character. Torn between two worlds, she is very often subjected to inner torture and sufferings. She loves solitude and avoids society. After her marriage, she loses her zest in life. In her suffering there is the real dilemma of isolation and not any sense of immigration consciousness. In *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* Sita, a middle aged mother of four children and the fifth on the way, experiences an extreme form of psychosis known as paranoia. The dissonance in her marital relationship with Raman fills her with nausea, boredom and frustration. She decides to retire to the magic island of Manori, in the hope that there she will be cured of her despair. In portraying the sad plight of Sita, the protagonist of the novel, Anita Desai shows how the marital discord affects the couple badly leading to disastrous consequences. Bored and frustrated in her married life, Sita tries to escape into a purposeless and unproductive loneliness. The novel seems to be an epitome of an irresistible yearning for a meaningful life. To Sita, experiences in the Bombay flat and on the island appear contrastive in nature. These experiences are linked together in as much as they enable her to see into the mystery of life and offer a glimpse of purposeful existence.
In *Fire on the Mountain*, Nanda Kaul values a pared existence above everything else. She, therefore, comes to the lonely secluded Carignano in order to escape the world, messages, letters and demands. Ila Das, Nanda’s childhood friend in the novel is a ludicrous spinster starving on her pittance as a social worker and comes to tea. The visit is shown as an unmitigated disaster. The grotesquely pathetic Ila Das has a voice so strident that it is like a deformity; she is garrulous, humble, painfully cheerful, uncomplainingly courageous, and unbearably irritating. Her life suggests another dimension of misery and meaningless existence. Ila’s real involvement in people’s welfare assumes tremendous symbolic significance when contrasted with the barren unfulfilled and lonely existence of Nanda Kaul. Yet, there is an irony in her tragic death, for if Nanda’s self-imposed withdrawal and alienation were meaningless, Ila’s involvement brings only tragic death to her so much so that on the way home to her rat-infested shack, she is raped and murdered. Nanda’s overwhelming will of the potential transcendence of the human spirit is totally negated by another equally lurid act that of Raka’s setting fire to the entire hillside with a box of matches. The message is only obvious that one must learn to connect in order to make one’s life meaningful, which both Nanda and Raka have failed to do. It is this imbalance in the lives of these female protagonists in the novel, which is its real strength, throwing its real insight into the missing essential link, in the absence of which the life becomes but a long tale of woe and suffering. Anita Desai does not portray her protagonists as
pitable human beings needing sympathy and compassion, but as dignified, strange, unpredictable and sensible individuals.

The novel *Clear Light of Day* is again the story of an inhibited personality called Bim, who, in the company of her mentally retarded brother Baba, makes a futile attempt to continue living in the old, dilapidated house in Old Delhi. She wishes to live in the past, discarding her prosperous landlord brother, Raja who is frustrated, angry and irritable.

The novel *In Custody* is also woven around an unfulfilled desire and the failure of Deven Sharma. Deceived and trapped, he fails to separate art from life. He suffers from an acute inferiority complex and overplays his love for Urdu poetry to compensate for the frustration caused by his ad hoc status as a lecturer in a private college. He is an obsessive neurotic who, many a time, realizes the futility of his desire to become a custodian of Nur’s poetry. No matter how much he despises the obsessive thought, he cannot abandon it or keep it out of his consciousness.

Anita Desai’s characters are persistently in search for a viable alternative. For majority of them, the real world is harsh, unpleasant and complex. In moments of crisis, they find the burden of human existence too heavy for them and face an overpowering sense of nothingness. They develop an aversion to all social contacts and attempt to seek peace, fulfilment and satisfaction in a lonely and detached existence. These anxious, unhappy, and bewildered people are terrified by the emptiness of modern life.
Maya’s anxiety in *Cry, The Peacock* is the sign of a fear where stimuli have been inhibited. Freud gives prime importance to sexual frustration for causing great anxiety. According to him, repression is the mechanism of neurotic anxiety. Alfred Adler establishes that anxiety is caused not only because of the non-gratification of sexual urges but because of the thwarting of a mastery drive. C.G. Jung thinks that the only motive that embraces all others is the prime desire to belong. In Anita Desai’s fictional world frustration causes neurotic disturbances. The husbands of Maya and Monisha hardly pay any attention to their emotional and physical needs in the Freudian sense. Even Nanda Kaul, Sita and Bim suffer from a nagging sense of non-belongingness. All of them, therefore, have turned neurotic. Adit, Sarah and Hugo Baumgartner are, also, examples of unfulfilled individuals because of their being “nowhere men” (S P Swain *Encyclopaedia of Literature in English* 408). They are so severely disturbed that they are totally out of touch with reality and generally regarded as psychotics. All of them behave in ways that, most people agree, are inappropriate to their situation. Several of Anita Desai’s characters are maladjusted at all levels of personality. Maya in *Cry, The Peacock*, Sita in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* and Raka in *Fire on the Mountain* belong to this category.

Both Maya and Sita also experience hallucinations. They are so deeply wrapped up in their psychic conflicts that they hardly make an effort to distinguish between the real and the imaginary. The material of hallucinations,
including dreams, is formed from the individual’s memories, both conscious and repressed, both recent and long past. Hallucinations reflect their motives, interests, pre-occupations, and the experiences of the individual. Anita Desai’s characters largely suffer from expansive delusions. Nirode, Monisha, Sita, Deven – all face delusions of grandeur as they consider themselves to be more gifted than others. Anita Desai’s characters embody another form of psychosis known as schizophrenia. In schizophrenia, there is an inconsistency between the behaviour and emotion of the person concerned. Primarily, the symptoms of schizophrenia indicate the condition of withdrawal from reality into fantasy.

There are different shades of schizophrenic disturbances in Anita Desai’s characters. Their behaviour reflects a virtual break with the usual human concepts of reality. Maya, Raka, Sita, Bim, Deven-all create an alternate reality. Alienation acquires a broad significance and range of meaning in Anita Desai’s novels. In sociological terms, it means loneliness, the absence of relationships, the feeling of dissatisfaction or the explicit rejection of social values and norms. The psychic tension in Anita Desai’s protagonists stems out of their desire to overcome this anxiety. Characters like Maya, Nirode, Monisha and Sita seek to understand the limitations of human situation and human relationships. They feel terribly insecure, apprehensive and frustrated and dejected. Almost all of them experience ungratifying interaction with their parents and find their environment undesirable. It shatters their faith in life as
also in the goodness of the world. For one reason or the other, their peculiar
childhood denies them the freedom required to develop their individuality.

The women in Anita Desai’s fiction seek freedom through actions that
are generally considered to be male prerogatives: Monisha is more fond of
books than of new clothes or jewellery; Amla seeks expression and realization
of her hidden potentially through paintings; Bim asserts her intellectual
independence and ability by taking up teaching as a profession. By taking up
these occupations, these women transgress the fundamental social taboos
against woman’s pursuit of self-identity and independence. They find greater
tension and conflict with the people close to them. Anita Desai seems to
emphasize the significance of these occupations, pursuits and tastes as a part of
women’s search for identity.

In *Fasting, Feasting*, Anita Desai returns to the central concern of
women’s oppression. This novel is about a family that does not value showy
customs, and garishness of the upper class. However, in this novel there is a
sharper focus on the concrete forms of oppression in the contemporary India. In
focusing on historically specific forms of gender-related oppression, and thus
illustrating the intersection of factors such as race, class and caste with gender,
the novel challenges the ethnocentric universalization and reductive
homogenization of the oppression of women in the third world by the majority
of western feminisms. The novel further suggests that many of the ugly
practices, particularly with regard to the oppression of women, seen in India
today are directly related to the culture of consumerism, the “corruption of custom” and “loosened traditional meanings” (Bulbeck 122) to which capitalism has led.

The novel suggests, however, that colonization is not entirely responsible for the situation of women in the present-day India. It is linked with the religious and cultural traditions that are responsible for the oppression of women. The first section of the novel is narrated from the perspective of the daughter, Uma. The family structure is clearly patriarchal, man being the undisputed head. The ironical tone that Anita Desai employs in the description of Uma’s parents clearly has a subversive role. Uma’s father is a retired lawyer determined to keep his authority intact. To this end, he has a perpetual scowl on his face and continually barks orders.

The tyranny of patriarchy is clearly evident in the family. Daughters in this society are denied autonomy and freedom. Uma and her sister Aruna are not given any privacy. The novel also throws light on the false dichotomy between the private and the public in this society. People, who profess support for the equal rights for women in public, deny their own wives and daughters these rights. Marriage is seen as the only remedy for women. The offer of a scholarship to study in Oxford made to Anamika, Uma’s cousin, is ignored by her parents. Instead the letter making the offer is used to procure a husband for her. The novel throws light on the misery that can follow a marriage, that is
hastily arranged and the lot of women in a typical joint family, in which the new bride is a virtual prisoner and a slave to the mother-in-law.

The novel exposes the degrading and exploitative nature of the dowry system – a system which clearly reflects unequal power relations between the relatives of the groom and those of the bride. Uma’s parents make several attempts to get her married off. With each successive attempt they lower their expectations. Finally, Uma is married to a man who is many years her senior and who already has a wife and several children. The novel throws light on the ease with which the bride’s marital family is able to murder her and claim that she had committed suicide. Alka Kurian reveals that on the basis of search carried out in 1977, the Women’s Enlightenment Committee in Delhi claimed that most of the cases being passed off as suicides were, in fact, murders committed by the bride’s family in the hope of getting a better deal through their son’s marriage the next time. Anamika’s mother-in-law claimed that Anamika poured kerosene on herself and set herself on fire but the neighbours believe that she was dragged out by her mother-in-law, in collusion with her son, and set on fire.

The novel *Fasting, Feasting* is also an indictment against marriages made for financial gains and for maintaining social status. Sometimes, the parents have a desire to have a son even though their daughters are in their teens. They even cut short the promising career of their talented daughters for the sake of their marriage. The novelist weaves a story about the life and
character of Uma, the daughter of an advocate of a small town in this novel. To bring into focus the difference between the two sets of values, two kinds of parental attitude, Anita Desai shows the plight of a girl in a family in America, the land of the four wheeled. Melanie, the unmarried daughter of the Pattons, catches a curious malady of overeating, a sort of mental disorder. She eats, vomits, and eats again with greater ferocity. She eats nothing but cookies, candies, peanuts and ice cream without a pause. In the end, the girl is taken “to an institution in the Berk-shires where they know how to deal with the neurosis of adolescent girls” (226). In no time she begins to show signs of improvement. To pay the bills, her father takes up a night job.

The Siamese twins, rendered nameless throughout the novel, are the prototypical parents found everywhere in the middle-class families of India. In their over-domineering concern, they tend to ignore the inadvertent possibility of enclosing or entrapping their own offspring. Thus, they do not give contingency, to the fact that perhaps their children too can have a life to call their own. Uma, the plain, skittish, spinster daughter of a close-knit Indian family is trapped at home, smothered by her overbearing parents and their regnant traditions and customs. She lives under the demanding rule of her parents and thereby is repressed, suppressed and is incarcerated at home. To her, both of her parents appear to have merged into a single identity – Mama Papa / Papa Mama:
Having fused into one, they had gained so much in substance, in stature, in authority, that they loomed large enough as it was; they did not need separate histories and backgrounds to make them even more immense. (6)

To Uma, a pleasant escape from her claustrophobic conditions at home is her school-going. The convent school is streaked with “golden promise” (20). Hence, she always goes early to the school and later finds some excuse to linger there for longer time. Conversely, she feels deprived during the dull weekends at home. She truckles herself into the varied trivialities of household chores. This seemed “a denial, a negation of life as it ought to be sombre and splendid, and then the endless summer vacation when the heat reduced even that pointless existence to further vacuity”(21). Regardless of Uma’s desire for convent education, she acquiesces to stop going to school when Mama gives birth to the third baby, Arun. Even as Uma shows disagreement, she is coaxed, cajoled and finally threatened to accept her Mama’s decision.

Reduced thus to a baby-sitter in her earlier days, Uma finds no escape from her enclosure. She looks forward towards her marriage to give her the much-needed relief. She returns home frustrated after her spliced marriage turns deceitful. As a stigma to the family and the society, she is denied of any sense of privacy and access to socialization. Her pilgrimage with her ailing aunt Mira-Masi offers her a brief repose of happiness and freedom. Catering to the whims and fancies of Mama Papa, Uma feels utterly friendless and alone,
even when she is at home and surrounded by her Mama Papa. In desperation, she thinks of writing a letter to a friend to share her grief but it only ends up with the realization that she has none to confide with:

She could write a letter to a friend - a private message of despair, dissatisfaction, yearning; she has a packet of notepaper, pale violet with a pink rose embossed in the corner – but who is the friend? Mrs. Joshi? But since she lives next door, she would be surprised. Aruna? But Aruna would pay no attention, she is too busy. . . . (134)

Her cousin Anamika’s scholarship to Oxford is used as a means to win her a husband, who is impervious to her beauty, grace and distinction. She is coerced to live in a patriarchal society that considers higher education to be the prerogative of men, and marriages as the major preoccupation of women. She is enclosed or encased in an insipid marital life that is devoid of love, mutual respect, understanding, self-esteem and dignity. Her entrapment ends in death at the hands of her husband.

Aruna, Uma’s smart and pretty younger sister makes a discreet choice and marries “the wisest, the handsomest, the richest, the most exciting of the suitors who presented themselves” (Fasting, Feasting 101). Her marriage with Arvind who has got a job in Bombay and a flat in a housing block in Juhu, facing the beach is just like a dream-come-true. Yet to live that dream-life fully, she transforms herself and desperately seeks to introduce change in the
lives of others. Aruna has liberated herself from the customs and dominating home rules that bind her. Yet, in negating these codes, her body modification ensnares her in a mad pursuit towards a vision of perfection. In order to reach that perfection, she constantly unearths and rectifies the flaws of her own family as well as that of Arvind’s. While Uma, Anamika and Aruna present the female versions of entrapment in *Fasting, Feasting*, Arun, the brother of Uma pictures the male version of it. Unlike his sisters, Arun desists in eating non-vegetarian food since it revolutionized the life-style of his father. Nonetheless, Arun fails to extricate himself from the clutches of his father, in terms of his education. Ironically, it is education, which instead of offering the desired autonomy, paves way for his enclosure.

Arun fails to manifest his identity as an individual in America. Caught in the prison house of his own family’s food habits, he can neither relish the alien food nor develop a sense of belonging with Patton’s family that shelters him during his vacation. Melanie, the daughter of Mrs. Patton suffers from bulimia – a disorder in which overeating alternates with self-induced vomiting and fasting. This is seen in contrast to Rod, the fitness fanatic, who spends all his time and energy in jogging. Anita Desai portrays a version of enclosure that entraps the individual and paves way for solitude - alienation, a culmination of a discipline of discrimination and not the beginning of contemplation for finding a solution. Familial bonds exert constant, subtle coercion on the psyche of the individual. This oppression is an instrument of power through which an
individual is cultivated, modified and manipulated. It acts as a power-laden scheme that produces and actualizes the individual’s psyche. Uma’s life is a continuity of the tradition of self-abnegation. The male version of servitude represented by Arun interpolates with that of the female version constituted by Uma, Anamika and Aruna. Their world is a narrow, seemingly timeless world in which lives are led in a social vacuum. Their attempts to escape from the enclosure are ephemeral, illusory and self-destructively abortive as entrapments through familial hanks are ubiquitous and all encompassing. Their passivity is fore grounded by Anita Desai to suggest an indecisive, insecure, weak female-male subject still in the process of subjection.

The central character of the novel *The Zigzag Way* is Eric, an American graduate student from Boston who loses interest in his exercise of turning his thesis on immigration in general. On his quest to discover the history of his Cornish grandfather, Eric comes in contact with an aristocratic old woman, “with a Teutonic name” (29) Dona Vera, Queen of Sierra. She runs a research centre, which is devoted to preserve the culture of the Huichol Indians. It is she, Eric realizes, who holds the key to his past. As Eric furthers his exploration in Mexico, he comes to find out more about the legend of Dona Vera and about his own past.

The main characters of the novel, *Journey to Ithaca* are Matteo and Sophie, a European couple who came to India as hippies in the early 1970’s. They came to India together to share an adventure, they would go through it
together, stay together, recover their unique and essential love. Matteo an Italian with an unhappy childhood is drawn towards the Indian Yogis, sages and mystics, as a result of his reading, particularly Hermen Hesse’s *The Journey to the East* and *Siddhartha* from Fabian, his home tutor. The weak minded Matteo had met Sophie, a banker at a lunch hosted at his house; they liked each other, got married and left for India.

The story begins with Matteo lying sick in a hospital in India. Sophie who had deserted him fed up with his foolish craving after Gurus, hurries to him to fetch him back home to live with her and her two children Giacomo and Isabel. Matteo’s sickness is partly as a result of the death of the Mother, the spiritual leader in whose ashram Matteo had finally found his destination after much wandering and sorrow. Sophie who had left Matteo at the Mother’s ashram earlier after the birth of their second child has completed her investigations of the Mother’s past. The Mother was actually Laila, an Egyptian born Muslim, the daughter of Hameed, a University lecturer and Alma, a French teacher. As a child, she was disinterested in studies but liked dancing. So her parents sent her to Venice for studies and later to Paris expecting that this would bring her a rich husband. There in Paris, she not only was trained in the Eastern occultism and spirituality but also was attracted towards an Indian dancer who played the role of Krishna. Joining his troupe with much labour, she toured Europe and North America before going to India.
In India, she renewed her search for a spiritual Guru, disappears into the ashram of a guru and remains there, and after his death as the Mother.

The long conversation between Matteo and Sophie which occupies a substantial part of the novel reveals the irreconcilable difference between the European Couples; the difference in their philosophies of life; their attitude towards Indian spirituality resulting in emotional incompatibility. The novel records ironically the journey of two characters, Matteo and Laila searching for enlightenment. In a way, Sophie also is on a journey seeking the truth of faked sainthood. Sophie emerges as a critique of her husband Matteo’s running after the spiritual Gurus. Of the three major characters in the novel, Sophie is at the centre of the narrative. Most of the novel is written from Sophie’s point of view.

Sophie’s long arguments with Matteo are intended to expose the European’s unusual enthusiasm and craving after Indian spirituality of their imagination as a result of Oriental discourses. When Sophie’s arguments based on rationalism failed to convince Matteo of his foolishness she decides to research into the past of the Mother whom her husband has falsely taken as the epitome of Indian spirituality. Her findings later support her observations.

The characterization of the Mother and the result of Sophie’s investigative journalism attain relevance because of the close resemblance of the character with the Mother of Sri Aurobindo’s Ashram at Pondicherry. The novel also portrays the pathetic condition of Indian artists who have not fully comprehended Indian spirituality. The touring of Indian classical dance troupe
led by the man who plays the role of Krishna projected as the symbol of Indian culture, religion and spiritually was forced to make unholy changes in their shows including shortening of the lengthy ballet to brief five-and ten-minute sketches to prevent them from starving in New York. The Radha-Krishna dance is mixed with other exotic elements and spectacles so much so that even Laila, the enthusiastic disciple of Krishna “became stiff with self-consciousness, understanding that this dance had nothing to do with any religious belief or spiritual exercise, Indian or otherwise” (290). Anita Desai is more sensitive to the quest and tensions faced by women, and their delicate nervous responses to these situations. These women characters struggle desperately to arrive at some image of fulfilled self but their struggle for survival is wrought with great tension.

On the other hand, women in the novels of Shobha De are the victims of male chauvinism who are willing to face challenges of life. A typical male attitude to them is enshrined in Deb’s assertions that “once a bitch, always a bitch” and “one bitch is as good as another” (Sultry Days154). Pratimaben, who meets her Ahmedabad based businessman husband, only once a week, calls him her weekend husband and passes her time arranging matkas and chatais with mirrors everywhere, associating herself with social work, and going on pilgrimages.

Despite limitations, Shobha De’s treatment of women’s problems is not without interest. The focus of the novelist in Sultry Days is rather diffuse and not so precise as in Socialite Evenings or Starry Nights. But, Anita Desai’s
novels narrate the mystery of the inner life of her protagonists and the Indian sensibility. She always describes in her novels the problems of adjustment and acceptance. On the contrary, Karuna in *Socialite Evenings* plays different roles at different times to quench her emotional and psychic thirst. She is a model, a housewife, a society lady and an actor-writer and a paramour. Marriage leads her to “aimless days indefinitely repeated, life that slips away gently toward death without questioning its purpose” (500). Unlike other married women who have practically no choice left to them save what their husband wills and desires, Karuna has independent thoughts. She has her own say and is free to choose her ways and means. The husband interferes but it is only by way of guidance and advice. There is no superimposition on her thoughts. Karuna’s is a life of instincts and urges. It appears that Karuna has just a formal relationship with her husband. Intimacy between the husband and wife is lacking for, Karuna, calls her husband derogatorily as ‘Black Label’.

De resorts to the technique of manipulating language in order to deconstruct the male ego: “the fact that his wife had taken a lover excited him. It seemed immoral that we should make love under the circumstances, but there was no point in resisting – it would have only consumed more time” (188). She views woman not only as meekly defiant but also as the embodiment of power. In Karuna this power (Shakti) syndrome assumes a positive figure but in Winnie it is a negative force, the destructive image, the image of Kali. The observation of Karuna’s husband about the bewitching Winnie is interesting.
“She is a very strange and powerful woman. . . I can’t do anything because I know she will destroy me. She has that power” (264).

Women in De’s novels seem to symbolize the overpowering materialism that characterizes the modern age. With the changing of moral and ethical values there is an inner conflict which drives the modern Indian women to seek shelter in different identities for momentary solace. It is through the actions, assertions and behaviour of her characters De presents vital issues pertaining to matrimony and gender. A male character is almost invariably portrayed in her novels, as a seducer, an exploiter, a wife beater, a rapist, or a callous husband. The novelist seems to be at ease in presenting her female characters with all their singularities. Some of the women characters have abnormal, lesbian, or perverted relation with people, who are mostly the victims of male chauvinism. Surprisingly, the Indian woman who is at the centre of De’s fiction is no longer a traditional woman who is passive in nature and accepts the dominance of men and society. De’s women boldly face life in spite of various problems they encounter. They enjoy their economic independence.

These were no-nonsense women who had ‘take me seriously’ written all over them. They even wore business suits to work and carried burgundy - coloured briefcases. . . They took their jobs with an earnestness that was almost terrifying in its intensity. Even the married ones insisted on being addressed as ‘Ms’ or stuck to their maiden names. Their male colleagues were not
permitted to crack jokes or flirt lightly…. Workaholism for women had become very fashionable. (Sultry Days 119)

Her latest book Surviving Men shows men as merely mama’s boys and ‘earthworms’, deserving love just as puppies need them. De believes that, “Most Indian men are high on ego and low on performance” (Uncertain Liaisons 7). On the other hand, Desai is more concerned with thought, emotion and sensation rather than with action, experience and achievement. Desai’s portrayal of man-woman relationship has been influenced and conditioned by the existing intricate social situation. Man-Woman relationship seems of particular interest to her for in most of her early novels she writes on this theme. She concentrates on the predicament of modern woman in this male-dominated society and her destruction at the altar of marriage. According to Desai, most marriages prove to be unions of incompatibility. Her novels illustrate this. While men are rational and business like, women are sentimental and emotional. Their interests, their attitudes are quite different. Naturally they look at things in different ways and react to the same situations differently. Interestingly, the titles of her novels are symbolical and highly suggestive of their theme.