

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end. It is not the task of the novelist to convey this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit, whatever aberration or complexity it may display, with as little mixture of the alien and external as possible? We are not pleading merely for courage and sincerity; we are suggesting that the proper stuff of fiction is a little other than custom would have us believe it.

(Virginia Woolf. *Modern Fiction. The Common Reader, 1st Series.* 1923.)

SECTION ONE

Literary Scene

ANITA DESAI belongs to the post-independence Indian English writing whose pen has broken a fresh ground to give a new dimension to Indian English fiction. Her literary output has progressively increased and she has now to her credit eleven novels, two collections of short stories, several books for children and plenty of literary articles. Her novels include *Cry, the peacock* (1963), *Voices in the City* (1965), *Bye-Bye Blackbird* (1971), *Where Shall We Go This Summer* (1975), *Fire on the Mountain* (1977), *Clear Light of Day* (1980), *The Village by the Sea: An Indian Family Story* (1982), *In Custody* (1984), *Baumgartner's Bombay* (1988), *Journey to Ithaca* (1995), and *Fasting, Feasting* (1999). She has tried to explore the inner lives of her characters with psychological insight, creative excellence and lyrical intensity. Her novels may be considered as the novels of self-discovery, of process and of becoming. She moves away from larger themes such as political, social, or satirical, towards the inner world of individuals.

For her literary contribution she has been conferred many national and international honours. She

is a member of the Advisory Board of English of the National Academy of Letters in Delhi. She has been awarded the Neil Gunn International Fellowship for 1994. She is also a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature in London, of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, member PEN, New York and of Girton College at the University of Cambridge. She has been given the honour of Scottish Arts Council, the Hellen Can Fellow, Cambridge University, 86-87, the Ashby Fellow etc. As K.C. Dutt, in his *Who's Who of Indian Writers: 1999* outlines, she teaches in the Writing Program at M.I.T. and divides her time between India, Boston, Massachusetts and Cambridge, England. She is also the visiting Professor of Smith College, USA 1987-88, the Purington Professor of English, Mount Holyoke College, since 1988, Visiting Scholar, Rockefeller Foundation, Bellagio, Italy 1992.

Born in Mussoorie on 24th June 1937 from a mixed parentage, Desai began writing prose fiction at the age of seven, which were published in children's magazines. Her father, Dhiren Majumdar, was a Bengali and her mother Antoinette Nime was a German. The family lived in Delhi and there she had her education: first at Queen Mary's School and then at Miranda House, Delhi University. She passed her Master's degree in English literature from Delhi University, worked for a year in Max Muller Bhawan, Calcutta, was married to Ashvin Desai, and mothered four children. As she has lived in

metropolitan cities like Delhi, Bombay, Calcutta, Poona and Chandigarh, she describes these cities in her novels.

After a long literary journey of four decades, she stands as an established novelist, as an heir of many great awards and prizes. She is the recipient of the Royal Society of Literature's Winifred Holtby Memorial Prize and the National Academy of Letters Award (Sahitya Academy) in 1978 for her novel *Fire on the Mountain*. She received the Guardian Award for Children's Fiction in 1982 in U.K. for her novel, *The Village by the Sea: An Indian Family Story*. *Where Shall We Go This Summer* won her Federation of Indian Publishers and Author's Guild of Indian Award for Excellence in Writing in 1978. She is also the recipient of Booker Mc Conel Prize in 1980 and 1984 from London; the Neil Gunn Award, 1994 for international Writers; Padma Shree, 1990 by the Govt of India. Her novels like *Clear Light of Day* (1980), *In Custody* (1994) and *Fasting, Feasting* (1999) were nominated for the prestigious Booker Prize. *In Custody* is recently filmed by Merchant Ivory Productions. The blurb of her novel *Baumgartner's Bombay* thus reads:

Her work has won widespread critical acclaim. Victoria Glendinning, writing in the *Sunday Times*, said of *Clear Light of Day*: 'Quiet writing, like Anita Desai's, can be more

impressive than stylistic fireworks. She has the gift of opening up a closed world and making it clearly visible and, by the end, familiar'; Peter Kemp in the *Sunday Times* described *In Custody* as 'resonant and realistic'; and Anthony Thwaite in the *Observer* called Anita Desai 'the most original person I've come across in fiction for a long time' (1989).

The literary platform of Indian English novel on which Anita Desai stands, seems to develop through various stages. In the beginning, it emerges as largely imitative of the European literary convention. An increasing sense of patriotism and spirit of nationalism inspire the later Indian novelists. Their novels can be considered as attempts to interpret the Indian consciousness to the rest of the world. The post-independence Indian novelists seem more interested in exploration of the individual in their creative writings.

With the introduction of English in India, a large number of English classics begin to find a place in the educated Indian minds, which consequently become models for the Indians writing in English. Bankimchandra Chatterjee becomes the first Indian writer of a novel in English, with the publication of his novel *Rajmohan's Wife* in 1864. The novel is a rather

melodramatic tale of the trials of a typical, long-suffering Hindu wife Matangi at the hands of her husband Rajmohan who is a bully (Naik, 106). *One Thousand and One Nights* by S.K. Ghosh and *Indian Detective Stories* by S.B. Bannerjee are other works of prose-fiction in English by Indians. Raj Lakmi Devi's *The Hindu Wife* (1876) and Toru Dutt's autobiographical novel, *Bianca or The Young Spanish Maiden* (1878) can be said to be pioneer novels by Indian women. Besides these, K.K. Lahiri's *Roshinara* (1881), H. Dutt's *Bijoy Chand* (1888), Khetrapal Chakravarti's *Sarata and Hingana* (1895), Ramesh Chandrs Datta's *The Love Palms* (1902) and *Slave Girl* (1909) are among some of the earlier works in English.

These earlier novels are more in consonance with Victorian literary models. Most of the novelists aim at elimination of social evils by trying to create a national and social consciousness. However, in the field of characterization they do not seem very successful. With some exceptions, the art of character portrayal continues to be stereotyped. The problem of creating round characters does not seem to be efficiently resolved. Many of them seem to be carried away by the lure of creating images of the romantic and glamorous India of Rajas and Maharajas, and of mystic saints and sadhus who could perform miracles. These novels provide us with historical significance than with literary insights.

The next phase of Indian novel is concerned with a nationalist consciousness as well as a social awareness. Ideas of the Indian struggle for freedom and social awareness are reflected in the novels of K.S. Vankataramani, Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan and Raja Rao. Vankataramani's *Murugan the Tiller* (1927) and *Kandan the Portrait* (1932) deal with economic and social themes entirely based on Gandhian thoughts. Anand is more concerned with the social milieu than with the individualized characters. Though his *Untouchable* (1935) is mainly about the caste system and social untouchability, the Gandhian myth is predominant in the novel. Most of his novels overlook the psychic portrayal of the characters. In *Coolie* (1936) the inner development of the main protagonist is ignored. Narayan seems to be implanted in his exclusive locale, Malgudi, thus producing 'Comedies in Sadness'. His novels like *Swami and Friends* (1935), *The Bachelor of Arts* (1937), *The Dark Room* (1938), *The English Teacher* (1945), *Mr. Sampath* (1949), *The Financial Expert* (1952) and *Waiting for Mahatma* (1955) deal with various regional problems, aspirations and wisdom of the Indian way of life. Raja Rao deals with philosophical and religious themes in his few but refined novels. His *Kanthapura* (1936) is a socio-political novel with the theme of 'Gandhi and our Village'. Another novel, *The Serpent and the Rope* (1960) deals with the themes of east-west cultural and philosophical confrontations.

Other novelists like Manohar Malgonkar and Bhabani Bhattacharya express a tradition of social realism in their novels. Malgonkar drives at literary pleasure rather than social criticism in his novels like *Distant Drum* (1960), *Combat of Shadows* (1962), *The Princess* (1963), *A Blend in the Ganges* (1964), and *The Devil's Wind* (1972). Bhattacharya writes from a social point in view, for whom a novel must have a social purpose. His novels like *So Many Hungers* (1947), *He Who Rides a Tiger* (1952), *Music for Mohini* (1952), *A Goddess Named Gold* (1960), *Shadow from Laddakh* (1966), and *A Dream in Hawaii* (1978) exploit political, social or economic realities. His novels are outstanding works on the themes of moral debasement of the characters struggling for physical survival rather than a spiritual one.

These novelists retain the momentum of national freedom coupled with a tradition of social realism. Apart from socio-economic themes, the struggle for freedom looms large in their novels. They show a political tension rather than a spiritual one. They mostly narrate a social story dominated by an urge for political freedom. Their writings manifest a choice of oriental subjects. The spirit of modernism seems to be almost alien to these writers. It appears that they make little attempt at shaking off the worn-out conventions of the colonial past. Even the fact of independence seems to mean only a political change to

some of them. The realization of freedom could hardly manifest itself in the choice of an idiom still belonging to their colonizers. A kind of decadent romanticism forms the literary ethos of the period of 1950s. Various themes like the spirit of nationalism, the Indian national movement, the partition of India and the destruction and suffering caused by it have inspired these novelists.

Indian novels continue to develop and grow, adapting to the changing Indian environment. Many social, political and industrial changes have brought parallel amendments in the substance of these novels. The thematic nucleus of these novels consists in the depiction of the picture of hunger, poverty and disease in the Indian rural life. Along with the depiction of widespread social evils and tensions, an examination of the survival of the past and an exploration of a hybrid culture of dislocations also constitute the themes of these novels.

The era of the modern Indian novel may be said to have started from the 1960s. The new novelists are basically concerned with individualized characters. There is a marked shift from the life of community towards the delineation of the inner life of the individuals. The introspective and psychoanalytic character of the modern Indian novel may be seen as a new trend in its history. Though the novel retains its

momentum of patriotism and national consciousness, the conflict between modernity and tradition comes to be one of the favourite concerns of the novelists. Many of them deal with the theme of east-west confrontation and its aftermath. Along with the themes of increasing inwardness, the new novelists have also explored the crisis of the self.

Arun Joshi in his novels like *The Foreigner* (1968), *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* (1971), *The Apprentice* (1974) and *The Last Labyrinth* (1981) deals with human predicament in its different aspects. In his thematic stance, he seems to be influenced by European writers like Sartre, Camus or Kafka. His protagonists are intensely self-centred individuals, prone to self-pity and escapism, who try to search for their own identities. Chaman Nahal in his novels like *My True Face* (1973), *Azadi* (1975), *Into Another Dawn* (1977) and *The English Queens* (1979) deals with the painful odyssey of the individuals in different contexts. B. Rajan deals with the problem of east-west encounter in terms of the individual's quest for identity in his novels like *The Dark Dancer* (1959), *Too Long in the West* (1961). His novels also deal with the themes of change. V.K. Gokak's *Narahari: Prophet of India* (1972), Timeri Mukherjee's *The Marriage* (1972), Raj Gill's *The Rape* (1974) and *The Infidel* (1979), Saros Cowasjee's *Goodbye to Elsa* (1975), S.S. Dhami's *Muluka* (1978) explore the new Indian consciousness. These novels lay

a great emphasis on personal tensions, private selves, alienation and isolation of individualized characters.

There seems to be a little continuity between pre-independence and post-independence fiction. The new novelists had yet to break with the literary conventions of their colonizers. They had to take upon themselves a new challenge and pioneer a new tradition. They could not fall back upon their predecessors. Yet they deserve a fairer estimate at least for their contribution to Indian writings. Some of their conclusions provide valuable insight into the modern Indian novel including that of Anita Desai.

With the dawn of independence there has been a sudden spurt of women novelists. They have attempted to provide new philosophical insights, wealth of understanding, and depth of meaning. They help the readers to reach out to a different world and also to realize the potential of human achievements through a feminine point of view. "One of the reasons that women have taken up their pen is because it has allowed them to create their own world" (Dhawan, 10). It also permits them to establish the conditions of existence, free from direct intrusion of men. They can also identify themselves with a range of characters. Ian Ousby observes that when women write they are in touch with libidinal energies and drives, which can find no place in the regimental discourses of male reason. Men

may perhaps gain access to such writing, and may even themselves produce it in certain rare cases (1994, 325). Women seem to have some different sense of values and are more concerned with thought, emotion and sensation. Their writings allow them to occupy a safe place from where they can discover a wide range of experience.

The women writers have taken up the issue of the tortured selves of the Indian women as one of their major themes. The novels of Kamala Markandaya can be studied as essays on realism. Her first novel *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954) deals with the theme of hunger, where food becomes the primary requisite for human dignity whereas hunger debases man. In her other novels like *Some Inner Fury* (1955), *Possession* (1963), *A Silence of Desire* (1960), *A Handful of Rice* (1966), *The Nowhere Man* (1972), *Two Virgins* (1973), and *The Golden Honeycomb* (1977), she projects India's quest for true identity in the context of cultural changes. Ruth Praver Jhabwala reveals the picture of the Indian urban life in the light of east-west encounters. In her novels like *To Whom She Will* (1955), *The Nature of Passion* (1956), *Esmond in India* (1958), *The Householder* (1960), *Get Ready for Battle* (1962) and *A Backward Place* (1965), she depicts the picture of such women who opt for modernity without conviction. Most of her female characters are portrayed as using modernity as a licence for free love. She also tries to explore the

mind, the sensibility, and the agitated heart of the lonely or trapped women. Sashi Deshpande reflects on a realistic picture of contemporary middle-class woman in most of her novels. Her very first novel *The Dark Holds no Terrors* (1980) presents an unusual female character, "who defies her mother to become a doctor, defies her caste to marry outside, and defies social conventions by using Boozy to advance her career" (Iyenger, 758). Bharati Mukherjee deals with the theme of an immigrant's experience of Indo-Americans in her novels like *Wife* (1976), *The Tiger's Daughter* (1980). Her female characters are deeply rooted in Indian ethos and possess admirable strength in facing the calamities of life. Nayantara Sehgal presents the picture of such women, who face various arduous situations in their quest for self-fulfilment. In her novels like *A Time to be Happy* (1958), *This Time of Morning* (1968), *Storm in Chandigarh* (1969), she explores the theme of the modern Indian woman's search for sexual freedom and self-realization. Besides these, other women novelists like Santa Rama Rau, Nargis Dalal, and Sobha De give various accounts of post-independence Indian life and culture.

These women novelists also present oriental and occidental cultural conflicts with deep insight. The theme of dejection remains a keynote for most of them. They profess the view that traditional Hindu values have oppressed Indian women. Writing for them becomes an approach for the rising of the consciousness of an

entire culture. The feminist cause as offered by these writers can be studied as a historically significant literary movement, well founded alternatively in Indian tradition, French enlightenment, British liberalism, and also deeply linked in style towards ideas of truth, justice, freedom and equality.

ANITA DESAI belongs to such a new phase of Indian writing in English. Her novels reveal the themes of alienation and survival accompanied by human quest for meaning and truth. She tries to explore the life of the individuals, who become victims of the conflict between tradition and newly acquired values of modern life. Since she is concerned with the inner-self of the individuals, the spiritual freedom and psychic dimension is what interests her the most. According to her, writing is an effort to discover, and to underline, and finally to convey the true significance of things. She confesses that her novels 'deal with the terror of facing single-handed, the ferocious assaults of existence' (Dalmia, 13). Hers is the writing that depicts the inward journey of the mind in preference to the world of men and matters. Her preoccupation with human psyche diverts her attention to the question of being and nausea of existence. The complexity and obscurity in her fiction originates from her existential roots that impart to it a substantial element.

SECTION TWO

Critical Background

There has been an ample amount of critical writings and research articles on the novels of Anita Desai, which provide us with diverse interpretations of her works. She has alternatively been appreciated as a novelist of new ideals and condemned as a mere imitator of European writers. She has been viewed as an existentialist, as well as a champion of feminist problems. A brief survey of such critical writings will be helpful in pointing out those areas which critics and researchers have left unexplored. Efforts can be made in bringing into picture those unexplored areas of her creative writings which basically emphasize the theme of survival of the self as an essential human element.

Her very first novel, *Cry, the Peacock*, has received wide critical acclaim for its novelty and philosophical strength. Most of her critics have interpreted the novel as Desai's attempt at presenting two different approaches to life: one poetic and another pragmatic. The first critical review of the novel of Anita Desai, "Rev. of *Cry, the Peacock*" (1963) by P. Lal, has interpreted the novel as Desai's

approach to present conjugal tension. Her second novel, *Voices in the City* (1965) has also received wide acclaim in the literary scenario. Meena Belliappa in her book, *The Fiction of Anita Desai* (1971) has made an attempt to study the scope and nature of Desai's first two novels, evaluating the fictional mode and techniques of the novelist. She has traced in Desai an evidence of a departure from current modes of fictional writing in India. B.R. Rao has studied the novels of Anita Desai as portrayals of human tragedies in his treatise *The Novels of Mrs. Anita Desai: A Study* (1977). According to him the tragedy in Desai's novels arises out of the inability of the characters to establish any connection with the prose and the passion in their lives. They live only in fragments finding no meaning of their existence.

R.S. Sharma has found the essence of Anita Desai's fiction in its explanatory nature. In his book *Anita Desai* (1981), he has tried to show a tension between prose of form and poetry of life as acting upon the lives of the characters of Anita Desai. He also shows Desai trying to achieve a unity between the two through a series of parallelism and contrast at thematic and structural levels. Appraising a keen observation of Desai, he remarks thus:

Nothing escapes her eyes, not even the leg of a spider! This intensity and density of

texture compensates for the absence of a strong plot or story line in her fiction. One reads her novels like long poems drawn mostly from those corners of life where no poetry seems to exist (1981, 166).

Madhusudan Prasad, in his book *Anita Desai: The Novelist* (1982) has made an attempt to study the novels of Desai from various angles. He tries to highlight her obsessive existentialist concerns as expressed in her novels. He emphasises the imagery, symbolism, narrative technique, lyrical prose and other aspects of her art. Harimohan Prasad also makes an elaborate study of the various themes and images as expressed by modern Indian novelists. He writes that in Anita Desai's novels, the acuteness of dilemma is lost in the welter of lyricism and her characters hardly emerge as sharply etched figures. According to his view, man is fumbling for his true self, his real identity. There is no definite image of man; he is groping *en route*. Hence quest is his condition. He thinks that the spirit of inquiry into the truth of human life as expressed in the novels of Desai is Indian, or to be more extensively, of Eastern lineage. The gospels of *Bhagawat Gita* have also been revealed in the fiction of Desai (1983, 37-42). Another critic C.P. Singh writes that Desai is struggling hard with an idea of producing a realistic novel of social as well as racial identity (1983, 232).

J.P. Tripathi has tried to trace the development of art and resourcefulness of Anita Desai in terms of her achievement as a creative artist. In his book *The Mind and Art of Anita Desai* (1986), he has studied the novels of Desai as depiction of human predicament marked by failure and frustration. He observes that the characters of Anita Desai are studies in inadequate love-relations. He also views that the free flow of love and sympathy may make marital life heavenly but Desai's characters being born with higher sensibility fail to provide them. This is the sort of emotional inadequacy, which exists between pairs of lovers in her books. He finds no deliberate attempt to cement their discord which is the result of temperamental differences. He considers the female characters of Desai as suffering from existential predicaments. He thinks that Anita Desai has always focussed her attention on the plight of women. Commenting on her eighth novel, *In Custody* he writes that:

Life as an eternal trap in the universe - this is the epitome of pessimism. In the situation the existential search for freedom - the human quest for liberty is put forth: "Then where was freedom to be found? Where was there fresh air to breathe?" in a limited sense only the novel is open to interpretations of existential philosophy (1986, 147).

Studies by Jasbir Jain, Ramesh K. Srivastava and Amarnath Datta have thrown light on various existential aspects of the novels of Anita Desai. Their studies point to the frustration, loneliness and defeat of women in contemporary India. According to Datta, Monisha's suicide, Sita's flight and re-absorption into quotidian life, and the tragic end of Nanda Kaul's deliberate isolation are all but different aspects of an organic and central vision (1987, 923). These critics find a strong influence of existential writers like Jean Paul Sartre, Albert Camus and J.D. Salinger on the mind of Anita Desai.

The novels of Desai have also been interpreted from the psychological angle. Usha Bande's book *The Novels of Anita Desai* (1988) considers the novels of Desai from the point of view of "Third Force Psychology", based on the concepts of neurotic processes, as evolved by Karen Horney, and its application to health based on the tenets of Abraham Maslow. S.L. Paul's *Cry, the Peacock: A Critical Study* (1988) examines her novel in the framework of 'the metaphysics of the unconscious' put forward by Von Hartmann in his book *The Philosophy of the Unconsciousness*. R. K. Dhawan, in his two anthologies of critical studies on Anita Desai has detected a new era of psychological realism in her writings. He comments that Anita Desai's serious concern is with 'the journey within' of her characters, the chief

protagonists being female characters. Therefore the recurring theme that we come across in her novels is the agony of existence in a hostile and man-dominated society that is not only conservative but also taboo-ridden (1991, 12).

Asha Kanwal makes a comparative study of the novels of Virginia Woolf and Anita Desai in her writing "Anita Desai and Virginia Woolf: Comparative Study". Examining the use of time and memory in their novels, Kanwal shows how these concepts are made to function as artistic tools integrated into the structure of the novel lending a unified vision to the art and vision of these novelists. Commenting on the theme of time as used by these novelists, she writes that we have its threefold effect - the passing of moments or hours, the voyage from youth to age, and the historical time, or time in relation to nationwide events. In Woolf, inner time is not in contradistinction to outer time, for she has decried the isolation of the self. To her, the external and the internal are complementary. Both Woolf and Desai use inner time without ignoring its relation to the outer (1991, 29).

Many critics have tried to explore the themes of loneliness, solitude or separation in the novels of Anita Desai. R.A. Singh interprets the novels of Anita Desai as the outcome of her tragic vision of life in his dissertation called *Existential Characters of Arun*

Joshi and Anita Desai (1991). He considers her novels as examples of existential writing in accordance with western writers like Sartre or Camus. He thinks that her imagination is terrified by the emptiness of modern man. He writes that a sense of insecurity surrounds the milieu of her novels as in the case with Saul Bellow or Margaret Atwood. He studies the theme of alienation as one of the negative forces that makes the characters of Desai frustrated and defeated. Since they find themselves as aliens in their environment, they fail to overcome the impending predicament of their lives. He shows them as doomed only to be defeated in their search for meaning and purpose of life. Another critic Salman Rushdie writes that the subject of Anita Desai's fiction has, thus far, been solitude. Her most memorable creations - the old woman, Nanda Kaul in *Fire on the Mountain*, or Bim in *Clear Light of Day* - have been isolated, singular figures. And the books themselves have been private universes, illuminated by the author's perceptiveness, delicacy of language and sharp wit, but remaining, in a sense, as solitary, as separate, as their characters (1991, 71).

Most of these critical writings show Desai as a novelist preoccupied with a tragic vision of life. Since they deal only with the human predicament, they actually miss the other dimensions human alienation. Though man suffers from the torment of alienation, yet he can transcend his negative attitude towards life and

come to a spiritual survival through knowledge and realization of the self as an independent individual. It is not necessary that an alien experience is only tormenting. The sense of alienation also paves the way for individual's quest for identity leading to the realization of true self. Critics have ignored the other aspect of alienation in the novels of Desai.

Usha Pathania, in her treatise called *Human Bonds and Bondages: The Fiction of Anita Desai and Kamala Markendaya* (1992), has made a comparative analysis of the works of Anita Desai and Kamala Markendaya in the context of 'kin' relationship to discover a pattern of human bonds and bondages emerging under the weight of multidimensional pressures and tensions. She considers that Desai explores the human bonds from the viewpoint of a psychologist whereas Markendaya examines the human relationship in social, economic and political contexts. She also attempts to understand the psychic turmoil the characters of Anita Desai.

Critics have also carried out studies on symbols, images and myths as essential features in the fictional setting of Anita Desai. Kunj Bala Goyal's *Language and Theme in Anita Desai's Fiction* (1989), Seema Jane's *Voices and Vision of Anita Desai* (1989), Kajali Sharma's *Symbolism in Anita Desai's Novels* (1991), S. Indira's *Anita Desai as an Artist: A Study in Image and Symbol* (1994), and Sandhyarani Dash's *Form and Vision*

in the *Novels of Anita Desai* (1996), provide extensive studies on the use of images, symbols, myths and the verbal patterns as used by Desai. They have viewed that Desai uses these images, symbols and myths in order to articulate her psychological and philosophical themes. They examine imagery as a major component of Anita Desai's fictional technique and artistry. They also view that an interaction between poetic texture and narrative structure raises her novels to a higher level of artistic success. These critics show how imagery has enabled the novelist to integrate the inner and outer rhythms of life, thereby giving the reader an absorbing experience of the inner drama as well as outer action. Their studies are primarily concerned with exploring the literary style of Anita Desai.

Fits and Misfits: A Study of Anita Desai's Protagonists (1996) by Narendra Kumar interprets her novels in terms of her relationship with the tradition of the Indian novel. The main focus of the study is laid on her art of characterization particularly the mode of individualizing of character. He writes that Anita Desai has never created common characters. Instead she has written about individual men and women - the solitary beings who are not average but have retreated or been driven into some extremity of despair and so turned against or made to stand against the general current of life. Her characters, independent, agonized, frustrated and combating with angry defiance

their individual problems and predicaments, make us feel as though we have noticed them in our neighbourhood. Herein lays the charm of Anita Desai's art of characterization (1996, 88-89).

The study of Desai as a delineator of the dilemma of Indian women is not a new concept. From the very beginning of her literary career, she has been studied as an author of the new Indian woman and her problems. Shyam Ansani interprets the novels of Desai as attempts to portray the concept of New India in a transition period. He writes that her fictional milieu is the India in transition with its cultural and ethical values in the melting point. In each of her novels, one could sense the author's urge for a way of living, which would respond to the innermost yearnings of the Indian women for self-emancipation and self-dignity (1991, 109). P.F. Patil also views that Desai portrays the picture of the defeated woman in many of her novels. In his essay called "The Theme of Marital Disharmony in the Novels of Anita Desai", he tries to show the picture of beaten, lonely or alienated women in the fictional world of Desai. He observes that the women characters of Desai live in isolated worlds full of existential problems. Solitary and introspective, they show a marked tendency towards neurotic behaviour. Obsessed with their life of alienation, depression and loneliness, her characters suffer from an inner torment of the self. According to him:

Anita Desai has introduced marital disharmony as a central theme. She has an independent approach to women's problems in Indian social life as well as life in general. She does not accept the social tradition emphasized through religious mottoes and economic needs that a woman's body and soul are similar to a male-dominated family (1991, 127).

Regarding her as a painter of the defeated woman, Ian Ousby also writes that *Cry, the Peacock* and *Voices in the City* feature sensitive Hindu women of orthodox background, seeking unorthodox means of fulfilment that leads to despair and insanity. *Clear Light of Day* is the account of an embittered woman discovering her own human shortcomings. He finds her interested in exploring the complex psychic depths of the female characters trapped within the close confines of incompatible marriages (1994, 253). Sashi Khanna analyses the treatment of broken human relationships in the novels of Anita Desai. In the introduction to her book, *Human Relationships in Anita Desai's Novels* (1995), she gives a brilliant description of human relationships as depicted in Indian fiction in English. In the rest of the book, she makes an attempt to explore the relationships between parent-child, man-woman and individual-society, as portrayed by Desai in eight of her novels. Besides these, various other

studies like Bindulata Chaudhury's *Women and Society in the Novels of Anita Desai* (1995), N.R. Gopal's *A Critical Study of the Novels of Anita Desai* (1995) and Rajiv Sharma's *Feminine Sensibility in Charlotte Bronte and Anita Desai* (1995) try to explore feminine sensibility as expressed by Desai in her novels. These critics try to make a study of broken human relationships marred by gender isolation with insight.

In the anthology called *Feminism and Indian English Fiction* (1996), critics like P.M. Nayak, M. Mani Meitei, Rama Nair and many others have given their outstanding expositions on the feminist aspects of the novels of Anita Desai. These critics have interpreted her novels as explorations of the dilemma of modern Indian women who are keen to define themselves in postcolonial situations. In his 'Introduction' to the anthology, Nayak reviews the novels of Anita Desai as being those of a first class feminist. He observes that:

Elaine Showalter talks of three phases in the growth of feminist tradition: imitation, protest and self-discovery. Anita Desai's works are directly related to the third phase. They encapsulate her 'private vision' that captures the long smothered wail of a lacerated psyche that tells the harrowing tale of blunted human relationship. The fate of

Maya, Monisha, Sita and Nanda Kaul reminds us of Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1996, 12).

Rama Nair is of the opinion that Desai is primarily interested in exploring the complex psychic depths of the female characters trapped within the close confines of an incompatible marriage. He writes that her women characters live in isolated worlds of existential problems. Solitary and introspective, they show a marked tendency towards neurotic behaviour. Obsessed with their life of alienation, depression and loneliness, they suffer from an inner torment of the self (1996, 57). Meity on the other hand tries to study the theme of the quest for balance in human relationships. He thinks that the age-old principle that men are for war and female for kitchen does not work in her fiction. Commenting on her impartial views on filial relationships, he writes that Anita Desai stresses conjugal co-operation and understanding as the basis of family harmony (1996, 45).

Ashok Chopra has considered the novels of Anita Desai as studies in Indian family problems arising out of marital discords. In his essay "Anita Desai: The Novel Queen", he comments that Desai is obsessed with relationships and problems in adjustment and acceptance, most specifically in familial relationships. After giving a brief survey of her

novels he concludes that Desai's forte is the portrayal of fractured relationships within the Indian family and kinship structures (1999, 40). S.P. Swain also studies the dialectics of marital polarization in the novels of Anita Desai. He considers her novels as portrayals of delicate housewives unable to cope with the apathy of the in-laws and the dehumanised and depersonalised urban milieu (2000, 95). Hariom Prasad writes that Desai has achieved a cohesive design of content and form in her psychological novels. She imposes harmony over different streams of feeling and sensibility, found in different strata of human society. He tries to find a match between 'what life is' and 'how it has to be lived' with the natural make-up as expressed in the novels of Anita Desai. He feels that in all her novels, Anita Desai seems to be under the spell of existentialism, and all her protagonists champion the cause of existential philosophy (2000, 112-119).

SECTION THREE

Despite the abundance of such critical heritage, a great deal seems to have been left unexplored. Most of these critical estimations focus on the pessimistic side of the novels of Anita Desai. The theme of a quest for identity and survival of the self has been ignored by these critics. They do not sufficiently explore the total concept of female sensibility that Desai attempts to bring into the arena of her novels. They also overlook the fact that Desai has portrayed her characters not only as subordinate entities under social legalities and external definitions, but also as seekers of truth and meaning of existence. Even some recent works look inadequate in delineating the themes of quest and survival within the individuals that the novelist often expresses in her writing. Though these diverse studies cannot be discarded as insufficient, yet we can trace some lacunae in these critical writings. These expositions study the theme of alienation as giving birth to the feelings of confusion, dilemma and indeterminacy, showing the characters of Desai accepting defeat in their quest for the selfhood. The critics have not sufficiently dealt with the individuals' potentiality in conquering or transcending the torment of alienation and achieving spiritual survival on the basis of their existence.

The present dissertation aims at fulfilling such gap which the previous critics of Desai have overlooked. It helps us to understand her novels from a new perspective. The stress has been laid on the quest and realization of the self at the heart of Desai's artistic self that she reveals in her novels. This uniquely illustrates the process of the evolution of human soul through alienation, quest and realization. This fresh approach offers a new insight into the novelist's philosophy of life and nature. A blend of subjective vision and objective reality, a subtle unity between her aesthetics and her philosophy has been taken into account in this thesis. Along with the theme of alienation, the individual's search for identity and the realization of the self as an essential element of survival has been taken up in the course of this study.

There are five chapters in this dissertation. The first chapter, "Introduction" is subdivided into three sections. The first section has opened a little window to the brief history of Indian English fiction. The second section has offered a panoramic survey of previous interpretations and commentary on the novels of Anita Desai. The third section of the chapter has shown the research gap of the study of the novels of Anita Desai. It reveals the original purpose of the thesis as to bring out the meaning of alienation and survival as depicted by Desai in her novels. Fresh departures have been brought to light in Desai's

philosophical views on life as depicted in her novels. There is a conscious movement away from the tormenting self towards a quest for identity and survival of the self. The stress is given on the spiritual realization and a unification of subjective vision and objective reality.

In the second chapter called "Philosophical Dimensions", the intellectual background of the works of Anita Desai has been explored. It contains a critical background of the theme of alienation and survival. This chapter has been subdivided into four sections. The first section gives the meaning of the terms 'alienation' and 'survival'. The second section deals with the existential notion of alienation and survival. The third section is concerned with alienation and survival in the postcolonial scene. The fourth section deals with gender alienation and survival. Her indebtedness to other sources of writings has also been discussed with reference to her novels. Efforts have also been made to bring into picture those direct or indirect influences and echoes of various writings, which are responsible in shaping the philosophical backgrounds of the novels of Anita Desai.

The third chapter, "Alienated Self", considers the different aspects of alienation and its consequent effects on man with reference to the novels of Desai. Desai portrays her characters suffering from an inner

conviction of isolation and uncertainty in the way of their existence. Most of her characters are alienated souls in the universe, and sometimes even from the self. The apprehension of this alienation comes in various ways. In the fiction of Anita Desai, it develops from a failure of human communication and a lack of emotional stability. It evolves also from the individual's failure to cope with his society, which always seems to be indifferent towards him. Her idea of alienation far exceeds what the existing critical accounts have explored. The feeling of alienation is not the product of loneliness or solitude. It is rather a feeling of division, cut off from the rest of the world. In this way, this chapter intends to interpret the theme of alienation from a unique perspective.

The fourth chapter called "Quest for Identity" shows that Desai not only deals with the alien experience of her protagonists but also outlines various means and methods that these characters adopt for their survival. The protagonists of Anita Desai make various attempts to overcome the torments of alienation, such as by creating different mechanisms of living, by performing different activities to make themselves meaningful, by trying to create their own values by acts of free choices, and also by aspiring for certain higher values in life other than the present ones. Since the interest of Anita Desai does not lie in mirroring the externals but in exploring the inner recesses of the individuals,

the search for truth consists in the life of mind and soul, and not merely in the life of body. Even in the midst of sorrow and pain, they keep alive some of their warmth and goodness towards an alien world. Their search for identity gives them a different dimension, depth and meaning even in their wretched conditions of life.

The final chapter called "Survival of the Self", deals with philosophical realization and recognition of survival as expressed by Desai in her novels. The present dissertation does not end in studying the themes of alienation and quest in the novels of Anita Desai. It attempts to explore the meaning of survival with new insights. Therefore, this chapter deals with various meanings of survival. It also shows how the characters of Desai finally attain their survival through their quest, realization and knowledge of the self. Such an idea of survival, still unexplored by the critics, is the subject matter of the final chapter.

The final chapter is followed by "Summary and Conclusion". It recapitulates the entire work with its major findings and their implications. This is followed by a list of "Works Cited", prepared according to the rules of *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*, Fifth Edition 2000, edited by Joseph Gibaldi. Attempts have been made to update the thesis in accordance to the guidelines as furnished by the *Handbook*.