

## CONCLUSION

In the preceding chapters we have seen how Anita Desai resurrects the subjugated knowledge of different Third-world as well as western women in their respective predicaments in a male-dominated society. Like a genealogist, she locates many discontinuous individual women's struggles against different forms of patriarchal power in post-independence India. Their struggles result in their taking different forms of resistance or negotiating in power relations. For self-fulfilment they either appropriate or abrogate the social institutions like marriage and family and different cultural practices with full consciousness of their selves. Desai's female protagonists cannot be therefore said to be selfless, passive and subservient or conventional and traditional, rather they are equipped with oppositional consciousness that propels them to assert their own selves. If knowledge of the self is power, each of them is endowed with this sort of power. Again, in spite of the common trait, they also show a marked difference among themselves.

However, while directing the struggles of her female protagonists at changing the power relations in patriarchal societies, Anita Desai takes different feminist positions that shift, though not in a linear way, from western to postcolonial feminism. As a corollary of this, she emerges as a postcolonial feminist novelist.

In her first novel, *Cry, The Peacock*, Desai takes a radical feminist position. In making a Hindu wife speak out against her husband and kill him, she subverts Hindu 'pativrata' or wife's fidelity ideology and thereby shows her radicality. Maya's move from speech to action is well-nigh akin to that of Dimple in Bharati Mukherjee's *Wife* (1976). Dimple is trapped in a loveless marriage with Amit with whom she talked in silences. The only person she can talk to is Milt Glasser, her American friend, in whose arms she finds love in her New York apartment. Towards the end her frustration at being imprisoned in the deadening routine of her bourgeois existence erupts into chilling act of self-assertion – she knives her husband. Maya and Dimple are no doubt extreme cases of women's self-assertion. But

Anita Desai, unlike Bharati Mukherjee, cannot grant her protagonist extra-marital sex perhaps because of the discursive pressure of Indian middle class morality. Anita Desai seems to have deliberately allowed her western radicality to be modified by Indian middle class morality with the purpose of representing not only Maya, but most of her Indian female characters, as sexually chaste. Of course, she is not blind to their sexual desires which she represents with great artistry. In *Clear Light of Day*, Bim's incestuous feeling for her retarded brother is a case in point :

She felt an immense, almost irresistible yearnings to lie down beside him on the bed, stretched out limb to limb, silent and immobile together. She felt that they must be the same length, that his slightness would fit in beside her size, that his concavities would mould together with her convexities. Together they would form a whole that would be perfect and pure. She only needed to lie down and stretch out beside him to become whole and perfect.

Instead she went out (166).

In addition to Bharati Mukherjee, Nayantara Sahgal, Shashi Deshpande, Gita Mehta, Shobha De, Nomita Gokhale and Arundhati Roy who have presented their stories from a feminist point of view make no hesitation in representing their female characters with extra-marital affairs for their sexual fulfilment. Nayantara Sahgal's central characters have no hangover of guilt when they have extra-marital affairs for sexual fulfilment. Deshpande's protagonists have extra-marital attractions : Sarita for Boozie and Padmakar, Indu for Naren and Jaya for Kamat. All three of them view it objectively as any other experience and do not allow themselves to be bogged down by any feeling of guilt. An attempt at a meaningful communication which their marriage lacks, spurs them into these relationships, but very soon they see the futility of such expectation. Gita Mehta's Jaya in *Raj* finds with Arun Roy the sexual fulfilment that her husband had denied her in marriage. With Nomita Gokhale and Shobha De, we enter the world of consumer culture. Their women of affluent and aspiring middle classes with new sex morality insist upon the right to have sexual life of their own both before and after marriage. In Nomita Gokhale's *Paro* and Shobha De's novels the quest for happiness can be equated with a more or less frantic effort to make the

best of the passing moment—the unabashed pursuit of sex. Arundhati Roy too has not been affected by the discursive pressure of Indian morality. Many critics are of the view that Roy has depicted some scenes which are highly pornographic. Anyway, in maintaining the sexual purity of her Indian middle class women characters, Anita Desai seems to have taken a position of resistance to the sexual corruption of western consumer culture.

Desai however reveals her radicality in other way through Monisha, in *Voices in the City*, who moves from silence to action. Her deliberate resort to silence and frigidity and later on suicide act as a mode of violent protest against oppressive patriarchal family structure. Desai's negative radicality takes on positive form through Amla who abjures marriage in favour of an independent profession. Her radicality is again noticeable in her construction of a Hindu sensual widow-mother who is the only Indian female character whom she grants an extra-marital affair with Major Chanda as a protest against her husband's greed for her parental property. But the affair has been only hinted at, not at all overdone.

In *Bye-Bye Blackbird* her postcolonial feminism opposes that postcoloniality which emphasizes the need of an authentic essential national culture in opposition to colonial culture. Imbued with emancipatory politics, Anita Desai does not want any culture to be dominated by another culture. She perhaps believes that women's emancipation is contingent upon cultural emancipation. With this conviction she invokes hybridity through construction of the discourse of an expectant mother. But again her postcolonial feminism switches over to a radical feminism in *Where shall We Go This Summer?* where she represents a violent pregnant mother struggling for reproductive freedom, although she has ultimately to suspend her radicality. In *Fire on the Mountain* her radicality takes on a more pronounced form, although she posits that fight against different forms of patriarchal oppression can be carried on from different positions : separatist, socialist and radical. However, in raising a stout symbolic protest against rape and envisioning a holistic and life-affirming women's world through Raka, Desai reinforces her radicality. In *Clear Light of Day* she shows her radicality in two ways : first, in exposing the nationalist resolutions' failure to solve the problem of the young widows like Mira Masi and second, in making a

young woman Bimala opt out of marriage for an independent life of her choice with an independent profession. But at the end her radical feminism turns into postcolonial one as she, through Tara and Bimala, shows preference for a composite culture over pure Hindu nationalist culture in India. In *The Village By the Sea* silence at the end is deliberately maintained as a protest against the nationalist discourse that locates women in the spiritual domain of its culture with myopia of their poverty. In refusing to locate a working class unmarried village woman in the spiritual domain of national culture in favour of a Marxist discourse that makes her conscious of the magic of money-power and the need for an independent earning, Desai takes a Third-world Marxist feminist position.

But in *In Custody*, Desai takes a Third world feminist position. A Third -world feminist shows concerns not only for the predicament of the women of the Third-world countries but also for that of the people who are marginalized there. But where the gender relations are concerned, she sides with the women. In making the muslim female artist assert her position in opposition to a male Urdu poet as well as a phallic critic Deven, Desai shows her predilection for the Third-world feminism. Again in *Baumgartner's Bombay*, Desai, from a transnational feminist position, showers compassion upon the two German expatriates who are marginalized in both India and Germany. But in respect of empowerment she favours the German woman, a cabaret dancer, whom she empowers to resurrect not only the subjugated experience of her own predicament but also that of the German Jew in an alien Indian culture. In resurrecting their subjugated experiences she creates a resistance to the violent capitalist power.

But in *Journey to Ithaca*, Desai rolls back to Third-world feminism. She takes a western feminist position as she constructs the power relations between two western characters who are husband and wife. But as she foregrounds the power relations between the western woman and the oriental woman, she shifts to the Third-world feminist position which overlaps with her postcoloniality in which she colludes with the traditional discourse of Hindu religion for empowerment of the oriental muslim woman. In her last novel, *Fasting, Feasting*, Desai evinces the feeling of a postcolonial feminist writer through her emphasis on multiculturalism that she believes would reduce dominance of one culture over

the other and widen the understandings of social relationships as well as through her vision of the women's subculture that underlines a bond of mother-daughter in opposition to an aggressive patriarchal culture.

Interestingly it may be noted that though in some of her novels Desai emphasises the need for cultural exchange between the West and the East, she does in no way show her predilection for the Western Christian values in her novels. Rather in *Journey to Ithaca* she denounces Christianity through a western and an oriental woman. She may have a fascination for modern Western civilization premised on enlightenment. But this does not debar her from getting sustenance from Indian traditional culture.

Unlike Desai, Sahgal and Kamala Markandaya, on the other hand, who, as Dr. Rakhi observes, are feminine in their perspective and 'feminist in ideology' (Manmohan K. Bhatnagar (ed.) Vol.III 1999 : 102) show their predilection for the Western Christian values. Raj in Sahgal's *The Day in Shadow* brings his Christian Values to bear on his criticism of Hinduism. In the novel he who on the tradition-modernity question stands for modernity helps Simrit and becomes foil to her husband. This, as Naresh Jain observes, indicates Sahgal's own predilection for the western Christian values (Naresh K. Jain, 1998:14). He also observes that this is not however an isolated phenomenon because Kamala Markandaya has an Englishman too. Dr. Kennington is the agent of change in *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954). But Anita Desai's postcoloniality perhaps propels her to disallow any of her fictional characters to apply Christian values for debunking Indian culture, particularly Hinduism. If ever she allows any character like Sophie to attack it, she allows her to attack not the essence of Hinduism, but some of its superstitious practices.

Another important point is that western feminism insists upon women adopting divorce as a potent weapon against male oppression. Three of Sahgal's novels such as *The Time of Morning* (1966) *Storm in Chandigarh* (1969) and *The Day in Shadow* (1971) dwell upon the theme of divorce that provides Sahgal with an occasion to castigate Hindu tradition where a woman's life is hemmed in by a web of duties to her husband and where she is enjoined to stay faithful to him at all costs, Sahgal has presented divorce as an assertion by women of their need for personal freedom including sexual freedom. But Desai does not

lead her women to revolt against male oppression through divorce. They either return to their parents or use violent weapons like self-immolation or suicide, or fight for their rights as wife within the framework of marriage and family. In other words, Anita Desai has created a new selfhood drawing sustenance from tradition and made an attempt at arriving at a resolution of the dilemma within the family structure.

Some critics are of the opinion that in the last two decades Anita Desai's popularity has begun to dwindle with the emergence of the women novelists of controversial merit like Gita Mehta and Shobha De who have presented their versions of the newly liberated women. Shobha De has portrayed the world of sexually infatuated people and Gita Mehta the spiritually hungry characters. Of them, particularly Shobha De is said to have an enviable appeal and an undeniable charm. But Shobha De's appeal can be at best called seasonal. If her novels are considered in depth, she easily falls short of the stature of a novelist. Anita Desai, on the contrary, remains a major novelist by any standard.

A postcolonial feminist, she has resurrected knowledges of the different women in the different roles as daughter, wife, mother or spinster, and in thus resurrecting, Desai has indeed made an insurrection in the field of feminism.