

**CHAPTER- III**  
**ANITA DESAI:**  
**VOICING WOMEN'S STRUGGLE FOR IDENTITY**

Like her predecessor Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai has also made the 'Woman-subject' her main preoccupation. But unlike Markandaya, who is more concerned with the social, political and economic issues affecting the lives of the common people, especially the rural and urban ones of the newly independent Indian nation-state, Desai clearly shows her disfavour for the novelists who take interest in "the 'outer' rather than the 'inner' world preferring the social to the psychological novels" (India Today: 15.03.1986:149). About her artistic mission, she herself states:

Writing to me is a process of discovering the truth... the truth that is nine-tenths of the iceberg that is submerged beneath of the one-tenth visible portion we call reality. Writing is my way of plunging into the depths and exploring this underlying truth. All my writing is an effort to discover... and convey the true significance of things (Vinson: 1972: 348).

Hence, K.R.Srinivas Iyengar's evaluation of her fictional world is quite pertinent:

Her forte is the exploration of sensibility – the particular kind of modern Indian sensibility that is ill at ease in a sterile set up (Iyengar: 1969:64).

While reading Mrs. Desai's novels the reader's first impression is that the novelist always tries "to forge a style... suggestive enough to convey the

fever and fretfulness of the stream of consciousness of her principal characters" (Iyengar: 1985:464). The emotions in her novels are too many and are often the result of excessive celebration on the author's part and not always determined by the exterior social consciousness. They truly constitute together the documentation of radical female resistance against a patriarchally acknowledged concept of normality. The novelist finds the link between female duality, myth and psychosis intriguing; each heroine is seen as searching for, finding and absorbing or annihilating the double that represents the socially impermissible aspects of her femininity. In other words, Anita Desai thus represents the welcome "creative release of the feminine sensibility which began to emerge after the world war second" (Rao, A.R.: 1972:50).

However, it is interesting to note that Mrs. Desai does not profess herself to be a feminist as some other woman novelists like Shobha De and Namita Gokhale do. Even critics like Usha Bande (1988), S. Indira (1995), Rajib Sharma (1995), Asha Kanwar (1989) and O.P. Budholia (2001) have analysed her novels from various points of view, but none of them has made an attempt to explore her as a feminist novelist. However, Sunaina Singh (1994) has studied her four novels in comparison with Margaret Atwood's four novels in a feminist perspective, and Jasbir Jain has passingly mentioned that her work, if examined against the three phases -- the feminine, the feminist and the female -- as traced by Elaine Showalter in her book A Literature of Their Own (1977) -- "falls into the third phase, and directly relates to it" (Jain: 1987: 157). But all these feminist readings of Anita Desai have remained incomplete in some way or other. The feminist perspective in which Sunaina has studied her four novels is ideologically inflected one with the result that she has failed to explore the complexity of power relations in her novels. Jain also overlooks the rhetoric of resistance in the principal characters of Mrs. Desai, and it is particularly in this backdrop that this chapter attempts to explore Anita Desai as a postcolonial feminist novelist voicing the Indian

women's struggle for existence in a traditional patriarchal society. As in the previous chapter, here also my study would be attentive to what the individual subjects in the novels do within the existing discourse structures and how do they construct their own discourses. It would not be author-centred in the usual sense.

With the publication of her first novel, Cry, the Peacock (1963), Anita Desai broke new grounds in Indian English fiction by presenting for the first time in it, a hyper-sensitive, heterosexual woman, who condemns her husband to death when she is denied love and sexuality, and thus deconstructs the cherished notions of Indian womanhood which has still been designated by 'Savitri' metaphor.

In the triptych structure of the novel, Part-I and Part-II occupy very small space, covering only three and eleven pages respectively, and both are in third person narrative, focusing on the death of the protagonist's pet dog and her suicide. However, Part-II of the novel is in the first person narration, covering a long space in which the discursive 'I' allows Maya, the protagonist to take the subject position for articulation of her repressed voice through the construction of a confessional discourse. This discourse not only reveals her husband's indifference to her, physically and mentally, but gradually makes herself conscious about her deprivation from the days of childhood. As she states:

My childhood was one in which much was excluded, which grew steadily more restricted, unnatural even, and in which I lived as a toy princess in a toy world (89).

Maya's brother Arjuna could free himself from the dominance of their father, but she could not because she, like average Indian girls, internalized a

life of submissiveness in such an ingrained way that it became her "second nature". As a result, she began to depend more and more on her father, and that is why she could not but accept her father's decision regarding her marriage with Gautama, a man of his choice:

That I marry this tall, stooped and knowledgeable friend of his, one might have said that our marriage was grounded upon the friendship of the two men, and the mutual respect in which they held each other, rather than upon anything else (40).

It is after her marriage that Maya realises that temperamentally she and her husband are polar opposites of each other. An average evening for her turns into hardly more than a "quiet formal waiting" (7) for him, thus making their married life punctuated all along by "matrimonial silences" (12). She is pained by the total lack of communication on his part:

How little he knew my suffering, or of how to comfort me. Telling me to go to sleep while he worked at his papers, he did not give another thought to me, to either the soft willing body, or the lonely wanting mind that was waiting near his bed (9).

Thus, from the very beginning of the novel, we become fully aware of Maya's hypersensitive and highly disturbed state of mind. Reacting to the untimely death of her pet dog, she rushes to the garden tap "to wash the vision from her eyes" (15). But her husband remains completely unaffected and would shrug her "words off as superfluous, trivial" (19). In fact, restlessness always boils within Maya, and the strangeness holds them apart. She feels "defenceless and utterly alone" in the company of the "bleak, comfortless figure" passing as her husband (146), whereas this "gaunt, sarcastically silent

intellectual" (74) is always eager to pursue the thread of logic "slowly and steadily as meticulous tortoise" (208). Ultimately, Maya's psychic problems, aggravated by her infantilism, drive her to a kind of schizophrenia. She describes herself as "a body without a heart, a heart without a body"(196).

However, the cultural set up in which Maya has been born and brought up does not allow her to cross the bounds of marital morality. Nor is she able to sublimate her powerful biological urge. Hence, she bursts into a rage by "giving herself up to a fit of furious pillow beating, kicking everything, but crying" (9). Of course, there are plenty of images in the novel that suggest Maya's erotic desire and its starvation. Maya's repeated references to the frenzied dance of the peacock for its mate, the cooing and mating calls of the pigeons, the heavy silk cotton trees, etc. reflect her sexual desires. On the contrary, the word 'chaste', 'virginal' and 'the moon' which are repeated several times, emphasise her erotic starvation. She ultimately experiences symbolic gratification of her sexual desire through some hallucinatory vision of lizards and birds copulating in weird setting (127). As observed by Freud, such a fantasy is obviously nothing but "the fulfilment of a wish, a correction of unsatisfying reality" (Freud: 1908:146, Cited in Patricia Waugh: 1989: 168).

Maya's proposal to Goutama to take her to Darjeeling whose scenic beauty and cool weather, she still believes, may soothe her tormented mind, is her last attempt to negotiate their marriage. But Goutama squashes her proposal. Moreover, the most humiliating experience that she undergoes is in Goutama's male party, where charmed by the vibrating rich Urdu poetry recited by the cultural wine drinking gentlemen, she breaks an age-old tradition and joins them, and Goutama subtly drives home to her the truth that she does not belong there. This is what she confesses about her humiliation:

Turning his back to me, he stood talking to a friend, a glass in his hand, and his voice rose, in order that I might hear, when he said, 'Blissful, yes, because it is unrelated to our day, unclouded by the vulgarity of ill-educated men, or of over bearing women' (104).

It is in this life of supreme humiliation and neglect from her husband that the fear of death, as predicted by the albino-astrologer, surfaces in her mind. But the question that she now faces is, whose death – her husband's or hers? Before deciding the question, she wants to understand other women's attitude to their respective families. And what she observes is that all those women have almost willingly surrendered to the oppressive structure of male hegemony. She pathetically feels for Leila who has accepted her 'fate'.

Had she raged, revolted, I should have rushed to her now (59).

On the other hand, Pam, her other friend, has the typical problem of an Indian housewife living with her in-laws. Pam is fed up with her in-laws, but not with her husband. Maya feels that her situation is quite contrasted by Pam's. She craves the company of her mother-in-law, but does not get it. She finds herself "alone with them after all" (64).

In her aloneness, Maya finds two options: to accept everything as inevitable and surrender to 'fate', or to revolt against the oppressive patriarchal power, exercised by Goutama. During the dust storm, through a dance in a pent-up house, she seems to "celebrate her release from bondage, from fate, from death, dreariness and dreadful dreams" (S. Indira: 1995: 25). And with this newly found consciousness of freedom, she resolves to kill Goutama:

The man who had no contact with the world, or with me, what would it matter to him if he died and lost even the possibility of conduct? What would it matter to him? (175).

The sight of the dancing Shiva appears to her as a symbol of destruction of evil and of liberation, and she assigns herself the god's other role, and breaks the constraints of the "pativrata" ideology.

However, in Part-III of the novel, Maya is found to commit suicide. Obviously, it draws our attention to its ideology. P.K. Pandeya argues:

Being a 'sankari' Hindu woman she suffers from guilt and remorse for killing her husband and in the end she kills herself (Pandeya: 1991: 92).

Here, Pandeya's argument appears to be androcentric. No doubt, Maya is a Hindu woman, and her religious root is so deep that when she approaches to murder her husband, she accepts God's dual powers and thereby constructs herself as a devout subject of Hindu religion. But in the text nowhere do we find any sense of guilt or remorse on Maya's part for murdering her husband. If there is remorse on Maya's part, it is because of her seeing that her discourse is challenged by her mother-in-law and sister-in-law, from whom she expected support because both of them have their experiences of repression. But her mother-in-law dismisses Maya's discourse by labeling it as that of an insane woman. She rather produces a counter-discourse: "It was an accident" (213). Hence, Maya's suicide is nothing but an expansion of her discourse of resistance to the patriarchal power. She refuses to be identified as an insane woman only because she has violated the standard patriarchal norms.

In her second novel, Voices in the City (1965) also, Mrs. Desai offers a similar kind of confessional discourse, this time on the part of its heroine, Monisha. The novel is divided into four parts, and like the previous one, except Part-II, all other sections are in third-person narration. In Part-II, however, Monisha takes the subject position to produce her subjugated knowledge about the patriarchal oppression towards her. Through the construction of a confessional discourse in the form of a personal diary she assigns power to herself by representing herself as a resistant female subject. It is, in fact, in her personal diary that she is privileged to enjoy power and autonomy, which she has been denied in her in-laws' house.

Monisha is not a common woman, but a highly sensitive and stubborn one, knowledgeable about European literature, as well as the Gita. But female as she is, she is denied an identity of her own from the very beginning of her life. Out of malice towards her mother, her father gives her in marriage to Jiban, "a boring non-entity, a blind moralist, a minute-minded and limited official" (198), who is not a perfect match for her. Here her father treats her not as a human being, but as a site on which he inscribes his masculine powers. One may argue that Monisha's compliance with her father's decision contributes towards the perpetuation of male hegemony and thereby makes herself a complaint subject. But it would be a phallic judgement to label her as a complaint subject because though her father exercises a form of patriarchal power over her body, yet he cannot capture her 'soul'. She resists the oppressions in her own way, because her silence, as she herself thinks "has power upon others, if not on mine" (130).

After marriage, Monisha longs for love "that is not binding, that is free of rules, obligations completely" (135). But she finds that "there is no such love" (ibid) in a male-dominated world. What she is offered in the name of love is nothing but a male-domination over her feminine self. She is the daughter-in-

law of the house, but is not regarded as an integral part of it. Rather she is excluded as an intruder, who is even “dangerous and infidel” (119) to the family. Even her in-laws always indirectly try to make her understand that she is barren, and a barren woman has no honour and dignity in a patriarchal family/society. Mentally isolated, she craves for privacy, but that is not also given. Monisha describes vividly how all lay bare her inside:

My ovaries, my tubes, all my recesses moist with blood,  
washed in blood, laid open, laid bare to their scrutiny (113).

Realizing that “there is no escape from it” (146), she begins to behave like a frigid woman, and it is through her frigidity that she opposes the heterosexual marriage norms.

Monisha shows her disobedience to her mother-in-law by her act of going out with Nirode. Not only that, instead of complying with her husband’s request to “be little friendly” to his sisters (118), she labels them as mean: “They have indoor minds” (139). Thereafter she shows “a violence of action” (133) against submission of her subjectivity to Jiban by disallowing him to read Nirode’s manuscript:

I snatch it away in fury... I’ll save Nirode as much as of it as I  
can; as I save my own self from it (133).

Through this “violence of action” Monisha indeed resists the power that Jiban tries to exercise over her. She also differentiates herself from the passive Bengali Hindu women whose lives are spent in “waiting for nothing, waiting for men, self-centred and indifferent and hungry and demanding and critical, waiting for death and dying misunderstood, always behind bars, those terrifying black bars that shut us in, in the old houses, in the old city” (120).

However, they again try to subjugate Monisha by imposing on her the identity of a thief or by summoning her to massage her mother-in-law's legs. But she is now tied to her own feminine sensibility. This is what she confesses in her diary:

For two hours my exile is lifted from me and I am summoned to massage her legs. I go and massage them. It is not difficult at all. My heart stays perfectly quiet. I do not tell myself, she is Jiban's mother, her legs give her pain, I am helping to relieve it because she is Jiban's mother and old. I tell myself: she thinks I am touching her feet. But I am not. I do not touch her, nor does she touch me -- there is this darkness in between. They will never reach through it to me (139).

This confessional discourse, by its claim to truth, makes it clear how much intransigent she is inside her mind.

With this new subjectivity, Monisha faces two alternatives: "choice between death and mean existence" (122). Mean existence means the surrender of her autonomy, which she cannot do. She finally declares her 'Great No' to the patriarchal power by committing suicide, and this self-immolation is also, like that of Maya's in Cry, the Peacock, an act of female resistance.

The discourse of Monisha's self-immolation suddenly leads certain things to be changed. Jiban confesses his fault before all:

If this terrible thing is the fault of anyone -- it is mine. Forgive me (246).

Nirode's subjectivity also gets changed by the discursive pressure of Monisha's suicide. While Monisha was alive, he knew about all her humiliations but showed no concern. Now all his love wells up within him. His concern over Monisha's charred body bears testimony to the fact. Moreover, he appears to be filled with an immense care for the world. He embraces his sister Amala again and again "with the hunger and joy as if he rejoiced in this sensation of touching other's flesh, other's pain, longed to make mingle with his own, which till now had been astonishingly neglected" (248).

The discourse of Monisha's self-immolation also affects Amala's subjectivity to get changed. As Desai writes:

Monisha's death had painted the way for and would never allow her to lose herself. She knew she would go through life with her feet primely shod, involving herself with her drawings, safe people like Bose, precisely because Monisha had given her glimpse of what lay on the other side of this stark, uncompromising margin (248).

Instead of a marriage that identifies women with wives and mothers, Amala decides to "go in the opposite direction" (Ibid), namely the pursuit of a career of an independent commercial artist. In fact, this resurrection of subjugated knowledge on the part of Amala is symbolically significant because if Part--II of the novel records the feminist consciousness of victimization of woman in a Hindu patriarchal society, Part--III of it, having Amala's transformation from a mere Westernized girl to a complete woman, is a clear call on the part of the novelist to reconstruct womanhood in terms of new-found consciousness of autonomy. Only the Part --IV of the novel is an unnecessary intrusion. In fact, the novel could run well without Otima. But, even in her character, we find a

deconstruction of a Hindu widow-mother figure, who traditionally never appears as sensuous and detached from her children as her. Moreover, in her repeated self-identification with the Mount Kanchenjunga, she asserts her position as an independent mother-widow.

However, the mountain in the novel Fire on the Mountain (1977) is no how linked with Otima's conception of the mountain-symbol in Voices in the City. The title of this novel is perhaps derived from William Golding's famous novel, Lord of the Flies, of which the second chapter is entitled Fire on the Mountain. In the novel, it symbolises the fire that burns in the heart of an old lady, Nanda Kaul. Her emotional world is the theme of the novel. The title also refers to the words of Raka, the seven years' old great grand daughter of Nanda Kaul, who says at the end of the novel:

Look, Nani, I have set the forest on fire. Look, Nani, look – the forest on fire (145).

These words are expressive of Raka's resolve to destroy a world where women cannot hope to be happy without being unnatural. In describing the central theme of the novel, Mrs. Desai makes use of the flashback technique, and the novel centres round the character of Nanda Kaul.

Nanda Kaul is quite different from women like Maya or Monisha. Emotionally she is stronger than others with a more balanced personality, capable of sustaining others. Her life's part is like "a great heavy book" (30) that tells us of a woman suffering from stranglehold of family ties. The wives of the professors and others would think, "The Vice-chancellor is lucky to have a wife who can run everything as she does" (18). But it was beyond their understanding that the house she stalked through, was "his house, never hers" (Ibid). In spite of her discharge of all duties and responsibilities in 'his house',

she had to bear a life of total neglect and lovelessness because her husband had an extra-marital affair with another woman, Miss David. As S.Indira points out, Nanda's loveless conjugal life is suggested by the image of the 'badminton court'. In her view, the badminton court evokes tension, anger, disapproval and distaste in Nanda Kaul. As the court is the place where her husband played games with his mistress, it becomes the symbol of treachery, "the broken and discarded shuttlecock" suggesting her loveless plight (S.Indira: 1995: 103). But, she did never question it, because she thought it beneath her dignity. Her mute protest through her shifting of his bed from their shared room to a small dressing room was not really enough to correct his behaviour. But she could not break the bond because, like average Indian women, she was economically dependent to her husband. Like Maya or Monisha, she could not commit suicide, because she had more zest for life than theirs.

Nanda's relationship with her children was equally ungratifying. For her, motherhood was not a joy but a commitment. She was so fed-up with their demands and pressures in the past that now she groans:

Discharge me... I have discharged all my duties, discharge  
(30).

Hence, Nanda Kaul's coming at Carignano and living a solitary life there is a sort of refuge to her. Here she finds everything that she wanted in her life. Residing in this quiet house, she fancies that she could merge with pine trees and be mistaken for one:

To be a tree, no more and no less was all she prepared to  
undertake (4).

This desire for identification with Nature may rightly be construed as her protest against the oppressive patriarchal ideology where “there is no space beyond those of daughter, wife and mother that a woman of India can occupy” (McLeod: 1996: 95).

However, Nanda’s quest for perfect stillness is thwarted with the sudden arrival of a letter from her elder daughter, Asha, who still expects her to discharge some more duties:

Darling Mama, ... Now I’ve persuaded Tara into going to Geneva and Rakesh into taking her ... I had a long talk with him. He is not really so bad as Tara might make you believe. She simply doesn’t understand him, dose not understand men, and she really is the wrong type of wife for a man like him. So I can’t blame him entirely although it is true that he does drink- well, I have to get Tara ready ... but there is one problem ... the problem is, of course, Raka ... Tara thought I could take Raka with me. But that is quite out of question ... she is very weak ... So Tara and I have decided it will be best to send her to you for the summer... And I know how happy it will make you to have your great – grandchild for company in the lonely house (15-16).

The discourse in the form of this letter affects Nanda’s subjectivity because of two things: first, Asha’s attitude to Tara, and second, Raka’s arrival at Carignano. Asha’s attitude to Tara suggests that not only a man but also a woman can be the enemy of another woman. Anita Desai never forgets to notice this fact too. She traces a compliant woman in Asha who colludes with a woman’s oppressor and thereby contributes towards the perpetuation of male hegemony. Instead of a protest against her daughter’s victimization by her son-in-law, she takes sides with him and holds Tara responsible for the

failure of their marriage. Again, Anita Desai delineates the male characters like Ram Lal and the grain-seller who are sympathetic towards Raka and Illa Das respectively, but not the oppressors of women. Thus Desai subverts the simple man/woman binary opposition in this fiction. However, Nanda Kaul is in dilemma. She cannot be unsympathetic and indifferent to Tara's predicament. Again she cannot allow Raka to intrude into her private life that she has found only at about the end of her life. But, finally, out of sympathy towards Tara, she reluctantly accepts Raka.

Raka provides a complete anti-thesis to Nanda's discourse. She is unlike the other ordinary children. Unlike them, she does not feel attracted towards the cheerful and gay aspects of Nature, but towards its uncanny places and things :

If Nanda Kaul was a recluse out of vengeance for a long life of duty and obligation, her great-granddaughter was a recluse by nature, by instinct. She had not arrived at this condition by a long route of rejection and sacrifice – she was born to it, simply (48).

However, Usha Pathania argues that "Raka is not a born recluse. She becomes an introvert because of the abnormal circumstances around her. She is the victim of a broken home" (Pathania : 1991 : 208). Pathania is right in her argument because Raka is not a born-recluse, but has grown into a recluse out of her knowledge of the ambiguous life in diplomatic society and her experience of the patriarchal oppression in her parental home. Her observation of her mother's constant living in a fear-psychotic situation, her experience of her father's total negligence towards her for being a girl and her grandmother's collusion with her oppressor-father are also the factors that

have developed in her a sense of rejection of human company and their so-called safe, cozy and civilized patriarchal society.

Solitude, therefore, never disturbs her. She is happy in Kasauli with its charred house on the ridge, with its fire blasted hill-top where nothing sounds mercifully, but the creaking of the pines in the wind and the demented cuckoos. She remains absorbed in a world of her own and avoids human company and conversation and even Nanda Kaul. Strangely, her indifference to Nanda Kaul makes the latter powerless. As a result, it becomes a goad, a challenge to Nanda to exercise power over Raka by any means. She applies the age-old great-grandmother's technique of story-telling to the children. But the fantasy tales relating to her childhood and her father fail to catch the interest of Raka because she has known from her life's experience that life is not idyllic as the fairy tales. Hence, Raka rejects her grandmother's friendly overtures and affection, and prizes loneliness :

She would have to break out into freedom again. She could not bear to be confined to the old lady's fantasy world when the reality outside appealed so strongly ... And here she was hedged, smothered, stifled inside the old lady's words dreams and more words (100).

Raka even cannot relate herself to the song of the Parental love in the club. It oppresses her mind so vehemently that behind "all the caged, clawed, failed, headless male and female monsters" she figures her oppressor father :

Somewhere behind them, behind it all, was her father, home from a party, stumbling and crushing through the curtains of night, his mouth opening to let out flood of rotten stench, beating at her mother with hammers and fists of abuse -- harsh, filthy abuse (71).

When she requests Ram Lal not to throw stones at the young monkey, it becomes clear that she identifies her position with it and plays the role of a sympathiser of the oppressed. In fact, she is too young to be called a female, but her experience in life has really made her 'feminine'.

When Illa Das arrives at Carignano, some more facets of the patriarchal oppression come out. Her arrival really turns out to be more than an 'interruption' because she herself is a "call to the battle against a patriarchal system that has brutally oppressed all three women since birth" (McLeod: 1996: 94). Illa looks back to her past to see that she too lived a life of luxury and abundance in her paternal home where her father provided her French lessons and English governesses" (127), but ultimately leaving her "helpless, positively handicapped" (Ibid). It was, in fact, an education that did "nothing to prepare Illa for life outside the patriarchally accepted spheres of female life – as daughter, wife and then mother" (McLeod : 1996 : 100). She received cruel treatments from her brothers, which compelled her to work, first as a lecturer and then as a social worker. In both the jobs, she organises battle against patriarchal oppression. She resigned from the job of lectureship as she found a junior promoted to the post of Principal over her head. It was an open protest against the injustice meted out to her and the hegemony of another Vice-Chancellor. Then, as she takes the job of a social worker, she wages battle against child-marriage, illiteracy and superstitions which enchain women everywhere. She takes this task because she observes that " the women are willing ... to try and change their dreadful lives by an effort" (129). Hence, in contrast to the radical feminism of Desai's other women, Illa is a socialist-feminist. But her feminism is not approved by the male-hegemony and she has to pay for it with her life. She is brutally raped and murdered by one Preet Singh, whose attempt to marry her eleven years' old daughter to an old widower, a father of six children, was restricted by her.

The incident of Illa's rape and murder makes a tremendous pressure upon Nanda Kaul's protective self. The whole imaginative edifice which she had so far woven with the help of fantasy tales about her father, crumbles down. She comes upon reality and confesses :

Her father had never been to Tibet – he had bought the little Buddha from a travelling pedlar. They had not bears and leopards in their home, but overfed dogs and bad tempered parrots (145).

She suffers from guilt consciousness that she is also involved in her friend's rape and murder because she refused to respond to Illa's unspoken yet clearly understood plea for a shelter in Carignano. This sense of guilt makes such a tremendous pressure on her heart that she dies of heart attack.

But Raka reacts to Illa's rape and murder in a radical way. She moves on to an action like violence for violence. She sets the forest on fire and thus symbolically destroys the violent phallic power with hope of regenerating and affirming a women's world. In fact, in the character of Raka we notice a gradual transformation of self. At the very beginning, she is a mere observer of male-oppression. Next She turns first into a sympathiser of the oppressed, and then to a radical feminist in action.

Anita Desai's more recent novel Fasting, Feasting (2000), however, marks a definite progression in her feminine sensibility. Through the claustrophobic existence of Uma in a tradition-bound society, she throws ample light on the plight of women in postcolonial India and, at the same time, through the portrayal of such character like Mira-masi, she portrays their inner strength and deep desire to rise up and find out proper solutions in a world

that is made not for theirs. Moreover, in portraying the religious sensibility of Mira-masi, the novelist shows her strong inclination towards the Indian way of life in which religion and tradition have their own importance.

The novel is divided into two parts. Part-I deals with family intrigue through socio-cultural and spiritual experiences in India, and Part-II describes familial existentialism in a small town in America. The main fabric of the plot is deftly woven around female characters giving the novelist ample scope of comparing the tradition bound life-style of India and the materialistic scenario of the West.

In the present dissertation however, I shall confine myself only to the Part-I of the novel because the focal point of this thesis is to delineate an Indian experience. Hence, Part-II of the novel is unnecessary for my purpose. Its relevance, however, lies in the fact that the novelist, being a postcolonial one, tries to create a concept a global sisterhood here. Here she takes the role of a third-world feminist who criticises the Western notions of female emancipation.

In Part-I of the novel, we are introduced to an apparently close-knit family with Mama, Papa and their three children – Uma, Aruna and Arun. While the mother is a shy lady indulging in clandestine activities such as playing cards with the neighbours or chewing betel leaves in the absence of her husband, her prejudicial attitude to Uma is obnoxious and uncalled for. Uma, a girl child is forced to live a life of subjugation – first in her parents' home and later in her in-laws'. She was compelled to quit her academic pursuits after the birth of her brother, Arun. Mama thought it was essential for Uma to learn the art of baby-sitting and household affairs because that is the ultimate future of an Indian girl. Soon a conflict arose between Uma and her

parents and she began to feel suffocated in the confines of the family. Anita Desai writes:

The tightly knit fabric family that had seemed so stifling and confining now revealed holes and gaps that were frightening – perhaps the fabric would not hold, perhaps it would not protect after all (86).

Even in a joint family Uma was tightly gripped by the pangs of isolation.

The moment Uma comes of age, frantic efforts are made to get her married. Her isolation deepens as she is segregated from other girls of her own age and she misses all the fun that other school-girls have. A suitor does come to see her, but demands the hands of Aruna, the younger sister rather than that of Uma. Meanwhile, another proposal for marriage comes in, though after extracting a lot of money, the boy decides not to marry her. Following this she is married off to an already married man. However, there also she gets overpowered by a complete sense of dejection resulting in greater emotional setback within her. She comes back to her parents' home and tries to reassemble her shattered life. But broken, dejected, frustrated, isolated, alienated and lonely, she stands nowhere, neither falling in the category of unmarried girls nor in that of married women. The novelist writes:

That she had not had their experiences, that hers was other: that of an outcaste from the world of marriage, the world which all the murmuring, and whispering and muttering implied, was all that mattered.

Retreating to her room, she sank down on the floor, against the wall, put her arms around her knees and wondered what it would have been like to have the Lord

Shiva for a husband, have Him put His arms around her (96-97).

Having cost her parents two dowries and no marriage to show in return, Uma is branded as ill-fated by all. And affected by an acute sense of failure she herself also starts to bear the humiliation inflicted upon her silently and stoically. The situation worsens when Uma's mother is not even ready to allow her any sort of diversion like visiting neighbours or talking to friends or even working. Hence, she has nothing to do but lie down in bed hearing the barking of dogs in the darkness of the night:

That was what Uma felt her own life to have been -- full of barks, howls, messages, and now silence (61).

Uma surrenders to the life of silence and loneliness. Mama would be angry even if she read books to divert herself. Ultimately she learns to compromise with her claustrophobic existence. She patiently suppresses her emotions, surrenders her finer impulses and accepts bravely the humiliation and desolation etched on her destiny.

Aruna, the younger sister of Uma, also suffers from isolation, though for different reasons. She exemplifies unsuccessful cultural hybridization because she surrenders a traditional life-style for a Western one. She consciously surrenders the conventional role of an Indian wife, mother and daughter-in-law, in favour of the Western ways so that she is called a 'modern' woman. But, very soon she realizes her folly and begins to suffer from claustrophobic schizophrenia. She begins to lead a life of isolation neglecting her two children. She, the marginal woman, is emotionally torn because she had ostracized her parents and sister as uncouth and now there is no one she

could appeal to for succour in time of need (Myles, 2006). Consequently, she withdraws within her shell of isolation.

The attitude of compromise is seen in Uma's mother too. Uma's father is a demanding man, a typical archetypal patriarch in the sense that without his permission or approval nothing can happen in the household. Uma's mother, though shy in the beginning, came to know her husband's temperament and soon compromised by playing the role of a submissive and obedient wife. Nevertheless, she is unable to shed off her hypocrisy completely and in his absence she becomes dictatorial towards her children and servants. She visits her friends to play cards but returns home before it is time for her husband to come back. She thus, maintains a balance between tradition and modernity.

Anamika, Uma's cousin, also leads an isolated life after her marriage. She is beaten up by her mother-in-law and suffers a miscarriage, leaving her childless afterwards. Her loneliness and frustration intensify day by day because she has nothing to look forward. She never goes out of her house except to the temple with other women. Neither is she seen alone with her husband. Her agony is, however, short lived because she dies a violent death after twenty-five years of marriage.

However, the character of Mira-masi, though she is delineated on a religio-spiritual level, yet so far as worldliness is concerned, she presents a picture of contentment by her compromise with life. As a widow she made this self-discovery that she had always to play a subsidiary role amongst her relatives. Hence, she remains satisfied with a minimum interaction and by small requirements in life. Eversince she has become a widow, her religion becomes a source of solace to her. She travels all over the country from one place of pilgrimage to another, thus creating a space uninterrupted by male

hegemony. Uma as a child was fascinated by Mira-masi, would snuggle beside her and listened attentively to the ancient myths of Hinduism being narrated in a realistic and lively manner.

Through the portrayal of Mira-Masi's character, Anita Desai brings out the practicality of the confluence of the social, the religious and the spiritual. Mira-masi is involved in religious pursuits no doubt, but when she travels from place to place and meets her relatives, she participates whole-heartedly in their lives, indulges in animated conversations, gives advices and even provides companionship and comfort to girls like Uma. Thus she emerges as a perfect link between the spiritual and the social sides of human existence.

In Part-II of the novel, the scene however shifts to America, portraying two women characters – Mrs. Patton and her daughter Melanie. While Mrs. Patton is obsessed with food and keeps busy in either shopping or cooking, Melanie suffers from Bulimia and shuns company. Melanie is a victim of loneliness and isolation. Both Mrs. Patton and Melanie find the Western environment stifling. In both their cases, excessive freedom lead to a suffocating environment and loneliness.

Uma and Melanie present two women of different cultures, each reacting to the claustrophobic unwanted social norms in their own ways. However, both lack sufficient will-power and hence fail to emerge successfully in their efforts to rebel against the existing social norms. Thus both of them are forced to lead isolated lives.

Now, after considering these novels of Anita Desai, it may well be concluded that her canvas is wide enough representing almost all types of the fair sex. She writes of pure housewives, working women, concubines on the one hand and mothers, sisters, wives, daughters, daughters-in-law, sisters-in-

law and aunts on the other. Some of her women are even depicted playing several roles at the same time. Though the status and the hierarchy of these women differ from role to role and from novel to novel, yet there is a common factor existent in all of them: all suffer from a sense of alienation whether within the family or outside it. In fact, after independence Indian women have become conscious of their suppressed position, and yet they have not made much effort to pull themselves out of this subjugation. Hence, the resultant isolation suffered by women are not of a superficial nature. It is deeply psychological. Anita Desai's depiction of the isolated women in her novels is to make the women aware of their actual position in the modern social set up. The message in her writings is quite clear that women can extricate themselves from the trauma of mental psychosis by realizing that they have the power of sustaining themselves and others. This realization gives them a lot of inner strength. In her novels, Anita Desai describes the women not only as symbols of growth and progress but also of withdrawal, regression, decay, death and destruction. Women like Maya, Monisha and Nanda Kaul represent withdrawal, even death out of frustration as in the case of Maya and Monisha; whereas women like Amala, Uma and Mira-masi represent a steady compromise with life. Their compromise does not signify a defeat. It is rather a kind of victory since they resolve to live life in their own way.

Desai appears to make it clear that there is no simple, straightforward solution to the dilemma of a woman. It is the awakening of her consciousness, which imparts the required strength to conquer the bastion of male domination. Hence, each novel of Anita Desai is a progression in unravelling her views on feminism. All her female characters are depicted to be under some kind of neurosis. Some of them give up midway, while some strive towards self-fulfilment. They unite in dethroning the myths of femininity, motherhood and marriage. They also successfully illustrate the true meaning of emancipation and also that it is a slow evolutionary process requiring much effort. Her

women characters are not passive creatures. Some of them have definitely proved to be rebels against the whole system of social relationships, while others appear to have accepted their traditional roles under duress.