CHAPTER - I

GENESIS

The Beginning

Quest for identity has been an integral part of man’s existence since time immemorial. It is this constant quest that made man foray into different fields. Gabriel Garcia Marquez, the author of Love in the Time of Cholera rightly states that, he allowed himself to be swayed by the conviction that human beings are not born all at one-go in a day when their mother gives birth to them; but that life obliges them over and over again to give birth to themselves. (Marquez)

Looking back from the threshold of 21st century one realises that it is the ambition to establish identity of an individual as well as that of a nation that has lead to a number of great inventions as well as wars. The very purpose of Darwin’s theory of life or existence is nothing but an attempt to find one’s roots or identity. The conqueror, the conquered, the colonist and the colonized and all the subsequent wars are the mark of establishing identity. The toppling of the superior’s authority by the subjugated or inferior is an attempt to reclaim their lost identity.

While the quest for identity has been there since the existence of man, women, the other half of the human race, have been ignored across the world. Their role has been defined and crafted by the patriarchal society. It is generally believed that it was only in ancient India that women were given importance and a worthy status in the society. They were considered equal in rank and cadre in all government and non government organizations. Though these tall claims are made with reference to the Aryan civilization there has been no concrete proof of the same. Yet women
played vital role in the Indian literature starting from the times of Vedas and Epics. It is literature that reflects the prevalent conflicts and debates of the time.

The beginning of Indian writing in English was the expression of the period of evolution from medieval to modern, from blind faith to rational thinking, from ardent acceptance to scientific questioning. In short, it is the great journey from a world slumbering under collective faith to a world awakened by studious inquiry. It was also an era of political awareness, social reform and religious retaliation. Referring to the increasing effort that was prevalent in the late 19th century and the early 20th century, Srinivas Iyengar in his book *Indian Writing in English* says:

> Indian Writing in English constitutes a pluralistic world wherein the colonial past, the Indian heritage, the indigenous forms, the inherited and internalized cultural values, the oral tradition, the Diaspora presence abroad, the parallels within and the differences from regional language literatures – all these jostle with each other (Iyengar 56).

Indeed, Indian writing in English has passed through many phases and conflicted with much oppression to attain the status of ‘a significant segment of world literature’. One of these significant phases is the contribution of the Indian Women writers in the second half of the twentieth century.

Women write to celebrate their womanhood; they sing women’s dreams and speak their bodies. Women’s writing is like a revelation. Their writing transforms their very existence in the socio-cultural milieu as it expedites their shift from marginal positions to centre stage. Literature is shaped by reality, but its corollary that reality itself is molded by reality. The Indian literary scene like in the majority of other literatures both oriental and Western was dominated by men as active forces,
always had a gap – it told the story of half of humanity through the voice of the other half. In a country where even the political power in the hands of rural and urban uneducated women is wielded by men, it becomes very important to explore the changes brought about in the literary scene by women writers. The shift from women as seen and projected by men, to women as lived and experienced by women themselves is not only an essential change, but also an imminent revolution.

This study aims at focusing on a quest for identity of women who are ironically called the better half of the human race but had invariably been ignored across all cultures in the world. Their role has been predefined and tailored from time to time by predominantly patriarchal societies. It is generally believed that it was only in ancient Greek and Indian societies that women were given a pride of place as proved by the first woman chancellor of a university in Greece – Sappho and the scholar-dancer-courtesan-sage Amrapali of the Mouryan Empire. Looking back from history they were considered equal in rank and cadre in different cultures as proved by the grace, valor and versatility of Sultana Razia, Chand Bibi and Jhansi Rani.

Though great claims are made about the Aryan civilization no historical proofs are left by the rampant Persian Lords or Western invaders and tradesmen. Yet women played an important role in Indian literature starting from the times of the Vedas and the epics. It is literature which reflects and preserves the prevalent conflicts and debates of the time.

The present thesis attempts to explore the various factors that influence the lives of Indian women in their ambience of culture and traditions, the beliefs and the fabric of the subcontinent. Though the theme of quest for identity is widely discussed by earlier writers, its relevance and dimensions are ever changing with different times and climes.
The present work examines the evolution of the protagonists in the select novels of Anita Desai and Shashi Deshpande. The two writers are selected as they represent a transition from earlier notions of the status of women in traditional agrarian Indian society to the post–modern view of a woman freed from the many aspects of her social shackles but one who is too much under the influence of a conformist British role model. But Anita Desai and Shashi Deshpande portray Indian women as they free themselves of the contemporary social restrictions of the traditional Indian womanhood, but do not fall in the snare of an alluring foreign culture. They do not own up the fashionable western model as a destination. On the other hand, they probe the situation further, and through their stout–hearted struggle arrive at what may be a plausible, acceptable and respectable solution to their quest. It is this angle of vision that unveils a wider range and profound meaning in the work of these two talented but temperamentally different artists. However, the nature of the theme ‘quest’ is of an apparently convincing but equally evasive nature and always subject to change as per the changes in the perception levels and maturity of the reader. In this context the works of Anita Desai and Shashi Deshpande acquire cardinal importance as they present an altogether refreshingly different view of the identity of Indian women. The study does not confine itself to interpretation of text but attempts to study the influence of the contemporary literary movements and the sociological conditions that influence the works of Anita Desai and Shashi Deshpande.

The prospective exploration of the circumstances and conditions that restrict, disintegrate, expand and emancipate the protagonist’s minds and bring a quantum change in their world view. However as already mentioned – the ‘quest’ is a continuous process that initiates new awareness, new decisions and new actions. An
inquiry has to be made to capture as many nuances of the theme as one can, rather than be satisfied with the factual findings of an investigation. In the process it is possible to trace the influences of a staid conformist view of the British literature and the more open and aesthetically superior influence of American and European literary worlds.

The aim of this research project is to trace the long journey of quest for identity in Indian literature and establish women’s identity in Indian writing in English with particular attention to women literature as distinct from main stream literature. The study also attempts to present the struggle for identity of the protagonist of select works of the two women novelists and how the quest for identity emerges through the sociological and psychological angst into which these characters are pushed by circumstances.

It has been a long journey of exploration and struggles to establish the platform which is all theirs. Attempts were made by many writers to define and establish the Indian position in the wider world of English literature but not many of them made a lasting impact. The forays made by the early Indian writers in English were considered to be, “a curiosity, an uncouth if exotic thing, often misty in the name of mysticism” according to Matthew Arnold (qtd. in. Iyengar 18). At the outset Indian writing in English was spearheaded by three writers of rare distinction – Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand and R. K. Narayan. All the three of them had rare talent and the generic differences between them are quite considerable. Raja Rao wrote about the new generation India taking part in the freedom movement. Mulk Raj Anand paints realistic pictures about the working classes and the caste system. Narayan concentrates on the lower middle class average Indian better described as the common man. Raja Rao, a child of Gandhian age has an enchanting prose style and reveals,
through his work, his sensitive awareness of the Gandhian revolution and the constant pull of a strong overpowering tradition. His themes revolve around the pre-independence days, the freedom struggle and its impact on the people of all classes. His style attempts to adopt in English the vernacular idiom, rhythm and tone. Mulk Raj Anand’s themes revolve around the plight of the downtrodden and the underprivileged who were largely ignored by the majority of Indian writers in English. He does not romanticize the poverty: in fact he brings out the grotesque. At the centre of his novels are the cruelty and exploitation that dominated India in those days. Anand seeks in the sufferings of the people a voice of India which is an unheard but stark reality that needs urgent attention and solution.

Credit goes to the stalwart trio, Raja Rao, R K Narayan and Mulk Raj Anand in engraving a niche for Indian English writing particularly in the genre of fiction. While the pre-independent writers were preoccupied with themes related to nationalism and patriotism, the post independent writers focussed on the challenges of handling new born freedom and the then existing social issues.

Raja Rao, the child of the Gandhian age has an enchanting prose style and reveals, through his work, his sensitive awareness of the force of the Gandhian revolution and the constant pull of a strong overpowering tradition. His themes revolve round the pre-independence days, with emphasis on the freedom struggle and its impact on people across the various strata of society. In the foreword to his book *Kanthapura*, Raja Rao says:

one has to convey in a language that is not one’s own, the spirit that is one’s own. One has to convey the various shades and omissions of a certain thought movement…the tempo of Indian life must be infused in our English expression, even as
the tempo of American or Irish life has gone into the making of theirs (Raja Rao 18).

His style was an attempt to adapt in English the idiom, the rhythm, the tone, the total distinctness of the vernacular speech. Raja Rao does this very successfully by bringing in characters from different strata of the South Indian society. Whether it is Javani, the low caste woman or Akkayya, the upper caste widow, both silent and selfless, yet, heroic in their own strength or Narasinga, the shepherd, or our Murthy, the one man who keeps everyone together in Kanthapura. There is also the plight of the dalits who work on the plantations. Raja Rao succeeds in bringing together the Indian philosophy and the Indian idiom and tradition.

It is in continuation of this backdrop that the world of Munov in *Coolie* and Bakha in the *Untouchable* was portrayed by Anand. Mulk Raj Anand like his contemporary, Raja Rao, tried introducing the Punjabi tradition. His themes revolved around the plight of the down trodden and underprivileged who were largely ignored by a majority of the then Indian writers. It was Anand who portrayed the more realistic or naturalistic picture of India. His characters were the under dogs of the Indian society rather than the elite or the sophisticated. He does not romanticize poverty; in fact, he brings out the grotesque. He sets his novels at the center of cruelty and exploitation that held the then India in its vicious grip. Anand’s novels are seen as the extension of his search for the identity which makes him explore the world of the down trodden and the underprivileged.

The third of the great pioneering Indian writers is R. K. Narayan who represents, like Dickens, a bludgeoning middle class that holds the best and the worst of India – its best aspiration and dreams, and also its little failures and abysmally shameful slips. Together the three writers give us chunks of the Indian class system, a
potpourri of deviant cultures trying to accommodate into a common civilization – modern India.

R. K. Narayan is the first Indian writer whose works were published in ‘The New Yorker’. In his search and presentation of true Indian identity, R.K. Narayan, in his exploration of the innocence in Swami & Friends manifests the nuances of humanity in the well woven poetic style of The Bachelor of Arts and gives in to experience that emerges in the rattle of civilization as seen in his later novels like The Financial Expert, The Guide, etc. Iyengar further says:

R.K. Narayan’s gift as a writer is out of the ordinary. He wields so difficult and ‘alien’ a language like English with masterful ease and conveys the subtlest shades of feelings and thought. He is considered, the master of comedy, who is very much aware of the tragedy of the human situation (116).

Iyengar’s beautiful parallelism sums up the unique quality of Narayan’s contribution to Indo-Anglian literature.

In R.K Narayan’s novels there is a fight on uprooting or disturbing the existing order and this is followed by the return or restoration of normalcy. The essence of R.K. Narayan’s fiction is the miracle of rejuvenation of life, love, beauty and peace. His protagonists emerge to this peaceful normalcy after going through the bitter and relentless strife between tradition and modernity.

One has to remember that the tussle between tradition and modernity is the result of the colonial British rule and the English education introduced by them in India. The aftermath of the colonial rule continues even today. Defining tradition, the well-known philosopher of 20th century, Jiddu Krishna Murthy says:
carrying the past over to the present. The past is not only one’s particular set of inheritances but also the weight of all collective thought of a particular group of people… One carries the accumulated knowledge and experiences of the race and family. All this is the past – the carrying over from the known to the unknown present – which shapes the future (JK 48).

One should also include into this literary history – a decade of hope, great youthful vigor and a romantic ideal of a free country. With an effervescence of brilliant thoughts and an aura of nostalgic longings all these found great expression in the movies of a few highly talented and focused individuals like Bimal Roy, Guru Dutt, Raj Kapoor and V. Santharam who found and created rare paradigms for common man’s dreams. This decade saw some outstanding women characters represented on the silver screen.

The sixties marked the emergence of two significant issues in post-independent India. The first being the surfacing of the great chasm between the haves and the have-nots, the privileged and the under-privileged, the poor and the rich, the educated and uneducated. A second phenomenon also surfaced that the best education, the best facilities are not available to everyone. The society was segmented and as per the money you can afford – your received services, products etc.

Among the noteworthy writers of post independent India are Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, Amitav Ghosh, Shashi Tharoor, Shashi Deshpande, Manju Kapur, Aravind Adiga and Chetan Baghat. These writers portrayed the struggles that individuals faced due to the social evils and norms that were and still are prevalent in independent India. Rushdie and Ghosh explored the impact of freedom. Ghosh’s The
Hungry Tiger showcases the struggle of the tribal people who are not liberated from the oppressions of the locals. Further these writers portray accepted images of the realities of the corporate and social world – the increasing role that money and riches played in everyday life, how it influenced the one to one relationship between human beings. A relationship like marriage becomes an object of psychological exploitation and extra marital relationship, or filial bonds receive a rude awakening as shown in Budhadeva Bhattacharya’s Rain through the Night. Equally impressive is the sad story of a foetus trader (played by Amol Palekar) and his sensitive wife (played by Aparna Sen) in Biplob Roy Chowdhray’s Spandan. These mark the emergence of a new India where values are subject to the cultural and economic shock and we are exposed to the crudest form of suffering. It is the heroine of Spandan, whose life and values are subjected to a threat and the conditions are the most miserable – and the relationships have deteriorated. Her heart-rending speech of advice to her husband is one of the emotional high-watermarks of Indian cinema, for once rid of all traces of melodrama or didacticism. The novel, though, has not reached such heights as the new wave cinema. Women novelists like Kamala Markandeya, Attia Hossain, Shakuntala Nagesh, Nayantara Saghal and Vimala Raina are preoccupied with the problem of adjustment they have been trying to explore the feelings of the agitated Indian woman whose ego is hurt. Rushdie and Ghosh explore the feelings of the women who fall victim to masculine perfidy. Rushdie and Ghosh explored the impact of freedom on women’s affairs. Ghosh’s The Hungry Tigers showcases the struggle of the tribals who are not liberated from the oppressions and atrocities of the landed gentry.
It is generally accepted that tradition means age old, conventional values and beliefs or practices, which in turn influence the lifestyle of man and woman. The struggle for identity in the modern post independent India remains a challenge that influenced the minds of writers and artists alike. The search for identity was interdependent on the conflict between tradition and modernity in India.

Many traditional values and attitudes have undergone a change because of the influence of western materialism, individualism, consumerism and the relatively changeable concept of progress. These concepts have caused a palpable change in the perception of the people modifying their attitudes to various social, economic and cultural issues. But the plight of Indian woman remained the same. The change in the attitude towards woman seems to be transformed, at least superficially. In the traditional society woman is confined to the four walls of the household and hardly has any say in the family matters. However, freedom, education, industrialization and urbanization have influenced the role and position given to women in post independent India. It is a well known fact that women are natural story tellers. Women writers are not far behind their western counterparts, in carving a niche for their story telling abilities. They are renowned for their originality, versatility, and the flavor of indigenous Indian milieu which is evident in their work. The focus of most of the women writers in India has been on the predicament of woman in the emerging socio–economic condition of the male dominated society. Each and every one of the woman writers explores and or struggles for identity. This is the underlying theme in the tales of all Indian woman writers. In one of her articles, Chris Weedon says, “Indian feminism is clearly a response to the issues specifically confronting many Indian women” (Weedon 13).
In this context one has to remember that though there is a lot of struggle, defiance in the works of Indian woman writers, their writings cannot be equated or grouped or categorised as feminist writings. Simon de Beauvoir in her book, *Second Sex*, says: ‘women today are in a fair way to dethrone the myth of femininity: they are beginning to affirm their independence in concrete ways but they do not succeed in living completely the life of a human being’ (de Beauvoir 29).

The woman’s voice or cause is raised after a break of many centuries by traditionalists. It is common knowledge that ancient India or Aryavartha, which was unadulterated by various western and northern invasions, gave equal importance to all human beings. Every individual was assigned a role based on his or her abilities and not on the basis of gender or birth. In the post invasion and post colonial scenario when Indian society was in the throes of establishing self identity, it is but natural that the cause of women and their role or identity, that had been doubly exploited, is brought to the forefront.

In the six decades of post-independent, Indian English fiction, many writers emerged with a wide variety of themes like social, economic, political, religious and spiritual issues that dominate the human experience. It is only after the turn of the century that women writers excelled both quantitatively and qualitatively. The intrepid attempt of these writers to experiment with technique and introduce taboo subjects in their literary works was internationally acclaimed. Authors like, Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Nayantara Sahgal, Shashi Deshpande, Ruth. P. Jhabvala, Shobha De, Arundhati Roy, Bharathi Mukherjee, Jhumpa Lahiri, Chitra Banerji, Rama Mehta, Geeta Mehta and Manju Kapur heralded a new consciousness, especially in relation to the predicament of Indian women.
Feminism in the western sense was and is unacceptable to many Indian English women writers. Feminism relates the independence of mind, spirit and body. Though feminism as a concept and movement originated in the west, the Indian counterparts adapted it to suit their circumstances. In fact the seedlings of feminism were implanted during the freedom struggle. Indian feminism is a far cry from that of the west. In India feminism is not truly theoretical. In fact it has changed as per the existing cultural and traditional, norms of the times. Bhasin and others in *Kali for women* says: “awareness of women’s oppression and exploitation in society, at work and within family, and conscious action by women and men to change this situation’ (Bhasin 64).

Therefore feminism in Indian fiction is an attempt made by the writers to assert the existence and also the specific identity of women in modern India. Many a woman writer tried to represent the trauma of the middleclass Indian women and their constant struggle for personal autonomy.

Women novelists like Kamala Markandeya, Attia Hussein, Shakuntala Nagesh, Nayantara Saghal and Vimala Riana have concentrated on a narrow genre of how women found it difficult to adjust to the changing world. Their focus is on the conflict that women undergo in reconciling the traditional stronghold of old world ideas and the fresh attempts at new- hassled ideas of liberty and self-esteem. Kamala Das’s attempts have failed and she is often regarded as the avant garde writer with great verve but no consistency. Writers like Jhumpa Lahiri, Meenakshi Mukherjee, and Geeta Hariharan with greater vigor and direction highlight the struggle of women to break free from the shackles imposed by society as well as spearheading a new line of thought that merely does not ape the West, but inspires the vision of the women of India. Though this image is not as sharp, poignant, well-defined and realistic as in the
movies like Ray’s Pather Panchali, Guru Dutt’s Sahib Biwi aur Gulam and Bimal Roy’s Bandini & Sujatha or as sensitive and authoritative - concurs substantially to the overall picture of the woman of India projecting a common, accepted image.

The fulfillment of the self, a desirable goal to the individualistic ideals of modern society is something alien to the native Indian tradition that gives importance to comprehensive consideration of the society or family. Writers like Shantha Rama Rau and Attila Hossain dealt with this theme of struggle for identity. In Shantha Rama Rau’s, Remember the House, the Indian woman Baba Goray, falls in love with Alex, an American, defying the barriers of caste, creed, religion and nation. But, in the end she marries Hari, an Indian, in deference to the wishes of her parents and family. The rebellion and struggle of the heroine fails to establish her independent thought. This is mainly because her feelings are well-ignited by instinct, but lacked the light of wisdom and experience.

In a way the same thread of thought is taken up by the women novelists in Indian English. It is in post-independent India that women were able to present in a more lucid manner the problem of identity and self realization of the Indian women. The present women perceive their life to be a battle ground struggling with the prescriptive roles based on the glorified models of a past era and the emerging cognitive map of modern society that pulls them asunder towards wider horizons. Thus continues the interpretation of struggle for identity by women in the works of women writers in Indian English.

Meena Belliappa, in her paper, ‘Anita Desai: A Study of her Fiction’, discovers a new direction that Indian fiction takes in the hands of the third generation urban writers like Anita Desai. Her novels deliberately move from debased tradition of friction or romance to a more meaningful struggle with reality. (Belliappa1).
The modern Indian woman is throttled and trapped in the tradition and customs that oppress her sociologically and lead to a psychological crisis. The alienation of the women from their reality which leads to further misinterpretation and a deep sense of uncertainty and emerges finally with a reality that is acceptable to them. This final realization of self identity varies from writer to writer. With the access to education, information and science there is a gradual but inevitable erosion of traditional customs and values and a determined quest for self-realisation and the existential reality. This conflict of tradition and modernity is a theme explored extensively by Kamala Markandeya. What distinguishes her from the other Indian women novelists is her acute awareness of the gradual shift in values that has been taking place in the Indian subcontinent during the past few decades.

Indian Women novelists in English succeeded in presenting the predicament of women. These writers challenged the role assigned to women in the Indian society and questioned the limitations of the private and public space given to them.

Kamala Markandeya belongs to the a Brahmin family. She deals with a wide variety of themes which have universality of appeal and an inherent purpose. In Nectar and Sieve (1954), her first novel, Rukmini, the narrator who is also the protagonist, is a mother beset with problems and sorrows. She receives shock after shock in her husband Nathan’s infidelity, her daughter’s sacrifice to save the family, and the death of the child Kuti. In Some Inner Fury (1957), Roshan and Meera symbolize the liberated women of modern India, who know their preferences. Strong-willed, self-confident and self-reliant, Roshan always tries to assert her individual identity, and for this she considers no cost is too dear. She sacrifices her parents, husband and luxuries of a comfortable aristocratic life. Thus here is a protagonist from the subcontinent acting on the intellectual plain for the first time.
In Attila Hossain’s *Sunlight on a Broken Column*, the heroine, Laila, is rebellious and tries to seek and establish her independent views, defying the traditions of her family, which proves to be tragic later in her life. Laila marries Ameer, against the wishes of her family, and he dies in a war. She is forced to return to the family that deserted her. In this novel the conflict or struggle is presented between parents and daughter. We can also interpret the clash between the two generations, that which is a tussle between tradition and liberty. Though, Laila’s attempt to break free from the shackles of the so Indian tradition seems to be fulfilled by her return to the family on Ameer’s death, with the realization of the importance of family, a stand which questions the very principle of struggle. Credit should be given to these Indian writers for taking a bold and intelligent stance and then striking a balance which is the most relevant thing that the situation demanded. In this way both Kamala Markandaya and Attila Hossain attempt to uphold the traditional role given to women.

Nayantara Sahgal, born into the most prominent of the political families of India, is one of the significant women writers of the 1950s. All her literary works have a political backdrop, and portray pre-independent and post-independent India more realistically. In the preface to *Prison and Chocolate Cake*, Nayantara Sahgal writes, “we grew up at a time when India was the stage for a great political drama and we shall always remain a little dazzled by the performances we have seen… .Our growing up was India’s growing up into political maturity — a different kind of political maturity from any the world had seen before, based on an ideology inspired by self-sacrifice, compassion and peace” (Sahgal 156).

Sahgal’s works present the personal world of where the main focus is the man-woman relationship that is restricted to the private space, in contrast with her role in the public space of politics that is an impersonal one. All the novels of this
Sahitaya Academy winner focus on the feminist concerns. Women in her novels are victims of the orthodox Indian society and struggle for their existence and identity. She exposes and analyses emotional trauma of women with great discernment. The tussle between freedom and independence, stability and protection of the institute of marriage and traditions and upholding the norms of the society are presented with sympathetic perception. In fact, in her last novel, *Mistaken Identity* Sahgal takes this quest to a more serious level, with the female characters rising in rebellion against the society.

During the second half of the 20th century, a few expatriate Indian women writers carved a niche for themselves. The more popular of them Jhumpa Lahiri and Bharat Mukherjee unfurl the struggle of the immigrants, especially that of the women. Jhumpa Lahiri, who was the second generation immigrants in America, is popular worldwide for her Indian themes. She authored the popular and well acclaimed works like, *The Interpreter of Maladies*, a collection of short stories and a novel, *The Namesake*. This novel portrays the issue of identity especially that of the Indian middle class mindset which is seen in the Gangulis over-precautious nature about everything, this reflects the constant fear of disaster which is the typical preoccupation of Indians or the tradition of naming of a child, which is considered to be most auspicious and extremely important to every Indian. Lahiri presents the problems of all the second generation Indian immigrants. They do not give importance to seeing people off or believe in being at home with family for festivals. The myriad rituals and traditions are baulked by them. This leads to the tussle between these two generations which results in the rooting, uprooting and rerooting of the lives of individuals. The novel aptly represents the bicultural life of the immigrants that leaves them in an eternal dilemma. Their inability to adapt to the
alien culture and the reluctance felt due to the intermingling of the eastern and the western ethics. The constant challenge of attempts to retain the traditions of the native land while adapting to new culture remains a matter of contention.

Jhumpa Lahiri’s feminist approach is different from that of the other Diaspora writers. Her women are not subjected to economic exploitation. Their preoccupation is more with the cultural dilemma. According to Lahiri, the psychological trauma of a woman is because of the patriarchal notion of marriage that throttles their independence. Their emotions and opinions are overlooked. Jhumpa Lahiri says:

When I first started writing, I was not conscious that my subject was the Indian-American experience. What drew me to my craft was the desire to force the two worlds I occupied to mingle on the page as I was not brave enough, or mature enough, to allow in life (qtd. in. Gilbert H Muller’s *The New World Reader* 113).

Her women are concerned about their roles in the new place and space, where the cultural diversity provokes the reconfiguration of identity. Here the various facets of feminine identity are also presented. The first generation women remain the preservers of indigenous culture.

Like Jhumpa Lahiri, Bharati Mukherjee, the expatriate Indian woman writer from Canada, also focuses on the complexities, caused due of the changed place and time, encountered by the immigrants. The prime concern of Bharati Mukherjee, the postmodern writer, has been the experiences of South-Asian diasporas and the perennial problem of acculturation and assimilation. Her characters are autobiographical representation of her own experiences in Canada. She best describes these as cultural and psycho-logical mongrelisation, Mukherjee’s literary works, both
fiction and non-fiction, reflect the two different experiences, that is, the one of being expatriate and the other as an immigrant. Thus these two writers contribution stands apart.

While the expatriate Indian women represented their constant struggle for identity in an unknown land, the more recent writers like Arundhati Roy wrote about the odds that still exist in the Indian culture. She believes that, a feminist is a woman who negotiates herself into a position where she has choices. Roy does not admit to being a feminist, yet her novel *The God of Small Things*, exhibits her feminine sensibility. In her prize winning debut novel *The God of Small things*, Arundhati Roy emphasised on the maladies of the 21st century India. Her novel focuses on the caste system and the problem of untouchability that still exist in nooks and corners of India. The superiority of the patriarch is promoted and supported by the matriarchs of the society and this leads to the persistent fear of loss of identity or individuality. Many literary critics feel that the theme of her novel is based on market strategy rather than reality. Yet the fact remains that Arundhati Roy’s work makes its mark in the literary world.

Manju Kapur, the noted novelist and winner of the Common Wealth Award for the Eurasian region, stresses on issues related to male dominance, inter-religious marriage, familial relationships, man- woman relationships, co-existence of past and present. All her protagonists are depicted as victims of gender, domestic violence. Kapur strongly believes that, there is a man within every woman and a woman in every man. When, manhood is questioned womanhood is fragmented. Manju Kapur’s other novel, *A married woman* is a scintillating love story set in a period of political and religious chaos. It is the challenge thrown to the moral of the middle class by the
artist. It is through her protagonist, Astha, that Manju Kapur presents her view on women says:

a woman should be aware of self-controlled, strong willed, self-reliant and rational, having faith in the inner strength of womanhood. A meaningful change can be brought only from within by being free in the deeper psychic sense. (Kapur 90).

While discussing Indian women writers in English, one cannot ignore Shobha De. Her novels promote the new Indian woman. According to Shobha De, a new woman is one who is in search of self-identity. Such a woman seeks liberation breaking away from the orthodox image of Indian woman.

In her novels women are portrayed as those indulging in free sex, leading fashionable and wealthy lives, Shobha De does not champion such attitude in the name of modernity. In fact De’s contempt and total disregard for such unethical behaviour can be inferred from the fate of the protagonists. Through her novels De establishes the need for women to search for their self autonomy. At the same time De exposes the misconception about freedom and the need for them to realize the difference between freedom and license. She abhors women who rush to compete with men. The best way to assert ones’ self is by focusing on women empowerment rather than becoming a man. This she warns is the greatest folly that women can do. She presents the realistic picture of the result of mindless freedom. In fact Shobha De does not hesitate to voice the truth that whenever a person, man or woman, disregards morality, they face disaster and destruction.

To mention a few more of the new generation women writers in English, there is Kiran Desai, the Pulitzer winner, Ashapurna Devi, Ismat Chughtai, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Preeti Shennoy. It is imminent that the efforts being made by these young
writers in continuing this perennial quest for identity in their literary works. Even in modern India woman is always considered to be the only being with low intellect and highly emotional, and should remain inside the house; providing food and sustenance, along with maintaining clean and healthy ambience in and around the family. The general belief is that our society is full of paradoxes and contradictions. Here a female is considered to be a peripheral member of the family, both in the parent’s house as well as in the husband’s. Throughout her life she is unable to decide her roots and this leads to her insecurity.

The present thesis, Quest for Identity by Women in the Select Novels of Shashi Deshpande and Anita Desai: A Study, attempts to explore the various factors that influence the lives of Indian women with reference to the milieu, culture, traditions, beliefs, the very fabric of what India is. Though the theme of quest for identity has been often discussed, its relevance and dimensions keep changing with times. The novels identified for this purpose are Shashi Deshpande’s Roots and Shadows, That Long Silence, and The Dark Holds No Terror and Anita Desai’s s Cry, the Peacock, Fire on the Mountain, and Clear Light of Day.

While there are some similarities between the two stalwarts there are many more factors that can be compared and contrasted. To explore this at length the present study has been categorized into six chapters. Chapter one is titled Genesis, an introduction. This chapter focuses on the milieu of Indian writing in English with special emphasis on women writers in India. Chapter Two which is titled Sociological Oppression examines the various social and cultural factors that cause oppression. Chapter Three is Psychological Influences and Chapter Four titled The Quest and Reality explores at length the conundrum of identity, especially in the context of Indian women. Chapter Five titled The Legacy elucidates the contributions of these
two novelists Shashi Deshpande and Anita Desai to Indian Literature and finally
Chapter Six is the conclusion.

Shashi Deshpande, the Sahitya Akademi Award winner for *That Long Silence*
is known for her social realism writes about women and their quest for identity.
Shashi Deshpande has eight novels, six short-story collections, four children’s books,
many essays and articles to her credit. All the women in her novels, especially her
leading ladies, are educated, middle class women who belong to the upper caste.
Deshpande’s stories revolve around their silent rebellion against the impositions on
women in the name of tradition and their journey in search of freedom and
independence. Contradictory to popular belief these women end up being victims of
married life. They are in continuous search for their ‘Self / Identity’. Though they
fulfill their duties as daughter, wife and mother they engage in recognizing their real
self through their life experiences and choices, as is mentioned by Deshpande in her
*Small Remedies*.

*Roots and Shadows* is the story of Indu, a middle class young girl, raised in an
orthodox Brahmin family by Akka. The novel is a journey of Indu’s understanding or
discovery of her roots of herself as an individual; her shadows are that of being the
daughter, a mother and commercial writer. Indu’s emancipation from the shackles of
the conventional, orthodox and rigid world of Akkamma is through her marriage to a
Jayanth, who belongs to a different caste. She assumes her new role of a wife with
the person of her choice is the expression of her freedom. The following lines of Indu
reveal her craving for complete independence, “This is my real sorrow that I can
never be complete in myself. Until I had met Jayanth, I had not known it […] I met
Jayanth and lost the ability to be alone” (RS 34).
"Roots and Shadows," the first novel of Shashi Deshpande, is known as the best Indian novel in English from among those published during the period of 1982-83. It is about the homecoming of a long lost daughter. The story unfurls the past, the childhood memories of Indu, in the ancestral home. The motherless daughter is brought up in the ancestral home by the strong widowed matriarch Atya, who runs the huge joint family. She leaves the imposing family home in search of an alternative which would free her from the binds of tradition and society. Indu sees the joint family as a restriction that throttles the residents. Mrinalini Sebastian in her book, *The novels of Shashi Deshpande in Postcolonial Arguments*, terms it as “closed world, mainly because of the old building which houses this huge family” (Sebastian 35). There are, of course, a few aberrant characters; like that of her absent father, eccentric relative Naren, the enthusiastic young, orphaned boy, Vital, the house guest. More than all these people Indu herself, is much distanced from her family. As a symbol of her independence Indu marries Jayanth, who is of another caste and lives in a city. It’s because of the last wish of Akkamma that Indu returns home. To her surprise Indu is left with all the wealth and is the decision maker.

The protagonist, Indu, is in a tussle between family and profession, between individual aspiration and social demands. Indu is a writer who has been struggling to adapt to the expectations. As a journalist, she is torn between self expression and social stigma. In the course of the novel, when Indu realises that she was not successful because she tried to fit into the mould, which left her dissatisfied. It’s only after her return to the ancestral home that Indu decides to write as would seem fit rather than for material gains. This novel is a journey attaining emotional growth, peace and fulfillment. Indu’s return to the past and revisiting the people and herself helps her emerge as a more confident person who is able to understand and accept her
identity. Thinking aloud Indu says, “Now I felt clean, as if I had cut away all the unnecessary, uneven edges off myself” (RS 78). Deshpande’s use of language is apt and suggests that it was the ‘physicalness’ of the hindrance and inconvenience which had to be removed.

The second select novel for the study is That Long Silence written in 1988. This novel was a major achievement as this book received the Sahitya Akademi Award for its literary excellence. Jaya, the protagonist of the novel That Long Silence, is depicted as one who is seen in the very typical role of a traditional Indian woman, that of a wife and a mother. Jaya is a housewife with a happy home, well earning husband, two children Rati and Rahul with all the much coveted luxuries. Despite all these socially accepted material assets Jaya is vexed with her monotonous life. Jaya feels that she has suppressed her true self which has left her in the lonely abandoned condition. Describing her present state of helplessness, she expresses her thoughts saying: “Worse than anything else had been the boredom of the unchanging pattern and unending monotony” (TLS 4). In her attempt to rediscover her true self, Jaya recognizes herself to be an unfulfilled wife, a disappointed mother and a failure as writer. (TLS 8)

Suman Ahuja reviewing the novel for ‘The Times of India’ observes that, Jaya was caught in an emotional eddy, endeavors to come to terms with her protean roles, while trying albeit in vain, to rediscover her true self, which is but a ephemera of unfulfilled wife, a disappointed mother and a failed writer.

Jaya’s husband Mohan is found to be guilty of corruption at office, which was an act to obligation to Agarwal in contracts, tenders and commissions. To avoid all embarrassment, Jaya’s family moves to Makarandmama’s flat in Dadar. Mohan is perturbed by the turn of events and takes refuge saying that the reason for his
unethical behaviour was because of his love for his family - his wife and children. He says: ‘I did it for you, for you and the children’ (TLS 10). This angers Jaya more than anything. It is during this silent and isolated period that Jaya paves the way for self-evaluation and self-criticism. It is here that Jaya re-examines her married life and after accepting certain realities she discovers that she is not really happy. Happiness has only been an illusion. Jaya does not enjoy her individuality. Like the Indian mythical role models Sita, who followed her husband Ram into exile, Savitri, pursued Yama the God of Death to reclaim her dead husband, Satyavan, and Draupadi stoically shares her husband’s travails, Jaya follows Mohan to Dadar flat. She is time and again reminded of the image of “two bullocks yoked together… it is more comfortable for them to move in the same direction. To go in different directions would be painful and what animal would voluntarily choose pain?”(TLS 12).

Jaya recalls how she remained a silent spectator when major decisions were taken without her consent. She also realises that she remained silent to make the marriage work. Like Bharati Mukherjee’s protagonist Jasmine loses her identity by being called by several names, Jaya also loses herself and identity when after marriage her name is changed from Jaya to Suhasini. Educating and advising Jaya about marriage and the role of the husband her aunt Vanitamani says, ‘a husband is like a sheltering tree’ (TLS 32). The ever curious Jaya maintains absolute silence after marriage. She recollects all the preaching given by her ajji and they ring in her ears constantly. Jaya recalls ajji telling her:

I feel sorry for your husband, Jaya whoever he is’, she had said to me once. What for, ajji? Look at you – for everything a question, for everything a retort. What husband can be comfortable with that? Though there is no question, there is
no comfort in her married life. That silence seemed heavy with uneasiness (TLS 27).

Jaya is fed up waiting for things to change in the routine life. She cannot be considered to be a feminist. In fact she fulfils all the duties assigned and expected of a traditional Indian woman – a dedicated wife and a dutiful mother. Mohan’s allegation that she’s responsible for their present state is unbearable and for the first time she expresses her disgust and dissatisfaction towards her husband. Insulted and irritated Mohan leaves his home. This leads her to self-introspection. Through this process Jaya does realize that the silence of woman symbolises her helplessness and her quiet acceptance of the burdens thrust upon her. But men take it as a symbol of woman’s contentment. Rashmi Gaur in her article analysis the reason for Jaya’s silence and confirms:

‘Jaya’s journey towards a well-defined self-hood is mired in the labyrinthine mazes of societal pressures, feminine conditioning to fashion oneself according to the accepted norms of behaviour, suppressive and egotistic male chauvinism and the continued dilemma of attaching a purpose to her life, culminating in a silence. Her silence is symptomatic of alienation and apprehension rooted in every woman’s soul in different forms – a silence which is often misunderstood by men as a symbol of woman’s contentment’ (Gaur 179).

It is during this sojourn that Jaya finally realises the need to understand her own self; she has been trying to fulfill the various roles expected of her, now it’s time to know her own identity. It is here that she emerges as a better person with an
identity of herself thus making her a better individual, a better wife and mother. She realises that it is her silence that has cost even her career as a writer.

The other novel identified for the current study, *The Dark Holds No Terrors* was published in 1980. To her credit this book of Deshpande was translated into German and Russian. It is the story of Sarita, a successful doctor and her lover turned husband Manohar or Manu, an English teacher in a third rate college. It is said to be Shashi Deshpande’s favourite work as disclosed by her in an interview. Deshpande says, ‘It was a simple theme and has fewer characters. It gripped me so much that I whipped through the writing. The wife had a better job and there was a very obvious tension between them. He was aggressive and surly. That set it off’ (Holm 13). In the same interview when Shashi Deshpande was asked about the use and symbolism of ‘Dark’ she says:

I told you, it started with this unequal couple that I saw. And then I wrote the short story, ‘The Liberated Woman’. I was very ill at the time and I re-wrote the story about 17 times. Somehow I have that figure still in my mind. And I still know that I hadn’t got it right. It went on to get a prize but I still wasn’t happy with it at all. I knew it had to be a novel. But I didn’t have the confidence to do it. So I waited a long time. I wrote a number of short stories, longer short stories, serials and Roots and Shadows. But once I began on it I wrote it from beginning to end. I am not saying that every single word came that way, but there was no time when I was actually stuck. Whereas there were points both with silence and the new book when I was stuck badly, when it seemed all wrong.
But when I finished The Dark, I knew it was a good novel and this is a very rare feeling. I was never sure in that way about the other novels. But about The Dark I never had any doubts (Holm 25).

This novel is the story of a girl’s journey to find herself and her confidence. Saru the protagonist craves for her mother’s approval. She seethes in anger when her mother ignores her; she is saddened whenever her mother reminds her to be a burden and an outsider, as she would be leaving home after marriage. Finally Saru leaves home going against her mother’s wishes and makes all decisions related to her adult life – choice of education, marriage, all planned and chosen to defy her mother. But in due course of the story we see her returning to her childhood home on the pretext of taking care of her father. But the truth is Sarita runs away from the nightmarish brutality imposed by her husband on her every night. Here in the quietness of her family home she wants to forget all her grief. Sarita introspects on the turn of events in her life which lead her to reminiscence the past to the present starting with her small town life, her loveless isolated childhood, her tyrannizing mother, her indifferent father, her marriage to the charismatic young poet Manohar, her children, etc. the novel explicitly portrays the metamorphosis of her husband from being a romantic to a sadist who abused her every night. Sarita no doubt is aware the reason for the change in this charming man. From being a saviour of a damsel in distress he turns into a jealous husband who is unable to digest the success and achievement of his wife. While his career is on a descent, that of his wife, Sarita, has overtaken him professionally. Sarita is seen more often struggling with the injustice of life, emotions, anxieties and misplaced priorities. Sarita soon realises that life does have much more importance than depending on family, marriage, children, parents and such other
institutions that are considered the hallmark of social status. The unaddressed fear that she runs away from is the cause of all her problems. Saru finally resolves to use her newfound self-truth or identity to make a better life for herself.

The portrayal of a woman's struggle to survive against all odds in the male dominated world is powerfully depicted in Shashi Deshpande’s novel, *The Dark Holds No Terrors*. The story line is mainly about the waking up of the protagonist and the subsequent realisation resulting in the knowledge that there is more to life than dependency on family, society and social acceptance. The woman is self sufficient in all aspects and in this story the protagonist is on the process of searching the same.

*Cry, the peacock*, is the first novel published by Anita Desai. It is the tale of a woman who is dejected due to her inability to adjust to her husband’s practical thoughts and pragmatic outlook towards life. She is infuriated at the difference in her own world and that of her husband’s and is alienated and demoralized. In this novel the psychoanalytic growth of Maya, the protagonist, is depicted followed by the catastrophe where she relates her sufferings with that of her pet peacock that dies and is ignored by her husband. The story ends with Maya finally throwing her husband from the parapet and killing him which is in a way similar to the peacock that kills its mate after mating thereby justifying the title.

Winner of the Sahitya Akademi Award, *Cry, the Peacock* is considered to be the first step in the direction of psychological fiction in Indian writing in English by many of the reputed authors, academicians and critics. Anita Desai adapts the elements of post modern technique. Her novel bears resemblance to Strindberg’s *Father* and *Miss Julie* and also D.H. Lawrence’s short novel *The Fox*. The story is
that of Maya, who is obsessed by a prediction about an impending disaster in her marital life, which was told to her in the childhood.

The story unfolds with Maya's father decides her marriage with his lawyer friend, Gautama, a middle aged man. The marriage is a non starter. To Maya it is a disappointment and failure of all her dreams. As a result she slowly turns into a psychopath whose emotional needs collide with that of the pragmatic outlook of her husband. Right from the beginning there is an element of Electra complex in the case of Maya. She adores her father and assumes that since Gautama if her father’s close friend he can take the place of her father. It is a kind of rude awakening to her when she realizes that Gautama is unlike her father, who always had time for her. He fulfilled her every wish. Maya recalls her childhood spent with her father. This reminiscence of those bygone days is a defense mechanism to set her free from her inner frustration and conflicts caused due to her marriage. While Maya is emotional, highly strung and sensitive, Gautama, is cold, detached and sober to the extent that Maya reflects, ‘It was discouraging to reflect on how much in our marriage was based upon a nobility forced upon us from outside, and therefore neither true nor lasting’ (CP 35).

Maya, the heroine, is a neurotic young woman, whose sanity soon disintegrates under the pressure of marital discords. The concept that women need something more than just food, clothes and accommodation is aptly illustrated in this novel. Anita Desai succeeds in portraying woman as an individual with a mind and emotion of her own. For the first time an Indian English woman novelist dares to present the trauma of the woman’s mind and give a woman’s perspective.
*Fire on the Mountain* reflects the concerns of Anita Desai for psychological reality. The novel is about the loneliness and isolation that leads to agony and anguish in the life of the anchorite Nanda Kaul, an old widow who lives in Carignano, in a desolate and haunted house in Kasauli, far away from the world ‘of bags and letters, messages and demands she had wanted to be left to the pines and cicadas alone...Whatever else came or happened would be an unwelcome intrusion and distraction’ (FOM 57).

Nanda Kaul's quiet world of solitude is disrupted when Asha, her daughter, sends a desperate letter, requesting her mother, Nanda Kaul to accommodate Raka, the grand-daughter of Asha, on her arrival. Though Raka is her own flesh and blood—her own great granddaughter – Nanda Kaul is irritated at the inconvenience that would disturb her peace. She becomes apprehensive and she painfully ponders, “now, to bow again, to let that noose sleep once more round her neck that she had thought was freed fully, finally now to converse again when it was silence she wished” (FOM 102).

The novel is about the non-involvement and determined detachment of Nanda Kaul that is the result of the unhappy and unsatisfactory conjugal ties, an oft repeated theme observed in Desai's earlier novels like *Cry, the Peacock, Where Shall We Go This Summer, Bye Bye, Blackbird, Voices in the City* etc., Nanda Kaul’s strong determination to live alone is because of disintegration of her worthless life as the unwanted wife of Punjab University’s ex Vice Chancellor. Though the relationship lacked in recognition and respect Nanda Kaul fulfilled the role of a dutiful wife. The reality of her life is revealed only after she deserts her family and settles in the mountains. Her life as the wife of Vice Chancellor was always overcrowded with meaningless social activity and was worthless and unsatisfying. It was devoid of
warmth and understanding yet, she carried on the obligations towards her husband and children with a sense of duty. Now after many monotonous, silent years she wants to be away and cries ‘Discharge me, I have discharged all my duties’ (FOM 28). Nanda Kaul always felt that her husband treated her as a prized possession rather than a human being. He did not love her. She was a convenient and efficient instrument who ran the household like clockwork. Though Nanda enjoyed the positional value of being a functionary’s wife, deep down she always felt neglected and lonely.

The womanizing nature of Nanda Kaul’s husband and his repeated betrayal with his extra marital affair with Miss David traumatized her throughout her marriage. She soon realised that there was a lack of any loving bond between them. In fact she as an individual self was never into the marriage which was indeed a success socially. Even in the isolation of Carignano, Nanda is unable to break free from the vicious grip of the hurtful memories of the numerous her husband visited Miss David's home for physical favors, neglecting her time and again. It is during these times that we see her losing her ‘composition and harmony’. The horrendous life of Nanda Kaul after her marriage and the lack of love or consideration is revealed in the lines, ‘nor had her husband loved and cherished her and kept her like a queen-he had only done enough to keep her quiet while he carried on a life-long affair with Miss David and her children were all alien to her nature’ (FOM 39).

The tussle between the need to withdraw so as to preserve the self respect and sanity of one’s self and the compulsion to withstand and stoically continue the painful process of life is vividly portrayed. Raka, the great granddaughter and a split image of Nanda Kaul, forces her to get involved forcefully. Raka wants to be in solitude to pursue her life in the thick of the rocks and pines of Kasauli. This perpetual bondage to nature is an oft replicated theme in the novels of Anita Desai. Nanda Kaul wants to
break free Raka from this dangerous desire for isolation. Nanda Kaul in her attempt to win the trust and attention of Raka tries to portray a beautiful picture of her childhood with her father but fails utterly. This futile attempt of Nanda Kaul indicates a hint at the poor and horrifying condition of her own childhood and family life.

*Clear Light of Day*, Anita Desai’s sixth novel, is divided into four parts. At the outset the story begins with Tara and her husband, Bakul’s visit to old Delhi, the city where Bim, her elder sister and Baba, her younger brother live. While Tara is quiet and less confident Bim is strong, able and attractive, but over the period of time circumstances change for both Bimla and Tara. The real purpose of Tara’s visit was to participate in the wedding ceremonies of Moyna, who is Tara’s other brother Raja’s elder daughter. Bim refuses to do the same because she despises Raja for abandoning his responsibilities towards his family and other siblings. Bim, on the other hand, devoted her life to nurse Raja – when he was seriously ill, their Aunt Mira who is an alcoholic and their brother Baba who was retarded. Though both sisters, Bim and Tara suffered a lot, things changed for Tara after her marriage with her moving abroad. Life of Raja became totally different. He was fascinated by Hyder Ali Sahib and his Urdu poetry. Finally Raja married Hyder Ali Sahib’s daughter Benazir and moved to Hyderabad on inheriting the properties of his father in law. Towards the end we find Tara pitying the state of her sister Bim. Though Bim is disappointed and disillusioned with her brother and sister, she soon realizes that her fate is certainly better than theirs. Raja is only a rich man who depends on his wife’s wealth. He gave up his passion for poetry and everything else. His identity is lost for his material gains. Bim on the other hand progressed handsomely in character, attitude and achievement. With very little resources and support she was able to fulfill all her responsibilities. She has a better and longer career and has carved a niche for herself.
The next chapter which is the Sociological Oppression explores and analyses the various sociological factors that dictate and limit the role of women in Indian society. While on the one hand women are given pride of place alongside Durga and Shakti, in reality women are oppressively restricted in their conduct, dreams, careers and life choices and priorities.