CHAPTER-IV

QUEST AND THE REALITY

*The Unending Journey*

“It is easier to live through someone else than to complete yourself. The freedom to lead and plan your own life is frightening if you have never faced it before. It is frightening when a woman finally realizes that there is no answer to the question ‘who am I’ except the voice inside herself.”

— Betty Friedan

This chapter explores the definition of identity, which is not a permanent feature – as it changes with the corresponding changes in society at a given point of time. The struggles and conflicts emerge because one tries to attain or retain a permanent identity, something that withstands and survives the vagaries of time. It reminds us of the great conflict Keats visualizes in his immortal *Ode to the Grecian Urn*. The dichotomy of the present and the external is beautifully portrayed by Keats. The disappointment that springs from it, the improbable attempt to make the ethereal the eternal, Keats makes three or four great attempts to resolve these vagaries of life, as in his famous sonnets ‘when I have fears that I may cease to be’ and ‘why did I laugh tonight?’. Thus the quest for identity invariably ends as the quest for reality. As no identity survives before the all consuming power of reality, the eternal quest has to be bearded because the reality is an ever changing phenomenon.
The quest for truth which was the goal of the philosophically inclined artist is replaced by a quest for reality by the commercially tuned artist. Hence a lot of abstract phenomena and terminology would undergo a necessary change. Hence the literary ideal of the great Victorian novelists, the French avant garde of the 19th century and the classic tradition of the Russian novel have set up a few standards for literary evaluation. Some of these were transferred (may be considered a cultural transfer) where representations of both cultures are sharing a common platform – even if not necessarily a mutually acceptable or even terms – still an exchange would take place. One of the most amazing of such transfers happened when the Greek and the Roman classics influenced the elite as well as the commoner in Elizabethan and Jacobean times. For Bacon, Milton, Dryden and Byron exemplify the Aristocratic line but you have Shakespeare and Keats representing the common – and low image class. This cultural transfer percolates the well connected class system. The same is reflected in Czarist Russia with Tolstoy and Turgenev coming from the Aristocratic class and Dostoevsky and Chekov representing the common man.

The early stages of pre and post – independent Indian writing reflects some of the universal concerns shown in the classic novels of the Victorian and early modern ages. Writers like Tagore, Sarat Chandra and Prem Chand had this universal vision in their themes. Tagore and Sarat Chandra come out with some outstanding portrayals of Indian womanhood – Munshi Prem Chand occupied a peculiar position among Indian writers. In him we see a perfect mixture of the three dominant cultures of India during 1550 – 1920, the Hindu, Persian and the Babu and he could write with equal ease and mastery about the traditional Hindu family, the folk culture, the Muslim and the phirangi (as the British were called). These three show a spontaneous and closer association in music and public world and fashion. The greater cordiality and
closeness of these will then be reflected in the more elite fields of art like writing. Indian writing in English shows a great deal of British and American influence, not only the good things are imitated, but also the prejudices find their place in popular literature. As the Britishers themselves are held by a strong tradition with its underlying economic and ethical principles as well as biases – their influence had a strong hold on the sub continent, where one was led to believe that all Russians are fanatics – as the word communist had a wrong connotation which equated with a Nazi – and everything French is associated with moral laxity and sexual licentiousness. The propaganda was singularly successful in unpopularizing the two races that happen to be the most conspicuous and successful in their economic, political, cultural challenges. Though the citizens of India became exceptional scholars in Persian, Urdu and even German and Japanese occasionally – they kept away from the French and the Russian with singular aversion.

The early Indian writers, on the contrary showed a good deal of French influence. Sri Aurobindo and Toru Dutt actually wrote in both French and English. Another writer who influenced the Indian writers is Somerset Maugham. His *Writers Note Book* and *Ten Greatest Novels of World Literature* virtually broke the predominantly British jinx on Indo-Anglican literary thought and preferences.

The literary, cultural and social ethos of a highly individual, promising and powerful group of writers should be given closer attention, and the post – independent Indo – Anglican writer should be treated as a separate entity as they move out of the British influence and develop their distinct individual affinities. Of these writers Shashi Deshpande and Anita Desai appear to evolve their own world of ‘reality’ as opposed to the general term ‘truth’. The study is related to specific conditions as they evolve in post-independent India.
In this chapter an attempt is made to present an analysis of the need for quest for the ‘self’, especially among women. Though this aspect is dealt with extensively, its importance never fades. With changing times, priorities and dimensions the definition of Quest and even that of self keeps changing. In the words of Coulmas: “Identity is a multi-layered dynamic process rather than an inborn trait that cannot be helped. Identities are partly given and partly made” (Coulmas 178).

The ideas of Coulmas apply to the works of Victorian women novelists, particularly those of Charlotte Bronte, one of whose characters Jane Eyre explicitly states:

‘I am not an angel,’ I asserted; 'and I will not be one till I die: I will be myself. Mr. Rochester, you must neither expect nor exact anything celestial of me - for you will not get it, any more than I shall get it of you: which I do not at all anticipate.

(Bronte 206)

From this, one can conclude that quest remains a continuous process which is influenced by culture and society. Identity is, in essence, the discovery of one’s self as one encounters struggles and overcomes the adverse conditions or problems. The urge for self-identity becomes acute whenever women are deprived of those rights – and are made to languish for long periods when the deprivation is increased exponentially. Even in England we can identify the differences in treatment given to Jane Austen and Elizabeth Barnet Browning on one side and that meted out to the others like the Bronte sisters, George Eliot on the other. Therefore Identity is the much-deliberated term in the context of, especially, the post-colonial literature. For most of the post-colonial writers, identity of the self becomes imminent or essential. Such writers tend to place the identity of self within the framework of their own known communities.
and cultures. As rightly pointed out by Promod K Nayar, in *Post-Colonial Literature an Introduction*, “Space for many of them (writers) is lived space, brought alive through relationships, emotions, histories and memories” (Nayar 71).

Further, Indian and Western concepts of individual identity show a broad difference in that the Indian view is predominantly influenced by communal and religious outlook, whereas that of a majority of women in Western countries have transformed themselves to higher levels of perception, and individuality as they outgrow the communal self – conscious state. This is because family, caste and community receive greater focus in Indian culture and structure of society while in the west it is based on individual growth and maturity. Despite this the women in the western societies were still left behind their male counterparts. This is best explained by Elizabeth Fox-Genovese in this statement:

> those who are trying to make their way in the newly competitive world of capitalism and individualism found it tempting to cast women as the natural custodians of harmony and nature. For men to be fully self-realising individuals, women must be self-denying” (Fox-Genovese 129).

When it is the question of culture, women are always burdened with the task of bearing and upholding culture. She is the repository of everything that is relevant, good tradition and culture of a nation. Therefore, a woman, in a country like India becomes the symbol of a well preserved and consistent identity. In her study of Indian culture, Irene Gedalof expresses a similar idea. She observes that the active culture management of women also helps in constructing certain other types of identity – like restricting them in one area actually gives them freedom to act more independently in another sphere. It gives them an identity that has focus as well as substance. Women
are accorded a cardinal role in presuming as well as transmitting to posterity the inimically unique and pristine Indian traditions. Similar studies by Western authors establish that there is a definite pattern in the conception and operation of the Indian social structure where woman is assigned a preconceived role. Nira Yuval-Davis in her book *Gender and Nation* puts it succinctly: “women are constructed as the symbolic bearers of the collectivist’s identity and honour, both personally and collectively” (Davis 45). Davis further talks about the severe punishments meted out to women who happened to break away from this strait – jacketed existence prescribed by society. On the other hand, a majority of them happen to follow the tradition, thereby providing the society an opportunity to establish and encapsulate the norms. Again, this phenomenon is not exclusively confined to oriental authors. In the Romantic or Victorian ages of English and contemporary European literature we get instances of the severe torture and social alienation faced by woman characters in the novels of Hawthorne (*The Scarlet Letter*), Hardy (*Tess of D’Urbervilles*) and Tolstoy (Anna Karina). They are punished for bringing shame and dishonour to their families and respective societies. Thus this is a universal feature to be found at various stages of intellectual development.

Cultural codes clearly demarcating what is proper and improper for women have been brought into vogue and were largely successful in building a traditional belief – system in women.

Identity becomes a crucial issue in the Indian context as it makes both man and woman consciousness of the advantages or disadvantages attached to their respective social predicament. The men are groomed to enjoy superiority while women are taught to uphold the burdensome restrictions and responsibilities attached to her gender.
Both Shashi Deshpande and Anita Desai present the struggles and travails experienced by women in a male-dominated social framework which challenges them at every step. They recognize that the concept of individuality is a typically Western phenomenon and is an offshoot of European education and culture and Indian women per se have a different set of social and cultural parameters as they are conditioned by the economic, social and communal background.

Both these novelists presented this struggle through their protagonists. Seemanthini Niranjana, in her article (1994) rightly summarizes that ‘the concept of the individual self is fundamentally a western imposition, at odds with Indian preferences for a more rational model of identity’ (32).

This broad outlook is noticeable in Indian Feminists as well as among Indian woman writers. Though there is a struggle, and, the protagonists rebel or reject and defy subordination of women and try to claim their individual identity and their rightful space one still observes that they do accept the framework of Indian familial and social relationships. Though certain degree of independence is essential and empowerment is desirable in the spheres of education or employment, the extent of social security provided by the Indian family system need not and should not be uprooted.

There is a marked difference in the manner Shashi Deshpande and Anita Desai present this aspect of Indian women. These two Sahitya Akademi winners portray their protagonists as struggling with the impositions of family and society merely forcing them to fit into the frame of an ideal woman. Their protagonists are not influenced by the Western culture, education, nor are they veiled by a fanciful liking for everything west. Shashi Deshpande and Anita Desai deal with a milieu which is a mix of people with these inclinations. They neither condemn nor extol western
culture. They are not driven by aspirations that finally lead them into a Diaspora. For them Indian society is a platform where all the different people have a stake. The main action is how life pans out for people who decide to stay here, to live or perish here. Thus they don’t write about a trend that is in vogue, a convention that may be time-bound, but they write about the people that inhabit and belong to India, about their concerns, about their strife and aspirations. As such the two writers gain and have a greater say over conditions in India, a greater knowledge of their milieu. Though this alone cannot give them a total advantage over the others, it substantially improves their chances of dealing with contemporary social problems and concerns with greater aplomb and astuteness.

While the protagonists of Shashi Deshpande defy these impositions and make their own choices of career and marriage, Anita Desai’s women are portrayed following the traditional norms and arranged marriages and giving up career or education. These are seen struggling to fit into the frame of a good ‘ideal woman’.

Shashi Deshpande’s women’s struggle starts afresh even after marriage, mainly in the choice of careers. They are up against the society that imposes restrictions. These protagonists, Indu, Sarita and Jaya are forced to rethink their career and marriages. They reject and abandon them and go away to ponder over and their actions echo what Nivedita Menon has mentioned in her study of Gender and Politics in India. Ms. Menon says:

Many feminists in India feel the need to reject community identity as an overriding one… the rights claimed by the communities vis-à-vis the state autonomy selfhood access to resources --- are denied by communities (Menon 31).
Anita Desai’s women are more attached to home. Maya, Nanda Kaul and Bimla, the three protagonists, the focus of present study, are seen struggling and trying to ascertain their identity. Maya and Nanda Kaul are married women and are wives of well settled husbands. Maya’s husband, Gautama is a successful lawyer and Nanda Kaul’s husband is the retired Vice-Chancellor of a university. Maya is a young wife married just four years ago and is still under the influence of her love for her father who was ever loving, ever caring and sensitive to her needs. She is disappointed with the pragmatic nature of Gautama. Thus Anita Desai’s characters are drawn from the upper middle class strata of the newly emerging social structure of independent India, who are to soon replace the ‘babu culture’ of the earlier times. There is also a total transition from the idea of Indian as subservient creature. The characters are well-defined and the sub themes are well-thought of and executed. In this aspect both Shashi Deshpande and Anita Desai establish without any doubt that they are not only Indian writers in English, but also they write about the Indians who live in India.

In Nanda Kaul Anita Desai brings about a great variation in her characterization. Maya of Cry the Peacock is only a young girl just entering he womanhood whereas Nanda Kaul is the wife of a retired government official. Hence she is likely to be more mature in her outlook and well-tempered by 30 years of long experience. She is aware of her husband’s unfaithfulness. She is in the know of his womanizing ways and his affair with his secretary, Miss. Davis. This she finds an insult to her as an individual. Despite all this, she continues to perform her duties as the ‘proper wife’ for the sake of family and the society.
The story of Bimla on the other hand is quite different. She is the elder daughter who has given up her own self interest for the sake of her family, her brother, Raja’s education and her sister, Tara’s future. She hopes that her brother would take up the responsibility but it turns out that he abandons his family in search of comfortable life and her sister Tara is married to a rich man and settles abroad. Bimla is left taking care of her paternal home her ailing parents and their livelihood. She remains a spinster. The strong story line reminds one of ‘Megha Daka Tara’ the famous movie made by Ritwick Ghatak.

Madhu Kishwar the founder editor of the feminist magazine ‘Manushi’, in her article ‘A Horror of “Isms” Why I do not call myself a feminist’, initially repudiates feminism as:

> it is very much a ‘Western’ concept and an off shoot of individualism and liberalism. On the other hand ‘men and women in India are trained and taught to value the interests of their families or that of the society and not to make their lives revolve around individual self-interest (Kishwar 30-31).

At the same time, she also elaborates how and why women’s individual rights in the families are ignored. Elaborating on Indian woman’s rights Kishwar states:

> An Indian Woman’s Identity’ is often riddled with a sense of insecurity. This is because in patrilocal, patriarchal societies like ours, she is denied roots even in her parental family. In most parts of India, daughters are considered ‘parayadhan’ (an alien’s wealth) and excluded from full membership of their natal families after marriage…. Even in her marital home, her rights are fragile. In case of breakdown of her
marriage, she can easily be turned out of that home (Kishwar 251-2).

This is clearly reflected especially in the case of Nanda Kaul in Fire on the Mountain and also Tara in Clear Light of Day. While the former’s lack of education restricts her to her family (marital) and inability to express her unwillingness to accept her husband’s adultery but in Tara this lack of individualism and lack of education works in her favour.

Another character, Ila Das in Fire on Mountain, is the victim of subordination by family and society. Coming from a poor background her education or upkeep were never considered.

The novels selected for this study present a sharp contrast between Shashi Deshpande and Anita Desai. The East West binary is invisible in the novels of Shashi Deshpande. In a way her novels are closed and restricted to the Indian terrain and society displaying a refreshing restraint from latching on to the much too over-publicized and cliché-ridden global perception of East West cultural scenario, which throws unusually a façade of social fallacy that falls short in conviction and hence ends up directionless. Both the writers in their own way steer clear of this.

There is hardly any NRI as a character in her novel. In the present project the select novels for study are, Roots and Shadow, The Dark Holds no Terror and That Long Silence (mentioned earlier). All the three protagonists Indu, Saru and Jaya belong to educated, middle-class Brahmin community. They succeeded in overpowering forces of their patriarchal driven homes and secured a life and marriage of their own choice by defying the traditions. Yet in the later part of their life it is seen that they fall victim and get entrapped in an image of a traditionally strong mother, wife, who is basically a superwoman and become silent sufferers. Such high
spirited ladies are confronted by a crisis which initiates their return to the childhood home and to introspect. They do realize that suffering and exploitation came upon them only because they allowed it and this is where they once again decide to defy traditions.

The protagonist of the novel *Roots and Shadows*, Indu, rebelled against the restrictive notions that are accepted as cultural identity. The way of asserting their individuality is marrying a non-Brahmin ignoring the widely accepted caste system.

Interestingly this novel also has Akka, the matriarchal head of the family who controls and commands the family, even though she herself is a Brahmin widow. Unlike her times, when women were never considered in matters of property, Akkamma was left with the ancestral home. It is shown as an advantage for she is independent and able to command every member of the joint family. This self denying widow interestingly leaves her property to Indu not withstanding the latter’s defiance of tradition.

More often than not one finds Shashi Deshpande extensively referring to the Hindu mythological texts *Ramayana, Mahabharata* and the *Upanishads*. Jasbir Jain rightly defines it as: ‘Multiplicity of intertextualities from different cultures’ (Jain 165). Jaya, the protagonist in the Sahitya Akademi winning novel *That Long Silence*, is obsessively preoccupied with the esteemed models of Indian womanhood like Sita, Savitri, Maitrayee and Gandhari as women who had epitomized suffering, duty or silence, all which point to the ultimate or ubiquitous epitome of self-sacrifice. This best fits the statement of Maitrayee Chaudhuri:

This concept of womanhood is an eminently patriarchal construct that emphasizes suffering, duty and silence. And Jaya’s universe is replete with women who subscribe to this
notion of womanhood: her neighbour, her domestic servants, Mohan’s mother, his sister (Chaudhuri 61).

Jaya is greatly influenced by Sita and Savitri and tries to act like them. This is noticeable when Jaya and her husband are advised to vacate their home until the investigation of his office is completed. Jaya says:

I remember now that he assumed I would accompany him had taken for granted my acquiescence in his plans. So had I, Sita following her husband into exile, Savitri dogging death to reclaim her husband, Draupadi stoically sharing her husbands’ trials…. No, what had I to do with these mythical women?

(TLS 11).

It could be that between the stale, unpleasant reality imposed by men and the cultural security surrounding a divine myth, perhaps the latter was to Jaya’s advantage, and she could perhaps fight back another day. It is this fine line of uncertainty that surrounds the characters of Anita Desai. The sort of complexity is seen only in these two women writers. This is the same Jaya who as a young girl refused to accept the traditional role of women implied by those myths and dreamt of a posh and sophisticated life. She was mesmerized and influenced by the myth sold by the world of media. But given her character, it should not be assumed that she had given in so tamely.

Jaya’s rejection earlier and acceptance now are governed by relatively superficial elements like her readings and her awareness garnered from the trendy media. Though the sources lack the prowess of genuine volition on individual perspective, they still portray the uncertainty and will go on and create characters with greater complexity.
Thus Jaya who defied the norms of the family and hated the silent acceptance of the restrictive roles assigned to women in the name of tradition and culture, remains silent herself during her marriage. She never raises her voice nor expresses her views. She lugs the domestic chores to try and attain the much craved status of a good wife and mother. She is constantly reminded of ‘the bullock cart drawn by oxen’ the typical Indian image presented about marriage.

Incidentally this image gives woman the equal status as that of man yet she remains the silent, discreet, non-existent member yet another picturization of woman as somebody who would never be heard but her presence is felt. Cicely Palsar Havely argues that assertive individualism of Western feminism does not suit a family centred society like India. As a result Jaya cannot achieve autonomy as a single woman but plays her roles as daughter, sister, wife and mother – a multi-faceted personality. Though that may not give her the strength as an individual who wins her egoistic battles of feminine whims against masculine ego- it gives her opportunities to live through situations in different contexts with different people. Both Shashi Deshpande and Anita Desai succeed in building this psychological and sociological extension to the popularly known perception of the ego-centric relationships of men and women.

Deshpande herself does not accept this. She does not see individualism and family ties to be mutually exclusive. She admits, in her interview to Chandra Holms, ‘I cannot see people in isolation; they are parts of families’ (Holms 246). This is more in keeping with the Russian point of view where they tend to see a character as a product of circumstances and hence has no lasting impact in its individuality.

The dichotomy between the Russian vision and the typical British and American literary platform where there is a greater scope for individualism should be understood properly. The novels of major writers like Hardy and Joyce show a great
deal of conflict that comes from the individual’s psychological oppression or psycho pathetic reactions to reality that lacks harmony. In sharp contrast the novels of Dostoevsky, Tolstoy and Turgenev; though they too deal with great conflicts, they have a harmonizing influence. The persona in these novels stands above the conflicts and seeks a solution that alleviates and the characters emerge with an improved and revitalized vision of life. Though Shashi Deshpande and Anita Desai operate on a much narrower and limited key and scale than all these writers, they do represent a path breaking endeavor and they make up with greater focus and attention. They deal with individual aspirations and their novels represent the most turbulent period (post-independence) rather a formative stage in the history of a new-born nation.

Shashi Deshpande’s preoccupation with caste and its prominence in cultural identity is reflected in her novel *Roots and Shadow* (1983). The protagonist Indu reflects her views saying,

We Indians can never get away from caste. If we’ve rejected the old ones, we’ve embraced new ones. Do I think of myself as a Brahmin? Rarely, if ever. But I’m the educated, intelligent urban middle class” (RS 58).

The above statement clearly alludes to the fact that India is a nation which tenaciously holds on to categorizing people; be it social class or classification based on caste. Caste is another dominant feature of the Indian Society. Though a few educated Indians rejected caste, they are equally influenced by the new divisions in the society, injected by the Western world, like the educated class, the intelligentsia and the upper or lower middle class people. There is a cultural similarity between India and Russia in this matter too. The Russians not only need political and cultural classification but they also expect characters cast in iconic moulds, with a clear
division between the positive and negative. Characters with shades of both positive and negative or those who are uncertain and changeable are not appreciated in their cultures. Though these may apparently seem more sophisticated – they will do greater damage as they spread to more areas of sub-classification. Indu confesses that after the youthful rebellion, there is actually a more emphatic subjugation- “and now she has her own rules and patterns to which she adheres more scrupulously” (RS 58). The earlier generations had poojas and fasts and this is how one has communes and celebrations. The characters feel that the conventions do exist.

Yet in all these divisions, women still bear the burden of cultural identity. Tradition and respectability are the tools that helped in keeping women of the upper and middle classes in reign in India. R.K. Sharma in this context states, “Deshpande’s heroines are all burdened with heavy inhibitions because of their social class.”

Interestingly in the same novel Shashi Deshpande also presents the varied notion of identity among women of different social classes and caste. While for the upper middle class women identity is their achievement either in academics or career or social status, the lower class women equate womanhood and her identity on the fruitful marriage and the number of children she bears and helps in the continuation of the legacy of the family name. A successful woman is one who fulfils all these.

Deshpande portrays a clear picture among the women living and making in India itself and their notion of women’s role and identity even in these modern times. While for Indu her personal achievement is marked by her success which is very much a western concept of individual importance. The helper on the other hand has the typical orthodox opinion and regard for successful woman.
The social class distinction and especially the haughtiness of Indu is evident in the way she refers to other woman characters. She identifies the elders of her family only by the relationship and their names. Similarly even her maid is ‘old’ woman. Indu notes that all women in the Hindu family lose their identity after marriage. In *Roots and Shadows*, Deshpande makes a strong statement when she says:

> These women… they are called kaku and kaki, attya and vaini, ajji and mami, as if they have to be recognized by a relationship because they have no independent identity of their own at all. And in the process their names are forgotten (RS 117).

For once Deshpande appears to be on weak ground- as she is pleading against the use of words Kaki or kaka are more powerful as they are attached to emotional relationships, and the true nature of the character is flat.

This is in sharp contrast to the manner in which the great Munshi Premchand presents Indian womanhood by extolling the very features considered humiliating to the self esteem of modern Indian woman. The terms of relationship are considered terms of endearment and the essential Indianness of such noble portrayals as Nirmala who weaves a magical web of human relationships rather than be content to become a mannequin of modernist ideology.

In the post-colonial scenario an Indian woman is typically accepted to be part of the family fabric and be there performing the tasks silently and uncomplainingly and nurture the young and old with conventional tenderness, concern, and care. There is no evidence of discussion or argument like the characters of George Eliot, no signs of illumination or intelligence as shown by those women in Charlotte Bronte, nor the spirit and tenacity displayed by those characters created by Emily Bronte. They
merely shrink into creatures that accept their sad plight with a phlegmatism that is inhuman and clichéd but a type created and perpetuated essentially by male chauvinistic dogma. It is refreshing to find the protagonists of Shashi Deshpande’s novels rebel against the confines of the so called traditional roles assigned and accepted by the Indian society.

A similar situation is portrayed even in the novel *The Long Silence*. Here also there is the character Jija, the servant maid, again an oft presented type character in the novels of Shashi Deshpande. Ganga of *Roots and Shadow*, Jija of *That Long Silence* and Shakutai in *The Binding Vine* (another novel of Shashi Deshpande written in 1993) represent the much ignored class of Indian women. These women are illiterate and lack economic opportunities. They are only child bearers and also breadwinners. They are the silent sufferers. They are blamed for the poor state of their family and childlessness. They are highly abused and are abandoned by their husbands who are usually an alcoholic or an ignoramus or a womanizer or all three. This is clearly observed in the following lines of Jaya:

Don’t ever give my husband any of my pay, she had warned me when she had started working for me, giving me a hint of what her life was like. There had been days when she had not come at all…. And I was wrong when I thought that Jeeja’s life had changed because her husband was dead and she had cast off those auspicious symbols of wifehood. The son, Raja ram, now drank and beat up his wife, Tara, so that Tara and her three children had become Jeeja’s responsibility (TLS 52).
There is to Jaya’s surprise a change in the attitude and approach of the younger generation even among the lower social class. They are shown to be bolder and stronger even from a very young age. The situation of Jeeja’s family depicts this in Tara the daughter-in-law. She does not suffer and wither. The fighting spirit and attitude is seen to improve in the case of the granddaughter of Jeeja. She is portrayed as a cheerful girl who studies in the school and also accompanies her grandmother to help her in her chores. Even Jaya is pleasant and flabbergasted at Manda’s enthusiasm. “Manda can understand English” (164).

This indicates that education is looked at as an opportunity to break free from the age old shackles of torture in the name of tradition. A different dimension of the suffering is portrayed in The Binding Vine when the Shakutai’s daughter is raped and is hospitalized. She is in coma and more than mental agony Shakutai is worried about the social stigma attached to a girl raped. It is clearly expressed when she tries to make Urmi, the protagonist, understand with these words: “Women like you will never understand what it is like for us. We have to keep to our places, we can never step out. There are always people wanting to throw stones at us, our own people first of all.

Shashi Deshpande’s protagonists are quiet, silent, sufferers who sympathize with the condition of women of lesser opportunities. They are seen clueless as to how to resolve or help these women. Though there is class distinction the fear and insecurity expressed about marriage and the physical relation there after seems to be the same.

Anita Desai’s protagonists on the other hand are stronger, in opposing the traditional family first concept. Her protagonists are over sensitive individualistic, living in their own world refusing interests or intricacies of family and society. Shashi
Deshpande’s characters comply with tradition unwillingly, though a great silent rebellion builds in their mind, it is more often not translated into action. In sharp contrast Anita Desai’s characters are more transparent, emotional to the extent of being violent and many a time they don’t hesitate to run on the wrong side.

Even though Anita Desai’s protagonists also belong to middle class Indian families they are also aware of the restrictions and limitations imposed on women from within the family. Though they are initially seen attempting to stifle their individualistic nature later they change and react each in their own ways. Maya in *Cry the Peacock* withdraws into her own world which her family and society ascribe madness to her behaviour. Maya is very similar to Raka in *Fire on the Mountain*. The later is seen to be engaging her in isolation or solitude. She is not comfortable with other human beings and refuses to respond to their sociable attempts. On the other hand Nanda Kaul the grandmother of Raka leads the life of a cold, detached recluse. She wants to lock herself away from the memories of her cheating husband, never ending responsibilities of household chores and family and children.

She is very reluctant and perturbed at the news of the arrival of Raka, her great granddaughter into her secluded world in Kasauli.

Bimala in *Clear Light of Day* is a total change from the earlier novels of Anita Desai. In this novel Bim’s reaction is completely opposite to that of her earlier counterparts. Bim is the first character whose quest for self identity is achieved or reaches the goal. She realizes her strength as a nurturer yet strong and independent. Here the individual and self are not different. In fact she reaches her self-identity despite or beyond social restrictions.
The protagonists of Anita Desai, Maya, Nanda Kaul and Bimala are individualistic in their thoughts and are staunch believers of fate. It is their fatalistic approach that influences their conscience and also affects their relationship with their family members.

Clearly Maya is a victim of fatalistic thinking. In a way this fatalism is a weapon used by the male dominated Indian society to ensure docility among their female counterparts. Most critics when discussing the situation of Maya tend to blame the negligence of her husband Gautama in comparison to the lavish love bestowed upon her by her father. Most researchers also tend to overlook the role of the father in incapacitating his daughter by not empowering her or allowing her to think her age or beyond. For this busy rich man it is convenient for Maya to remain childish. This would lessen the altercations that the father and daughter may have, which suits his convenience as there is no mother who can act as a buffer.

The father is never cruel; in fact he seems to be more sympathetic and sensitive towards his only daughter. Thus Maya remains childish and lives in her own world not because she is individualistic but she is insecure about the rest of the world. Also there is no evidence of Maya’s interaction with any other person before her marriage.

Maya encounters the concept of family and the various view points and differences of opinion with other people like her mother-in-law, husband only after her marriage. Her childhood discomfitures were always brushed aside by her father and this is visible in the oft repeated statement or solution brainwashed by him to Maya: ‘It is best to accept as it is’ (CP 52). ‘It must be accepted as it is you who will find that to be the wisest course’ (53).
It is inevitable that Maya is forced to accept whatever happens for her own good, which actually refers to her being tamed into gentleness with supposed love and tenderness into being docile and accepting the fate of being woman who is inferior in the patriarchal society.

Time and again Maya antagonises Gautama for his pragmatic ways and materialistic thinking, where he cares for nothing. In Maya’s own words she says: “Gautama saw no value in anything less than the ideas and theories of human and preferably male brains” (99).

He does not give importance to Maya as an individual. His attitude to women seems to be that of proud possession that have to be well maintained (material requirements) and exhibit her as the bearer of his success. He is portrayed as a successful lawyer who was modern in thoughts and views, yet there is a clear disregard for women. Gautama understands his wife Maya to be childish, brainless, and stuck in meaningless emotions. This is seen in his response whenever Maya tries to get his attention.

“Now what is it?” he sighed, in utter disgust, “Really, it is quite impossible to talk to a woman” (124). This one expression speaks volumes about his inherent hatred and impatience for women as his superiority complex always on the move to rankle. He has no time or inclination to understand Maya as an individual. He is unable to even recognize her reluctance and disinterested in the physical relation of their marriage. While Maya abhors his touch and barely bares the advances of her husband, Gautama thinks he has done his duty of fulfilling the physical desires of his wife.
Like in most of Anita Desai’s novels here also it is visible that Gautama repudiates the fact that women have a mind of their own. He also feels that if in case one has such intention it is too much of western influence, hence unbecoming and unsuitable to the Indian ethos.

Surprisingly in India any demand by women for recognition and rights is deemed to be influenced by the west yet even in the Western world women are still struggling for their identity.

In Anita Desai’s other novel Fire on the Mountain, Ila Das, friend of Nanda Kaul, is a living example of the struggle of women. Ila Das belongs to an upper middle class family. She was fortunate to have been educated in music and French keeping in tune with the modern world of the colonizer (the British). These lessons were meant for the native English women who are groomed to assume the role of an elegant wife of an elite officer of a higher rank.

Despite this status in having education she is left a pauper by her wealthy parents because as per the Hindu inheritance laws women did not have a right to their father’s property. Ila Das remained unmarried with no resources and was forced to live in poverty. Her education which emulated the ‘bad west’ was useless in the very typical Indian society and thus Ila Das remains a misfit. She is seen to be western and not acceptable. As a member of the elite middle class Ila Das is unable to change her ways to suit the circumstances.

On the other end of the spectrum there is Nanda Kaul, friend of Ila Das, and wife of the ex-Vice Chancellor. She must have also received education, similar to that of Ila Das, in courses that would help in grooming her to fit into the role of a proper wife. Nanda Kaul is portrayed as the proper gentle wife who remains unobtrusive and silent, ever present yet never heard. She caters silently to the needs
of her family members. Though she is aware of her husband’s adultery she remains silent. Though disheartened, and insulted by his disloyalty Nanda Kaul does not complain or rebel as it is unbecoming of her class of society.

In Anita Desai’s novels women’s identity is ascribed by her social class and community. The expected norms and demands of the society force her to be silent until she becomes a recluse finally abandoning the bondage of family, after the death of her husband.

In a way it is due to these imposed roles on women by the Indian society that they are seen curbing their true self. Women of the middle-class could never rebel and demand for themselves. Nanda Kaul best fits this description. Though she’s born into an affluent family and married into an equally wealthy family, Nada remains the silent door mat, who is constantly trampled by everyone in her family, more so her husband.

Anita Desai in her novels does present the pathetic condition and suffering of women who belong to various classes of society. Also there is a clear divide between women from village and those of from city.

Ila Das who was allowed to grow up thinking she is equal to the English women, because of her education, soon realizes that her education does not help her in achieving the life she was made to believe. When abandoned penniless by her own family, her education does not fetch her proper job that would take care of her daily needs.

Ila Das struggles to associate with her identity. She finally chooses to be in the wilderness of Kasauli as a social worker helping the village women and children fighting the atrocities perpetrated by the men of these societies. She is not accepted by them. In fact she is treated as an outcast.
It is her fight to save the young daughter of Preet Singh. He decided to marry his seven year old daughter in return for money, two goats and a quarter of an acre of land. He is very upset. He does not understand the concept of exchanging the condition of women. It is interesting that the women of the village who express or show willingness to Ila’s preaching. Yet they are stalled by their men.

Ila Das is unable to make them understand their conditions and ill treatment and she is seen more often fighting a losing battle. She shares her woes with her friend Nanda and says: ‘The women are willing, poor dears, to try and change their dreadful lives by an effort, but do you think their men will let them? NO, they never budge” (FOM 136).

This open battle taken up by Ila Das, fighting for the cause of these village women is self satisfying. She is able to do something on her own and create an identity for herself. Of course, somewhere down the lane she is raped and killed for voicing thoughts of the vicious West and corrupting the minds of the pure ideal women who remain the bearers of Indian tradition and philosophy; for others, the family and society is more important than living and giving importance to one’s individualism.

Through Ila Das’ character and story Anita Desai aptly portrays the socio economic conditions of women from all classes of society across India. The reality of their self, that is their present condition, a role assigned by the Indian Patriarchal society; a traditional role into which they are groomed depending on their class and region as opposed to their aspirations and dreams. It is noticeable in Carmen Wickramagamage’s argument,
The village men’s antagonism towards her as the Village Welfare Officer is no doubt compounded by her disdainful attitude towards them as her social inferiors. But if Ila resorts to class in her effort to stand against the men who appear less amenable than the women towards her attempts to reform existing social practices, Preet Singh resorts to a uniquely gendered revenge… rape, before death by strangulation… to regain his superiority over her as man in a culture governed by an ideology of female subordination (Carmen 34).

A similar judgmental attitude and class disparity is portrayed in Desai’s new novel *Clear Light of Day*. Dr Biswas and his wife the middle class family try to squeeze in all the paraphernalia that would include them into the upper middle class groups. Mrs. Biswas even tries her hand at looking and using war paint and powder liberally. She is anxious to please her guests and fulfill her role of a dutiful wife.

It’s not just the identity of the women that is presented by these writers. Especially Anita Desai focuses on how there is a transition that started in post independent India which effected changes in every walk of life of every individual. So is the case of Shashi Deshpande’s world too.

Modernity was equated with Westernization and tradition was conceived to be superstition and savagery. The colonizer created a make believe world of the Western Society, or more specifically the English Society and culture to be the most civilized one and hence coveted. They always had a secluded life. Their education was nothing but pre training for their role as society wife, who is a proud possession of her husband. The British woman’s role was limited to the house, social get togethers, fashions, stitching, dancing and such other etiquettes.
A range of binaries are observed. The protagonists of both the novelists Shashi Deshpande and Anita Desai are women in quest of their identities. While Desai’s women belong to an era right after independence there is interaction between the women of the middleclass and upper middle class with their English counterparts. The presence and influence of the intruding West in the name of modernity is felt. This is, though, limited to only the male.

The spatial world of Anita Desai’s women is wider and longer. Maya is seen moving the sprawling mansion and garden of her husband Gautama. Nanda Kaul who goes on self exile is surrounded by natural beauty of hills, trees and forests.

Their experiences have been with the elite upper class of the Indian patriarchal society. Despite the Westernized thoughts, philosophies and education women’s space is restricted to being the pride possession. Women like Maya, Nanda Kaul, Tara are all seen doing their assigned womanly, wifely, motherly tasks without outward protests. The struggle to break away from the traditional role imposed is internal and psychological.

It is in search of their identities and mastering the same that we see Anita Desai’s women, moving away into exile, not necessarily imposed by others. Maya goes into herself and moves away from the real world mentally and thus becomes mad and lives in memories of her childhood. Nanda Kaul again, waits until she’s freed of her duties as woman and turns into a recluse by moving away from her family to the beautiful serene Kasauli hills.

In the case of Bimla, there is no physical or psychological movement in search of identity it is the time that extends the space. This for a writer who published her works in the 1960s is indeed an achievement. Addressing the problems and struggle
of the women under the garb of traditional roles and the attempt of these women to find their space is laudable.

Anita Desai does argue that the concept of individual identity is unknown to the Indian psyche whether it is a man or woman. This is clearly reflected in her works. Though the present thesis studies the early works of Desai, as the time her novels have portrayed a point of view, a shift from being a women centric writer to a male centric writer.

Undoubtedly prior to Anita Desai’s novels there were none with women being pivotal to the narrative. Similarly, Shashi Deshpande is the other woman novelist whose female characters were seen emerging from the quagmire and burden of culture and tradition imposed upon all women cutting across all social classes in modern India. Though Deshpande’s women are economically independent and rebel against the imposition of castes, class etc they are still seen struggling to find their space both at home and at work place too. Commenting on Anita Desai’s novels Jasbir Jain in her book *Stairs to the Attic* states:

The conflict that forms the mosaic of her novels is not between the need to withdraw in order to preserve one’s wholeness and sanity and the need to be involved in the painful process of life….This oscillation between attachment and detachment reflects the need for a meaning in life (Jain 29-30).

The real conflict is between the identity endowed on these women by the society based on the socio-cultural forces and the one they each want to carve in true sense, the “ideal self”.
Confined behind the silent walls of the sanctity of homes are the major focus of Desai’s novels. R. S. Sharma’s apt comment sums up Desai’s women:

Anita Desai has conveyed her women characters’ fundamental dependence on men through her lexicon and traps of mastery, command and domination. Her women sometimes do attempt to assert their independence and self-sufficiency, but their quest for identity is thwarted at significant junctures …. No woman in Anita Desai’s novels … has been fortunate enough to free herself from the shackles of feminity (Sharma 93).

Shashi Deshpande, the contemporary of Anita Desai throughout her first novel in the 1980s much later than her predecessors. She is identified by many as being the true Indian woman writer presenting a realistic background or milieu for her stories. None of her characters interact with the west. The conflict is again recognizing or realising their space or identity. It is definitely not the case of East vs. West or Tradition vs. Modernity. Deshpande’s protagonists have a different identity crisis.

Unlike Anita Desai’s women Shashi Deshpande’s women exhibit more fighting spirit and rebel against the existing system. Her women are educated and working trying to establish their career and fit into the roles of being a wife and that of the mother.

Here it can be noted that the conflict of the women is neither against the western forces nor is it a tradition vs. modernity. It is a struggle for the right to inner space.
All Shashi Deshpande’s women are similar in that they belong to the same class and cast of the social class and educated. In fact all of them refuse and rebel against being groomed and fit into the various roles of the inner sanctum of the home. They defy the traditional norms, acquire education of their choice and even marry a person of their own choice. In Mrinalini Sebastian’s words:

> The world of Deshpande’s novels is a world that is rooted in a certain idea of tradition, of culture and even though there exists a kind of conflict between tradition and changed values, it does not really suggest transnational or translational elements because nowhere do we really see this culture coming into conflict with any of the “focus” of culture (Sebastian 155).

The attempt to break the traditional role assigned to women both at home and also in society, as in her career the strength of the character of these protagonists who while remaining silent still came to a self realization and understand the situation they find in is self imposed. They try to fit into the role imposed by tradition thinking to remain faithful to the Indian notion of the family and society being important than the individual self and choice. The same is articulated in Shashi Deshpande’s interview to Chandra Holm:

> I do believe that women have a great strength. All humans do. Actually we have reserves we are often unaware of. But for women the situation is made more complex by the fact that they have been told they are weak, they are made to believe in their weakness. And often they learn to hide their own strength; because a woman’s strength seems to weaken a
man... often they are the main supports of the family, though
the male is titular head (Holm 247)

These two novelists Shashi Deshpande and Anita Desai are the early Indian
women writers who addressed the question of women’s identity. Keeping in tune
with the existing literary philosophies of the Western world of the late 20th century
and the modern thought both the novelists have attempted to adapt similar techniques
into their narration.

This quest for identity is a process of understanding one’s true self emerging
from the tumultuous pressure of society, family and culture.

The next chapter attempts to analyse the contributions made by these two
stalwarts to the cannon of Indian Writing in English along with their approach,
narrative technique, characterisation etc.