CHAPTER – V

THE LEGACY

The form of the novel suited a woman better than that of, say, the epical the poetic play because all the older forms of literature were hardened and set by the time she become a writer. The novel alone was young enough to be soft in her hand… If a woman wrote, she would have to write in the common sitting-room. And … she is always interrupted. Still it would be easier to write prose and fiction there than to write poetry or a play. Less concentration is required. (Woolf 67).

This opinion of Virginia Woolf expressed in her book A Room of One’s own (1928) explains how the novel is the most used genre by women writers. It allowed them the space and freedom to express at their convenience. The novel was readable and easily available hence an increase in the readership.

The present chapter studies how novel turned out to be much favored genre of women writers across women novelists in India. The chapter then moves on to analyze the form and narrative strategies adapted by Shashi Deshpande and Anita Desai in the select novels to explore and examine the contribution made by these two to the literary canon.

From times immemorial the world or art of literature has been the bastion of the men. It was only with the advent of the novel that women could attempt and also excel at this creative craft. It encouraged women to be prolific writers and make major contributions to the literary canon.
Even in the present, novel is rightly considered to be suitable for women writers. As Virginia Woolf observes women writers’ contribution is unique because:

The training in the observation of character, in the analysis of emotion becomes in novel writing. This similar to the Indian Women novelists, the British woman writers had been educated for centuries by the influences of the common sitting-room people’s feelings were impressed on his personal relations were always before her eyes (Woolf 67-8).

The novel best suits the present socio-economic and political conditions as there is a steady increase in the complexity between individuals and society. These binaries can be explored at length through the medium of the novel. Even Arundhati Roy in her book *Patterns of Feminist Consciousness in Indian Women Writers* (1999) opines “their close approximation to reality can easily create the impression of social documentaries deficient in imaginative reach and artistic sophistication” (Roy 9).

She further observes that there has been and still exist sexists prejudice in evaluating the writings of women and complains:

While courageously dealing with sensitive areas of woman’s existence, Indian women writers in English have not shown equal courage in the use of different narrative modes to challenge patriarchal ideology. In the last two decades, women writers of the West have found alternatives to the traditional realistic pattern of women’s writing in lyrical poetic narratives, in fantasy, in parody, in satire. On the other hand, On the other hand, their Indian counterparts have shown an aversion towards experimentation… The lacuna becomes
even more prominent if compared with the vibrant technical experimentation of Indian male authors after Rushdie (Roy 144-5).

In 1970’s the concept and movement of French Feminism developed by women like Helene Cixous, Julia Kristeva and LuceIrigaray. Kari Weil, in her article ‘French Feminism’s Ecriture Feminine’ (2006), expresses that ‘for French Feminists women’s desire is what is most oppressed and repressed by patriarchy and what most needs to find expression—all but impossible task since, according to their language is itself patriarchal’ (Weil & Kari 155). French feminism equates language as symbolic discourse which is a means used by man to objectify the world. Everything is represented and reduced to his terms. Hence women writers are free and comfortable to express their thoughts, desires etc., in the existing language. In general feminist literary theory considers the existence of links similarity to the writing style of women, narrative strategies and feminist consciousness. The distinctive images used by women across continents posit a link between the metaphor or image and the social status or position of women. An often recurring image is that of a caged bird that represents the restricted life of women. This particular image is seen in the British novel Jane Eyre written by Charlotte Bronte and is comparable to that of Anita Desai’s novel Cry the Peacock.

The attempt of all these women writers was to use the vast space and freedom of the novel as a genre to explore the emotions and traumas of women struggling with the roles and conditions imposed by society and family. It is toward the end of the novel that their true self emerges. While this purgation leads to death or madness in Anita Desai’s novels, the protagonists in Shashi Deshpande’s novels arise as stronger and happier individuals. They are confident and accept their reality and their self.
Jasbir Jain rightly observes that ‘The way a novel ends is a statement of the self or ability or inability to survive, especially when the “self” is a woman cornered in a world which does not provide for her self-expression’ (Jain 35). Therefore the structure, the technique and form adapted in the novel writing is very important.

These two writers carved a niche for themselves in the world of Indian Writing in English. Infact Anita Desai is first among the woman writers in English. She published her first story when she was just 9 years old. Shashi Deshpande started her writing career as a journalist and then took up writing short stories and plays. It was much later that she started writing novels. The other interesting aspect which is common to both these writers is that both are multi-lingual. Anita Desai was born to a Bengali father and a German mother and lived in Bengal before partition where the local language spoken was Urdu and her schooling was in English. Deshpande was born into a Kannada family and her schooling was in English. She married a Maharastrian and has knowledge of Tamil too. This makes them both more real than most other Indian English writers who have one or two languages. These two seem to have a better understanding of the regional variations and multi layered ethos that is part of the fabric of India,

Compared to the two Anita Desai wrote and published her works much before Shashi Deshpande’s, Anita Desai’s contribution to the literary canon is enormous. She started with woman-centric novels and moved on to short stories, and criticism. Though male writers before her expose the atrocities on women from different walks of life in India, she is one of the first woman writers to not just explore but also provide radical ending like madness or death or murder etc., the focal point in her novels is subjective experience of the individual self. She explores at length the myriad roles and relationships that a woman takes up in India. Though there is a shift
in the point of view, perspectives and counterviews the novel in general remains subjective.

Desai’s works are in third person. Interestingly all her novels are divided into three or four parts. The technique adapted is quite modern. Her very first novel *Cry the Peacock* (1963) is divided in three equal parts. The first and the last parts are narrated in a third person point of view, which is the observation made by the narrator. The middle part of the novel is Maya’s own point of view in first person. It is here that she presents her disappointment and personal tragedy. Commenting on this middle section Anuradha Roy in her book *Patterns of Feminist Consciousness in Indian Women Writers* observes that:

> The disjointed sentences, the sudden transitions, the silences and gaps which are integral to the method are particularly suited to convey a fractured sensitivity….the feverish quality of the prose, the gush of images, powerfully convey the Maya’s mental disintegration. In her over-wrought imagination, everything is intenser, larger than life (Roy 112-3).

The distorted perceptions of Maya about the reality are accentuated by her surrealistic experience that reflects the progression of her consciousness that culminates into a tumultuous storm. This is well reflected in the following images of Maya:

> For all the while the heat was oozing into the room, pouring in like thick, worm oil, swelling and expanding till it became physical, a presence that pressed against one’s body, strangled one in great virulent arms (CP 181).
The hallucinatory images of reptiles, snakes, and the astrologer, who prophesied ruin and death at a very early stage in her life after marriage, reflect her constant fear. Her helplessness to fight the circumstances and inability to accept the existing situation and also the glass house like secluded life, where she remains the eternal child is no more. She was never allowed to realize or recognize her true self. Her life after marriage with Gautama breaks and destroys the myth of beautiful world of the child created by her father. The insecurities caused due to lack of understanding force the ever sensitive Maya into a world of insanity.

Anita Desai is one among the first Indian women writers who has successfully experimented with the theme of existentialism in her works. She was indeed the trail blazer who paved the way for the later women writers to explore this path of establishing the identity of women. Her novels do not merely exemplify the traumatic emotions of women’s suffering under the increasing oppressions of the society and self but also try to find a solution to them. Desai adapts the existential philosophy and we see in the three novels identified for the present study reflect the same. The highly sensitive, emotional protagonists go into self imposed exile so as to find room and space to locate and revenge their true self.

The main concern of Anita Desai is the character rather than the plot or story. She always creates binary oppositions in attitudes, temperaments and perception of life between her characters. This is very much evident in the case of Maya, the imaginative, emotional and sensitive character and Gautama who is the ever pragmatic intellectual in Cry the Peacock. Desai affirms that ‘story action and drama means little to me except insofar as they emanate directly from the character I am writing about, born of their dreams, wills and actions’ (qtd. in. Dash 10).
Similar binaries with contrasting ideas are presented even in *Clear Light of Day*. Though Bim and Tara are Das family sisters, their characters, perceptions and experiences are in total contrast. Tara, the wife of a diplomat, is sociable, dynamic, a true extrovert, was a timid, passive and dependent girl as a child. On the other hand, Bim, who was spirited and bold with enormous confidence and ambition, ironically is seen trapped in Old Delhi, restricted to a life of taking care of her home and family. The once upon a time outgoing, amiable Bim becomes a silent, ever anxious and responsible individual preoccupied with fulfilling her responsibility in her adult life.

These two sisters are a total contrast in their nature and even in their lives. There is another pairing of contrast present in the same novel, that of the ever giving and loving Mira Masi and the cloistered and withdrawn parents.

Another such parallel is present in *Fire on the Mountain*, the contrast between the two friends Nanda Kaul and Ila Das. Both are in exile. While the former is in a self-imposed exile, the latter is in one that is imposed by circumstances. Interestingly it is the view of the past which is also in contrast. Nanda resents her past and the deception and the drudgery she went through. She wants to forget and wipe out the memories of her past life. Whereas, Ila Das craves for the past, and romanticizes her early life, it’s not just their perception of past life that is in contrast but also their present life and attitudes towards others that is contradicting. Nanda Kaul who had earlier been the ever caring, responsible role model wife and mother in the earlier part of her life severs all links with family during her time at Kasauli Hills. Ila Das who enjoyed a cocooned life where she had riches, and resource and self-centered in the lap of luxury is now a common middle-class woman, who struggles for means to livelihood. Not only this Ila who was self-centered earlier is seen to be conscious of the conditions of the society especially that of the women. She works for the welfare
of the illiterate village women who are exploited and abused by their family and society. The socialite of earlier times into a social worker and activist which is a total contrast to Nanda Kaul who was a completely dedicated mother and wife, a family woman and turns into a silent recluse.

As stated earlier Anita Desai’s preoccupation while writing novels is to explore the emotions and experiences of individuals from different angles of life. Time and again in her novels we see the tussle when these binaries spar. For example in *Cry, the Peacock* it is the emotional maladjustments of Maya and Gautama that is evident in the perception and reaction to circumstances and surroundings of their lives, particularly the visible contrast in their attitude towards death. This is evident when dog Toto dies. While Maya is saddened and shaken instigating her childhood fears, Gautama is practical. Similarly when the peacock dies Maya is pushed into madness as it reactivates her fear of the impending death within four years of her marriage as per the predictions of the albino astrologer. She mourns the death of the peacock, becomes sentimental giving up her food etc., on the other hand Gautama is matter of fact and works on the practical problems at hand and sees to the clearance of the carcass. This insensitive, pragmatic approach hurts and disturbs Maya.

Similar is the contrast between the two sisters Bimla and Tara in the novel *Clear Light of Day*. More than the events and the situations are condition of life Desai emphasizes on their perception and reaction to these circumstances. The change in approach to life and decisions as the narrative progresses which is the result of past events and reminiscences is often seen in her works.

Another unique aspect of Desai novels is the past recalled as memory that flashes in the mind of the protagonists in the present. The inner meaning of the present with past is one of the strategies used by her to highlight the impact and
influence of the past on the emotions, actions and decisions of the present. This again is another of the techniques adopted in the modern literature known as the stream of consciousness. Desai being well read and influenced by the emerging literary genres and philosophies emerging in the West, uses them in her writings. The reference to the past in her novels is not a mere recalling of the old self or life but they are used as prompts that elaborate the events in the present despite the two being separate. Meena Belliappa in her book argues that in the context of *Cry the Peacock* that:

> The albino astrologer is an active presence in her consciousness. His prophecy that either she or her husband would die in the fourth year of after marriage shapes the course of her life. Her pampered childhood and life with her father are present not merely as reminiscences, but affect her response to the present frustrations of her married life. The father, who doted on her and shut out evil from her fairy world, becomes the point of reference by which Gautama’s failure to perform a similar office is judged (Belliappa 7-8).

As Desai’s novels depict the subjective experience of the individual selves, there is a liberal use of images and symbols to illustrate the emotions, feelings and perceptions of these characters. The psychic state of the protagonists is the focus of the novel hence the use of landscapes and their responses. This is oft repeated in Desai’s novels. The driving need for vast natural spaces, be it the luxuriant gardens’ in *Cry The Peacock*, the hills and forest of Kasauli in *Fire on the Mountain* or the shift of space from old Delhi homes and the ambience in *Clear Light of Day*. 
Maya’s helpless agony is visually conveyed through the images such as the caged bird, chained animals and dark skies. Similarly, the morbid fight – dance – mate – death sequence of the peacocks has strong likeness to Maya’s unrequited craving for love and affection for Gautama. It also signifies the fear and anxiety about the impending death predicted by the astrologer. She mentally ascribes the image of the death of the Peacocks. After their frenzied dance to the fate of Gautama and herself who might end up killing the other. The craving and love of Maya for Moon also reflects the image oft associated to feminine. Moon symbolizes love and lunacy, the two variations of Maya’s Psyche. Her deep unfulfilled desire for love leads her to self imposed exile where she becomes a lunatic. This is a perfectly used metaphor in this novel.

Whenever Maya gazes at the dark sky, that fascinates her, the vast dark spaces among the glittering stars remind her of the fear of her life. She says:

    Death lurked in those spaces, the darkness spoke of distance, separation, loneliness – loneliness of such proportion that it broke the bounds of that single word and all its associations

    (CP 22).

*Fire on the Mountain* is the other novel of Desai where the desire or craving for vast open spaces and nature is presented. Raka, the great granddaughter of Nanda Kaul during her stay at Kasauli Hills goes on these long solitary walks. She prefers this to interacting with people. Here again the use of the image of landscape is symbolic to the emotions of the characters. Raka, the traumatized child, like her great grandmother Nanda Kaul, is alienated and wanders in the abandoned woods and ravaged places, that fascinate her most, because according to her these places draw and hold her attention and inspire her also (FOM 90). Raka goes out of her way in
search of such desolate places which are uglier than her dark, unfair experiences of her life with her parents.

Similarly the image of a hoopoe feeding its young is one from which Nanda Kaul turns away rejecting it as it reminds of the nurture and care taker role given to her which she has renounced in search of her true self. Referring to the use of such symbolic images Ram and Bande in their article state:

Nanda’s urge for freedom, represented by the imagery of an eagle swooping down the valley, is counteracted by the clear domestic tones of cuckoo singing in the garden. On the other hand, Raka’s abnormal psychology interprets the cuckoo’s call not as domestic. For her it is the call of the wild mad birds from nowhere. These are demented birds that raved and beckoned Raka to a land where there was no sound, only silence, no light, only shade. By using the cuckoo imagery and letting the characters interpret it, the novelist reveals two different psychologies – the attitude of Nanda Kaul, who strives to be alone but cannot deny her duty, and Raka’s intrinsic urge for isolation (Ram and Bande 425).

In an interview when questioned about the deliberate use of symbols Anita Desai said that this noticeable usage of symbol is not a conscious attempt. She further says, ‘I find that certain things of themselves gain such significance that after having employed them – perhaps repeatedly, I find that they have indeed turned into symbols’ (qtd. in. Ram & Bande 422).
Imagery has been used to stress on Nanda Kaul’s craving for seclusion and quietness, lazing around listlessly. In one of the chapters Nanda expresses her staunch desire in the following lines, “to be charred tree trunk in the forest, a broken pillar of marble in the desert, a lizard on the stone wall” (FOM 23). Nanda’s very choice of the locale and the house where she stays itself is symbolic. The place Craigavon is a very remote, isolated one which is not the desired destination for most people. Thus it symbolizes her rush for alienation. According to Desai,

“Craigavon is no longer a sought-after place but a deserted house after independence. Both the place and the house had become irrelevant for people. Craigavon thus stands for irrelevance, rejection, escape, put-on withdrawal, loneliness” (FOM 224).

These images symbolize the agony of the women trying to fulfill their assigned roles and their antagonism to fulfill the tasks assigned to them.

This is presented in the third novel of the present study Clear Light of Day. Similar to the hoopoe nurturing its young ones in Fire on the Mountain is the image visualized by Mira Masi. She imagines herself to be a tree and her children as the vines that surround the tree and thrive on it as they grow (CLD 111). Thus this message seems to be highlighting once again the role of a woman as the nurturer and care-taker. In the same novel another image is presented which is in total contrast to the earlier one. Bim imagines her house guests to be the mosquitoes that torment her and suck her blood (CLD 153). Bim rejects the role of the caretaker and ever welcoming and serving hostess.
Interestingly in the same novel once again Desai presents another binary in the perception of Mira Masi. This lady who exalted in the role of the ever loving nurturer moves to the other extremes and hates this very ole. This is symbolized in the images that Mira Masi draws in her alcoholic stupor. These hallucinations do indicate her resentment at the subconscious level. Mira’s anger is evident from the hallucinations that she has in her drunken stupor and imagines herself to be a drudge, a busy and never tiring worker bee, trying to satisfy the unending demands of the larvae that, “swelled on nourishment she brought them” (CLD 89).

Anita Desai’s novels tend to be less realistic when compared to her contemporaries like Nayantara Sahgal and Shashi Deshpande. Undoubtedly her novels are woman-centered and present extensively feminist concerns especially that of family, society and the cultural and traditional norms which oppress women in general. Her narrative technique however does not consider that the female consciousness is different and exclusive to that of the men. Anita Desai does deny on many an occasion being identified as a feminist. Though her novels imply a skeptical view of the reality she seems to be attempting to give women their rightfully deserving space. Each of her works is an endeavor that ventures into the new vistas of narration where women try to break free from the binds of the society. Though she does not give a positive or happy ending to her novels there definitely is a new path laid down for the upcoming writers to explore and extend further. For the first time Anita Desai brings in the modern, western postulates like alienation and Existentialism.

Shashi Deshpande the other woman novelist, identified for the present study, also won the Sahitya Academy award for her novel That Long Silence is a very highly reputed among Indian women writers. She began writing at a relatively late age of 32,
and had a stint as a journalist before she started writing short stories and also four children’s books. Starting with *Roots and Shadows* (1980) she has so far published ten novels with *The Dark Holds no Terror* (1982) and *That Long Silence* (1988) garnering wide-spread critical and reader interest and accolades. Her novels are generally about women’s problems arising from changing sociological and psychological conditions in post-colonial India, particularly the sixties, seventies and eighties. In almost all the novels the main protagonist is a woman and the main themes are rather the dilemmas into which these protagonists are gradually pushed than the impact of the adverse to catastrophic events. The home makers ‘Home’ is the center of all action, and whatever social or political events that belong to the outside world have strictly no influence on either the characters or the course of the novel. The interactions between a select number of people belonging to a family and their close friends or relations, these constitute the whole society, though the persona constantly cautions about family tradition, social status and certain ‘ideals’ that should never be lost sight of. The themes revolve around the struggle between what life offers them, and what they aspire, and finally what they get and the depression of failure etc. though this is the general thematic setting against which the dramas are played out, there are areas where Shashi Deshpande stands out by attempting something strikingly different from the others. She deals with Indian conditions, and there is no trace of reference or influence or protest against the British influence like Narayan. For Deshpande language happens to be a vehicle to communicate her ideas to her audience who are essentially Indian. Hence there is no attempt made to please or appeal the native English people, to play up to their culture etc. like peddling and selling our culture by impressing the self-appointed custodians of the English language. This total blocking of the sensitive and often vulnerable area is a feat in
itself, accompanied with consummate mastery by Narayan and with admirable tact and élan by Shashi Deshpande. Her women characters are pivotal in her fiction and even her plots coincide with the fundamental intention of Anita Desai. In fact Shashi Deshpande in an interview states “when I begin a novel, I never start with a plot. There are only people….The events unfold in accordance with people’s nature” (TLS 106-7). Commenting further on her writing process she says,

I am averse to idealizing my character, who are all human beings one sees in the world around. I have heard people saying should have strong women characters. But my writing has to do with women as they are (qtd. in. Pathak 16).

All Deshpande’s novels begin with a crisis. This disaster or crisis initiates alienation of the protagonist. The protagonists go away, though not into an exile like Anita Desai. They return to the place where their journey of quest began. It is the place that they associate as their first home. In the case of Indu of Roots and Shadows and Sarita in The Dark Holds no Terror it is their childhood home. This return to origin leads to an intense introspection. They are seen facing their fears, silence and all other apprehensions. It is here that their tumultuous thoughts find peace. This journey into the past helps them reemerge as stronger and bolder personalities who are courageous to take on the problems and fears by the horns. They are also seen realizing that it is the silence that is the reason of all the problems in their life. In Roots and Shadows it is slightly different in the sense that the novel begins with the anxiety in the family related to the marriage of the young girl miner and who we have the casts of the big fat Indian wedding are to be borne the impending decision of Indu who has been bequeathed the ancestral home, the property of Akkamma is where it all begins.
In Deshpande’s novels the protagonists focus on relooking, rethinking and analyzing their lines after marriage and the then emerging situation and the gradual change in the dynamics of marital relationships. Her novels can be compared to the traditional Indian novels of Buildungsroman. Jasbir Jain categorically says:

Deshpande’s novels are all about growing up – not through an adolescent period, but growing up into selfhood once the characters are able to outgrow the traditional training imparted to a girl child and the socialization which renders her docile and obedient (Jain 264).

It is true that, the traditional Buildungsroman is the literary narration where we see the growth of the character. This is the literary focus used by many male writers where the growth is through age adventure. But in the novels of Shashi Deshpande the growth and change in the individual psyche, when encountered the challenges assigned by the society.

Elizabeth Jackson in her book, *Feminism and Contemporary Indian Women’s Writing* (2010) says,

I would argue however that the growth of Deshpande’s protagonists is more complicated than this simple linear progression from social conformity to mature selfhood. In the first place, they have all repudiated gender-based restrictions in their youth… it is only during their young adulthood that they have succumbed to patriarchal ideology, and this process as well as their struggle against it is represented as more subtle than an overt battle between conformity and rebellion (Jackson 169).
Deshpande’s protagonists are not the docile ignorant and innocent women. From their childhood they are portrayed to be intelligent, spirited, logical, having a practical approach, rather than blindly giving into the orthodox and traditional customs and beliefs. They are also intensely critical and constantly questioning themselves and their relationship with others too. Elizabeth further adds, “They are constantly aware for instance, if the conflict between their own needs and those of others, and constantly wondering where the ideal balance should lie and how to achieve it” (Jackson 169).

The unique style of narrative point of view adopted by Shashi Deshpande Jasbir Jain “is observer-narrator status… allows both comment and introspection, both criticism and confession” (Jain 130). It is not one constant mode of narration that Deshpande uses. In *Roots and shadows* and *That Long Silence* the narrative technique adapted is that of the first person, especially by the protagonist, this is interwoven with the sub-narratives of the other characters to given another version of the truth. Each of these sub-narrations provides a different point of view of the characters. They provide access to understand the different relationships between people. Interestingly these sub-narratives constantly shift the picture and reality of the past. Jasbir Jain classifies the narrator of these two novels as participant and that of an observer, interweaving the histories of their individual lives and also the observations that they make of others.

Both Indu and Jaya are writers themselves and they try to present the process and method adopted by them to counter the crisis and emerge as better persons. It is not just about facing the problems or crisis in their familial relationships but also their own careers too. Both have failed as writers and refuse to analyse the reasons. This
period of introspection provides them the space to analyze and understand their true self.

In *The Dark Holds No Terrors* the narration alters between first person and third person, past and present. Deshpande herself states in an interview that she used the third person narration when portraying the present, whereas the first person narration was used to represent the past. Another noticeable technique in this novel is the third person narration is chiefly through the protagonist Saru’s consciousness. This focus is a contrast to the earlier mentioned two novels *That Long Silence* and *Roots and shadows*.

In any case Deshpande’s protagonists observe and analyse themselves with the same severity as they do to others. For instance, in *That Long Silence* uses diaries where she comments and criticizes in the third person making her own self as the other. The constant self questioning is evident in the following line of Jaya,

> You can never be the heroine of your own story. Self-revelation is a cruel process. Looking for it is as trying to know how you really look. Ten different mirrors show you ten different faces (TLS143).

This understanding complexity with the past in flashback is another of the feature which is adapted by her reflects the digressive patterns of the narrative structure. Deshpande herself describes *That Long Silence* as “really a chaotic mass of memories which emerged in an order that only memory recognizes” there is no chronological order. All my novels are like this: there is no plot, I only have characters.
Adele King commenting on the narrative patterns that are digressive says: “They express the position of women in a patriarchal society as someone without a clear sense of purpose and without a firm sense of her own identity” (King 165).

With all these variations Deshpande’s novels are realistic as she seems to present more realistic characters with real situations and real struggles in the real urban middle class Indian society. It appears to be possible because of the close attention given to minute details of daily lives chores ever gritty physical surroundings. Deshpande admits that her approach to the reality of women’s lives is through trivial everyday activities because she strongly believes that reality is never trivial. (Deshpande163). She further opines that she tries hidden truths and complexities of human existence that lie unexplored in everyone’s life. (Deshpande 108).

Jasbir Jain in her book Gendered Realities compares Deshpande’s realism to that of the British women writers and comment.

“Jane Austen, Elizabeth Gaskell, George Eliot and Margaret Drabble, are all writers who rejected the polarities of the one-dimensional portrayal, who deconstruct both romantic and heroic images of women” (Jain 17).

Another interesting observation made by many critics is that Deshpande’s novels are overcrowded by women. Male characters are more often absent and those present are a non-entity except for the male friends of the protagonists. The views of even these male friends are provided from the protagonists’ point of view only. Discussing the role need of these male friends, Atreya and Kirpal, in their book comment,
“the male friends are instrumental in leading the women to redefine their lives within marriage. They are men who understand the feelings of women. They also understand the intent of the society and challenge and undermine its patriarchal values” (Atreya and Kirpal 56).

Discussing Kamat, the special male friend and confidant of Jaya of That Long Silence, in her interview to Holmstrom in 1993 Shashi Deshpande submits, “I did bring trying in Kamat to serve a purpose: to show Jaya the kind of relationship she could achieve with a man. Jaya seeks special kind of companionship with Kamat which she never gets from her husband” (247).

The protagonist in the novel Roots and Shadows, Indu, similarly provides a sense of completeness and recognises herself with him as he is genuinely interested in her as a person and also in her writing career. Naren is a total contrast to Jayanth, Indu’s husband, while the latter remains silent. Naren questions until Indu is forced to see the truth and accept her real self.

Though all of her novels revolve around women and are limited to exploring the changing equations among the various relationships associated with the family, Deshpande does not universalize the conditions of the women. This is evident from Jaya’s observations about the differences in the nature of suffering from that of her mother-in-law and herself. The suffering due to oppression is common among the women belonging to the social class presented by Deshpande. Yet their nature and reason are different. While Jaya’s mother—in-law suffers by the cruelties of her harsh demanding husband and her own condition is a different. Jaya recognizes that she has been oppressed by her own fault of accepting the traditional role and striving to fit
into them silently. Her suffering is because she tried to fit into the culturally and traditionally ascribed role of an ideal wife.

The image of the cart is drawn by two bullocks is one that plays constantly in the minds of her protagonists indicating that the cause of their suffering is tiring to take over the mantle of the ideal women and fit into that identity which they themselves question.

Many critics like Rajan opine that Deshpande’s view of only family restricted to a particular social class limits her feminine critique and her constant attempt to understand her conditions appears that Deshpande supports the patriarchal view that domestic sphere is the natural domain of women. (Rajan 79)

Deshpande reacts to such allegations in her interview to Gangadharan in 1994 declaring her staunch belief that in the Indian context nothing can be more universal than family unit and no relationships more fundamental than those between the members of a family. Person to person and person to society relationships and that all these figure in the domestic arena where everything and every individual begin. (252)

Though Shashi Deshpande appears to be feminist basing on the content of her novels her narrative technique makes her works to be the voice of feminist consciousness in her novels. Most of the protagonists are writers and they are placed become pivotal, which is a move away from the traditional position of female as the other in writing.

Thus these two novelists, Shashi Deshpande and Anita Desai carved a niche for themselves with their technique, content form and philosophies adapted by them in their work on the lives of earlier women writers like Kamala Markandaya and contemporary writers like Nayanatara Sahgal yet the feminist criticism implicit in the writings of these two is more distinguished and stronger. Their novels do not look for
solutions, and explore at length the complex problems posed by patriarchal ideologies that given the lines and conditions of women in the Indian society.

The self knowledge leading to self-development depicted in Deshpande’s novels need not necessarily break them from their marital relationship. They constantly question and analyze themselves the others and the circumstances, a long and complex process until there is mental maturity in understanding and resolving to face the situation boldly. They do realize there is no complete and realistic solution to the problem, but only a mature and changed perspective with a stronger approach to take on the forces that approach them.

Desai’s protagonists on the other hand tend to progress towards madness, suicide and murder except for Bim *In Clear Light of Day*. Exploring the individual subjective experience within the domestic situations is commonly portrayed by these two writers.

The use of symbols and images to express the varied experiences and business make Desai’s novels a distinctive as that of Deshpande who strives to consciously present realism to counter the constant contrast and challenge of women as the traditional versus the modern. She also explores the impact of the epics that dictate the life and philosophy of the millions of Indians both men and women thus influencing prescribed codes of behavioral norms acceptable to society which is superbly truly India.

Shashi Deshpande is different from a vast majority of Indo Anglican woman writers. Most of the novels published by these writers depend more on incidents, opinions and feelings rather than the more essential tools of the novel like characterisation. Deshpande attempts to create a more realistic world in that her characters show a lot of psychological struggle and try to face the situation through
forbearance and silence. Lost opportunities and personal disillusionments are not uncommon in Victorian literature. However, the mature outlook shown by the characters like Biddy in *Great Expectations* bring out the charming aspects of how wisdom and maturity can turn and temper the challenges thrown by a hostile unfriendly milieu.

Deshpande implies that psychological paranoiac anxiety dents the character more than physical agony and distress. This group creates the second level characterisation, as the early cited Biddy whose suffering and misfortune are beautifully balanced by an excellent degree of forbearance and the silent capacity anticipation and absorption of frustrations.

The third level of characterisation is that of the intellectual plane where the characters are disillusioned with the traditional - feel a deep distressing sense of alienation- are even strong enough to raise voices of rebellion – characters who are lost in a maze of post-modernism like Stephen Didaulus in Joyce’s *Ulysses* – or involved in a metaphysical but very much humanistic exercise of self-questioning as in the characters of Sue and Jude in Hardy’s *Jude the Obscure*. The bottom rung is the crowd of ordinary characters who comprise the milieu, and whose sole concerns are physical well being and a great urge to complain whenever that parameter is not fulfilled properly.

Shashi Deshpande is a great expert in creating these self-doubting, self-abnegating characters belonging to the middle rung. That they do not and cannot reach the maturity levels of a Biddy is a result of the difference in the educational, ethnic and cultural backgrounds.
An interesting fact about these two writers is that their recent works are quite different from their earlier ones. It would be relevant here to bestow some attention to the latest works of these two writers. Anita Desai known for her outstanding contribution to the genre of novel writing, has been exploring other genres like short stories for over a period of time. Her latest work *The Artist of Disappearance* was published in 2011 is a trilogy of novellas and Anita Desai is once again experiments in the genre, novella. The tree novellas in this trilogy are not sequels nor are they connected. Interestingly what links or binds them is the world of art. The first of them is ‘The Museum of Final Journeys’, the second ‘Translator Translated’ and the third one ‘The Artist of Disappearance’.

In this latest work of Anita Desai there is neither the traditional beginning nor a conclusive ending. All the three novellas are open-ended. Anita Desai rightly justifies saying that all the stories need not have conclusive endings. She further says that the format of novella, which was perfected by the Russians and Germans, gives scope to explore only an incident or event or character. A novella is episodic in nature. It is a well known that only a series of incidents or events that make a story of a life. So the novella cannot accommodate the length and breadth of it, hence no ending. Further there is the concept of zero ending popularized by Chekov wherein it is claimed that a novel or story cannot have any ending –happy or sad. Having been a voracious reader of Russian literature Desai seems to be very much influenced by writings like Chekov, who did not believe in happy or tragic endings.

The critical appreciation or analysis of any literary work explores and attempts to understand the characters and their nature. This trilogy of Anita Desai has limited characters. Each one of these novellas has not more than two or three characters. The first of the novellas, ‘The Museum of Final Journeys’, has the government bureaucrat,
an old servant of the abandoned mansion and a young rich lord of the mansion, who is not physically present but is referred to and mentioned time and again by the old servant with awe about his passion for collecting artifacts.

Similarly, the second of these novellas, ‘Translator Translated’, has Suvarna, the almost invisible writer, Tara the sophisticated publisher friend and class-mate of Prema. Tara is the one who publishes all the works of Suvarna. Then of course there is Prema, who translates the literary works written in Oriya by Suvarna. Prema is a middle-aged English teacher who is listless and is engrossed in emptiness and depression. It is Tara who offers Prema the job of translating Suvarna’s works. The last of the novellas, ‘The Artist of Disappearance’, has Ravi the recluse sculptor and the documentary film-maker with his jeep full of team members.

Unlike the earlier literary works of Anita Desai, especially the novels, there are no strong or important characters. All the three novellas have weak, frightened or disinterested characters who are non-achievers. They are poor decision makers and run away into wilderness in moments of crisis. They shy away attention and a few of them like Suvarna of ‘Translator Translated’, and Ravi of ‘The Artist of Disappearance’, are under tremendous pressure while they themselves are going through mental upheaval. Suvarna the much acclaimed writer is a mere puppet in the hands of Tara her publisher. It is Tara who decides and dictates the area or milieu and the framework for all of her literary works. Suvarna is seen following the instructions given by Tara, her mentor and publisher, with utmost sincerity and silence. When a crisis arises because of the liberties taken by Prema, her translator of her works, Suvarna remains silent and escapes into the remote village in the interior of a forest area and allows her family and publisher deal with the situation.
The important contributions of her latest work are a great variation in characterization which in turn may lead into far more uncertain endings. The movement maybe turned as one from melodrama to paranoia. The failures in these works do not lead to suicidal ending or murderous intent.

The first novella starts with an old, retired bureaucrat, whose name remains unknown, and who was never seriously interested in the tasks assigned to him. He was always on the move from one small town to another visiting the popular local places and trying to identify the importance or greatness of the ancient structures that were there. His duty was to restore them, yet none of his tasks impressed him except one when he was literally dragged into the task by an old servant of the old, sprawling mansion. He was taken there to retrieve and restore the bounty stored in the inner recess of the mansion. The bureaucrat who usually napped through such useless tasks recalls how he was struck in awe by the grandeur and variety of artifacts collected. Each and every piece is described and their beauty and worth is exemplified. He is also shocked when he turns around the corner and stumbles upon the elephant chained in the abandoned garden for many years. One wonders how it survived all these years.

This recent work of Anita Desai does not have characters that can be looked up to or hate or love or admire. This is so unlike her early works, that is the novels, where it appears as if hatred and antagonism expressed about other characters and conditions is so strong that it seems as if this hatred or antagonism itself is one of the characters of the novel too.

There is a kind of detachment towards the conditions and the incident that occurs in each of these novellas. This latest work also seems that art has lost its relevance in the present day world. it has becomes more of a means of social status or muse, hyped to promote a celebrity. The people associated with the art form are given
more importance than the work of art itself. These people, that is, the artists or writers are unable to counter the circumstances that push them center-stage and prefer to remain nonentities; hence they disappear into the unknown and invisible background.

Ravi in the third novella is a psychologically affected person who is hurt and disillusioned by his childhood experiences and unsympathetic parents. The carvings in his secret glade are an outlet to vent out his mental distress. The beauty and excellence of his works is discovered by chance by the documentary film-maker. He decides that these works of art should be brought to limelight and publicized. He wants to also glorify and create a media hyped celebrity out of Ravi, who is a silent recluse. For this the team meticulously plans and prepares a questionnaire and also the answers that Ravi should give during the filming of the interview. Ravi feels that these efforts are frivolous and does not agree to the artificiality that is unpalatable to him. Instead of encountering and boldly refusing thereby expressing his decision, he runs away and disappears. The filmmaker has no use of the excellent carvings without the artist. The tinge of sensationalism is lost because of the absence of the artist, so, he abandons the project. Instead he chooses to shift his attention filming the mines and the explosions. The whole team shouts in unison and excitement on capturing the explosion that blasts and razes everything to ashes. They all agree that this would be the finale shot that would make the film a super sensation.

Almost similar situation is depicted in the second novella, ‘Translator Translated’. Suvarna is a popular writer in Oriya who is well-read and admired by many. Prema the English teacher working in a school is appointed to translate Suvarna’s works into English. Prema also appreciates her works and looks forward to meet and interact with Suvarna. For all her fame and name that Suvarna enjoys in reality she turns out to be a disappointment. She is silent and always takes cues and
follows the instructions her publisher Tara. Prema who desires to achieve something in her monotonous and dull life decides to tweak Suvarna’s works and change the mood and tone with stronger words. In this process the essence of the original text is lost. Prema is blamed and belittled for changing the tone and tenor of the literary work, which is out of bounds for a translator. Therefore she loses her one hope to redeem her dull life and satisfy her inner self. Suvarna leaves the decision of removing Prema to others and disappears into the remote and quiet forests in search of peace and inspiration.

The first novella has the unnamed old servant, who lacks knowledge about the worthiness of artifacts stored in the mansion, is a worried man who wants to save them before leaving and closing the abandoned mansion. It his concern for the treasure stored in the master’s house that drives him to the bureaucrat requesting him to restore them. He seems to be more enthusiastic than the bureaucrat.

This trilogy highlights in a very subtle way the pathetic condition of arts and artifacts in the present day. The importance of art and artist is equated to the monetary value and publicity it can provide. The emotionally and psychologically weak artists like Suvarna and Ravi are terrified to voice their opinion and so remain recluse.

Responding to the observation of the critics about the lack of strong characters and conclusive plot, Anita Desai expresses that she felt it was time to depict the weak characters meandering in a plot-less theme. She says that every other person in the world is weak or scared or senile and more importantly not everyone individual is strong or powerful or dynamic. Desai says that it is time to write about them too.

The other book that has to be mentioned is the latest novel of Shashi Deshpande Shadow Play that was published in 2013. It is a sequel to her earlier novel A Matter of Time. There is a generation shift in the storyline of Shadow Play. Where
the former ends with the death of the female protagonist Sumi, the latter begins with the life of the three daughters of Sumi. The three sisters Arundhati, Charulatha and Seema are close knit after losing their parents. Sumi, their mother met with an accident and died. But even before this their father Gopal abandons his family and goes away to Rishikesh to become a monk.

Arundhati the eldest of the eldest of the three take on the role of their mother and also that of their father. She is the only breadwinner of the family. The novel Shadow Play begins with the grown up Arundhati finally giving in to proposal of her longtime beau Rohith and agreeing to marry him. The novel begins on a high note with beautiful description of the traditional Indian marriage. In the background is the looming death of the beloved ajji or grandmother of the three girls Kalyani. It is because of her critical condition that Aru agrees to marry Rohith who admires and adores her. Unknown to the three daughters, Kalyani invites Gopal to return as the girls would be on their own. As per her wishes Gopal agrees to stay with his daughters and be there when in need. Yet Gopal is unsure and hesitant about the feelings and reactions of his children, especially that of Aru. This is because the two were very close and were responsible for the welfare of the two young sisters and also Sumi. This we know from the earlier novel A Matter of Time. Gopal loves his wife Sumi and adores his three daughters. The reason for his departure and renouncement is not revealed in the earlier book. Aru is unable to forgive her father for abandoning them without reason and feels cheated out as they shared a special bond. She always wondered how such a loving person can switch off his emotions and turn into a sanyasi just overnight.
It is in this novel Shadow Play that the mystery about Gopal is revealed. Gopal shares with Seema the reason for his sudden departure. Gopal is a scholar and a lecturer at a local college. He works on the poems and hymns of a renowned saint. He discovers the erotic feelings and emotion expressed by the saint and presents the same in a paper. This hurts the sentiments of the local people and the student community questions him, abuse him and force him to withdraw his research paper. Further they coerce him into resigning his job. Gopal does all these without protest though he was not at fault. Yet the local people threaten to destroy his family if he refuses to stop writing and leave the place and go. Gopal is shocked and insulted. He feels that his manhood has been challenged. Being forced to never write is a punishment that destroys his self-respect. The subsequent threats destroy his mental peace. It is only here that we get to know of the psychological torture that Gopal had to go through because of his widowed mother’s remarriage to her brother-in-law. Gopal is confused and feels cheated. The person who was an uncle till then suddenly turns into father. He loses trust in relationships until he meets Sumi and falls in loves with her. It is because of his abundant love for his family that he leaves them in the hope that they would survive without embarrassment.

Once Aru gets to know of the real reason for her father’s abandonment the relation between the two improve a lot. Interestingly in the earlier work Gopal is close to his eldest daughter Aru but in the Shadow Play he is more close to Seema the youngest of all. Gopal understands his tight-lipped, reserved daughter Seema. He is more concerned and protective about her. She is the weakest of the three with a very fragile confidence yet surprisingly she into the profession of modeling. Though initially Aru is upset at the closeness of her father and Seema later she is happy with the situation. The second sister Charulatha is a doctor by profession is married to her
own cousin and lives abroad. She has a son who is pampered and throttled with emotions. He prefers the company of his Arutai, Seema Masi etc. Charu is suspicious and over cautious about her son and the company he keeps. The boy loves spending more time Seema as she is a reputed model. He boasts about her to his friends and accepts their challenge to invite her to their party. Seema accompanies her gullible nephew and gets attacked by his crude friends to gang rape her. The boy who is unaware of the cruel intentions of his friends leaves her with them. He is shocked when on his return he is locked out and later beaten up by his so-called friends. He hates himself for being the cause of such trauma for his favourite masi and so runs away in shame.

When Charu gets to know of her son’s role in this horrendous attack on her little sister she is torn apart. She requests her elder sister Aru, who is a lawyer not to report about her son. Aru is determined to fight this unpardonable crime and wants the culprits to be punished. Seems remains isolated and silent and refuses to respond to her Aru’s request to complaint the incident. It is Gopal who understands the mental trauma that Seema undergoes and waits for her decision. To everyone’s surprise Seema does not want to make an issue out of the incident. Being a shy and reserved girl Seema shuns all the negative attention that it gets and she is not interested in languishing around the courts for years to get justice. She prefers to ignore it as a bitter experience and move on with her life and career.

This is a totally unexpected turn of things. Referring to this sudden unusual ending Shashi Deshpande says that even she is stunned. Personally she would never agree with Seem’s decision to let the ruthless criminals to go scot free. As it is in the character’s nature and the decision taken by Seema has to be accepted by the readers, though it might be debatable and unpalatable. Arundhati the strongest of the three
sisters practices law and wants to ensure that everyone gets justice, especially women who are exploited and those who are victims of violence and abuse. Yet when it comes to her personal life this strong termagant is silent and remains confused. Despite all her achievements Aru feels that she is incomplete, useless and unfit because she cannot bear children. She becomes obsessed with children and her barren condition. Though her husband never questions her or demeans her she suggests that he should marry another lady so that she can bear children and help in continuing the family lineage. It is only towards the end that she agrees for adoption of a child.

This novel of Shashi Deshpande in a way comes full circle and completes the role of the characters that first appeared in her earlier novel *A Matter of Time*.

These two novelists, Anita Desai and Shashi Deshpande, continue to enjoy writing and their every contribution is a milestone. Every piece of literature written by them, be it novel or short story or novella, they set high standards that inspire the young and upcoming writers. Both give equal importance to content, quality of language and also the narrative style.

Though there have been other women writers in regional languages of India, Anita Desai’s and Shashi Deshpande’s works remain iconic when it comes to Indian Women Writing in English. Both are writers who were ahead of their times and experimented with content, philosophy, language and narrative technique by leaving a tall legacy unparalleled to others.