Indian writing in English has produced a galaxy of women writers touching various facets of woman’s life. Women’s writings in India with its varied dimensions and themes have occupied a very important place in the field of literature. Today, women are not just confined to the four walls of their house, but have scaled each and every arena which was earlier considered to be the forte of men only. The Sita-Savitri image expected of women due to the patriarchal society had kept women bogged down for ages, curtailing their intellectual expressions. But today women have realised the tricks played by the patriarchal society and have come out in the open to show to the world that their work is not just limited to child-bearing and child-rearing, but that they can do wonders when they are given opportunities.

Women writers due to the virtue of their feminine sensibility have been able in portraying women characters with greater understanding, deeper insight and stronger impact. They are asserting themselves by expressing their feelings through their creative works. Indian women writers in English like Kamala Markandaya, Rama Mehta, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Shobha De, Dina Mehta, Bharati Mukherjee, Arundhati Roy, Namita Gokhale and many other hordes of women writers have shown through their writings the changing faces of woman from the pre-independence era to the present.
This article portrays the novelist Anita Desai whose women characters undergo psychological trauma in a male dominated society with reference to her three novels, “Cry, the Peacock” (1963), “Voices in the City” (1965) and “Where Shall We Go This Summer?” (1975). Anita Desai started a new era of psychological novels and gave a new dimension to the world of novel writing in English. Her women characters unfold a new vista with their unique nature of sufferings. Through her novels she tries to project the agony and predicament of women in a male dominated, conservative and taboo-ridden society. A well-known critic, K. Meera Bai in one of her critical writings on Anita Desai tells,

*Anita Desai breaks a new ground in the world of Indian-English fiction by shifting the emphasis from the external to the internal world. She creates a world of her own which she fills up with extraordinarily sensitive beings. She eschews social documentation and moralizing. It is not as though her novels are devoid of social purpose. Her novels delineate the inner lives of hyper-sensitive women who are in eternal quest for meaningful life in a way- ‘the true significance of things’.*

The women characters of Anita Desai undergo a strange psychic experience and suffer from failures and frustrations. They undergo trauma due to their hypersensitive nature and their insensitive husbands. Most of the female characters of Desai are either women with affluent background or are mere housewives. The women in the novels under study are not those who play dual roles as that of a house-wife and a career woman in order to suffer from the tension of being over-worked. The restricted surroundings make the women suffer intensely, due to which they react silently or violently. This leads to incompatibility between the husband and the wife.

In the novel, “Cry, the Peacock”, Maya is the pivot character whose father’s excessive care and concern makes her behave abnormally in her later life. Maya’s sorrow begins with her marriage to Gautama who is a rational, middle-aged, busy lawyer and the protégé of her father. Gautama is insensitive to the desires of his young wife and therefore she feels lonely, isolated, alienated, neglected and frustrated. The vast difference between their ages creates a wide chasm between them. Maya expects more attention from Gautama, like the one that is given to her by her father. He should not only cater to her childish illusions of happiness but also protect her fantasy from encroachments of the outside world of sorrow. Her husband is busy in his professional preoccupations and has no time to spare for his wife.
Maya is childless even after four years of her marriage. She naturally gets attached to her pet dog, Toto. To make matter worse, the death of Maya’s pet dog, Toto is enough to create an emotional upheaval in her life and she becomes inconsolable. *Childless women do develop fanatic attachments to their pets, they say. It is no less a relationship than that of a woman and her child, no less worthy of reverence, and agonized remembrance.*

Gautama’s indifference towards the death of Toto makes Maya neurotic which further worsens her condition. When Gautama does not heed to her feelings, his indifference upsets her terribly and she becomes highly reactive. Though he arranges burial of Toto, it is without any attachment. When Gautama sees Maya bereaved at the loss of her pet dog, he utters, *You need a cup of tea, he said. Yes, I cried, yes, it is his hardness – no, no, not hardness, but the distance he coldly keeps from me. His coldness, his coldness, and incessant talk of cups of tea and philosophy in order not to hear me talk and, talking, reveal myself. It is that – my loneliness in this house.*

Maya and Gautama suffer from their temperamental differences that cause alienation between them.

The novel, “Cry, the Peacock”, depicts incompatibility between the husband and wife as there is no harmonious relationship between them. Maya suffers from hypersensitive fantasy and is unable to lead a normal life with her husband.

*Toto’s death is the first sign of her abnormality which evokes a series of consequent reactions. The usual decaying flesh seems unusually terrific to her and it is this peculiar insight that suggests her highly emotional and hysterical response to worldly events. Soon after the incident, the agony of missing the pet lurks in the blank spaces of her mind, making her more and more restless.*

Gautama’s professionalism and utter lack of tender care makes Maya drift further away from him. Maya who led a protected life under the care of her father tries to find her father figure in Gautama. She is unable to strike a note of compromise between her inner self and the realities of the outer world. Her tragedy is solely due to her not coming in terms with life. It is this incompatibility that brings disharmony in their lives. Maya’s tragedy further worsens as a result of her father’s fixation, coupled with the haunting fear of the prophecy of the albino astrologer who portends that either of the partners would die in the fourth year of their marriage. This childhood prophecy remains deep-rooted in her mind which becomes one of the causes for her abnormal behaviour.
Maya has nothing to keep herself busy and does not have anything to fill the long lonely hours. She feels neglected by her husband. She reflects, *Telling me to go to sleep while he worked at his papers, he did not give another thought to me, to either the soft, willing body or the lonely, wanting mind that waited near his bed.* Maya is childless, even after four years of married life. It gives rise to frustration and she becomes psychic. Temperamental incompatibility makes Maya unhappy, unfulfilled, lonely, disappointed and alienated from her husband. It is this temperamental crisis that makes their relationship inconsistent. Neither make a sincere effort to over-come this jarred relationship and their conjugal happiness becomes a total failure.

Maya wants Gautama to love her very intensely. Gautama advises Maya to practice detachment, for attachment leads to self-destruction. Gautama’s indifference towards her desires and above all the albino astrologer’s prophecy that either of the partners would die in the fourth year of their marriage results in the psychological trauma in Maya. Both Maya and Gautama have opposite views on life and are not able to see beyond their own points of view. Maya is governed by strange obsessions and becomes hypersensitive. It is Maya’s desire to live and the fear of death haunts her that makes her to push Gautama down the parapet.

*Like Lady Macbeth, she becomes a victim of hallucinations which speed up the process of disintegration of her consciousness.*

Gautama’s death took away even the last straw of hope without which life to her appears meaningless. It is Gautama’s detachment from Maya and Maya’s detachment for more involvement in life leads to the killing of her husband. *Anita Desai views Maya’s plight as an inextricable paradox of love and death. Maya must love in order to exist as peacocks do, and like peacocks again, she must tear the mate and be torn by him.* “Cry, the Peacock”, is a novel which depicts the neurosis of Maya who becomes a psychic and pathetic figure and in the end kills Gautama as she thinks that he is the cause of her suffering.

The women characters in Anita Desai’s novels are shown to have sensitive and emotional nature which is too fragile to cope with the dehumanised and artificial urban surroundings and with the hardened unfeeling nature of the in-laws. It is a difficult situation for these sensitive women to adjust themselves to the changing scenario, a troublesome transit from the protective nests of the parents’ family after their marriage to a totally different family in the urban surroundings.

In another novel, “Voices in the City”, Desai deals with the psychological trauma of an educated woman Monisha, married in a conservative Hindu Joint family this is not to her
standard. There is no mutual love and understanding between the husband and wife. Monisha does not get the privacy, which is necessary to concentrate on some private work. She is in a way happy that they give her a lot of work to do which keeps her busy. She reflects, *I am glad to be occupied in cutting vegetables, serving food, brushing small children's hair. Only I wish I were given some tasks I could do alone, in privacy, away from the aunts and uncles, the cousins and nieces and nephews.* Jiban, her husband wants her to be friendlier with his people. Being in a joint family she is unable to get much time for communication with her husband and he too fails to respond to her needs. Therefore, Monisha lives a frustrated and lonely life and longs for privacy and solitude. According to Dr. Suresh Singhal,

*She represents the tragic intensity of conjugal incompatibility suffered by a woman, in the Indian context, who becomes emotionally, psychologically and physically vulnerable to her husband, and at the same time, paradoxically, that the security of the wife’s role justifies and maintains relations between man and woman on the basis of the family institution rather than on the basis of real human involvement with each other.*

Monisha becomes a topic of discussion among the members of Jiban’s family because of her sterility. This results in a psychological emotional shock that upsets her behaviour. They talk very lightly about her infertility in her absence. They discuss whether her Fallopian tubes are blocked or whether her womb is in the wrong place that needs an operation. Monisha knew that they were discussing about her organs and her inability to conceive.

*Like a burst of wild feathers, released full in my face, comes the realization that they are talking of me, my organs, the reasons I cannot have a child. I can’t leave these vegetables I am cutting up for them- that would create a disturbance – but I stop listening, and regard my insides: my ovaries, my tubes, all my recesses moist with blood, washed in blood, laid open, laid bare to their scrutiny.*

Monisha’s condition further deepens when she takes Jiban’s money from the cupboard. She is accused of theft by her mother-in-law for taking money from Jiban’s cupboard without his prior permission. She feels hurt that she does not have the right to touch the money of her husband. She wants to pay the hospital bill of her brother Nirode, and thinks that she has every right to her husband’s money. When her husband does not support her while she is being accused, she feels quite humiliated. She understands the futility of her being
economically dependent. Her mother-in-law’s words were unbearable and piercing, who rather accuses her by telling,

_He left it in the cupboard when he went to the office: my son is always careful of his things. Only you were in the room at that time. When you left, you shut the door and none of the servants could have gone in. Of course the servants will be dismissed, all of them. I will not have a thief in my house, I say, I will not have a thief in my house. Who is to tell who this thief is? After all, you were the only person who was in the room all day._

Monisha is already gripped by loneliness and neglect by her husband. When Jiban does not support her on being accused as a thief, Monisha gets completely disheartened. The words spoken by her mother-in-law seem to be very harsh and it upsets her, as Monisha expresses, _I opened the door and went quickly in, and on my back felt their white-hot brands sink in and burn through my skin: Thief._ Monisha’s loneliness and false charge of theft weighs so heavily upon her mind that she completely loses hope in life. Monisha becomes sensitive and cannot bear the insult of allegation of theft and immolates herself.

_Monisha, like Maya, is a victim of the situation. The diminished dingy situation of the physical world drains out every drop of life from her. Though she is uncommunicative, her suicide is a confession of failure; through her reaction she disregards the idea that women place themselves in bondage to men, whether in marriage or out. All their joy and ambition are channeled that way, while they go parched themselves. The end of the quest is at last clear. Her reaction is violent but it upholds that death is more welcome than mean existence._

Anita Desai’s “Where Shall We Go This Summer?” is yet another novel depicting the mental disturbance of Sita, the protagonist. Sita’s husband Raman, a busy factory owner, belongs to an upper middle class and being engrossed in his work has no time for his wife. She feels frustrated due to the neglect by her husband. As a child too she feels herself unfortunate for being a neglected child and the same feeling arises on her marriage to Raman. Sita’s alienation from her husband is due to her loneliness. Sita is already burdened with four children and is expecting her fifth child. She becomes psychic and starts smoking in order to overcome the neurotic disturbances. She tries to assume her individuality by escaping to Manori Island to keep her child unborn. The island is supposed to be a place of miracle and an enigma of her father.
Her voyage to Manori, the magic island where she had spent her childhood, is also a voyage of self-discovery. Illusion may be an escape from reality. But it is bound to vanish in the light of reason that is solid and tangible.\textsuperscript{15}

When she understands the reality she makes up her mind to return home. Sita was not like Maya of “Cry, the Peacock”, or Monisha of “Voices in the City”, where their psychological frustrations and abnormal sensitiveness led them to the act of homicide and self-annihilation. Sita learns the hard realities of life and compromises with it. Sita’s return to her family does not depict her failure, but shows her courage and patience to face the ups and downs of life.

*Her reaction proves that it is very difficult for a woman, however modern she may be, to get rid of the situation she is once placed in. In spite of her dislike to the ways of world, to the traditional life of loyalty, she resumes her return journey to adjust to the role of wife and mother. Hence, she accepts defeat, crumples her passion and mingle with the prose of life for the betterment of human relationship.*\textsuperscript{16}

Thus in these three novels the women characters react differently due to their hypersensitive nature. Maya in “Cry, the Peacock” kills her husband, Gautama as fear lurks in her mind because of the albino astrologer’s prophecy. Monisha, in “Voices in the City” is unable to live in a joint family set up as she lacks the solitude that she craves for. She cannot bear the sarcastic remarks of Jiban’s family. Her only solution to escape from these mental agonies is death and she immolates herself. Sita of “Where Shall We Go This Summer? like Maya and Monisha too reacts hysterically and escapes to Manori Island, far away from the humdrum and the mundane routine of everyday existence, to experience the magical aura of the place. She returns with her husband when he comes to take her back home and compromises with the realities of life.
References


3. Desai, Anita, *Cry, the Peacock*, Orient Paperbacks: Delhi, 1980, p.10


12. Ibid p. 137.

13. Ibid. p.137.

