

Anita Desai and Shashi Deshpande: A Comparative Study of Their Fiction and Writing Style

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Abstract:

This article focuses on the following works of Anita Desai: Clear Light of Day (CLD). Cry, the Peacock (CP), Fasting, Feasting (FF), Fire on the Mountain (FOM), Where Shall We Go This Summer (WSWGTS). For Shashi Deshpande, the following works have been studied: In the Country of Deceit (ICD) That Long Silence (TLD) and The Dark Holds No Terrors (TDHNT). The effects of repression, silence and anger in a patriarchal society have fashioned women's characters for centuries. Self-expression and the above all, the expression of anger is a fascinating study towards women's quest for identity.

Keywords: Anger, women's voice, identity, alienation, patriarchal, feminism, silence.

Shashi Deshpande and Anita Desai belong to the same generation of women writers born in pre-Independent India. As pioneer women writers in India, together with Nayantra Sehgal and Kamala Markhandaya, they are prolific writers; their decades of writing are deeply concerned with women's issues, women's lives and women's struggles. But they also use women's silence symbolically to denote the absence of the woman's voice, which was either silenced or unheard. She occupied almost a subaltern status in the societal framework.

The quest for identity, in which the Desai and Deshpande excel, is a process by which the silencing of the woman comes to an end. She finds her identity, questions her place and her role in society to become an individual in her own right. The preoccupation with women's issues is evident, and both writers have a propensity towards women characters who, in spite of societal norms or strict tradition, aspire towards finding their own place in society and towards the control of their own destiny. The experience of finding one's own individuality within a larger patriarchal framework often follows as a deeply cathartic experience. That quintessential cathartic experience forms the crux of the novels, which are chiefly centred on the feminine experience.

Family Environment

Anita Desai comes from a multicultural family with a German mother and a Bengali father. Her dual ancestry enabled her to observe Indian society as an insider as well as an outsider; it also probably allowed her to understand alienation as it has been rarely been written about. Psychological analysis and the capacity to penetrate the depths of the mental state of her protagonists is a tool that she utilizes brilliantly in her novels. In the alienation of expatriates in novels such as Baumgartner's *Bombay* or *Bye Bye Blackbird*, she uses the voice of the male protagonists as well. Her reason for doing was given in an interview to *The Guardian*:

My whole life was about family and neighbours: it was very difficult for a woman to experience anything else. I was bored, and I needed to find more range, which is why I started to write about men in books like Baumgartner's *Bombay* (in which a German Jew flees the war in India) and *In Custody* (a college lecturer goes in search of a famous poet). Men led lives of adventure, chance and risk. It just wasn't possible to write that from an Indian female perspective.ⁱ

Shashi Deshpande's background is more traditional and regional. The plots are all set in India and do not cross international frontiers. The novels that she has written evoke tradition, mythology, rituals in the domestic space as well as intricate relationships within the household. Myths and epics are often referred to or used in symbolism. Deshpande's households are peopled with a multitude of characters, and family relationships are often complicated. *That Long Silence* is partially Shashi Deshpande's autobiographical novel, as is *Clear Light of Day* for Anita Desai. As such, the elements found within their pages are of value when dissecting the writing styles of the two authors

As women writers, both novelists used their writing as a form of catharsis.

It has been said that writers are the only sane people in the world because they are able to get rid of much of their emotional burdens in their writing. I am not sure if this is true (I am sure it is a writer who said this), but undoubtedly writing provides a kind of catharsis which helps the person to move on.ⁱⁱ

Anita Desai, in an interview also speaks about her interest for unusual personages. Her characters are in the throes of existential angst, despair and isolation.

I am interested in characters who are not average but have retreated, or been driven into despair and so turned against the general current. It is very easy to flow with the current, it makes no demands, it costs no efforts, but those who

cannot follow it, whose heart cries out 'the great No', who fight the current and struggle against it, they know what demands are and what it costs to meet them.ⁱⁱⁱ

Components of their Fiction: Delineation of Tradition and Sacrifice

The transition of the traditional, self-sacrificing women without choices to one who is able to analyse and take decisions is the Indian woman as portrayed by these two novelists. Interestingly enough, it is Nanda Kaul (Fire on the Mountain) and Anamika (Fasting, Feasting), women without any real choices in spite of their education, who take their own lives. They symbolize the failure in personal lives when speech is silenced, and silence is resignation or submission. Maya, (Cry, the Peacock) is able to question but unable to choose, mainly because of her father who was unable to prepare her for a life without his paternal fondness. This brings up an interesting psychological question with regard to women in postcolonial novels: societal pressures are not the only tensions that limit choices. The women are victims not only of societal norms but also love that ruins their emotional balance.

It can be observed that Deshpande's novels focus largely on women in traditional households who seek to circumvent, or enter into conflict with societal pressures. The joint family is often represented, and also its stringent codes which may restrict the freedom of women. Anita Desai's societal pressures are more understated. Her protagonists undergo psychological trauma and upheaval: it is this factor that leads to the fundamental decisions in their lives. The internal emotional dissatisfaction of women is elaborated on often by Deshpande and Desai. The psychological impact of unhappiness is a factor that is essential in the delineation of the female characters and provides a strong thread of existentialism to the novels.

Stream of Consciousness Technique

The stream of consciousness technique has been used successfully by both novelists. It is a technique which is an interior monologue by which the reader can glimpse the inner workings of the character's mind. The technique was first named by William James in *The Principles of Psychology* (1890) when he said that:

Consciousness, then, does not appear to itself as chopped up in bits...it is not joined; it flows. A 'river' or a 'stream' is the metaphor by which it is most naturally described. In talking of it hereafter, let's call it the stream of thought, consciousness, or subjective life.^{iv}

Anita Desai used it first with *Cry, the Peacock* which was published in 1963. With this novel she was able to write about the psychological torment of a young married, childless

woman in a manner that was to enrich the field of Indian English writing and bring Indian psychological fiction to the fore. The possibility of neurosis, psychosis and its subsequent upheaval is the theme of *Cry, the Peacock*. Maya, unable to communicate psychologically or emotionally with her husband, Gautama, begins to ruminate obsessively as the foundations of her life begin to crumble. Maya could only function in a world that was conditioned by security. Her emotional immaturity implied a relationship with paternal overtones, which is why she married a man much older than herself, as her husband, Gautama, himself pointed out. Maya's anguish, fears and phobias fashion the atmosphere of the novel upto its tragic end.

The technique of flashback has been used by both writers: in *Fire on the Mountain*, Nanda Kaul's loveless marriage and repulsion at her husband's betrayal are revealed by flashbacks into the past. In *That Long Silence* as well Jaya remembers the past and the manner in which she is forced to cope with the changed circumstances of her life. Desai's *Clear Light of Day* also uses this technique of flashback to highlight the facets of Bim's personality and her anger; she uses the stream of consciousness technique to great effect. Her fiction is concerned with emotional and psychological sensibility rather than the events that constitute the plot; the unravelling of the character's thoughts enables the reader to understand the inner workings of the protagonist's mind. The psychological aspect of the stream of consciousness technique is incomparable in this aspect.

'Out-of-Control Characters' and Speech

Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar wrote about the underground tradition in women's literature, about characters that go out of control and where there are symbolic representations of imprisonment or confinement; of male domination that can drive women to lunacy in their ground-breaking study *Mad Woman in the Attic*. We find this symbolism in Desai's *Cry, the Peacock*, as well as in *Fasting, Feasting*:

A life of feminine submission, of 'contemplative purity,' a life of silence, a life that has no pen and no story, while a life of female rebellion, of 'significant action,' is a life that must be silenced, a life whose monstrous pen tells a terrible story.^v

The emphasis on silence is thus born of the need to curtail women's speech. Articulation is synonymous with rebellion. At times the societal pressure is so intense that the character is close to insanity or even suicide. The metaphors of suffocation can be used. Anita Desai herself admits feeling this sensation of suffocation when writing only about women confined to domestic spaces:

Specially in my earlier work I found myself addressing the same things over and over again: very much about the life of women, especially those women who are confined to home and family, also the solitude from which a person can suffer even if living within a big family or surrounded by crowds. But after several years and several books I began to feel suffocated myself by the confinement of these subjects.^{vi}

Elements of Feminism

One does not get the impression that Anita Desai is largely concerned with feminism but rather with female lives. The women in her novels are tussling with their own lives: When the weight of the past becomes too much, when the protagonist has lived a lie, the consequences are often violent as Nanda Kaul's tragic end reveals. Women protagonists are often the victim of societal violence, physical, emotional or intellectual. They have to break the bonds of submissive silence to find a certain degree of self-esteem.

In Deshpande, the prose is simple, often dialectical and much given to argument. Desai's style is sober, refined and given to introspection. The issues she deals with are questions of identity, hybridity, shifting identity and persona, roles as burdens as well as shifting perceptions as lives unfold in different geographical places. Nature affects the personality of her characters and it is essential to her writing style. In *Cry, the Peacock* and *Fire on the Mountain* nature adds symbolism to the style of the narrative. The details of the vegetation, climate, mountainside, sky add myriad details to the plot and atmosphere of each of Desai's novels. It is the ally of the protagonist in the depths of introspection or suffering.

Alienation and Silence

Both writers have created characters that are tormented by both alienation and silence. Their psychological alienation is the result of suppressed anger: they are forced to act out their roles as daughters, wives and mothers though they resent the lack of freedom and the stifling relationships. The families have the burden of households that keep secrets: Devayani's father's constant failure to succeed in his business ventures until his undisclosed suicide, Nanda Devi's pretence of not knowing her husband has a mistress, Sarita's trauma at being the object of maternal hate and spite. The silence grows around the protagonist as each of them struggles to cope with the pain and guilt of their existence. One can state that they are in the throes of existential angst and acute alienation.

Change of Spaces

The geographical lieu seems of utmost importance for Desai; in *Where Shall We Go This Summer*, when Sita flees to Manori, the island of her childhood, she is quitting one

geographical spot for another. Sita seeks to escape her stifling life and its domesticity in a city that she detests. Gender inequality in the patriarchal mode (Fasting, Feasting) is also dealt with, though interestingly enough, the men have a minimal role to play in the household, and the action is mainly centred around the women protagonists who often project their underlying violence onto the younger women or widows, and rarely onto the men.

Deshpande, too, implies that spatial movement can signify a change in attitude. Sarita in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* and Jaya in *That Long Silence* both have to leave their homes. However, the thread of women who have failed to cope with their lives is consistent: women who have had no choices and preferred to end their lives rather than to conform to the dictates of society and an existence that was out of their control.

Patriarchal Norms

The patriarchal slant has been evoked time and again: the orange incident in *Fasting, Feasting*, Nanda Kaul's humiliation at being betrayed openly by her husband and having to keep up social appearances, the birth of sons and emphasis on education for the sons, the domination by older women towards younger women in a household, the submission or complicity of women towards patriarchal norms and above all, the silence of women in spite of humiliation and abuse.

As Doranne Jacobson remarks:

As a daughter, a girl usually enjoys some freedom of movement within her natal settlement, as well as affectionate treatment from natal kin. At her wedding, the Hindu bride is likened to Lakshmi, the Goddess of Wealth, in symbolic recognition of the fact that the groom's patrilineage can increase, and prosper only through the fertility and labours of the new bride. Despite this simile, stated in elegant language, the new bride is pressed into service as the most subordinate member of her husband's joint family. Only by producing much-desired sons and, ultimately, becoming a mother-in-law herself does she gradually improve her position within her conjugal household.^{vii}

Social approval is vital for the marriage and its aftermath. Jacobson has stated the anxiety of the new bride to conform to social expectation by giving birth to at least some male heirs. Jacobson further states:

It is through bearing children, especially sons, that the married woman finds social approval, economic security and emotional satisfaction. Her contributions bring strength to the patrilineal joint family...Because she

herself receives acclaim for giving birth to sons, she typically joins in the traditional disparagement of females when she bears a daughter.^{viii}

In the works selected the narrative techniques are single voice, flashbacks, to show the relevance of the past, and the meditative monologue. Deshpande uses dialogue often: in Desai, the narrative is much more reflective. The alienated self is much more evident in Desai's fiction; Shashi Deshpande's protagonists are battling against social norms, rather than psychological equations. Anita Desai's psychological fiction deals with the alienated, psychological individual often in desolate or isolated landscapes: the description of nature that reflects the emotional state of the individual is part of her style. Deshpande's protagonists are fighting against cultural norms that suffocate them. They analyse their anger at societal circumstances by virtue of interior monologues.

Death and its Ramifications

There is a sense of the nauseating reality of death-in-life often used by the images of dead animals: the drowned cow in the well which was never taken out (Clear Light of Day), the dog that died and remained in the hot sun which Maya mourns in Cry, the Peacock. Anorexia and food are linked to spiritual and emotional deprivation in Fasting, Feasting. The scenario takes place both in India and America; geographical frontiers have been crossed and the symbolism of food and the meal as a ritual is underlined. In Uma's home it was the ritual of food at the table with Papa as the monarch and in America it was Mr Patton who initiated the barbecues and was disgusted by the fact that his wife and Arun did not want to eat the grilled meat that he prepared for them.

In That Long Silence, similarly, when Jaya finds Kamat dead in his flat, she is confronted with an unexpected death. The unspoken desire and closeness she felt towards Kamat is revealed as well as her own cowardice: she had quietly left the flat and let Kamat's death to be discovered by another person. Her propensity to avoid conflict, born of the years of submission to her husband, makes her avoid the terrible reality of death and being involved in it. In Fire on the Mountain, death had already deprived Nanda Kaul of her husband; but it is as though, like a traditional woman, the purpose of her life had been to manage his home. She does not know what to do with herself as an aged lady and as a widow. She is emotionally barren and chooses to retire to a remote hillside town. There is the sense of tragedy in the air. Nanda Kaul cannot deal with relationships, not even with her great-granddaughter. One can only fathom whether it was the reason for her unhappy marriage.

Death is also present in the suicide of Devayani's father, in Anamika's dowry death, in Maya's dog's death, Mohan's mother's death, and Bim's parents, which left her with the

burden of the household, Saru's brother Dhruva's death. Thus, death being the ultimate unresolved question of existence is omnipresent in all the novels. Whether it is Devayani in *In the Country of Deceit* who, caught up in the throes of *Carpe Diem*, wants to live every second of her liaison with Ashok Chinappa knowing that it won't last, or Nanda Kaul who pays for her wasted life by ending it, or Maya who, from being an over-indulged daughter, kills her husband, death and its violence are never very far. The violent deaths (Mohan's mother dead of a botched abortion), Dhruva (Sarita's brother who drowned accidentally and her mother blamed her for it), Anamika (suicide), Maya (violent death concerning murder as well) or Nanda Kaul who ends her life, abound in the novels. Many of them concern women. Violent death or atrocities committed against women are also counterbalanced by atrocities committed by women against women in tight joint family households.

Submission to Dominant Women's Authority

There is an underlying thread throughout the novels that reflects middle class society and its norms. One of its aspects is the fact that the girl child or the young women have to submit to the authority of older women implicitly. It is the older women who position the young women in a situation where she is initiated into the submission to strong patriarchal traditions. Without the domination mother figure, older sister or grandmother, the norms of patriarchal society cannot exist. The repressed anger present in some of the women in the household finds its target in the younger daughters of the household. The manner in which they, as repositories of anger, deal with generational anger is the plot around which the plot is woven.

Mothers and Daughters

Simone de Beauvoir makes a telling observation about the relationship between mothers and daughters:

In her daughter the mother does not hail a member of the superior caste; in her she seeks a double. She projects upon her daughter all the ambiguity of her relation with herself; and when the otherness of this alter ego manifests itself, the mother feels betrayed.^{ix}

Maternal presence and absence are always of significance. The female protagonist has to either deal with the maternal absence or with a mother who has ambiguous feelings towards her. The complexity of mother-daughter relations are revealed as far from ideal.

Bim and her mother: Bim's mother, Mrs. Das, is an ardent bridge player. Playing cards every evening is of fundamental importance to the extent that other matters fade into insignificance. There are no passages of Bim's mother in conversation with her children or

with anybody for that matter. The centre of Mrs. Das' existence was playing cards. In fact there is a poignant scene when she was dying: "Their mother died without seeing any one of them again. If, she ever, for a minute regained consciousness, it was only to murmur the names of familiar cards that seemed to drift through her mind with a dying rustle"(Desai, CLD 88).^x

Devayani and her mother: The novel does not reveal much of Devayani's mother, a traditional lady who respected her husband highly and never contradicted him. Her mother had to bear the anguish of seeing her husband fail in practically every enterprise that he undertook. The experience of her parents' death also must have influenced Devayani to seize happiness when it was within her reach without about thinking of the consequences.

"I want a needlepoint of extreme happiness, I want a moment in my life which will make me feel I am touching the sky" (Deshpande, ICD 25).^{xi} Pushpa, Devayani's mother also had to witness her husband's financial failures. His many disappointments in his career surely caused her anxiety. It can be said that Devayani's anguish at the passage of time and the fragility of existence was the reason she chose to seize the emotional happiness that lay within her grasp.

Maya and her mother: Maya had been brought up by her father. Nila, Gautama's sister and his mother are only references she has; when she remembers her childhood it is only the comforting presence of her father that she can recall. No doubt Maya's father, the Rai Sahib, being conscious of the fact that she was a motherless child, had redoubled his love and attention to compensate for the maternal absence. Maya does not possess the capacity to become a woman. The code by which a girl transits into womanhood is a mystery to her. She cannot deal with her husband, her marriage, her conjugal home, her pet dog's death. She is lost in her own world, a world of insecurity and phobia.

Sarita and her mother: When Sarita goes back to her father's home to take a respite from her matrimonial turmoil, she also has to deal with her mother's ghost. She has had been made to feel guilty for Dhruva, her younger brother's death all her life. She has also been made to feel inadequate for her lack of beauty, dark skin and gender. She is complexed and becomes ambitious to prove her worth: to become a doctor, to be successful professionally.

But then it had been a kind of miracle anyway, her joining medical college in spite of her mother...but she had done it. I won that time. But I was not alone then. Baba was with me. Now I wonder whether his was a fight for me or against her. Whether he used me as a weapon against her? Whether that hurt her more than my own rebellion did? Is it waiting for me too, a taste of that

bitterness? But that guilt is not mine alone. He has to share it with me, for he helped me, my father (Deshpande, TDHNT 139).^{xii}

Sita and her mother: In *Where Shall We Go This Summer*, one can deduce that a lot of her insecurity stems from the fact that Sita had a strong father figure in her life but no mother figure. Rumors said that her mother had left her husband to go to Benares. Sita feels betrayed when she learns this fact. Perhaps the reason she decided to have a large family of five children also is the consequence of insecurity; she needed subconsciously to show that she could be a mother too. But she does temporarily abandon her children as well when she leaves to go to the island. It is to be remembered that her mother had abandoned her family as well to go to Banaras. She is neurotic, dissatisfied and looking for a meaning to her existence. Anita Desai has described a highly strung woman who tires of her maternal role to the great surprise of her husband.

Uma and her mother: Uma is the sacrificed child. She is the eldest child, and being dull in studies, her mother schemes to keep her home and help with the new baby. She eventually becomes a drudge, working at home at her mother's orders, unable to have a life of her own. But the story reveals that Uma had been tricked onto two marriages in which she had been the object of dowry greed. Eventually the reader comes to the conclusion that Uma had been able to return to her family indeed, her father had come to fetch her home, unlike her cousin Anamika who died of abuse at her inlaws' home; she has security and eventually will be able to even have a dominant position in the house as her parents age.

Women's Emotional and Intellectual Solitude

. The solitude of a woman's existence, often alone, married, widowed or unmarried and without children is depicted starkly. The numerous problems of living in a household through marital discord or misunderstanding, brings an immense solitude and silence. Silence as a symbol is evoked by both writers, whether it is Nanda Kaul who escapes to Kasauli looking for isolation and silence, Sita running away to the island of Manori pregnant with her fifth child, or Jaya trying to make sense of her own marriage.

Desai, who is one of the pioneers of psychoanalytical women's fiction in India, speaks of her own isolation as a writer at a time when Indian writing was less prominent than today:

There were perhaps half a dozen like me, but we were scattered all over the country. So I didn't meet them, I didn't belong to the rest of society, and because of this I was able follow my own stream of consciousness, uninterrupted. I was very fortunate in that way.^{xiii}

This isolation as a writer no doubt helped to forge her identity as a writer of fiction that was different: neither autobiographical nor steeped in social problems. Her protagonists, like herself: “You have to get through long periods of self-doubt...”^{xiv} analyze, doubt, and hesitate. Yet one cannot speak of a fusion between Anita Desai and her characters: rare for an Indian woman writer, she has written fiction where the male protagonist speaks in the principal voice, thus successfully endorsing the male voice in several novels like in *In Custody*, *Voices in the City*, *Bye, Bye Blackbird* and *Baumgartner’s Bombay*.

Desai also speaks of claustrophobia:

Specially in my earlier work I found myself addressing the same things over and over again: very much about the life of women, especially those women who are confined to home and family, also the solitude from which a person can suffer even if living within a big family or surrounded by crowds. But after several years and several books I began to feel suffocated myself by the confinement of these subjects. I felt I was limiting the territory to such an extent that it created a kind of suffocation even for me. So I deliberately opened the doors, to widen the canvas, and started writing more about male characters and their lives, because I felt they had a wider experience of the world, and I could address a greater variety of experiences.^{xv}

Shashi Deshpande has often said she is a woman writer, though not a feminist writer. “I am a woman, and I do write about women, and I'm going to say it loudly...”^{xvi} Essentially, she writes about female lives and the feminine experience. Deshpande began to write as a married woman. Being a housewife was frustrating as she struggled to write. The autobiographical slant is omnipresent in *That Long Silence*. Jaya is a writer too, writing with her husband’s approval until one of her stories shocked him, when she ceased to write. Her husband’s control over her intellectual domain was only broken when she met Kamat, who encouraged her to write out her anger. Finding an outlet for her suppressed rage was ultimately a factor that enabled Jaya to articulate her thoughts

Suppressed Anger

Anger has been incorporated into the women protagonists who people Deshpande’s novels. There is an element of latent violence against which women have to fight against: Saru as she battles against her husband’s abuse, or Jaya’s mother-in-law who had to bear her husband’s verbal and physical violence in silence. Conflict is inevitable as one battles against established social norms. The monotony of the domestic space where one is reduced to tasks and silence is the sphere in which many women have to confine themselves to. As Jaya

admits to herself in *That Long Silence*, "I had to admit the truth to myself - that I had often found family life unendurable. Worse than anything else had been the boredom of the unchanging pattern, the unending monotony (Deshpande, *TLS* 4).^{xvii}

Patriarchal norms exert pressure on women that are difficult to bear. Anamika's brilliance in her studies, for example, were touted as an advantage to get her a decent husband. Anamika was the brilliant student, beautiful and much loved but she met with a tragic end; Uma who was the despair of her parents with regard to her botched marriages and education, became a survivor. In the same vein, Arun is sent to America for his studies whereas Uma is kept at home to look after her parents. Girls remain within a certain domestic space; women who remain in this sphere have to submit to patriarchal norms but also to the dictates of society.

The Woman's Body and Sexuality

The male domination over the roles, actions and bodies of women are all demonstrated in the novels. Whether Ila Das is criminally assaulted on the mountainside or Saru is violated in her own marital space, the control over a woman's body is manifest. When Sita, pregnant with her fifth child, flees to Manori, is it to escape her pregnancy or her marriage? Her feeling of suffocation in the city threatens to overwhelm her and she has to escape, a kind of exile like her mythological namesake, Sita. Her anger at her fifth pregnancy breaks through though she had managed the previous four ones with serenity:

Her husband was puzzled therefore when the fifth time she told him she was pregnant, she did so with a quite paranoiac show of rage, fear, and revolt. He stared at her with a distaste that told her it did not become her - a woman now in her forties, greying, aging, to behave with such a total lack of control. Control was an accomplishment that had slipped out of her hold without his noticing it, over the years, till now she had no more than an infant has...and so she wept and flung herself about, over-forty, grey and aging.^{xviii}

'The lack of control' was a matter of bewilderment to her husband, and not the reason for Sita's anger, which he did not seek to understand. It did not 'become her' which brings to mind Mohan in *That Long Silence* who found anger in a woman 'unwomanly.' Both husbands did not understand the emotional turmoil of their wives and do not seek to understand their anguish.

A woman's body symbolically has enormous ramifications in societal norms. In traditional societies the symbolism of puberty, marriage, motherhood and widowhood are all symbolised by the woman's physical aspect, as to the wearing of colours, the symbolic

embellishments (bindis, flowers, bangles etc.). When Sita wishes to run away at her fifth pregnancy, her anger could be directed towards a body that had let her down by becoming pregnant yet again. Her need to escape to Manori to keep the baby within the womb is mystifying for a woman who had already given birth to four children. In fact it is so irrational as to not be credible at all.

Devayani, on the other hand, is unmarried and childless. There is an emotional vacuum that she feels within her, but she also listens to her body's demands. The pull of her desire for Chinappa is immense; he is married, but Devayani flouts social convention and fatalistically waits for the relationship to end, as it does. The subject of female sexuality has been broached by Deshpande in a manner where her protagonist, Devayani, knowingly follows her heart and exercises her personal choice with all its consequences. Shashi Deshpande has remarked about this novel:

My novel is about adult love. Devayani, the protagonist, who chooses to live alone in the town of Rajnur after her parents' death, falls in love with the town's new district superintendent of police, Ashok Chinappa, who is much married and older and - as both painfully acknowledge from the very beginning - it is a relationship without a future... In my book, the first thing the man tries to tell the woman is that I promise you nothing. But I stand outside your gate and cannot get you out of my mind. I think that's the real sign of love.^{xix}

Violence and sexuality is the theme of *The Dark Holds No Terrors*. Saru is a doctor, a repository for women's biological complaints:

Backache, headache, leucorrhoea, menorrhoea, dysmenorrhoea, loss of appetite, burning feet, an itch 'there'... all the indignities of a woman's life, borne silently and as long as possible, because 'how do you tell anyone about these things..?' Everything kept secret, their very womanhood a source of deep shame to them. Stupid, silly martyrs, she thought; idiotic heroines. Going on with their tasks and destroying themselves in the bargain, for nothing but a meaningless modesty. Their unconscious, unmeant heroism born out of the myth of the self-sacrificing martyred woman, did not arouse either her pity nor her admiration. It made her angry.

"Why didn't you do something about it earlier," she often asked. But they had schooled themselves to silence (Deshpande, TDHNT 107).^{xx}

The silence is symptomatic of the shame felt by tradition-bound women who are reluctant to talk about their bodies, and indeed felt humiliated to do so. The discomfort that they felt at their maladies finally forced them to go to the doctor, but only after they had borne the ailment as long as they could. The passage cited above brings to mind a passage from Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch*:

Repressed disgust for female genitalia is why the many cases of vulvar itches are seldom properly investigated, and many women treat themselves ineptly for conditions which they regard as chronic and nervous or moral in origin, until they become incapable of treatment...The universal lack of esteem for the woman's organ becomes a deficiency in woman's self-esteem. They are furtive and secretive about their own organs and their functions...^{xxi}

In *The Dark Holds No Terrors* Sarita is the symbol of the woman who has been the subject of her mother's anger throughout her life. However, the one technical flaw in this novel is Saru's confession of her rape by her husband. Is it brutality or rape? Saru in the end forgives her erstwhile rapist and reconciles with him, her husband. The novel treats the theme of her mistreatment in a home where the parents preferred her brother, Dhruv, flagrantly discriminating against her. Due to his unfortunate death, Sarita was disliked by her mother, who blamed her for Dhruv's death; her father retreated into a world of silence. Her marriage also brought about conflict due to her social ascension. Sarita has to learn to dispel the darkness, break the silence and find her own place in life. But she also realizes there was a problem with her own attitude towards her family and at the end of the novel she tries to change it.

Masks and Pretensions

A woman who gives vent to rage is a subject of 'distaste'. The lack of self-control is deeply disturbing to the people who live in the household: an open expression of anger means frustration, unhappiness, and discontent. The slightest hint of rebellion and the societal edifice comes tumbling down. The authority resides with the patriarchal head but it is the woman who keeps the household together. She has a place of respect and privilege if she follows societal norms. As N.D.R. Chandra has written:

Indian women's identity is one that is usually connected to and denied by the societal and cultural norms of a particular familial structure. This identity is denied within the parameters of their social relationship to men. They are traditional conservative, and therefore they are reluctant to cross the 'Laxmanrekha' of their family and culture. They are regarded as preserver of

essential nationalist spirit. They are to smile always, welcome their guests and entertain them, care for their family performing all household duties and if there is any pain, they are to hide it behind their veil. They are to become true symbols of Indian tradition and culture. Thus, Indian women become a metaphor for purity, chastity and sanctity of the ancient spirit that is in India. The national construct of Indian women attributes to the spiritual qualities of self-sacrifice, devotion, and religiosity and so on. Consequently anything that threatens to dilute this model of Indian womanhood, constitutes a betrayal of all that.^{xxii}

Nanda Kaul is the example who keeps the household running smoothly at the cost of her personal happiness to the extent of swallowing her rage for years. Visitors to the house see an elegant lady, hospitable to all those who come to visit. She performs her role to perfection in spite of the terrible anger that lies within her.

Deshpande analyses her writing thus:

Though no writer in India can get away from the idea of social commitment or social responsibility, committed writing has always seemed to me to have dubious literary values. However, after 25 years of writing, I cannot close my eyes to the fact that my own writing comes out of a deep involvement with the society I live in, especially with women. My novels are about women trying to understand themselves, their history, their roles and their place in this society, and above all their relationships with others. To me, my novels are always explorations; each time in the process of writing, I find myself confronted by discoveries which make me rethink the ideas I started off with. In all my novels, from *Roots and Shadows* to *The Binding Vine*, I have rejected stereotypes and re-questioned the myths which have so shaped the image of women, even the self-image of women, in this country. In a way, through my writing, I have tried to break the long silence of women in our country.^{xxiii}

She also speaks about gender discrimination in a patriarchal society: “In Indian society also male children perpetuate the family name and are significant”.^{xxiv} Gender discrimination has been used by both novelists as tools to show that a phallogocentric society can discriminate, shape roles and to a certain extent muzzle women. “I have tried to break the long silence of women in our country.” In fact, as Jaya ruminates in *That Long Silence*:

Middle-class. Bourgeoisie. Upper-caste. Distanced from real life. Scared of writing, scared of failing. Oh God, I had thought, I can't take anymore. Even

a worm has a hole it can crawl into. I had mine - as Mohan's wife, as Rahul's and Rati's mother (Deshpande, TLS 148).^{xxv}

She considers her place in her home, as a wife and mother, as a 'hole' that she could crawl into. It demonstrates the fact she does not feel esteemed in her role in the domestic space; her husband has been working extremely hard to provide a comfortable life for his family; Jaya does not feel equal to her husband, in her role as a housewife. She had tried to write and had met with success until she realized that her husband exercised control over this aspect of her life as well. Claustrophobia is exactly what is being portrayed in Sita's frustration with her monotonous city life. The disappointment with marriage brings to mind the frank statement of Germaine Greer about her own foray into marriage: "It was just a mess," she said. "He was shaping me to his needs and trying to conquer me. Everything looked like the crudest form of colonization."^{xxvi}

The incompatibility of married couples is shown to be a problem that one encounters often. For Maya, "Poor Gautama, poor dear Gautama who was so intense and yet had never lived and never would"(Desai, CP 172).^{xxvii} The conflict of interests with the male characters in their fiction is frequent as the woman protagonist seeks to assert herself. Nanda Kaul did not choose conflict: she chose to run with the tide, to immerse herself with her social life as a Vice Chancellor's wife, and busy herself with her children thus burying her resentment and anger. In *In the Country of Deceit*, Devayani falls passionately in love with a married man; it is her choice to enter into an adulterous relationship with the police officer Ashok Chinappa who meets her on the sly. In her heart she knows that he will never leave his wife and daughter.

In an essay called "Of Concerns and Anxieties" Deshpande writes:

Most of my writing comes out of my own intense and long suppressed feelings about what it is to be a woman in our society, it comes out of the experience of the difficulty of playing different roles enjoined on me by society, it comes out of the knowledge that I am something more and something different from the sum total of these roles. My writing comes out of my consciousness of the conflict between my idea of myself as a human being and the idea that society has of me as a woman. All this makes my writing clearly women's writing.^{xxviii}

She sees the opposition between two contradictory selves - the inner tension between the two opposing selves that brings about psychological trauma and unrest; the feeling of angst that many women experience. The woman, merged with her roles that enable her to

function in society, also sees herself as an individual, and that is when the conflict between the Self and Others arises.

Much of their writer's concerns are clearly defined in the interviews given by the two writers. The hybridity of Desai enabled her to see India as an outsider. "I always told myself that a desk and a chair in a corner by myself is all I need. I like to have a window and a view too, but I mostly need to be alone when writing."^{xxix}

Desai's women function with heightened sensitivity and emotional consciousness. As Srinivasa Iyengar points out:

Her forte, in other words, is the exploration of sensibility...Since her preoccupation is with the inner world of sensibility rather than the outer world of action, she has tried to forge a style supple and suggestive enough to convey the fever and fretfulness of the stream of consciousness of the characters.^{xxx}

One of the striking features of Desai's writing is the close connection between protagonist and environment: Cry, the Peacock uses the obvious simile of Maya's psychological state and the peacock, Nanda Kaul and the isolation and rugged landscape of Kasauli, Sita and the isolation of Manori. In Deshpande's fiction nature plays a limited role. The plot takes precedence and relationships predominate. The protagonist is in conflict with herself, other personalities or incidental happenings but nature is more subdued.

Shashi Deshpande was often asked if she was a feminist writer or if she had any social purpose in her fiction. In an interview in the Sunday Observer she says: "Somebody once asked me if I have a social purpose in my writing and I very loudly said, 'No, I have no social purpose, I write because it comes to me.'^{xxxi}

Shashi Deshpande has also made an attempt to explore female psychology and female sexuality. The notion of sexual relations for gain (Saru in *The Dark Holds No Terrors*) or by passion (Devayani in *The Country of Deceit*) are an attempt to reclaim women's bodies by women themselves. The attempt to explore female desire is part of Shashi Deshpande's style. Her female protagonists are able to experience desire, and it is a leap forward in their experience of discovering themselves. They have to reclaim their bodies but also their minds, and dispel the silence that deprives them of agency. Deshpande herself has stated in an interview:

That *Long Silence* is a hysterical novel in the sense that inside of me I was kind of screaming, but when it came out - as you said, one steps back from that screaming self - and one says, look, Jaya is very analytical. There is no

point at which she gives way to her emotions or self-pity or anything. Throughout she is analyzing herself, her life, her relationships, and I think that is how it has been for me. I think it was really the culmination of the anger and all the repression; everything came out in That Long Silence.^{xxxii}

For Anita Desai, *Clear Light of Day* is closely autobiographical. For her, psychological and emotional ramifications take precedence. In this novel, there is the background of the Partition, and the old house in Old Delhi with Bim, the only member of the family to stay behind in the house to look after an alcoholic aunt and an autistic brother. The atmosphere of time that has stood still is very strong; Bim has stayed on with her teaching job and her long repressed anger at being the person in the family left to tend, or nurse the others.

The silence of Nanda Kaul towards her husband is total; her silence is her bitterness at the social humiliation of being betrayed in public. Her life of duty replaced conjugal happiness; but the reader is kept in the dark about the reasons for her conjugal misery. The single act of rebellion that Nanda Kaul as a married woman performs is to relegate her husband to an antechamber and out of the conjugal bed. Her anger is perfectly controlled, like her.

The themes of silence, guilt, frustration, alienation and exile have been shared by the two writers in their own style. They have tabulated women's lives and struggles in an often hostile environment, but they also write about women who question life, themselves and the situations as they occur in their quest for identity and fulfilment. The traditional role of woman as a giver and never a receiver, as a symbol of sacrifice and devotion have been examined and often disrupted. The deconstruction of the maternal myth is very evident. In none of the novels does one find a mother who corresponds to the maternal myth of sacrifice, forbearance and devotion.

To conclude with Shashi Deshpande once remarked: "I realize that I write what I write because I have to, because it is within me. It's one point of view, a world from within the woman, and that I think is my contribution to Indian writing."^{xxxiii}

Endnotes

ⁱ<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2004/sep/02/fiction.gender>

ⁱⁱShashi Deshpande, 'A Writer's Look at Literature, Fiction and Mental Health' (*Indian Journal of Psychiatry* 2012.54:381-4).

ⁱⁱⁱAtma Ram, 'An Interview with Anita Desai', (*World Literature Written in English*) Vol. 16.No.1. April 1977), 21-23.

^{iv}William James, *The Principles of Psychology*, Vols 1-2 (Dover Publications, New York. 1950).

^vSandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *Mad Woman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination* (London: Yale University Press, 1979).

^{vi}Magda Costa, "Interview with Anita Desai, *Lateral* March 2001

http://www.umiacs.umd.edu/users/sawweb/sawnet/books/desai_interview.html. [9/15/2002].

^{vii} Myron L. Cohen 'Gender relations, Changing Patterns in India' *Asia, Case Studies in the Social Sciences: A Guide for Teaching* (M.E. Sharpe, 1992, New York).

^{viii} *ibid*

^{ix}Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, Trans. H.M. Parshley, (London: Vintage, 1997). 532.

^xAnita Desai, *Clear Light of Day* (Delhi: Random House, 2007), 88.

^{xi}Shashi Deshpande, *In the Country of Deceit* (Delhi: Penguin Books, 2009) 25.

^{xii}Shashi Deshpande, *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, (Delhi: Penguin Books India, 1990) 139.

^{xiii} <http://www.sampsoniaway.org/interviews/2014/01/14/you-turn-yourself-into-an-outsider-an-interview-with-anita-desai/>)

^{xiv} *ibid*

^{xv} <http://www.sampsoniaway.org/interviews/2014/01/14/you-turn-yourself-into-an-outsider-an-interview-with-anita-desai/>

^{xvi}Shashi Deshpande, , "Of Concerns, Of Anxieties, Indian Literature, Vol XXXIV, No 5, Sept Oct 1996

^{xvii} Shashi Deshpande, *That Long Silence* (Delhi: Penguin Books India, 1989).4.

^{xviii}Anita Desai, *Where Shall We Go This Summer*, (Delhi: 6th printing, Orient Paperbacks, 2012) 29

^{xix} <http://www.dnaindia.com/entertainment/interview-my-new-book-is-about-adult-love-shashi-deshpande-1222218>

^{xx}Shashi Deshpande, *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, (Delhi: Penguin Books India, 1990) 107.

^{xxi}Greer, Germaine. *The Female Eunuch*. (London: Flamingo, 1993), 159-260.

- ^{xxii} N.D.R Chandra, , ‘Identity, Culture and Theory: Towards Feminine Gender Representations’ , ‘Critical Response to Indian Fiction in English,, Ed. Prasad, A, (New Delhi: Atlantic Publication, 2007).
- ^{xxiii} Both this statement and the disclaimers are quoted by Shyamala A. Narayan, "Shashi Deshpande," in Contemporary Novelists, ed. Lesley Henderson and Noelle Watson, 5th ed. (Chicago and London: St James Press, 1991) 241.
- ^{xxiv} Shashi Deshpande, “Of Concerns, Of Anxieties” Indian Literature, Vol XXXIV, No 5, Sept-Oct1996, 108.
- ^{xxv} Shashi Deshpande, *That Long Silence* (Delhi: Penguin Books India, 1989)148.
- ^{xxvi} (<https://www.nytimes.com/books/99/05/09/specials/greer-shock.html>)
- ^{xxvii} Desai, Anita. *Cry, the Peacock*. (Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 1980) 172.
- ^{xxviii} Shashi Deshpande, ‘Of Concerns and Anxieties’, Naresh K. Jain, (Ed.). *Women in Indo-Anglian Fiction: Tradition and Modernity*. (New Delhi: Manohar Publications, 1998).
- ^{xxix} <http://www.sampsoniaway.org/interviews/2014/01/14/you-turn-yourself-into-an-outsider-an-interview-with-anita-desai/>
- ^{xxx} Srinivasa Iyengar, *Indian Writing in English* (Delhi: Sterling Publishers Pvt Ltd, 1985) 464-465).
- ^{xxxi} “Everyone Has a Right to Choose a Language” interview by Stanley Carvalho, *The Sunday Observer*, No 11, February 1990.
- ^{xxxi} Juorl.Kuortti *Tense Past, Tense Present: Women Writing in English*. (Kolkata: Stree Samaya, 2003)
- ^{xxxi} “Everyone Has a Right to Choose a Language” interview by Stanley Carvalho, *The Sunday Observer*, No 11, February 1990