INTRODUCTION

Gender discrimination has been a universal phenomenon in human history from time immemorial. Though the country has made a lot of progress, the role of Indian women in society remains only peripheral. Owing to a new set of educational values and economic dependence, the position of women has certainly been enhanced and women have now certainly got a status in society. But in order to iron out the unevenness in society, they need to learn to assert their rights and shun the injustices heaped on them. Thus the new generation of Indian women novelists advocates independence and assertiveness in women by depicting their characters as survivors who successfully bear torment both physical and emotional and raise a voice against the brutalities and violence surrounding them. They tend to rebuke the male dominating Indian society which discourages self-reliance in women and urge women to build up their fragmented lives and express their affirmation.

K.V. Surendran writes, “There has been a very slow evolution in women’s writing to come to its own. This may be owing to several reasons like lack of education, their social and familial obligations, tradition of child-marriage, child bearing and child rearing etc. History has ignored and submerged their contributions; the critics have dismissed their works and its aesthetics on the ground that they were concerned with a limited world of experience because they were more confined to their domestic duties and liabilities”

The theme of modern woman’s existential struggle to establish her own identity in order her individuality surfaces quite often in the novels of Indian women novelists of post-independence age as can be seen in the works of kamala Markandaya, Ruth PrawerJhabvala, Anita Desai and NayantaraSehgal. The women writers of India have given anew dimension to the Indian literature. Indian English literature has developed over a period of time and writing in English did not start in a day. It took many years and several distinguished personalities to bring the present status and distinction to Indian English literature. Indian literature is not only about novels, it is also about poetries and short stories. Before the rise of novels, several women writers composed songs, short stories and small plays. It is still believed that women are the upholders of the rich Indian tradition of fables, storytelling and more. In the mid-nineteenth century, more women started to write in the English language. With the passage of time, English literature has witnessed several changes in the writing patterns. Women novelists have
incorporated the recurring female experiences in their writings and it affected the cultural and language patterns of Indian literature. They have brought a stylized pattern in the whole context of Indian writing. Nowadays, people enjoy reading the anglicized novels presented by the new age women writers.

In the past, the work by the Indian women authors has always been undervalued because of some patriarchal assumptions. Indian societies gave priorities to the worth of male experiences. In those days, women used to write about a woman's perception and experiences within the enclosed domestic arena. On the other hand, male authors used to deal with heavy themes. Thus, it was assumed that their work would get more priority and acceptance in the society. During the 18th century, these factors led towards the decline of Indian women writing. And with all these factors, production of women's literature declined further. In the 19th century, more and more women actively participated in India's reformist movement against the British rule. It again led to the women's literature. At that time, their write-ups mainly concentrated on the country's freedom struggle. Over the years, the world of feminist ideologies began to influence the English literature of India.

In the 20th century, women's writing was considered as a powerful medium of modernism and feminist statements. The last two decades have witnessed phenomenal success in feminist writings of Indian English literature. Today is the generation of those women writers who have money and are mostly western educated. Their novels consist of the latest burning issues related with women as well as those issues that exist in the society since long. These books are thoroughly enjoyed by the masses and the publishers make easy money out of them. The publishers feel that the literature actually survives because of these types of bold topics and commercials used by the women novelists. They describe the whole world of women with simply stunning frankness. Their write-ups give a glimpse of the unexplored female psyche, which has no accessibility. The majority of these novels depict the psychological suffering of the frustrated housewife.

Since long, feminism has been used by the women novelists. Their novels reflect that the present age women have realized that she is not helpless and is not dependent. They feel that a woman is an equal competent just like a man. Today, a woman has also become a direct money
earner and she is not only confined to household works. The women of modern era think on different lines and that is what is depicted in the novels of the Indian women authors. These facts are incorporated by the women writers. Indian women writers explore the feminine subjectivity and applies the theme that ranges from childhood to complete womanhood. Through their novels they spread the message of what actually feminism is, which actually is very broad. These women writers say that feminism means putting an end to all the sufferings of a woman in silence.

The theme of modern woman’s existential struggle to establish her own identity in order to assert her individuality is quite often in the novels of the Indian women novelists of the post-independence age as can be seen in the works of Kamala Markandaya, Ruth PrawerJhabvala, Anita Desai and NayantaraSehgal. As a novelist Kamala Markandaya is intensely aware if the impact of the socio-economic forces on contemporary women. In her novel, Nectar in a Sieve, Rukmani the protagonist is presented as a woman of sorrows barely managing to survive in a South Indian village, the existential plight of women in a male-dominated society is effectively presented in Anita Desai’s fiction too. Her women characters are in perpetual quest for some meaning or value in life. Maya in her novel Cry the Peacock inhabits a world full of morbid fears and turns neurotic and eventually psychotic, because of her failure to establish a cordial and satisfactory relationship with her husband Gautama. Having experienced the bitterness and agony of marital discord which ultimately resulted in a divorce in her own life, NayantaraSehgal depicts in her novels and Indian woman’s struggle for survival in the present day world and her quest for individual freedom and self-identity. With a profound understanding of feminine sensibility, she explores and voices the mute miseries of millions of married women through her works of fiction.

Authors like Kamala Markandaya, ShashiDeshpande and Anita Desai have chosen the problems and issues faced by the women in today's male dominated world as the main theme of their books. For instance, some of the novels of Anita Desai like 'Voices in the City' and 'Where Shall We Go This Summer?' she has portrayed the complexities between a man and woman relationship. She has tried to explore the psychological aspects of the lead protagonists. The women novelists try to create awareness that this is the time to proclaim with definite precision.
In India, the women writers are doing very well and their contribution is immense. Indian English writing started with authors like Sarojini Naidu. This great poetess charmed the readers with her writings. Regional fiction theme has been aptly used by Kamala Das, Anita Nair and Susan Viswanathan. Novelists like Kamala Markandaya and Anita Desai captured the spirit of Indian cultures and its traditional values. During the 1990's India became a popular literary nation as a number of women authors made their debut in this era. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Suniti Namjoshi and Anuradha Marwah Roy used realism as main theme of their novels. The list of Indian women novelists also comprises popular names such as Bharati Mukherjee, Nergis Dalal, Krishna Sobti, Dina Mehta, Indira Goswami, Malati Chendur, Gauri Deshpande, Namita Gokhale, Ruth Jhabvala, Shobha De, Arundhati Roy, Jhumpa Lahiri and many more. They are known for the contemporary approach in their novels. Most of these female novelists are known for their bold views that are reflected in their novels. Basically, these are the novels of protest and an outburst of reservations and contaminations. Unlike the past, where the works of women novelists were given less priority and were actually undervalued, classification of feministic or male writings hardly makes any sense today. Majority of the Indian readers comprising both male and female read the novels of the Indian women authors with certain expectations. They look for some 'Indian-ness' in the write-ups. Only the women novelists of India are capable of conveying the messages of feminism in an Indian way.

With the attainment of independence various reforms were made by the government to ensure development in the country. Soon, a new sphere of literature appeared where the writers wrote on themes projecting the miseries and complexities of human lives and concentrating on individual predicament. The mid-1950’s and 1960’s mark the second important stage of Indian English writing, when writers like Arun Joshi, Anita Desai, Kamala Markandaya, Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, Shashi Deshpande and Nayantara Sehgal came out with their works that changed the face of Indian English novel. They have opened up a new vista of human nature and man-woman relationship. The problems discussed in their novels are individual, rather than universal. These writers have projected the inner psychological turmoil of human beings surviving in different sections of the society. Anita Desai has portrayed the tyrannies, torture and violence faced by women in Indian society. She has stressed the disturbed psyche of women which makes them appear neurotic. Shattered by their stifling atmosphere her women characters become depressed and helplessly suffer.
1.1 Introduction - Anita Desai

Anita Mazumdar Desai (born 24 June 1937) is an Indian novelist and the Emerita John E. Burchard Professor of Humanities at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. As a writer she has been shortlisted for the Booker Prize three times; she received a Sahitya Academy Award in 1978 for her novel Fire on the Mountain, from the Sahitya Academy, India's National Academy of Letters. She won the British Guardian Prize for The Village by the Sea. Novelist, short-story writer and children's author Anita Desai was born in 1937 in Mussoorie, India. She was educated at Delhi University.

Her novels include Fire on the Mountain (1977), which won the Winifred Holtby Memorial Prize, and Clear Light of Day (1980), In Custody (1984) and Fasting, Feasting (1999), each of which was shortlisted for the Booker Prize. In Custody was made into a film by Merchant Ivory productions. Her children's book The Village by the Sea (1982), won the Guardian Children's Fiction Award. She is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, the American Academy of Arts and Letters, Girton College, Cambridge and Clare Hall, Cambridge. Anita Desai lives in the United States, where she is the John E. Burchard Professor of Writing at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, MA. Her most recent book is The Artist of Disappearance (2011), a trio of linked novellas about the art world, each featuring a different kind of disappearance.

Most of her women characters lack the spirit of viewing life with optimism and fail to overcome their existing traumas and apprehensions. Maya in Cry, the Peacock is unable to understand her husband who has a practical approach towards life. Raka in Fire on the Mountain is a product of a broken marriage who has witnessed the violent attitude of her father towards her mother. The brutality of her father destroys the humanity in Raka. She sets mountain on fire and rejoices in her act. Sita in Where Shall We Go this Summer lives a life of comfort and ease with her husband, who is flexible and understanding. At the time of her fifth pregnancy she develops a psychological imbalance during the gestation period. To escape the reality of her life she takes refuge at the island of Manori with the thought of getting blessings of his dead father who was known for performing miracles among the local people. It not only disturbs the smooth course of her marital life, but also pushes her children to the darkness of the island. Monisha in Voices in the City commits suicide as she finds no way out of the monotony of her life.
Anita Desai has also projected the pathetic condition of Indian widows through her character Mira Mavshi in the novel Clear Light of the Day. She is one of those contemporary writers whose themes revolve around the female world. Her women characters though lack strength, vitality, valour and hope, and are normally unable to develop a positive approach towards life. Her women characters are feeble and engrossed in their pain, which inculcates in them a devious state of mind restricting them from initiating relevant and authentic changes in their lives. Most of them lack the power to analyze their pathetic condition and cannot overcome their neurotic state. Her novels mostly exhibit the disturbed psychology of bereaved women and their lassitude due to the stifling atmosphere in which they have to survive. Her fiction does not talk about the emancipation of women either intellectually or morally. Her themes are not universal rather they talk about individual women and their emotional and psychological turmoil.

1.2 Introduction - Kamala Markandaya

Kamala Markandaya is one of those contemporary writers who have tried to define the pathetic condition of Indian women by raising some feminist issues. Kamala Markandaya's novels come under this stream that elevate the womanhood. Her Nectar in a Sieve (1958) and A Handful of Rice (1966) are her memorable masterpieces, because they study the impact of technology on an auxotonic social structure. The Coffer Dams (1969) and pleasure city (1982) are her forceful tales’ depiction the silent upheaval of social and familial structures in the grip of westernization. A Silence of Desire (1960) and Two Virgins (1973) expose inter-cultural and personal relationships in their full hypocritical intents. Possession (1963) and The Nowhere Man (1972) are the portrayals of the disturbing effects of political milieu on the lives of individuals yearning for self-realization and self-identification. Some Inner Fury (1955) and The Golden Honeycomb (1977) also deal with the problem of self-assertion and self-identification of women.

She talks about women trapped in their poverty like Rukumani in Nectar in a Sieve and Nalini in A Handful of Rice, whereas in The Golden Honeycomb she has written about women belonging to rich families. Unlike Anita Desai and Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, she points out that the crux of all prevailing problems of women is their financial dependence. Her women characters like Premala, Sarojini, Vasantha and Meera project the idea that the economic independence of women shall solve most of their problems. These characteristics of Kamala Markandaya’s female protagonists distinguish them from women characters of other contemporary Indian-
English writers. Her women characters’ refuse to treat men as oracles. Her novels take up some feminist issues and provide a new, strengthened and independent image of women. Unlike other writers, she not only criticizes the deplorable the status of women, but also wants to guide and encourage them to transcend it. Though she has suggested financial independence as a remedy to the doomed feminine world, yet many other problems concerned with women, such as social conditioning, sexual discrimination, and forced sex remain unanswered. Still, Kamala Markandaya has successfully propounded some feminist ideas in her novels.

Kamala Markandaya’s panache for depicting life in all equal proportions of anxiety, thrill, excitement, resentment, disappointment, tragedy, sorrow, being resilient and contentment would be the summary of the novel. Rukumani the lead character around who the entire novel is circumference is a daughter of a village head. Novel begins with the excitement of Rukumani’s dreams of being given in marriage of grandeur as were her three sisters, but resentment knocks her through her mother’s words taking her face in palms that four dowries for a man is a heavy weight knocking him down. This shows the economic situation of family trying to maintain the traditions of the family of many children.

Kamala Markandaya is important from many angles. She has tried to articulate the then contemporary philosophical and sociological strains in her novels: hunger, human damnation, racial recalcitrance, cultural chaos, assaults of modernity on traditional faith and individual inner crisis form the content of her fiction. Kamala Markandaya’s novels reveal the triumph of human nature and the innate dignity of woman in the midst of varied conflicts, trials and tribulations at a time when Indian women were transiting from a purely orthodox definition of their boundaries to a less conservative environment. The author is remarkable for the manner in which she recalls the consequences of industrialization and commercialization of a rural population: with great restraint, avoiding histrionics, moralization and false rhetoric.

The tragic pathos in Markandaya’s novels is a product of her awareness of the utter waste that accompanies great social change. A fine feminine sensibility pervades the fictional world of Kamala Markandaya. Rukumani, Ira, Mira, Premala, Roshan, Sarojini, Nalini, Saroja and Lalitha all show unusual courage, endurance, determination and stoicism. In this sense they are all emancipated women, who can cut across the barriers of race and religion and go beyond tradition
and customs and envisage a new world. They are all well drawn characters who are both ‘types’ and individuals but mostly they are conformists and traditionalists.

1.3 Introduction - ShashiDeshpande

ShashiDeshpande is one of the famous contemporary Indian novelists in English. She writes about the conflict between tradition and modernity in relation to women in middle class society. ShashiDeshpande’s novel deals with the theme of the quest for a female identity. The complexities of man-woman relationship especially in the context of marriage, the trauma of a disturbed adolescence. The Indian woman has for years been a silent sufferer. While she has played different roles-as a wife, mother, sister and daughter, she has never been able to claim her own individuality. ShashiDeshpande has emerged as a writer possessing deep insight into the female psyche. Focusing on the marital relation she seeks to expose the tradition by which a woman is trained to play her subservient role in the family. Her novels reveal the man-made patriarchal traditions and uneasiness of the modern Indian woman in being a part of them. ShashiDeshpande uses this point of view of present social reality as at is experienced by women. To present the world of mothers, daughters and wives is also to present indirectly the fathers, sons and husbands the relation between men and woman, and between women themselves. Her young heroines rebel against the traditional way of life and patriarchal values. The words which we always associate with what we consider to be the concept of an ideal woman are, self-denial, sacrifice, patience, devotion and silent suffering.

ShashiDeshpande began her literary career in 1977 as a short story writer. She is a born storyteller who proved her sustained creativity with the novel form. She is one of the widely read post–independence Indian English writers who write consciously of the issues that concern the educated middle class woman in Indian society. She attempts to closely analyze man-woman relationship within the perimeters of family and the contemporary social set-up. She primarily focuses on the captivating problems and the suffocating environs of her heroines, who struggle hard in this malicious and callous male-dominated world to discover their true identity. ShashiDeshpande's first book was The Legacy, a collection of short stories, and since then she has published dozens of stories. The authentic recreation of India, the outstanding feature of her stories, is a distinct feature of her novels also. There is nothing sensational or exotic about her India—no Maharajahs or snake charmers. She does not write about the grinding poverty of the
Indian masses; she describes another kind of deprivation—emotional. The woman deprived of love, understanding, and companionship is the center of her work. She shows how traditional Indian society is biased against woman, but she recognizes that it is very often women who oppress their sisters, though their values are the result of centuries of indoctrination.

Deshpande has thrashed women’s problems and situations in a fast-changing social scenario. We cannot brand her either as typical Western liberated or an orthodox Indian one. She does not let herself be overwhelmed by the Western feminism or its militant concept of liberation. In quest for wholeness of identity, she does not advocate separation from the partner but a diplomatic assertion of one’s identity within marriage. In spite of the advances in technology and science, society still marginalizes woman, based on gender distinction. In our society, there is a distorted notion that if somebody writes anything about women, that would be a feminist work and it is against masculine supremacy. It is also noted that many of the feminist writers worked out on the exaggerated or fabricated troubles of women and at the end of the story the protagonist quarrels with the male characters and publicly challenges the male domination.

Shashi Deshpande differs from other feminist writers on this angle. She does not write as a feminist but she has a woman’s perceptive on her works. She deals with the genuine problems of contemporary Indian woman. With her works she could convey the depths of female psyche. Her protagonists are modern, educated young women, crushed under the weight of a male dominated and tradition bound society. Her attempt to give an honest portrayal of their sufferings, disappointments and frustrations makes her novels ‘feminist texts’. She does not make her women characters stronger than they actually are in their real life. We can see the elements of ‘Deshpandean heroines in every woman of today’s Indian society. They hold the authenticity of flesh and blood. Deshpande has handpicked these characters from real life and readers can equate these characters with themselves or somebody they know. I think this might be the reason behind her popularity.

Her female protagonists redefine the Sati- Savitri image. She tries to re-evaluate the present Indian value system and recommends the importance of equality in man-woman relationship. On this aspect, she has portrayed the ‘bossy’ nature of men and pointed out that women are turned to be mere secretaries after their marriage. A typical Indian husband considers
his wife as a machine, which speed up or smoothen his day to day work. For them marriage is a means for their social and personal betterment. After accepting dowry, they use their wives as unpaid servants; Indian husbands gain more from the ‘marriage sale’. Mohan in That Long Silence is that kind of husband because he married the protagonist for his social betterment. Though Deshpande is aware of this fact, she never suggests the female chauvinism as a solution to all the problems of Indian women. This is why her voice is different among the feminist writers in India.

Shashi Deshpande generally has the heroine as the narrator, and employs a kind of stream of consciousness technique. All the novels of Shashi Deshpande hold the power to deliver the problems of middle class women in a genuine sense. Her novels conceive the elements of personal experiences. Her psychological insight into her characters put her on par with the masters of the genre.

In this whole scenario the fiction of Shashi Deshpande comes as a fresh air, which not only propagates feminist ideas but also advises women to understand their naked selves. Deshpande’s novels suggest that women should take cognizance of their weaknesses, overcome them and implement their potentials in order to assert their individuality. As a novelist she mirrors the new socio-cultural context of the process of change. Her novels reflect the social realities of Indian life. They also revaluate and reinterpret women’s status, helping them to reinvent their identity and community positions, norms and values. The themes dealt by Deshpande in her novels possess universality. They do not refer to a particular woman or a particular section of women in the society but are representative of Indian womanhood.

As compared to the novels of Anita Desai, Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, Kamala Markandaya and other early writers, we find her fiction giving a more transparent picture of the status of Indian women. She is neither prejudiced against men nor has any partiality towards her female protagonists. She presents the true facet of the modern Indian society in her novels. Supporting the autonomous self-hood for women she suggests that substantial and reasonable methods should be employed to improve their condition. Like Virginia Woolf, she feels that women should be allowed to utilize their talents, and simultaneously they should fulfil their duties towards their families. Like Betty Friedan, she too advocates that women should be equivalent to men and their existence should be noticed as human beings. Like Simone de Beauvoir she traces
and exposes the limitations associated with a woman’s life from her childhood to womanhood. Deshpande’s feministic concerns are different from those of the other contemporary writers. She presents the new image of the Indian woman who wants to be a wife, mother and daughter, and simultaneously desires to achieve her individuality. Deshpande’s novels define the concept of feminism within the context of Indian social milieu.