IMAGE OF WOMEN IN INDIAN ENGLISH FICTION: A STUDY OF ANITA DESAI, SHASHI DESHPANDE AND BHARTI MUKHERJEE’S THE SELECT NOVELS

INTRODUCTION:

The present research work deals with the image of Indian women in Indian English fiction. It is concerned with the theory of Feminism. Feminist approach is the prominent in modern and post modern literature. Women’s liberation movement is a serious reform movement aiming at an upliftment of women in society. The first voice in favor of women’s right was raised by Mary Wollstonecraft in *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1972). She demanded equal opportunities for women in the field of education, economics and politics. The strong male supporter of women liberation, John Sturt Mill, showed serious concern about women’s oppression in his *The Subjugation of Women* (1869). He felt the need for improved education for women and condemned women oppression as domestic slavery. The term ‘feminism’ is Worldwide. It is a global and revolutionary ideology. It is a socio-cultural movement that aims at the freedom of women from male domination in the patriarchal society. It is also an equivalent to Humanism. Women’s liberation movement is radical. It highlights various hidden and oppressive aspects of man – woman relationship. It has a profound impact on the debate concerning the relationship between genders, culture, and creativity and knocks down the claims of a particular culture that women produce children and not art. This movement is fought for the issues related to women like gender discrimination, male domination, oppressive culture, domestic violence, sexual harassment, reproductive rights, property rights, equal salary, equal opportunities for career and business, liberation and empowerment of women. It has swept the world and has brought a tremendous change in the status of women across the world.
Feminist approach is the prominent in a modern and postmodern literature. It is first inaugurated with publication of Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights for Women* (1792) and since then there brought revolution in the women’s issues as women’s culture roles and achievements, their social political rights, equal rights for women, injustices etc. The modern and postmodern women novelists advocated feminist approach in their writings. Feminist literature in English is not a recent innovation. It is a product of the western liberalization in general and feminist thought in particular. The Indian women caught in the flux of tradition and modernity saddled with the burden of the past but both to cast off her aspirations constitute the crux of feminism in Indian Literature

Feminism is an ideology against oppression and exploitation of women in patriarchal system. The goal of feminism is to establish and defend equal political, economic and social rights and equal opportunities for women. It has been minutely handled in the works of Indian English fiction especially Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Bharthi Mukherjee, Githa Hariharan, Kamala Markandaya, Shobha De, Suniti Namjoshi, Arundhati Roy, Mahashweta Devi, Nayantara Sahgal etc. These Indian women Novelists have portrayed women’s issues realistically both psychologically and physically in their novels. They broke the literary and social norms of the past. They studied deep into psyche of their characters and projected various images of women and their status in society. They have written about women in a varied cultural perspective. In fiction, some women characters have attitude of rejection and negation of life while others have an affirmation and acceptance of life with a compromising attitude leading to deep sense of fulfillment. In this sense, the postmodern Indian women writers create a pattern of new study because they have dared to shatter the myth of a male dominated social system. They laid a firm foundation in the realm of female study in Indian Literature in English.
The proposed study attempts to focus on different images of women in Indian English fiction with special reference to the select novels of Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande and Bharati Mukherjee. These Women novelists reveal different images of women in their fictions. To understand these images it is necessary to think over feministic approach reflected in Indian English fictions.

**THREE WOMEN NOVELISTS:**

Anita Desai, one of the prominent Indian women English novelists, was born on June 24, 1937 in Delhi to a German mother and a Bengali father. She grew up speaking German at home and Bengali, Urdu, Hindi and English at school and in the city streets. She married with Ashwin Desai, businessman. They have four children including Booker Prize winning novelist, Kiran Desai. Her first book, *Cry, the Peacock*, was published in England in 1963, and other novels include *In Custody* (1984) and *Baumgartner’s Bombay* (1988). She is a very distinguished Indian novelist. She has been recognized as such both in India and abroad. Women writers of all ages have a natural preference for writing about women characters. Anita Desai is no exception in so far as. She has written by and large about women characters through her fiction.

Throughout her novels and short stories, Desai focuses on the personal struggles of anglicized, middle class women in contemporary India as they attempt to overcome the societal limitations imposed by a tradition bound patriarchal culture. Her novels move around women characters although she is preoccupied with the theme of incompatible marital couplets. Most of Desai’s works engage the complexities of modern Indian culture far from feminine perspective while highlighting the female Indian predicament of maintaining a self identity as an individual.
Cry, the Peacock is a novel mainly concerned with the theme of disharmony between husband and wife relationship. It deals with the psychological consciousness of the female protagonists and is aptly illustrated amidst detail images, monologues and flashbacks. The female character Maya, in the novel, envelopes the reader as she unfolds the growth, development and climax of her neurosis. Maya is a young girl obsessed by a childhood prediction of disaster. The story unfolds that Maya’s father without thinking much married her off to his own lawyer friend – Gautam who was middle aged man. The marriage was never fruitful and slowly Maya turns into a psychopath whose emotional needs were seen to be collided with that of the extremely practical outlook of her husband. The climax of the story lies when Maya’s attachment with her father further develops into and ‘Electra Complex’ which again acts as the catalyst in the deflowering of her marital relationship with her husband. Extremely frustrated Maya then looks back to the class of her childhood spent with her father. This reminiscence of those long lost days serves as the defense mechanism to set her free from her inner frustration and conflict. This dark state of affair is again unacceptable by the conscious mind of Maya. She relaxes her tension by pondering unconsciously on how “Peacock breaks their bodies” in order to receive their own pain. Here comes the sense of violence, the feeling of killing or get killed which engulfs Maya. The violent desire of killing her husband awakening from her own frustration as revenge against his icy cold impressiveness and indifferences weaves the story Cry, The Peacock. The very concept that woman needs something more than just food, clothes and accommodation, is aptly illustrated in this novel. The hyper sensitive mind of the women is illustrated by Anita Desai in the most tender way where the atmosphere of tension is set ideally against the backdrop. In Anita Desai’s novels Cry the Peacock, Voices in the City, Fire on the Mountain, She has
explored the psyche of both Childless woman and women with Children. She has covered women of all age groups and types.

The novel *Clear Light Of Day* is published in 1980. It set in old Delhi. The novel is divided into four sections covering the Das family from the children’s perspective in this order: adulthood, adolescence, childhood and the time perspective returns to adulthood. It starts with Tara, the wife of Bakul, India’s ambassador to America, greeting her sister Bimla (Bim), who is a teacher of history living in Old Delhi as well as their autistic brother Baba’s caretaker. Their conversation comes to Raja, their brother who lives in Hyderabad. Bim doesn’t want to go to the wedding of Raja’s daughter, showing Tara an old letter from when Raja became her landlord, unintentionally insulting her after the death of his father-in-law. In second part, the setting switches to partition era India, when the characters are adolescents in what is now Bim’s house. Raja is severely ill with tuberculosis and is left to Bim’s ministrations. Aunt Mira (Mira Masi), their supposed caretaker after the death of the children’s often absent parents, becomes alcoholic and alcoholism. Earlier Raja’s fascination with Urdu attracts the attention of the family’s Muslim landlord, Hyder Ali, whom Raja idolizes. When he heals, Raja follows Hyder Ali to Hyderabad. Tara escapes from the situation through marriage to Bakul. Bim is the chief and simplest protagonist of Anita Desai. Her ambition was two–fold; to be emotionally and economically independent. She never wanted to marry. The whole novel revolves around ‘Time’ drawing different impressions from the characters. Anita Desai herself says, “My novel is about time as a destroyer as a preserver and about what the bondage of time does to people. I have tried to tunnel under the mundane surface of domestically.’”

The novel *Fasting Feasting* relates with the disastrous attempts of an Indian daughter to leave her parents home and achieve independence without marriage. Her parents barely notice their
daughter’s aspirations as they lavish all of their attention on their only son. Anita Desai highlights on a different types of women liberation through the character of Mira-Masi; a distant relative developed the habit of travelling all over the country alone, visiting one place of pilgrimage after other. Through the portrayal of Mira-Masi character, Anita Desai divulges the practicability of the confluence of the social and the spiritual.

Anita Desai’s works represent a unique blending of the Indian and the western. Her novels catch the bewilderment of the individual psyche confronted with the overbearing socio-cultural environment and the ever-beckoning modern promise of self–gratification and self-fulfillment. In the face of this dual onslaught, her protagonists—Male or Female—Maya, Sita, Monish, and Alma; Sarah, Nanda, and Rakha; Bim and Tara; Devan, Baumgartner—are seen poised tantalizingly at different juncture of the philosophic spectrum. In every country, there is common contemporary issue of women facing to the people. It is the issue of women who are seen as launching themselves for their identity. It is in western or Indian literary tradition. Today the ‘New Women’ challenges the traditional notions of ‘Angel in the house’ and ‘sexually voracious’ image. The ‘New women’ is a woman of awareness and consciousness of her low position in the family and society. Anita Desai has presented image of a new women who challenges the old traditions. She wants to create her own place in the family. Anita Desai asserts that her protagonist’s are new and different. “I am interested in characters who are not average but have retreated or been driven into some extremity of despair and so turned against … the general current”.

Shashi Deshpande (1938) is one of the post independence Indian woman fiction writers. She is known for her sincerity and ability in voicing the concerns of the urban educated middle class women. Her novels reflect the gamut of Indian cultural issues. She is the living dynamic

*The Dark Holds No Terror* (1980) Shashi Deshpande’s first published novel presents Saritha’s quest for identity and her assertion for equality to her brother and later to her husband. It is the story of Saru who feels like a trapped animal, trapped by her need to succeed at any cost. She needs to find somebody who would care for her. The futility of her search becomes obvious to her when she hears what her mother had commented on listening to the end of the war in Mahabharata. The mother had said ‘‘on listening to how Dhuryodhana leaves the battlefield and goes into a lake waiting for the Pandavas to come and kill him…that’s what all of us have to face at the end that we are alone. We have to be alone.’’ This kind of utter loneliness a human being faces in life stands at the core of *The Dark Holds No Terror*. Saru is lonely because she has not received any love all through her life.

In this novel the novelist brings out powerfully the psychological problem of woman and discusses it artistically without crossing the barriers of art. The novel also transcends feminine constraints and raises issues which the human beings in general encounter in their life. The novelist aim is to show one should take refuge in the self. It means that woman should assert and ascertain herself, so she can overcome the suppressing forces. She makes Sarita’s consciousness to be touched by her experience as a doctor. Sarita realizes that one has to be sufficient within oneself because there is no other refuge elsewhere, puts an end to her problems. She realizes that we come into this world alone and go out of alone.
The novel, *That Long Silence*, tells us the story of man and woman from woman’s point of view and of wife and husband from the wife’s point of view. She expresses the silence of the women protagonists Jaya as expression of the silence of the modern Indian housewife. Although modern women writers tried to express the silence that had turned women into non-entities; they could only provide psychological depth to their characters. They either created unreal sentimental romances or succumbed to the temptation of mounting feminist ideology. But Shashi Deshpande’s success lies in her representation of real life experience. She realistically depicts the inner conflict of Jaya and her quest for the self identity. The novel sustains its credibility from the fact that Jaya is a convent educated – English – speaking lady with a literary taste. It portrays the conflict raging between the narrators split self and the housewife. Jaya represents urban and middle class woman. Her upbringing demands the suppression of the self. Her paint up feelings makes her neurotic she is content to play the role of a caring wife. But like Seeta, She fails to accompany her husband in exile. To Jaya the experience turns out to be traumatic. She lives several days in a traumatic state. *That Long Silence* is the masterpiece of feminist writing in Indo- Anglican fiction raises the status of Shashi Deshpande among the writers of the present day. The novel highlights the image of middle class women sandwiched between tradition and modernity. The novel is about gender discrimination and inequality prevalent in society. Here the protagonists raised voice against the role models of the age old patriarchal set up. Her romantic appearance is the feminist mark of the new woman. But she concludes that a husband is a sheltering tree and she plays again the role of an orthodox Hindu Wife.

Shashi Deshpande’s third novel *A Matter of Time* (1996) expounds the human predicament of four women – Manorama, Kalyani, Sumitra and Arundhati. These four women are representing four generations of the same family. They deal with motherhood, husband – wife relationship,
mother – daughter relationship, problems of Indian joint families, mental and physical trauma of women, sex and sexuality. It is a fine example of the pain rampant in life of the leading women, their suffering at domestic and social levels and the imposed endurance in marriage. It voices a scathing aspect of Indian social institutions like marriage or family, orthodox expectations from Hindu wife, suffocation experience by the women protagonists and symptomatic of the emerging ‘new woman’ who struggles to overcome her domestic plight with ‘dignity and strength’. It revolves around an urban, middle class family of Gopal and Sumi with their three daughters – Arundhati (Aru) Charulata (Charu), Seema and opens a midway with Gopal’s walking out of their marriage confronting mental agony and suffering to the each member of the family. The story leads us to have a quick and miserable glance at the family and its crumbled history where we find the marginalization of women either honour or dominant traditional patriarchy. Kalyani-Shripati marriage is one of pivotal concerns of A Matter Of Time. Kalyani’s plight in marriage and prolonged silence of her husband are in no way less heartrending than that of Sumi. On Sumi’s downfall in married life, Kalyani finds an echo of the same miseries of which she has been suffering. Being a woman and the traditionally confined caged birds that longs for happiness in vain, She recounts the bitter realities of her own life Though her marriage and social duties were the outcomes of typical Hindu marriage institution, Kalyani’s real tragedy begins when her four year old son, Madhav who is lost at the railway station.

A matter Of Time is the deep study in feminine consciousness and human relationships of all sorts of human bonds. In this novel the relationship of Gopal- Sumi, Shripati- Kalyani, Vithalrao- Manorama, Kalyani- Sumi, Sumi- Aru are the most rewarding things. The four middleclass women are focused in this novel. There are several kinds of comments on
relationships. The novel is the excellent feminine document. The images of Mother Daughter relationships, womanhood trauma of a deserted wife, and marginalization of women are focused. Like Anita Desai and Shashi Deshpande, Bharathi Mukherjee responded to the theory of Post modernism in different ways. She presented social status of women in new society as the ‘Second Sex’. Through her all novels, she raises voice against gender equality.

Bharati Mukherjee was born on July 27, 1940 to an upper-middle class Hindu Brahmin family in Calcutta, India. The second of three daughters of Sudhir Lal, a chemist, and Bina Mukherjee, she lived with 40 to 50 relatives until the age of eight. Bharati Mukherjee and her sisters were always given ample academic opportunities. They have all pursued academic endeavors in their careers and have had the opportunity to receive excellent schooling. In 1947, her father was given a job in England and he brought his family to live there until 1951, which gave Mukherjee an opportunity to develop and perfect her English language skills. She earned B A. with honors from the University of Calcutta in 1959. Then, her family moved to Baroda, India, where she studied for her Master’s Degree in English and Ancient Indian Culture in 1968. She went to the university of Iowa in 1961 to attend the prestigious writer’s workshop and planned to study there to learn her Master’s Of Fine Arts. Though she returned to India to marry a bridegroom of her father’s choice, she married with Clark Blaise, a Canadian writer, in lawyer’s office. Then she completed her Ph. D. in English and comparative literature from the university of Iowa in 1969. In 1968, Mukherjee immigrated to Canada with her husband and became a naturalized citizen in 1972. Her 14 years in Canada were some of the hardest of her life. She found herself discriminated there. She has spoken in many interviews of her difficult life in Canada. During these situations she wrote her first two novels, The Tiger’s Daughter (1971) and Wife (1975). She collected her experience and sentiments in Canada in her first collection of short stories.
Darkness (1985). Finally fed with Canada, Mukherjee and her family moved to the United States in 1980. She was awarded a National Endowment for the Arts grant. She has had different experiences in her life. She has been described as a writer who has lived through several phases of life, first as a colonial then National subject in India. She led life of exile as a post-colonial Indian in Canada. Finally, she shifted into a celebratory mode as an immigrant, then citizen in the United States. She has written fictions like Jasmine (1989), The Holder of the World (1993), Leave It To Me (1997). She responded to the Feminine approach and reflected various images of Women through her fictions.

The novel Jasmine (1989) the title character and narrator of Bharati Mukherjee’s novel, was born approximately 1965 in a rural Indian village called Hasanpur. She tells her story as a 24 year old pregnant widow, living in IOWA with her crippled lover, Bud Ripplemeyer. It takes two months in IOWA to relate the most recently developing events. But during that time, Jasmine also relates biographical events that span the distance between her Punjabi birth and her American adult life. These past biographical events inform the action set in IOWA. Her odyssey encompasses five distinct settings, two murders, at least one rape, a miming, a suicide, and three love affairs. Throughout the novel, the title characters identity changes again and again: from Jyoti to Jasmine to Jazzy to Jassy to Jase to Jane. In chronological order, Jasmine moves from Hasanpur, Punjab to Flowerskey, Florida (near Tampa), to Flushing, New York to Manhattan, to Baden, IOWA, and finally is off to California as the novel ends.

The novel The Holder of the World (1993), presents individuality and self-confidence. It is the story about dislocation. The central figure is Hannah Easton, born in Massachusetts and travelled to India, involved with a few Indian lovers and eventually a King who gives her a diamond known as the Emperor’s Tear. Hannah presents enduring strength for achieving
personal recognition. The story is told through the detective searching for the diamond Hannah’s viewpoint. Here Mukherjee’s focus continues to be on immigrant women and their freedom from relationships to become individuals. She also uses the women characters to explore the spatiotemporal connection between different cultures.

*Leave It To Me (1997)*, presents the story of a young woman sociopath named Debby Di Martino who seeks revenge on parents who abandoned her. The story reveals her ungrateful interaction with kind adoptive parents and a vengeful search for her real parents. The novel also looks at the conflict between eastern and western worlds and at mother–daughter relationships through the political and emotional topics by the main character in her quest for revenge. In this novel Debby Di Martino is presented as central figure. She tried to take revenge on her American mother and Eurasian father. They abandoned her in late 1960s. She emerged as a strong independent woman trying to balance her chaotic life. Her life is an encounter with existential realities. She presented social status of women in new society as the ‘Second Sex’. Through all her novels, she raises voice against gender equality.

These three great Indian women novelists handled various themes regarding women’s life and status in male-dominated society. For example gender equality, her alienation, anxiety, insecurity, fear her marital familiar and social relation, sufferings and exploitation, struggle for new identity, psychological disturbance in her mind, mother-daughter relationship, disharmony between husband and wife’s relationship etc. Through these themes these women novelists have tried to project various images of women. For example the image of traditional, modern and new, liberated, immigrant, middle class, sensitive, sterile, emotional and self-sacrificing woman.