

FEMINIST POETICS IN ALICE MUNRO AND ANITA DESAI

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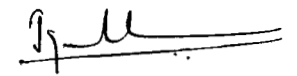
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Calicut,
19 July 2000

Snehaprabha
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DECLARATION

I, Jayasree Sukumaran, hereby declare that this thesis, "Feminist Poetics in Alice Munro and Anita Desai", is a *bona fide* record of research work done by me, and that it has not previously formed the basis for the award of any degree, diploma, associateship, fellowship, or other similar title or recognition.



Jayasree Sukumaran

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Introduction

Jayasree Sukumaran “Feminist poetics in Alice Munro and Anita Desai”
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Introduction

Despite the vast socio-cultural differences that exist between Canada and India, the basic issues that confront their writers, especially their women writers are similar. As Ananda Coomaraswamy observes, "there cannot be anything absolutely unique in the experience of any race. Its peculiarities will be chiefly a matter of selection and emphasis, certainly not a difference in specific humanity" (21). It might also be argued that the uniqueness of individual experience is nothing but the result of a shift in emphasis brought about by socio-cultural differences, which can be traced back to purely geographical or political factors. Moreover, the boundaries that separate literatures are not like those which geographically or politically separate nations. Their boundaries are "infinitely porous . . . open to influences from anywhere in the world". They generally combine "local and world wide interests". It is this "boundary-without-walls" aspect of literature that makes the comparison of writers like Munro and Desai, a possible and profitable literary exercise (Frye 15).

Striking parallels exist in the histories of the emergence and development of Indian and Canadian literatures in English, and their struggle to establish their respective identities against the hegemony of European and American writing. Both India and Canada have had an indelible colonial experience. Although its character and extent might be

varied, their literatures in English have been overshadowed by that of Europe and America till the first half of the twentieth century. In this sense, both Canadian anglophone writing and Indian writing in English belong to the post-colonial writing, struggling against cultural imperialism.

The intellectual atmosphere of the sixties and after, with its awareness of the significance of the marginalised, encouraged all subordinated cultures and literatures to advance along their own independently and individually charted routes. This process was catalysed and accelerated by several world-wide movements, working in the same direction, like the Women's Movement, the Black Movement and the Movement for Conservation. During the same period, Canada had been defining itself as an independent, political and cultural self. The emerging culture of Canada gradually came to be recognised as a cultural mosaic, in which every individual chip contributed its share to the general pattern by its varied shape, size and hue.

Since then, Canada has also witnessed the rapid emergence of women writers who soon dominated the country's literary space. The growth of Canada as a nation and that of women as competent writers are thus simultaneous occurrences. All the women writers have been preoccupied with the question of identity and the search for roots, through the familial past, at a time when the nation itself has been engaged in a

similar activity. This coincidental link has given women's writing in Canada, a special, privileged status.

Alice Munro and Anita Desai are major contemporary voices in Canadian and Indian literatures respectively. Although they hail from two entirely different socio-cultural milieus, their contemporaneity undoubtedly functions as a crucial element in determining their thematic choices as well as structural concerns, as writers of fiction. They are united in their common pursuit of the truth about the shifting roles of women in family and society in relation to their specific environment. Hence besides their contemporaneity, their gender and their concern for gender offer the strongest link between these two writers.

The second half of the twentieth century in which most of their works are written, has witnessed radical and dramatic changes in the roles and experiences of women in family and society, informed and encouraged by the ideal and goals of the feminist movement. Their fiction reflects these turbulent shifts in attitudes and perceptions. It deals with the complexities of experiences undergone by women characters who find themselves trapped in a hostile patriarchal milieu. They embody the aspirations and frustrations of women who fail to conform to the conventional pattern of life, prescribed by a biased and therefore imperfect male dominated society. They also foreground the problems of accommodation and adjustment

faced by female heroes in their struggle to find a space for themselves in a restrictive environment. The relationship and the power struggle between the sexes get ample exposition through their narrative content. However, there is no belligerent advocacy of feminist ideology in their works. A conscious social objective or an overt propagandist mode seems to be absent in them. They contain mostly an oblique critique of life and society. But the fact that the main thrust of their works is on the exploration and exposition of the traditional limitations imposed upon women's life, testifies to their concern with gender specific issues and their "support for the feminist project of making women visible" (Moi 129).

Munro is temperamentally averse to the notion of strident didacticism in art. In an interview with Boyce and Smith, she says, "I don't like messages attached to my reading . . . I also think that writing about 'current issues' dates very quickly" (224). However, in her conversation with Geoff Hancock, she admits that her stories "do have a social and political content in the broadest sense of the terms" (206).

Desai also adopts a similar stance in her concern as a woman writer. She has stated in lucid terms that her novels are "no reflection of Indian society, politics or character" and that "her interest is always in the individual, rather than in any mass movement" (Libert 51). She further says that a writer can "only be a social critic quite unconsciously". Yet, very

much like Munro, she modifies this stance slightly in her conversation with R.K. Srivastava. Her novels, she states, "are not meant to illustrate theories of philosophy or psychology, although they may participate in such debates and enquiries" (212). However, their fiction subtly and forcefully argues that the trauma of being a woman is directly caused by the unbalanced social structure.

Munro's reputation as a writer rests mainly on her short stories, the form of which she has subjected to a series of experimentation throughout her career. She has been the winner of Canada's prestigious Governor General's Award three times for her works, *Dance of the Happy Shades* (1968), *Who Do You Think You Are?* (1978) and *The Progress of Love* (1986) respectively. The last one was also selected as one of the best books the same year by the *New York Times*. Her other works include *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971), *Something I've been Meaning to Tell You* (1976), *The Moons of Jupiter* (1982), *Friend of My Youth* (1990) and *Open Secrets* (1994). She has been a guest speaker in China, Norway, England and Australia and her work has been translated into several languages.

Desai's literary career began with the publication of *Cry, The Peacock* in 1963, and it extends through nine novels to her most recent one, *Fasting, Feasting*. She has written several short stories too, ten of which are collected under the title *Games At Twilight* (1978). In this study, Munro's *Lives of*

Girls and Women and *Who Do You Think You Are?* are selected and closely analysed along with Anita Desai's *Cry, The Peacock* and *Clear Light of Day*.¹ An attempt has been made to understand how "the process of making women visible" operates in the fictional canvas of these writers. It was not possible to range equally over the entire fictional oeuvre of these writers. However, references have been cited from works other than the selected ones, when necessitated by the context for validation or endorsement.

The fiction of these two writers reveals close resemblances in thematic concerns as well as in narrative strategies. Their range alike is narrow, for their fictional material is derived primarily from private experiences and is based on a "private vision".² An attempt has been made in this study to analyse the distinctive signs and features of women's writing in these two writers against the framework of feminist poetics. Converging and contrasting attitudes of Munro and Desai are highlighted, after a close scrutiny of the selected texts separately and in detail. Granting that the essential human experiences are similar, there may still occur differences in creative approaches and critical stances. So the differentiae of female experience in these writers are explored and analysed with the help of Canadian and Indian feminist points of view, both having been primarily derived from Euro-American critical theories.

Although unforeseen difficulties had cropped up in the wake of bringing these two writers into a common focus, it has been an inspiring literary project. For, a comparative evaluation, setting one writer against the other, leads to a clearer and a better perspective of either of them. It reveals the fundamental unity of human perception, women's perception, in particular. A bipartite approach has been adopted in the thematic analysis of these writers in chapters II and III. The study of one author is profitably used to evaluate the other.

The first chapter develops the framework derived from feminist poetics, on which the analysis is founded. Chapter II proceeds to examine those characters in Munro and Desai who have been shackled and restrained by patriarchal domination. It highlights the damaging impact of unjust patriarchal discrimination on helpless women. Chapter III traces the gradual development of the emerging independent women in their fiction. Chapter IV deals with the gender relationship in society and reveals how they are integrally connected to the prevailing concept of power in society. Chapter V delineates the narrative devices employed by Munro and Desai, identifying shared approaches and pointing out obvious divergences. The conclusion sums up the insights gathered from this study, underscoring the point that in writers like Munro and Desai, the feminist poetics itself becomes a vision of life, inspiring both the theme and structure of their work.

NOTES

¹ The Novels will hereafter be cited as *Lives*, *Who*, *Cry* and *Clear* respectively. All citations are from the following editions.

Anita Desai, *Clear Light of Day*. (1980. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986).

— — —. *Cry, The Peacock*. (1963. Delhi: Orient, 1980.)

Alice Munro, *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971. Toronto: Penguin, 1990).

— — —. *Who Do You Think You Are ?* (1978. Toronto: Penguin, 1991).

² See Desai, "The Indian Writer's Problems". 1982. *Perspectives on Anita Desai*. Ed. Ramesh Srivastava. (Ghaziabad: Vimal Prakashan, 1984) 3.

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Evolving a Feminist Perspective

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Chapter 1

Evolving a Feminist Perspective

Feminist literary criticism comprises a number of related practices, all of which are informed by certain shared concerns and common goals. It makes use of several divergent critical practices like Marxist, structuralist and deconstructionist, in order to achieve its objective - to end male domination in literature. As Mary Eagleton remarks, "Feminist theory is a broad church with a number of co-operating and competing approaches: it is probably more appropriate to talk of feminist theories, rather than feminist theory" (2).

Feminist criticism is a 'discovery' in the original sense of the word - it 'dis-covers' literature in a new light, this unveiling being inspired by the awareness that gender is a crucial and influential factor in the writing and reading of literature. Feminist scholars have found out that 'the great tradition' in literature as well as in criticism is merely one-sided and biased, with a concept of creativity and interpretation based merely on male experience and communicated through male voice.

This chapter outlines the general contours of feminist criticism with a special emphasis on those strands of critical thought, which have been helpful in analysing the thematic content and the narrative devices of

Munro and Desai. The insights used are derived from several sources – Anglo-American, European, Canadian and Indian. The chapter examines: (1) the circumstances that made patriarchy a dominant and oppressive social practice, (2) the ideas that helped women break free of the restraints imposed upon them and emerge as dignified individuals, (3) the theoretical exposition of the gender relationships in society and (4) the feminist critical theories regarding the use of language and narrative structures.

Eliot's observation that the function of criticism is "the elucidation of the works of art" and "correction of taste"¹ is applicable to feminist criticism as well, but the latter has an additional perspective and a different aim. For feminist criticism is not merely elucidation of the works of art but elucidation to expose the duplicitous and prejudiced nature of literary and critical tradition. This implies an approach to literature with a view to changing its prejudiced profile. It brings within its compass the study and interpretation of all facets of women's life and experiences as depicted in literature. Its mission is to incorporate the suppressed or unvalued women's work into the literary canon and to effect necessary transformation in the methods of study and standards of literary evaluation. The former poses a direct challenge to traditional male criteria regarding the literariness of a work of art and marks a deliberate attempt to make articulate the female voice derogatively treated by the male tradition.

Feminist criticism thus has two distinct modes as observed by Elaine Showalter.² "The first mode is ideological; it is concerned with the feminist as *reader*, and it offers feminist readings of texts which consider the images and stereotypes of women in criticism - and women-as-sign in semiotic systems (335). The second mode of feminist criticism is "the study of women as *writers* and its subjects are the history, styles, themes, genres and structures of writing by women, the psychodynamics of female creativity; the trajectory of the individual or creative female career; and the evolution and laws of a female literary tradition" (335). Showalter terms the latter "specialised critical discourse" as "gynocritics" (335). The study of Munro and Desai would thus fall within the rubric of gynocriticism.

Finding that the art of representation is stained by patriarchal ideology which is partial, unjust and a distortion of reality, feminist literary, criticism in general, foregrounds the issues of marginalisation and vituperative discrimination suffered with little or no protest by women writers down the years. So feminist critics ask how literature represents women, what they say about gender relations and how they define sexual differences. With the same questions in mind, gynocritics make close scrutiny of women's texts.

Women writers and gynocritics alike aim at revolutionising the gender relations in society through their creative and critical practices.

They intend to re-structure sexual relationships in such a way that gender discrimination and bias would cease to prevail. As Ann Oakley and Juliet Mitchell maintain, they aim at annihilating the "varying degrees of misogyny [which] are part of the general culture" (1). Their intention is therefore humanistic more than belletristic - to transform society by making it shed its prejudices against women and their achievement. It may be true, as Oscar Wilde maintains, that "(l)ife imitates art far more than art imitates life".³

Showalter in *A Literature of their Own* identifies three categories of nineteenth century women's writing. She designates these three separate but overlapping phases of writing as 'feminine', 'feminist' and 'female'. The first term indicates an imitative phase. The second, a protesting or belligerent phase, and the third is marked by a tendency in writing towards self-discovery and exploration. Toril Moi slightly modifies Showalter's categorisation suggesting that a distinction be made "between 'feminism' as a political position, 'femaleness' as a matter of biology and 'femininity' as a set of culturally defined characteristics".⁴ She defines writing by women as '*female*', adding that this is a neutral "label" and "does not say anything at all about the nature of that writing; as *feminist*, writing which takes a discernible anti-patriarchal and anti-sexist position; and as *feminine*, writing which seems to be marginalised (repressed, silenced) by the ruling social/linguistic order" (132).

As a logical corollary she argues, 'Female' criticism, which per se only means criticism which in some way focuses on women, may then be analysed according to whether it is feminist or not, whether it takes female to mean feminist, or whether it conflates female with feminine. The apolitical study of female authors is obviously not in itself feminist. But she stresses the fact that "in a male dominated context an interest in women writers must objectively be considered a support for the feminist project of making women visible" (129). This theoretical position would mark the fiction of Munro and Desai as female fiction with feminist overtones.

Feminist literary criticism is the direct and the most expressive outcome of the feminist movement, which emerged as a vigorous political force in the sixties, and seventies and which revolted against gender discrimination in society. It was an eloquent and incisive attack against the basic assumptions of patriarchal culture about women. The movement sought equal rights and opportunities for women in private and social life. The activists fought against the patriarchal apartheid practised in the domestic front and work places. It made women conscious of their powerlessness which at the same time instilled into them the courage and determination to change it. Therefore, it had its impact on all levels and aspects of social and familial life. If the first wave of feminist movement focused on the question of women's civil and legal rights, the second wave,

through the seventies and later, exhorted women to assert their rights and to be liberated from the stereotypical gender identities.

Patriarchal domination and the allied power structure that prevailed in human societies gave rise to gender discrimination. All human organisations have been androcentric in character. Such a situation has always been unreasonably favourable to men and worked to their benefit at the expense of women. Throughout history in a patriarchal social structure, a lower social status has been imposed on women with fewer rights and privileges, but with numerous duties and obligations. Feminist uprising is the natural eruption of such continual marginalisation and oppression. In this context, it may be pertinent to trace briefly the evolution of ideas that led to an androcentric worldview.

The Western patriarchal notion was laid by Judaeo-Christian thought expounded in the Old and New Testaments. It was the Judaic myth of creation that made the woman 'the second sex'. Even earlier Aristotle regarded woman as "an unfinished man, left standing on the lower step in the scale of development".⁵ Aristotle was accepted by the Catholic church. St. Thomas Aquinas, the thirteenth century scholastic philosopher makes an almost reiterative statement . . . that a woman is "a man *manque*, an *animal occasionatum*, who is defined by what she lacks".⁶

Plato, on the other hand, maintained a just and impartial attitude towards women, indicative of his philosophical maturity. Tomlin observes, "Plato almost alone among the thinkers of antiquity advocated the equality of the sexes" (268). In the ideal community he envisages, there is no sexual discrimination or privileges. He believes that "the division of labour must be by aptitude and ability, not by sex", and instructs accordingly, "if a woman shows herself capable of political administration, let her rule; if a man shows himself to be capable only of washing dishes, let him fulfil the function to which Providence has assigned him".⁷

Two later works of seminal importance which deal with the predicament of women as the subjugated, are Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792) and J.S. Mill's *The Subjection of Women* (1869). In the conclusion of her novel, *Mary and the Wrongs of Women* (1798) Wollstonecraft writes, "It is the partial laws that make the world a veritable prison for women, at least the majority of them" (73). J.S. Mill goes further. He believes that subordination of women would block human progress (*Utilitarianism* 121). He declares: "No slave is a slave to the same lengths and in so full a sense of the word as a wife is".⁸

Simone de Beauvoir gives a brilliant account of the patriarchal assessment of women by tracing her social status down the centuries. She observes that the Catholic Church has always been a sacred accomplice in

the oppression of women. The patriarchal views authenticated and sanctified by the church came to be respectable in culture and art. The Canon Law of the fourth century considers even marriage as incompatible with Christian perfection and as a concession to man's frailty. Woman was looked upon as a temptress, an enemy of man. Such a misogynist perception is absent in the Indian texts. In them condemnatory remarks can be found side by side with eulogistic ones. The *Dharmashastras* are scattered with alternate instances of woman's glorification and debasement.⁹

However, in the East and the West, masculinity is centralised by marginalising femininity. Beauvoir traces this phenomenon to man's tendency "to view the world under the sign of duality" (10). The binary system in which one pole is privileged over the other is the foundation of Western philosophy and is imbricated in the patriarchal value system. Ruthven observes: "The earliest recorded list of binary opposites is attributed by Aristotle to the Pythagoreans; it sets male against female, right against left, good against evil in such a way that the list appears to be tacitly promoting a first term sequence ... at the expense of the second term sequence (41). Thus in the Man/Woman pair, the valorisation of the first term resulted in the subordination of the second. Man came to be regarded as society's self and woman as the 'other'. Similarly Cameron points out that since the women is regarded as the "other", all the negative characters

of humanity – as men perceive them are projected on to women (84). She further remarks that, for the same reason, in the binary opposition like good/evil, reason/unreason, light/darkness, where the oppositions are "differences" as well as "hierarchies", women are placed in the realm of "all that is negative, evil and dangerous, in need of control" (84).

Such a semantic and the corresponding social status resulted in the subordination and oppression of women in patriarchy. She was thus reduced to a social component lesser in status, but usable and exploitable.

The word 'man' in English and the equivalent term in many Indian languages initially functioned both as a generic singular and as a sex-indicative term.¹⁰ So by a subtle semantic game, all male values and attitudes began to stand for general human values and attitudes. This also produced an asymmetry between the terms, man and woman. As Shoshana Felman points out, "Theoretically subordinated to the concept of masculinity, the woman is viewed by the man as *his* opposite, that is to say, as *his* other, the negative of the positive, and not, in her own right, different, other, otherness itself".¹¹ Thus women as a group are demarcated as the 'other' and maintained collectively in an inferior status.

Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* lashes against patriarchy for having thus inferiorized women. She writes, "It is not the inferiority of women that has caused their historical insignificance; it is rather their

historical insignificance that has doomed them to inferiority" (160). Throughout her work, she maintains that gender relations, roles, and allied concepts are all culture born and custom reared. Since the publication of her work her statement "one is not born but rather becomes, a woman" (273) has become a household aphorism.

It may perhaps be difficult to destroy or ignore the dualism that underlies Western thought. Robert Scholes makes a perceptive observation on the fundamental nature of duality and its relation to the differentiation of sexes. He says: "It is in the differentiation of sexes that we learn our earliest and deepest lessons about sameness and difference. Sexual differentiation is the basis not only of our social system, but of our logic as well. If there were three sexes, our computers would not have begun to think in terms of binary opposition" (197). However by earnest feminist efforts, the social attitude to the components of the binary pair can be changed.

Since social conventions operate at the behest of the ruling class, marginalisation of women as a class of inferior beings became the general social practice. The sense of inferiority therefore never disturbed the minds of women and was accepted as the norm. G.H. Mead has pointed out in his study of the concept of individuality that the 'self' of an individual arises in the process of social experience and activity " and that it

does not exist initially at birth, and independent of society. "The individual experiences him [her] self as such, not directly but only indirectly, from the particular standpoints of other individual members of the same social group or from the generalised standpoint of the social group as a whole to which he [she] belongs" (146). Therefore the response of the 'other' has a pivotal role in the definition of the 'self'. It follows that the woman's 'self' relegated to the secondary pole in the binary pair gets subordinated socially and culturally.

Shulamith Firestone in *The Dialectic of Sex* (1971) coins the term 'sex-class' to emphasise the fact that women are culturally distinguished from human as they are biologically so from man. She says ": This is the oldest and most rigid class/caste system in existence, based on sex - a system consolidated over thousands of years, lending the archetypal male and female roles an undeserved legitimacy and seeming permanence" (23).

Eva Figs in *Patriarchal Attitudes: Women in Society* (1970) traces the history of male tyranny from the Middle Ages to the Victorian period when it reaches its crudest form. Her work is also a critique of man made norms of femininity forcefully imposed on women and later identified as her natural essence.

The constraining influence of patriarchy on women, women writers in particular, is perhaps most satirically expressed in Virginia Woolf's essays

and in her signal contribution to feminist thought, *A Room of Ones Own* first published in 1928. Like many other epoch-making publications, the book did not create any impact at the time of its publication or immediately after. Woolf focalises the problems faced by the nineteenth century women writers. She points out the acute contrast between what women actually wish to be, and what society expects of them. She comments on the patriarchal unwillingness to make women enter the world of letters and challenges society's unjust gender assumptions. She relates the cultural poverty of women to their material poverty and economic dependence. As Mary Eagleton observes, "[i]n some ways it is difficult for feminist criticism to go beyond Woolf. So acutely did she foreshadow future events that feminists from a variety of critical positions – Marxist, psycho-analytical, post-structuralist – turn to her as their starting point" (1).

In "Professions for Women" she considers how women writers are imprisoned and made helpless by the ideology of womanhood. Referring to the title image of the *Angel in the House* (1835) she writes, that, "killing the Angel in the house [is] part of the occupation of a woman writer" (60). With a rare insight she says, "Had I not killed her, she would have killed me" (59). This image which was once used to evoke powerfully the patriarchal notions of womanhood has since then become "an emblem of undesirable domestication". (Ruthven. 72). Virginia Woolf and Simone de Beauvoir are the two crusaders who waged a steady battle against

patriarchy and provided the intellectual fervour to the feminist efforts in life and literature.

Germaine Greer in her revolutionary work, *The Female Eunuch* (1970) indicates through the title image that patriarchy has debilitated women morally and sexually to such an extent that they have been reduced to the state of 'female eunuchs', shaped according to male desire and vanity. She stresses how socio-cultural conditioning has made women naively and unquestioningly accept patriarchal assumptions of themselves as the natural way of things. Greer goes to the extent of saying: "women represent the most oppressed class of life-contracted unpaid workers, for whom slaves is not too melodramatic a description. They are the only true proletariat left . . ." (369).

A few scattered traces of the earliest expression of feminist protest against patriarchal tyranny could be found in the creative writings of the nineteenth century writers. Mary Wollstonecraft's *Mary and the Wrongs of Women* is an example. It represents the eighteenth century critique of society and speaks for all women writers and readers who came before and after. She points out how the misery of oppression peculiar to women arises out of unjust social customs. Several creative writers since the nineteenth century, influenced by the liberal humanistic attitudes, have argued in favour of women voicing their distrust of male hegemony in life

and art. Hardy, for instance, exposes the hypocritical Victorian morality through characters like Bathsheba, Tess and Sue. Towards the end of *Far From the Madding Crowd*, Bathsheba says, "It is difficult for a woman to define her feelings in a language which is chiefly made by men to express theirs (415). These words might seem revolutionary in the Victorian literary atmosphere when linguistics was in its infancy, and little research had gone into the impact of gender on language.

The awareness of patriarchal discrimination worked as a strong motivating force and made women writers and critics struggle against it through their writing. They used language to overthrow and break free of male domination. The Marxian method of interpreting society with a view to getting it changed, suited the feminist need. Thus educated and politically informed women initiated into Marxist ideology made the feminist protest a reality. For the Marxian feminist critics, patriarchy, not capitalism became the target of attack.

The history of Europe has witnessed how Renaissance made Reformation possible, and how the latter paved the way for the democratic ideology to take root in the minds of humanity. Democracy in turn gave rise to Marxism and later to feminism. The feminist activists challenged the issue of gender, not poverty, as a socio-cultural construct, and fought against the related social restraints. Ann Oakley observes:

Sex has a biological referent as female or male: the chromosomal differentiation of body cells and all that emanates therefrom. Gender – femininity and masculinity – is the parallel cultural term. It was originally a grammatical one, referring to sex of words and linked to the term 'genus' though it also had another meaning to do with copulation and generation In modern usage, gender refers to the multiple differentiation of bodies that occur in social space and are mapped on to the biological ground plan.(32)

However, practically it is impossible to draw a line of division between sex and gender as in the case of nature and culture. It can only be said that gender operates on the side of culture in the subtle nature/culture dichotomy. The meaninglessness of the relation between these two binary poles, has been effectively proved, by Derridean deconstructive analysis.¹² It is an obvious deduction, that any system of binary terms, man/woman, for instance, could be dismissed as meaningless by the same analysis. Therefore to a certain extent, the deconstructive practice lends support to the feminist ambition of changing structures that are 'fixed' by culture.

In order to bring about the desired social transformation feminists also turned to the structuralist disciplines, which developed from the

descriptive linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure. The latter propounds a fundamental linguistic principle that words are not things but merely signs of them. The logical inference of this revelation is that the meaning that the word 'woman' happens to have, does not inhere in it naturally, but is imposed upon it by culture.

Another valuable and revolutionary insight came from the researches into the linguistic analysis and the knowledge about the role and function of phoneme. No phoneme is more important than the other. The constituent elements of language are held in binary opposition to one another and linguistic meaning is produced by a system of articulated differences. In the same way, social meaning is produced by the gendering of sexual difference into masculine and feminine components. It follows that the difference – linguistic or any other – between the components of a binary system does not suggest any hierarchical relationship. Hence, the privileging of the masculine pole over the feminine, turns out to be illogical. As already explained, deconstructive assessment also has dismissed the concept of binary opposition.

Feminist critics reject traditional power structure in society and the social relationship between the sexes, as they are based on biased and one-sided androcentric notions and which are therefore detrimental to the interests of women. In Western society, as Hazel Henderson observes, "the

values and attitudes that are favoured and invested with political power are the typical masculine values - competition, domination, expansion, etc. - while those neglected and often despised - co-operation, nurturing, humility and peacefulness - are designated as female".¹³ Hence, an unbalanced power structure prevails in androcentric societies. Virginia Woolf does not support the power struggle between the sexes. She lays faith in the concept of androgyny especially in relation to creative imagination. The latter, according to her is neither masculine, nor feminine, but sexless or androgynous. She seems to have gained inspiration from a similar statement Coleridge made in 1832 to that effect. According to her, Coleridge might have meant, "that the androgynous mind is resonant and porous; that it transmits emotion without impediment, that it is naturally creative, incandescent and undivided" (*A Room of One's Own* 97). Seeking and finding differences between the language and attitudes of men and women would not in any way help women writers or critics, in their goal to revolutionise the social structure. As Gilligen observes in the essay "Getting Civilized", "Just as women and men are of women born, so neither sex reproduces itself; both sexes contain and infuse one another much in the way people's voices flow in and out of one another, carrying psychology and also culture, mixing inner and outer worlds" (18). Such an understanding is essential for the foundation of a harmonious society, devoid of gender discrimination.

In any discussion of feminist poetics, the analysis of the relationship between women and language has become imperative, since the realisation that like gender, language is also a socio-cultural construct, and that language creates, maintains and reflects social relationships as well as the power struggle associated with them. The belief that language can encode or express objective or neutral facts has been dismissed by linguistic philosophers, both Eastern and Western. Even at the level of social interaction, *effective* communication rarely takes place. At the same time, since language is perhaps the most powerful instrument of socio-cultural practices, in an androcentric society it encodes and communicates only androcentric assumptions. Hence, it mostly oppresses rather than helps women. Patriarchy has used it to silence them. A woman is thus both an object and a subject in the linguistic realm. Several feminist critics have therefore argued that male domination in literature and life can be arrested only through a radical linguistic revolution. Hélène Cixous the French feminist critic, strongly argues for a specialised women's language or 'écriture féminine' or feminine writing, which is written by or from the female body. She insists that a woman must write herself and that in so doing she must return to the body "that has been worse than confiscated from her"¹⁴ by patriarchy. Cixous attacks the system of binary oppositions. She considers it the feminist mission to subvert this metaphysical logic of dichotomous oppositions, like positive/negative, presence/absence,

same/other and man/woman, which dominates the patriarchal ethic, and cultural attitude. She proclaims that "écriture feminine" which has infinite powers can undo the patriarchal binaries and establish a voice as well as a writing, which belongs only to women. So she exhorts women writers: "write yourself; your body must make itself heard. Then the huge resources of the unconscious will burst out" (116).

Like Cixous, Luce Irigaray, too has called for a woman's language, which she calls 'womanspeak'.¹⁵ Both these feminist critics accept the Lacanian concept of a symbolic order of language which is phallogentric and which therefore excludes women. It is for this reason that they suggest the use of creating a woman's language, which can challenge the effects of a patriarchal symbolic order.

Because of the sexist nature of language, a woman writer finds herself enmeshed in a system of signs which embarrasses her and obstructs her progress as a writer. As Ruthven observes, "Language is specifically a woman's prison", and "linguistically speaking, women are doubly disadvantaged in being (as it were) prisoners of the male prisoners in the prison house of language" (59). It is not surprising therefore that Woolf in *A Room of One's Own* cries out for a woman's sentence unspotted by patriarchal rationality for, a man's sentence is "unsuited for a woman's use" (77). Cixous' term "écriture feminine" is its logical conclusion.

However, the idea of creating a specialised language for women is controversial among feminist critics themselves. Deborah Cameron, for instance, in *Feminism and Linguistic Theory* expresses her disapproval of linguistic determinism - the concept that one group has the ability to fix meaning and deprive another the access to do the same. She places confidence in the flexibility and resourcefulness of the medium, which can be manipulated in such a way that it can be made to express the experience of women to the same extent that it does for man. She recognises the integral connection that language has with the power structure in society. Although verbal meanings are cultural constructs, they are learned and imbibed so young that they sound natural. So language produces and maintains male superiority and male power. Even then Cameron believes that there is no reason for women to be disheartened, as the history of humanity is full of instances of the victims of oppression bringing down the oppressor at some point of time, despite sharing a common language between them. Oppression, like any other phenomenon must run its course. Only through language, the instrument of the oppressor, can this be carried out. Cameron reminds the feminists that they must be aware of their own power to create "new meanings for a different and better world" (227). Gilligen in "Getting Civilized", subscribes to the same view. She says: "The cultural meanings of masculinity and femininity are socially constructed and are far more changeable than they may seem at any given

time" (18). Thus language by itself has no special power. It is the power of the user that it takes upon itself. It is a two-edged weapon that relates as well as alienates. If language is conceived to be 'man-made', by logical deduction, it can also be 'woman-made'. Therefore, while the French feminist critics speculate on the possibility of a 'feminine' body language, which would break the authority of patriarchal speech, the Anglo-American critics seek a linguistic space within the existing system itself. However there is an inherent ambiguity associated with Cixous' term 'écriture féminine', as the latter word does not connote a feminist protest in the contemporary idiom.

Canadian and Indian feminist criticism is mostly derived from Anglo-American and European theories. In Canada the energy of the female voice in creative and critical writing is identified with the voice of the nation politically and culturally. Henderson observes, "It is the writers of the marginalised gender who are writing the Canadian postmodern [literature] par excellence". Feminism can therefore be "the ethical centre of Canadian post modernism" (49). In the Indian scenario, although the feminist ideology is fed by Euro-American attitudes, it is a syncretic blend of Western ideas and the Indian ethos. Since an average Indian mind is rooted in tradition, the Western ideas get altered in character by its irresistible gravity.

The Hindu scriptures and the traditional Hindu law-books appear to have a strong anti-woman attitude especially when viewed through Western feminist ideology. The historians of ancient India celebrate and glorify the Vedic and pre-Vedic ages as ideal egalitarian epochs in history with no gender discrimination and exploitation.¹⁶ They testify to the fact that women were honoured in society. Sacred rituals like *yagnas* were performed by the couple together, the wife sitting next to the husband. In *Brhadaranyaka* and *Chandogya* Upanishads, there are allusions to women's participation in philosophical discussions. Probably they are exceptions and social reality may have little to do with textual representation. But, even similar references of honouring women do not reportedly occur in the Western religious or secular works. Coomaraswamy observes, "Indian women have remained the guardians of spiritual culture" and are expected to be "mothers alike in spiritual and philosophical senses" (118).

The historical period that followed was naturally antithetical in character. Women were then, denied the privileges of scriptural education. Gender based roles began to develop in social echelons and women as a class began to be equated with the sudras in the social ladder. They were reduced to the status of an animal existence, totally banished from the realms of education. They were allotted roles distinct from that of men, very much like, in Judaeo-Christian culture. There were very clear discrimination between the rights and privileges of a daughter and a son -

Manusmṛti makes only occasional mention of a daughter's inheritance. In patriarchal joint families, women were relegated to the kitchen, burdened with unending domestic chores¹⁷. As Alladi observes, "the patriarchal joint family system consolidated the position of the man by forever damning that of woman" (3). The situation is not much different in today's nuclear families.

However, the Indian lawgivers had the best of intentions, for they had envisaged a composite and integrated Hindu society and had social welfare as their objective. They believed in the division of labour. Coomaraswamy observes, "the Hindu marriage contemplates identity and not equality. The primary motif of marriage is not merely individual satisfaction but the achievement of *Purushartha*, the purpose of life, and the wife is spoken of as *Sahadharmacharini*, 'she who co-operates in the fulfilment of social and religious duties" (36). He further says that in a Hindu marriage, it is "not equality but identity that is contemplated" (36).

Manusmṛti, the most notorious of Hindu Law books is replete with contradictions on almost every subject that is discussed therein. In the chapter devoted to the sacred duties related to marriage, entitled *Dampati Dharma*, the Acharya speaks in unequivocal terms that "the sages have declared that the husband is the same as the wife."¹⁸ Woman is both praised and belittled in several different verses. Perhaps the most discriminatory

views occur in matters concerning a wife's duty to her husband. In chapter V, 154, it is said, "though destitute of virtue, or seeking pleasure elsewhere, or devoid of good qualities, yet a husband must be constantly worshipped as a God by a faithful wife." Unquestioned obedience to her husband seems to grant a woman eternal bliss and several punishments await her if she breaks the law. But however grievously man sins against his wife he goes scot-free. As Alladi remarks "[s]ociety has overlooked these contradictions, and the precepts that have taken hold in the social fabric are those that are responsible for the Indian woman's peculiarly low position (2).

Coomaraswamy puts the blame on the materialistic Western education for corrupting the Indian attitude towards life and its basic aspects. In Hinduism, the female principle denotes, Energy and is worshipped as '*Shakti*' by Shainvites, as '*Sri*' by Vaishnavites and as Prakriti in the Samkhya system of philosophy.¹⁹ These ideas and their spiritual dimension have infiltrated even into the lowest rung of Hindu society and have exerted a perennial influence on the Hindu outlook upon life. The Hindu religion holds sway over a man's life not only from birth to death, but in all his rebirths. Coomaraswami maintains that "the governing concept of Hindu ethos is vocation (dharma); the highest merit consists in the fulfilment of ones own duty, in other words, in dedication to one's calling" (199). So for a Hindu woman, "life is so designated that she is

given the opportunity to be a woman - in other words, to realise rather than to express herself" (123). He further says, "Hinduism justifies no cult of ego-expression" (119), for, it "does not identify freedom with self assertion" (130).

In the Indian ethos, family and familial relationships play a decisive role. The family forms the traditional socio-cultural base and a woman's life can never be analysed outside this primary reference point. In an Indian household, no decision can be taken individually. Krishna Raj observes that a household is a micro-community.

Every individual resolve affects the morphology of the household and calls for the re-adjustments in the family. This is the fundamental dilemma for women. As their fate is linked to that of the household, they identify strongly with its welfare and yet the fear of losing its security generates special vulnerabilities [and] episodes like widowhood, separation and abandonment are traumatic for women. The household's choices are in turn circumscribed by the larger socio-economic order.(15)

In such a cultural environment, marriage is a sacred obligation, and the "begetting of children, the payment of a debt" to one's ancestors (Coomaraswamy, 121).²⁰ Hence as a mother the woman is idealised and

she enjoys a dominant role in the family, even though the authority may rest with the husband or the son. This unique ambivalent status creates corresponding duality in society's attitude towards her, which in turn gives rise to endless socio-familial conflicts. However, this social situation is totally different from that which prevails in Western culture, in which the woman is eternally relegated to an inferior status.

A blind condemnation of woman is thus absent in Indian thought, for Hinduism, both condemns and deifies her simultaneously. A Hindu "worshipped goddesses and degraded women . . . he adored the mother and slighted the wife" (Ranade 255). He never looks upon her as 'the second sex,' an attitude which has its origins in the Biblical myth of creation. This concept is not found in Indian thought, nor has this term an equivalent in any Indian language. The dominating Father concept as the foremost among the sacred Trinity attributed to Godhead in Christianity is also absent in Hinduism. In the Hindu pantheon of the worshipped, gods and goddesses are treated with equal reverence. Thus in a spiritual or religious dimension the distinction between male and female seems to disappear in the Indian thought.

Another influence on the Indian mind is that of its religious myths and legends. They contain many stories dealing with the metamorphosis from one gender to the other. Men are very often re-born as women and

vice-versa. So in the collective unconscious, the gender identity is not fixed, but is always fluctuating. Diverse influences thus constantly modify the Indian attitude to gender-role stereotyping.

There is yet another interesting difference between the Eastern and Western attitudes related to the concept of gender. In the Indian world-view, even today, the idea of gender is associated with every object in the universe, concrete or abstract, from the zodiac signs to the basic elements. Even then, the apparent opposition between binary poles does not disturb the Indian psyche as it does Western thinking. For in Oriental philosophy, in general, the opposition gets resolved as their mutual complementarity is never forgotten. The idea of spiritual wholeness and perfection underlies all eastern philosophic thought. The relationship between yin and yang, the male and female principle in Chinese thought may be cited as an example. Yin and yang do not belong to different categories, but are extreme poles of a single whole. For the Chinese, "nothing is only yin or only yang. All natural phenomena are manifestations of continuous oscillations between the two poles, and all transitions take place gradually and in unbroken progression. The natural order is one of dynamic balance between yin and yang".²¹

Although in the metaphysical dimension, the male/female distinction disappears in Hindu thought, in practical life, things appear to

be different. Since the latter marginalises spirituality itself, the discriminatory practices based on gender prevail in modern Indian society. The Indian urban elite impressed by the Western ideas of individualism and materialism are also influenced by Western ideas of feminism. Hence, urban Indian women are poised between two worldviews. Even then as Nabar maintains, the Indian woman by her socio-cultural and religious conditioning, perceives her role, whether it is wretched or otherwise as spiritually fulfilling (35). This mental stance works as a decisive force in shaping the characters and events in the fiction written by women writers in India, like Desai. Traditional laws continue to mould even present day thinking.

NOTES

¹ T.S.Eliot, "The Frontiers of Criticism.", *On Poetry and Poets* (Kent: Faber and Faber, 1957) 115.

² Elaine Showalter, "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness." *Modern Criticism and Theory; A Reader*, Ed. David Lodge (London: Longman, 1988) 335.

³ Oscar Wilde, "Decay of Lying", *De Profundis and Other Writing* (1954. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973) 74.

⁴Toril Moi, "Feminist, Female, Feminine," *The Feminist Reader: Essay in Gender and the Politics of Literary Criticism*, Ed. Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore (London: Macmillan 1989) 117.

⁵ Will Durant, *The Story of Philosophy: The Lives and Opinions of the Greater Philosophers* (1926 New York: WSP, 1961) 83.

⁶Maclean, *Renaissance Notion of Woman*, 12 qtd in K.K Ruthven, *Feminist Literary Studies: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1984) 44.

⁷Will Durant, *The Story of Philosophy: The Lives and Opinions of the Greater Philosophers* (1926 New York: WSP, 1961) 35-36.

⁸J.S.Mill, *The Subjection of Women* (London: 1869) 57, qtd in K.K.Ruthven, *Feminist Literary Studies: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1984) 29.

⁹ The Dharmashastras are sacred books of Law in Hinduism. Manusmṛiti is an example.

¹⁰The word *manusya* in Sanskrit can be cited as an example.

¹¹See Shoshana Felman, "Women and Madness: The Critical Phallacy." *The Feminist Reader: Essays in Gender and Politics of Literary Criticism*. Ed. Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore (London : Macmillan, 1989) 135-36.

¹² See Jacques Derrida, "Structure Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences." *Contemporary Criticism: An Anthology*, Ed, V.S. Seturaman (Madras: Macmillan, 1989).

¹³ See Fritjof Capra, *Uncommon Wisdom: Conversations with Remarkable People*. (London: Flamingo, 1988) 257 for his conversation with Hazel Henderson.

¹⁴Hélène Cixous, "Sorties: Out and Out: Attacks/Ways Out/Forays". *The Feminist Reader: Essays in Gender and the Politics of Literary Criticism*. Ed. Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore (London : Macmillan, 1989) 116.

¹⁵See Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore "Introduction: The Story So Far" Ed,Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore *The Feminist Reader: Essays in Gender and the Politics of Literary Criticism*. Ed, Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore (London: Macmillan, 1989) 13.

¹⁶The relevant details are gathered from Eknath Ranade, Sakuntala Rao Sastry, Roma Chaudhury and Siddhinathandaswamy

¹⁷See Manusmṛti Chapter 2, Verse 67.

*Vaiṅhikō vidhistṛiṅām samskāro vaidikāḥ smṛtah
Patisēvā gurauvāsō gṛhārthōgniparikriya*

For women, marriage is ritual initiation; serving the husband, learning at the house of a guru; serving the hearth and doing household chores, performing rites of fire.

All citations from the text are from *Manusmṛti* ed, Sidhinathanandaswamy, (Calicut: Mathrubhumi, 1988)

¹⁸ Manusmṛti Chapter 9. Verse :45

*Ētāvānēva puruṣō yajjāyātma prajāti ha
Viprāh prāhustathā caitad yō bhartā sā smṛtānganā*

A man achieves manhood only through his wife; his progeny is also part of himself. So the sages have declared that the husband is the same as the wife.

¹⁹. See Roma Chaudhary, "Some Reflections on the Ideals of Indian Womanhood". *Cultural Heritage of India*. Vol II. Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, 1975.

²⁰. See Taitiriya Samhita. 6.3, 10.5 qtd in Manusmṛti 250.

*Jāyamānō vai brāhmaṇastribhir ṛnairnva jāyatē
Yajnēna dēvēbhyaḥ prajāya piṭrbhyaḥ Swādhyāyēna ṛsibhyaḥ*

²¹. See Fritjof Capra, *Uncommon Wisdom: Conversations with Remarkable People*, (London: Flamingo, 1988) 165 for the author's conversation with Margaret Lock.

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Of Woman's Bondage

Jayasree Sukumaran “Feminist poetics in Alice Munro and Anita Desai ”
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Chapter 2

Of Woman's Bondage

This chapter is a gynocritical analysis of those characters in the selected works of Munro and Desai who, because of centuries of acculturation, have become the unacknowledged upholders and continuators of a discriminatory patriarchal tradition. Paradoxically, this role in Munro's works is allocated mostly to women, who are so bound by stereotypical values that they are blind to any existential crisis affecting their own lives or the lives of the other women around them. They are so 'made' that they accept the status of inferiority conferred upon them by phallogentric perceptions and prescriptions. Their ideal woman conforms to the image of the Angel in the House - "intensely sympathetic", "immensely charming", "utterly unselfish," one who "excelled in the difficult arts of family life" and "sacrificed herself daily" (Woolf 57). They are content to remain silent and submissive without ever demanding to have an equal status with men.

As Rasporich observes, many of Munro's characters "belong to a dying or defunct Faulkneresque world of south western rural Ontario" and these traditional, orthodox women, mostly the aunts, grandmothers and spinsters who live "on the edge of civilisation" provide a means of

self-understanding for Munro and her questing persona" (33). Like the rustic characters in Hardy, these women serve as touchstones to measure and evaluate the growth and development of the central characters who in both the novels under analysis are emerging independent women and developing artists.

Lives of Girls and Women (1971) is a collection of eight interconnected stories. Although thematically unified, the structure of the work differs formally from that of a conventional novel. Munro refers to it as an "episodic novel" (Martin 75). The story comprises the sensitive and warm recollections of the young narrator Del Jordan, of her lonely childhood, and adolescence in the small town of Jubilee. The novel traces the gradual development of selfhood achieved by Del whose experiences continually emphasise her difference and isolation from a prescriptive and oppressive environment. As in a *Kunstlerroman*, she reaches maturation as an artist as well. Each of the eight stories or 'self contained segments' deals with one particular phase of Del's life.

The first section "The Flats Road" introduces the quiet household of the Jordan's and their two small children, Del and Owen. Mrs. Jordan's portrait through the little girl's eyes is consistent with the picture of a conventional mother, contented and at ease beside her

husband. The story captures the innocence of childhood that feels secure and comfortable in the seeming affection between the parents. Munro suggests here the beneficent aspects of tradition, which has a positive effect on the growing psyche of children who do not suspect its hollowness or hypocrisy. At the same time the mother's craving for independence is suggested through her dissatisfaction with her social status and environment. The seed of discontent in her mother makes her different and unpopular unlike Mr. Jordan, the fox farmer who is a simple and affectionate father. Patriarchy considers a thinking woman like Mrs. Jordan unfeminine, and a potential threat to the establishment.

In this section the patriarchal domination is subtly and symbolically projected through Uncle Benny, the eccentric assistant at Mr. Jordan's fox farm. He is made of primitive patriarchal stuff. He lives at the edge of the bush near the Wawanash River. "To his way of thinking, the river and the bush and the whole Grenoch Swamp more or less belonged to him, because he "knew them, better than anybody else did" (*Lives* 1). His egotism, possessiveness and supercilious nature are typical patriarchal attributes. Uncle Benny always had some "captive animals" in pens and "[m]uch as he enjoyed taming and feeding animals he enjoyed also their unpleasant destinies" (3). His bewildering world creates a frightening impact on the little ones especially on Del who comes to know from him and his tabloids, "revelations of evil, of its

versatility and grand invention and horrific playfulness" (4). By contrast the heavenly peace of Del's home is really comforting. Their home is "as small and shut up as any boat is on the sea in the middle of a tide of howling weather" (22) and the "troubling distorted reflection" of a bygone primitive patriarchal world of Uncle Benny fades into insignificance beside the seeming security of the conventional home of Del. The former has little or no permanent impact on the domain of childhood.

In the "Heirs of the Living Body," the second section of the novel the spinster aunts gain prominence, who emerge as staunch and faithful followers of prejudiced male centred views. In this section Del's attention is focussed on her father's family and her attitude towards its members. In other words, literally and symbolically it is a delineation of her relationship with the concept of patriarchy itself. The entire family is introduced, with great narrative skill, through family photographs. The story portrays Uncle Craig and the two spinster aunts - Auntie Grace and Aunt Elspeth and closes with a detailed account of Uncle Craig's death. The influence of the elderly aunts on Del is the central theme of the episode. Apart from her mother, the women who dominate and mould her impressions in childhood and early adolescence are certainly these spinster aunts. Although in her earliest remembered childhood, she encounters and learns about women

like Mrs. Sandy Stevenson - the character in Uncle Benny's story, Madeline, whom Uncle Benny marries, Irene Pollens, an idiot girl, and Mitch Plim's wife the prostitute, they are all outside her socio-cultural orbit.

The aunts epitomise the conventionalist mode of feminine existence. Despite their spinsterhood and the independence it entails they strive to evolve an identity of sorts by rotating and revolving round Uncle Craig's life. He is a clerk of the local township whose work assumes an inordinate significance to these walled-in women. Blinded by culture to the futility and wastefulness of their lives, they accept the drudgery of their existence with a repugnant servility. They continue performing the "daily marathon"(27) of domestic chores with a sense of undue obligation and fulfilment, so much so that when Uncle Craig dies, they feel rudderless and miss looking after him. They then channelise their service to Del's father, Mr. Jordan, "glad to darn his socks occasionally" (50).

When as a young girl Del reads about Natasha in *War and Peace* she is very much reminded of her own great aunts. When she finds Tolstoy's Natasha ascribing "immense importance" to her husband's "abstract intellectual pursuits" without understanding them, Del is quick

to draw a comparison between them. With sympathetic sarcasm she comments:

It would have made no difference if Uncle Craig had actually had abstract intellectual pursuits or if he had spent the day sorting henfeathers. They were prepared to believe in what he did . . . when he began his slow, loud, halting, but authoritative typing, they dropped their voices, they made absurd scolding faces at each other for the clatter of a pan, Craig is working! (27)

The reference to Tolstoy apart from being an instance of intertextuality, is also a thematic pointer. Munro seems to indicate that time stands still with respect to the gender-based social roles of women, and the attitudes they cherish. These early twentieth century women of Munro are no different from the nineteenth century Russian housewives presented by Tolstoy, which again suggests that there is a universal women's predicament transcending geographic, cultural and temporal boundaries.

Auntie Grace and Aunt Elspeth are not conscious of their subordinate status, or if conscious, do not dare to question or defy. They feel secure in an illusory world of contentment, and 'naturally' expect other women to do the same. But there is an inherent

contradiction in their attitude to men's work, which bewilders Del. She observes:

They respected men's work beyond anything; they also laughed at it. This was strange; they could believe absolutely in its importance and at the same time convey their judgement that it was from one point of view, frivolous, non-essential. And they would never meddle with it; between men's work and women's work was the clearest line drawn and any stepping over this line, any suggestion of stepping over it, they would meet with such light, amazed, regretfully superior, laughter.(27)

For the readers, the laughter has a Sisyphean echo, the mythical laughter at the absurdity of existence, which makes the gods angry. But it could also be a safety valve, which helps these marginalised women maintain normalcy and balance, as suppression of natural desires is part of their daily reality.

The torture of Sisyphus has already been used as a powerfully evocative metaphor for the endless domestic chores that enslave women in Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*. She writes, "Few tasks are more like the torture of Sisyphus than housework with its endless repetition; the clean become soiled; the soiled is made clean over and

over, day after day" (470). So far as these aunts are concerned, women's work is endless. Munro gives a detailed description of their work:

[m]orning marathons of floor scrubbing, cucumber hoeing, potato digging, bean and tomato picking, canning, pickling, washing, starching, sprinkling, ironing, waxing, baking. They were not idle setting there; their laps were full of work-cherries to be stoned, peas to be shelled, apples to be cored. Their hands, their old, dark, wooden-handled paring knives, moved with marvellous, almost vindictive speed. (*Lives* 27-28)

They tell stories like Uncle Benny and enjoy playing children's jokes. Their words and actions name and legitimise male superiority more strongly and effectively than any direct patriarchal proselytisation. Such tradition-bound women very often prove more patriarchal than the so-called patriarchs themselves.

Mrs. Jordan serves as a direct contrast both to the aunts and to her daughter Del. To the child Del, her mother's world of intelligence, openness and "serious sceptical questions" seemed repulsive when compared with the traditional world of the aunts, their world of "work and gaiety, comfort and order, intricate formality" (31). Del realises that "there was a whole new language to learn in their house" (31). As she

comments "My mother's disapproval was open and unmistakable, like heavy weather; theirs came like tiny razor cuts, bewilderingly, in the middle of kindness." Their mockery is always "embroidered with deference" (31).

Mrs. Jordan thus represents a significant phase of female evolution - the post-feminine or post-imitative stage, between the 'naturally' meek and the truly independent women, between subjugation and freedom. She is fully aware of changes coming in the lives of girls and women, but by herself, she is powerless to live out the changes. She therefore represents an inevitable transitional stage in the process of psychological development. She has imagination and vision but is haunted by tradition. She lacks the courage to realise her dreams. The aunts on the other hand belong to a closed world, and so unconnected with the main stream of life. Munro suggests their marginalisation through an effective description of their house. "Their house became like a tiny sealed off country, with its own ornate customs and elegantly, ridiculously complicated language, where true news of the outside world was not exactly forbidden, but became more and more impossible to deliver" (50). As they grew older "each of their two selves was seen to be something constructed with terrible care; the older they got the more frail and admirable and inhuman this construction appeared" (50). Del makes insightful comments on these

old maids: "This was what became of them when they no longer had a man with them, to nourish and admire, and when they were removed from the place where their artificiality bloomed naturally" (50). An illusory world of contentment seems to be their lot. Del is thus exposed to a kind of learning by negation. As Packer remarks, "Munro shows Del learning what she does not want to be, and formulating values in response, which will enable her to live more fully than the women around her manage to do" (134).

Initially, however, the traditional manner of life does exert an attractive and persuasive influence on the child's imagination, as her mother's enterprising, unconventional ventures invite only embarrassment and social ridicule. Nevertheless, as she grows older, these childish perceptions are altered in diverse and complex ways. Her growing consciousness learns that their limiting values corrode, degrade, and disfigure their inner and outer selves. She realises how childish and sterile they are in their dependence on men and in their adherence to a decadent way of life. They exist in a world of ignorance, without being conscious of it.

What bewilders Del about the aunts is not their overstated veneration for men or their "abstract intellectual pursuits", but their tendency to scoff at any personal attempt on the part of any woman at

amelioration. They are pungently critical about everything Mrs. Jordan does. Her frankness and unconventionality, in short her difference makes them feel helpless and angry. They are alarmed by her ambition. For, according to them, "to be ambitious was to court failure and to risk making a fool of oneself. The worst thing . . . that could happen in this life was to have people laughing at you" (32). Their words and actions suggest that "choosing not to do things showed, in the end, more wisdom and self-respect than choosing to do them. They liked people turning down things that were offered, marriage, positions, opportunities, money" (32). This is a despicable heritage of patriarchal attitudes. Like frogs in a pond, these aunts and others like them remain complacent in life outside the social structure and unacquainted with the larger and broader issues of life; they are blind to their own need for self-fulfilment. As Beauvoir says this is what "humanity has made of the human female" (69). Eva Figes maintains a similar point of view: "Women have been largely man-made, and the norms of femininity have worked in the interests of men because the social conventions always operate on behalf of the dominant group."¹ Internalising the values and requirements of the dominant culture, these 'patriarchal women' are bent on celebrating and perpetuating the stereotypical notions of womanhood that exist in the provincial Canadian society. Wittgenstein's aphorism "the limits of my language mean the limits of

my world" suits their lives best². However, Munro might be implying that selfhood and self-fulfilment are purely relative terms and that one woman's meat is another woman's poison.

Another instance of their stagnant conventionality is provided in Del's attempts to justify their affection for her cousin Mary Agnes Oliphant. She instinctively knows that the aunts prefer Mary Agnes to herself. Mary Agnes, their sister Moira's daughter, blunted with a congenital malady, is a dependent and protected creature, and therefore in a way powerless and helpless like the aunts themselves. On the contrary Del is "tainted by other influences and by half [her] heredity; [her] upbringing was riddled with heresies, that could never all be put straight" (33). Munro perhaps suggests that sticking to limiting conventional prejudices is also a shortcoming, a defect, a congenital malady having a psychosomatic effect. The aunts are more akin to Mary Agnes than to Del who is marked out to be different with her sensitivity and acute intelligence. The aunts however acknowledge Del's intelligence, when the unfinished manuscript of the history of Wawanash County written by Uncle Craig before his death is entrusted to her. The aunts hope that some day she would complete it. They initially wanted the mantle of the writer to fall on Owen, because he is "the boy", but realises that Del is "the one, has the knack for writing compositions" and that she might "learn to copy his way" (52). But Del

realises that, it is not her way and that emancipation does not mean "the adoption of the masculine role," but "developing a form of genuine woman power against which the male 'Omnipotent Administrator' cannot prevail" and she learns that "woman power means the self determination of women, and that means that, all the baggage of paternal society will have to be thrown overboard" (Greer 130).

Munro foregrounds this idea through a masterly narrative stroke towards the end of this second section. Del carried the box containing the manuscript "awkwardly" under her arm, and put them under her bed along with a "few poems and bits of a novel" (52) she had written. Later she recollects, "I didn't want Uncle Craig's manuscript put back with the things I had written . . . It seemed so dead to me, so heavy and dull and useless, that I thought it might deaden my things too and bring me bad luck" (52). So she "took it down to the cellar and left it in a cardboard box" (52). Later in one spring when the cellar gets flooded, the manuscript turns into "just a big wad of soaking paper" (52). This metamorphosis does not seem to affect her the least, for Uncle Craig's work had seemed to her "a mistake from start to finish" (52). But when she imagines the possible reaction of the aunts to this catastrophe she "felt remorse, that kind of tender remorse which has on its other side a brutal, unblemished satisfaction" (53). The passage symbolises with telling effect how Del's developing self partly rids itself of the invisible

shackles of patriarchy. As a historian, Uncle Craig represents the past, its tradition, and its narrow-mindedness. Therefore, his death and the natural destruction of the manuscript symbolise the death and destruction of the androcentric tradition that he stands for.

The third section "Princess Ida" is devoted to Del's mother. Fed up with the limiting provincial life on the Flats Road she leaves Mr. Jordan behind, and moves with her children to Jubilee. The aunts are pushed to the offside of the stage. Yet, they continue to make perverse and discouraging remarks on Mrs. Jordan and her ambitions. Mrs. Jordan begins to sell encyclopaedias which the aunts tauntingly consider "going on the road!" (54). The patriarchal scorn and the resulting social embarrassment make Del extremely uncomfortable. The uneasy conflict between Del and her mother is actually the result of their likeness and similarity. Del "felt the weight of [her] mother's eccentricities . . . land on her own coward's shoulders" (54). This self-criticism is strongly indicative of her self-awareness. When the aunts frown upon her mother's knowledge, "your mother knows such a lot of things, my," (55) it is clear to Del that "nimble malice danced under their courtesies" (33).

Del remains a coward unable to ally herself openly with her mother's attitudes. Neither can she identify herself with the aunts who

represent the town's repressiveness. She lacks courage to assert her independence and face their ridicule. Her mother however remains understanding and sympathetic. She knows that Del is hiding "[her] brains under a bushel" (57).

A glimpse into Mrs. Jordan's unhappy childhood is provided at this point in the story. Del's mother recounts scenes from the past. Del notices how her "mother's voice telling these things, is hard, with the certainty of having been cheated, her undiminished feelings of anger and loss" (63). Mrs. Morrison, Del's grandmother, is in Mrs. Jordan's words, "a religious fanatic" (63) who even in the midst of poverty deprived her children of the little money she had inherited, by spending it on an expensive box of Bibles meant to be distributed to the "heathen" (64). This inordinate and unwarranted religious enthusiasm cured Mrs. Jordan, of religion.

This retrospective narrative speech and the introduction of the grandmother are of immense thematic significance. Mrs. Morrison, the kneeling woman, is a figure from the past and brings in the influence of religion, which has for centuries sanctioned and sanctified the prejudices of patriarchy.

By rejecting religion, Mrs. Jordan thus rejects the most powerful and forbidding accessory of patriarchy. She makes Del listen to the

story of her adolescence and youth - her endless painstaking struggles against odds, fighting for opportunities and just rewards at every stage of her life. The account of her unhappy marriage with Mr. Jordan upsets Del. She understands that the broken relationship is partly the cause of her mother's restlessness. Mrs. Jordan's attitudes and actions reveal an inability to accept the reality she finds herself in. Her protest only makes her miserable, it does not make her free. Naturally and symbolically, she is Del Jordan's mother. Del watches with humiliation her mother's awkward public life. Her mother is different from the rest of contemporary women - she drives a car, sells encyclopaedias, possesses intellectual and critical acumen, joins scholarly groups for literary discussions and writes letters to the newspapers about important local issues. Del finds that her mother's assertiveness, and personal accomplishments make her a butt of social ridicule. She realises that neither the primitive submissiveness of her patriarchal aunts nor the aggressive spirit of her ambitious mother is edifying or rewarding. She therefore rejects both the feminine way of acceptance and enslavement, and the feminist one of protest and belligerence, as both are incapable of providing self-fulfilment to a woman aiming at independence and self-hood.

Aunt Nile, Uncle Bill's second wife, presents another aspect of traditional womanhood, feminine decorativeness closely associated

with sensuality. She creates extraordinary impressions in Del's mind. She recollects, "I thought she was an idiot, and yet I frantically admired her She reached some extreme feminine decorativeness, perfect artificiality that I had not even known existed" (72). Seeing the perfect artificiality of femininity for the first time Del understands that, by the same standards, she would never be beautiful. The insight is clearly suggestive of her unconscious decision to grow out of artificiality and sensuality accepted and patronised by patriarchy.

Mrs. Sherriff, a slightly eccentric woman and Naomi, a typically conventional minded girl of Del's own age, appear in "Age of Faith", the fourth segment of the novel. Del comes to know that Mrs. Sherriff had to face a series of "bizarre troubles in her family which either resulted from, or had resulted in, a certain amount of eccentricity and craziness in herself" (85). Her eldest son had died of alcoholism, her second son was a neurotic and her daughter had committed suicide by drowning in the Wawanash River. Very few details are available on her husband. She too is not clearly individualised in the novel.

Female eccentricity has been explored in considerable depth by several feminist critics, which according to them is the direct outcome of leading a life of oppression in a morbidly prescriptive and inhibitive social structure. Barbara Rigney in *"Madness and Sexual Politics in the*

Feminist Novel observes, "[W]omen in particular suffer from more or less obvious forms of schizophrenia, being constantly torn between male society's prescriptions for female behaviour, their own tendencies toward the internalisation of these roles and a nostalgia for some lost, more authentic self".³ Shoshana Felman also makes similar, illuminating comments on the subject in "Woman and Madness: The Critical Phallacy" : ". . . madness is the impasse confronting those whom cultural conditioning has deprived of the very means of protest or self-affirmation. Far from being a form of contestation, 'mental illness' is a request for help, a manifestation both of cultural impotence and political castration". This socially defined "help-needing and help-seeking behaviour," Felman continues, "is itself part of female conditioning, ideologically inherent in the behavioural pattern and in the dependent and helpless role assigned to the woman as such".⁴

Munro has introduced the theme of "craziness" in the first section of the novel itself through Madeleine, the "mad woman", the queer and criminal wife of Uncle Benny, and through the marginal portrait of the idiot girl Irene Pollox. This assumes a larger thematic import in this section with Mrs. Sherriff and her deranged son, Bobby Sherriff. The latter's portrait serves to indicate Munro's broader perspective about what can be termed madness. She is suggesting that social repression can cause psychic malady in both men and women. She gives

expression to this idea in her interview with Rasporich. Pointing out her disagreement with the contemporary feminist view that "madness is almost synonymous with the condition of being female," Munro says, "Madness doesn't seem to me a gender thing - I have more made women simply because I know more women and I know stories through women" (30). Finally, towards the end of the novel it is through Bobby Sherriff, Mrs. Sherriff's insane son that Del receives a unique epiphanic experience.

Naomi appears in the fifth section, "Changes and Ceremonies" and is developed in the two following sections, "Lives of Girls and Women" and "Baptizing." She offers the closest and the strongest foil to Del. Shared interests and concerns bring these two teenagers together. However, Naomi remains a representative of submissive conventionality all through. It is interesting to note that patriarchal attitudes initially represented by Del's father's aunts, and later by Del's own aunt Nile, younger in age, is now projected through Naomi, a girl of her own age. By presenting three generations of women against the growing protagonist, Munro is able to project effectively the impact of the different yet related aspects of patriarchy on the female psyche at different points of time.

The basic difference between Naomi and Del in matters of intelligence and imagination is poignantly suggested through a scene in the school library. "I was happy in the library. Walls of printed pages, evidence of so many created worlds - this was a comfort to me. It was the opposite with Naomi; so many books weighed on her, making her feel oppressed and suspicious" (99). Yet, they remain close and affectionate until differences become conspicuous. Initially Naomi was the keeper of Del's conscience, her most intimate confidante especially in obtaining and exchanging information about sex and sexuality. But the friendship begins to fritter away when Naomi quits school and takes up an office job in a creamery where she joins a set of "well groomed" girls all set toward marriage and whose ways of life and attitudes "frightened" Del "to death" (149). At this stage, Del feels inferior to these trousseau-saving girls, each of them bent on getting hold of a man and willingly pursuing a life of conventional domesticity. However, she soon grows out of bewilderment and doubt and prefers to be herself. With an absurd feeling of anguish Del watches how easily Naomi slips and sinks into the enclosed spaces of marriage and family life, with a sense of humility verging on humiliation. She behaves as if "marriage is the sole justification of her existence" (Beauvoir 439). Naomi is self-righteous in her option for marriage and domesticity. It is the "normal life" to her way of thinking (161).

It was the life of the girls in the creamery office, it was showers, linen and pots and pans and silver ware, that complicated feminine order; then turning it over, it was the life of the Gay-la-Dance Hall, driving drunk at night along the black roads, listening to men's jokes, putting up with and warily fighting with men and getting hold of them, getting hold - one side of that life could not exist without the other, and by undertaking and getting used to them both, a girl was putting herself, on the road to marriage. There was no other way.(161)

However, Del thinks differently. She "was not going to be able to do it"(161). Although the friendship with Naomi thus ends up in discord and antipathy, the experience has been an edifying one for Del as in her progress towards self maturation it gives her a clearer insight into her own nature and a better understanding of her own aims and requirements.

"Changes and Ceremonies" contains a tragic episode, involving the suicide of their teacher Miss Farris, again by drowning in the Wawanash River. She used to be in charge of the operetta the school puts on every year in March. Not young, but heavily made up "her little sharp boned face self consciously, rouged and animated" (103) she excites people's laughter, and even elicits the comment of the sensual

Fern Dogherty, Mrs. Jordan's boarder, "Poor thing, she's only trying to catch a man" (102). Her romantic affair with Mr. Boyce the music teacher serves in fact only to provide subject matter for "baroque concoctions of rumour" in Jubilee (103) and ends up tragically. She commits suicide after which Mr. Boyce with typical male nonchalance leaves the town and manages "to get along quite well" in Western Ontario (118). The incident offers an emphatic lesson on human vulnerability and women's fate.

The events narrated in the title chapter, "Lives of Girls and Women," make explicit Del's attitude to love and sex. As Packer perceptively remarks, "The chapter speaks not only of Del's sexual and romantic dreams, but of the distance between those dreams and the dissatisfied sexual lives of girls and women around her" (140). Del learns about the treachery and deceit associated with love and sexuality through her relationship with Art Chamberlain, Fern Doghertry's lover, who is an exhibitionist and a pervert. He has been sexually exploiting Fern. Out of curiosity and adolescent fantasy Del too falls into the romantic trap of this middle-aged pervert. She encourages his sexual advances and even becomes an accomplice and an instrument in Chamberlain's tricks devised against Fern in order to abandon her. Finally, when Chamberlain deserts Fern, Del watches the reaction of Fern closely. "Her expressed feeling was that men always went and

better they did before you got sick of them" (143). Mrs. Jordan's righteous indignation at his abominable conduct is met with "shrugs and ambiguous laughter" (144) from Fern. However, her cheerfulness is only defensive. Munro is pointing at another common instance of social misconduct connived at by patriarchy.

Mrs. Jordan's pragmatism is revealed towards the end of the story in her advice to Del "to use her brains" and never to be distracted by or over a man (147). This sounds repugnant and unwelcome to Del. She comments:

[i]t was not so different from all the other advice handed out to women, to girls, advice that assumed being female made you damageable, that a certain amount of carefulness and solemn fuss and self-protection were called for, whereas men were supposed to be able to go out and take on all kinds of experience and shuck off what they didn't want and come back proud. Without even thinking about it, I had decided to do the same.
(147)

All her personal experiences have thus been repeatedly confirming the point of view that silent suffering and open rebellion are both extreme measures and would not serve her purpose of achieving intellectual and

emotional independence. Personal liberation can be achieved only by finding out who she is, and by being herself.

Her comic short-lived love affair with Jerry Storey brings about her encounter with his mother who offers yet another kind of traditional femininity with her "indecent" practicality (168) and lack of common sense. With Jerry she enjoys an intellectual kinship of sorts, although she cannot admire the "gymnastics of his mind" (163). They therefore drift apart and Del's real and intense love affair begins with Garnet French. Her mother's strong disapproval of this lumberyard worker, only intensifies their intimacy. It shows her total rejection of all the values that her mother cherishes. Del is her mother's daughter in every sense of the word. However, in the unfixed plastic stage of her social development and self-maturation, she lacks the courage to support her mother's personal ethics and consequently suffers an embarrassing sense of social humiliation because of her. Del's struggles against her mother very much resemble Mrs. Jordan's own struggles against hers. If Mrs. Jordan's contention with her mother is because of the latter's missionary zeal, Del finds her mother's secular ambitions and sale of encyclopaedias equally offensive and hypocritical.

She reads an article in a magazine by a New York psychiatrist, a disciple of Freud, discussing distinct male and female habits of thought.

He states that a boy looking at the full moon will think of the universe while a girl will think only of washing her hair (150). The article upsets her, for she wants men to love her and at the same time wants to think of the universe when she looks at the moon. Without racking her brains any further, she "took the magazine out to the garbage pail, ripped it in half, stuffed it inside, tried to forget it" (150). The article is the voice of patriarchy and its tyrannical tendency to prescribe stereotypical gender roles to men and women. It has the authority of the written word, which is capable of making a powerful impression on the social psyche. Del's throwing it into the garbage pail is also highly symbolic of an outright rejection of Freud and his theories of femininity. The feminist writers of the early seventies considered Freud an arch misogynist and believed that patriarchy was reinforced by Freudian psychoanalysis.

"Baptizing" is a story with a crucial significance. Garnet French insists that Del has to join his church and therefore has to be baptised before she can be a wife or a mother. He pushes her "right under the water and her whole person is physically submerged for an instant. Thinking that he might drown her, she fights for her life and breaks free of his hold (198). The incident terminates the relationship. After this refusal to be baptised into conventionality, she decides to pursue the career of her choice and become a writer. She is thus baptised into "real life" and out of Garnet French and all that he represents. The struggle

under water is "a symbolic struggle against male domination and loss of self" as Bailey observes (116). Rejection of Garnet French is a symbolic rejection of religion and religious restraints too; a repudiation of the anti-woman tendencies inherent in Christianity.

The text subverts the myth of male domination by charting the progressive development of Del's psychological maturation in proportion to a steady deterioration and insignificance of male figures and their androcentric value system. If the opening segment projects the virile pre-historic male strength through Uncle Benny – which is itself ironic because Madeline, the woman, he marries, walks out of his life – the novel closes with a piteous picture of Bobby Sherriff, the surviving deranged son of the Sherriff family. Based on his familial tragic experiences Del makes her first attempt as a writer of fiction. Del Jordan is thus seen passing through a series of consecutive episodes, observing and repudiating the limiting codes and values of patriarchy, in their diverse and complex forms, manifested through its incarnations who are mostly women, or through its verbalisations.

Like *Lives*, Munro's fourth volume, *Who* also explores and exposes the traditional limitations placed on female experience. Rose is the central character, whose struggle for survival and recognition as an actress comprises the story of the novel. In fact, the novel is Rose's

attempt to answer the taunting question of her stepmother Flo (18), later repeated by the teacher Miss Hattie Milton, "Who do you think you are?" (262) in the first and last segments of the book respectively. Similar to *Lives* in structure, *Who* is a collection of ten linked or interlocking stories, each of which projects ten loosely connected scenes from the life of the heroine. They are more or less consecutive stories, chronicling the conflict and tension in Rose's life until she reaches psychological maturation and selfhood, both as an individual and as an actress. While the first four stories deal with Rose's childhood in South Western Ontario, the next four relate her marriage and separation in British Columbia. In the last two stories, she returns to West Hanratty and her origins. Although the feminist quest informs the theme of the novel as in *Lives*, there is a major difference between the two with respect to the narrative voice. While Munro uses the pseudo-autobiographical mode or the first person narrative in *Lives*, in *Who* the narrative is reported from the third person point of view. This major shift in perspective affects the projection and delineation of both the theme and the characters to a considerable extent. Moreover, Rose's excursion into the adult world is deeper and more extensive than that of Del.

The opening story is about the beating of Rose by her father the 'king' of "The Royal Beatings". The title and the incidents crammed into

the story have a comic-sardonic ring about them. However, the main incident is pathetic in effect, as it gives in detail the punishment of Rose, a motherless child, who is beaten to exhaustion by her father at the instigation of her stepmother. This commonplace domestic scene is a palpable projection and an impressive illustration of patriarchal oppression. It is a specific and singular manifestation of 'patria potestas', or a father's control over his family. In fact, the phrasing of the title seems to suggest the vicious, sadistic strain inherent in the social psyche and its glossing over of its horrifying misogyny. It is highly significant that Munro opens this book of fiction with this melodramatic domestic incident of punishment meted out to a little girl by her father. It serves as a pointer to the general theme that remains to be unrolled in the following sections.

The gender implications of the situation are obvious when Brian, Rose's half-brother "runs away . . . to do as he likes. Being a boy, free to help or not, involve himself or not. Not committed to the household struggle" (17). Flo has so imbibed the requirements of patriarchal values that she very often acts as a well-bred custodian of the restrictive tradition. However, the situation turns ironic as Rose knows her father is "acting, and he means it" (22). It is merely a cultural ritual, occurring in diverse ways in different contexts. For culture 'makes' not only

women but men too; and their relationships as well. Its damaging influences contaminate the lives of both sexes.

A similar ironic stance may be noticed in the macabre story of Becky Tyde, narrated by Flo, before the scene of punishment is enacted in the domestic front. Becky is another motherless child, "a big headed, loud voiced dwarf" (7) afflicted with polio. Her father is a "family tyrant" (9) and according to local gossip, "has beaten all his children, and beaten his wife as well, beat Becky more now because of her deformity which some people believed he had caused (they did not understand about polio)" (9). The local people also believed that she was made pregnant by her own father and the child had been disposed of. The father was finally beaten to death by a group of three useless young men – small town vigilantes Jelly Smith, Bob Temple and Hat Nettleton. In fact, the misery of little Rose pales into insignificance when set beside the wretchedness and horror associated with the Becky Tyde episode. Becky is certainly a helpless victim of stark male brutality. But the import of the situation shifts when Munro recounts how Mr. Tyde himself was beaten to death by other men. Therefore, the incidents, apart from suggesting gender discrimination, illustrate powerfully the human potential for brutality and savagery. Feminist protest is therefore slightly "snuffled by this relationist point of view" (Rasporich 60). Nevertheless, they strongly indicate the gender disabilities, which

torment women. Thus while society forgets the crimes of men, it always remembers the victims. While social miscreants like Smith, Temple and Nettleton later in their middle age become respectable members of the community, oppressed and beaten women remain branded and handicapped for life. The events are actually more striking for their theatricality. The element of theatricality assumes a unique significance in this work as it forms the most important feature of the protagonist's life and leads finally to her successful career as a television actress and an interviewer.

While in *Lives* several prominent characters serve to project the patriarchal attitudes, Flo is perhaps the only well-drawn woman character in this novel whose speech and actions represent the patriarchal world of small town Ontario. Therefore, Flo disappears in the middle section of the novel, along with South Western Ontario. Although she is confined to the hearth, the entire local community, their legends and gossip come active and sparkling on her tongue. As In *Lives*, the juxtaposition of young girl with an elderly maternal figure provides here too a retrospect on female life. Her oral narrations mostly based on local gossip initiate the growing Rose into an uncanny world of nastiness and evil which is an integral aspect of Canadian provincial life. Ironically the young protagonists are inspired and empowered by the oral narrations and experiences of the elderly women, although the

narrators themselves may be timid, tradition-bound and powerless. Both Del and Rose are benefited in this manner and so are those who read women's fiction.

Flo is an embodiment of earthiness and practicality. The consequent fixity of attitudes, is a prominent characteristic of conventional patriarchy and is contrary to the flexibility and adaptability of Rose for whom life is always fluid "a series of surprising developments" (49). As a result of an osmotic cultural internalisation, women like Flo turn out to be effective disseminators of androcentric attitudes and ways of life.

"Privilege" gives a shocking picture of the incalculable sexual savagery, taking place on her school premises. There are 'big fights that tore up the school, two or three times a year' (36). "Fights and sex and pilferage were the important things going on" (39) at school which Rose "could never tell about" (32). She learns to live with them, and the memories of the horror and violence of school life, the "various scandals and bits of squalor from her childhood" (31) remain with her for years.

The incident involving the half-witted Franny's macabre sexual experience opens the social ulcers of male hypocrisy and patriarchal injustice. It also points out how the system of education in patriarchal societies is so designed that it becomes a powerful instrument in

reinforcing sexism and sarcastic condemnation of womanhood. Franny becomes a piteous victim of sexual assault, by various boys, including her own brother. For the rest of her life, she remains outlawed by the local community. Munro here explodes the traditional masculine mythology, which romanticises prostitutes and invests them with glory and glamour. When Rose came across "saintly whores" in books and movies she remembered Franny. Munro comments:

Later on Rose would think of Franny when she came across the figure of an idiotic, saintly whore, in a book or a movie. Men who made books and movies seemed to have a fondness for this figure, though Rose noticed they would clean her up. They cheated, she thought, when they left out the breathing and the spit and the teeth; they were refusing to take into account the aphrodisiac prickles of disgust (35-36)

Here Munro is drawing the reader's attention to the ironic distance as well as relationship between life and art. While in books and movies glorified portraits of prostitutes are given, in actual life they are victims of abject misery and wretchedness.

Beauvoir's observation regarding prostitution and her attack on patriarchal hypocrisy bears remarkable contextual significance.

According to her the existence of prostitution was due to

the honest woman's enslavement to the family. Maintained hypocritically on fringes of society, they played a most important part in it. Christianity poured out its scorn upon them, but accepted them as a necessary evil. Both St. Augustine and St. Thomas asserted that the suppression of prostitution would mean the disruption of society by debauchery. Prostitutes are to a society what sewers are to a palace. (134)

Despite her coarseness, earthiness and lack of education, Flo possesses a rustic simplicity and straightforwardness. She revels in weaving stories, which have a strong folk quality. They are simple and sensational. In her interview with Rasporch, Munro admits that "Flo is a folk character and that the folk ways render her portrait "a comic dimension" (27). Although she is an innocent perpetuator of masculine values, she is very often a resisting reader of culture when victimisation and oppression are concerned. Therefore, Flo combines in her some of the traits of Del's great aunts, along with a partial sense of justice and freedom, which are fully developed in Del's mother Mrs. Jordan. For instance when Rose makes a mistake in telling Flo the truth instead of some lie, about the tearing of her raincoat at the armhole by a senior boy at school, Flo goes to the school "to raise Cain" and remains there till she

"heard witnesses swear Rose had torn it on a nail" (37). She believes that "offenders would confess or be handed over" (37). Rose's father whenever he talked to Flo "often spoke in country phrases and adopted the country habit of teasing, saying the opposite of what's true or believed to be true" (69). With her congenital hostility toward books it is no wonder that, "Flo thought Spinoza must be some new vegetable [her husband] planned to grow, like broccoli or egg plant" (3). Munro reveals her sense of humour in Flo's portrait.

In "Half a Grapefruit", the following section of the novel, Flo is held forth as the embodiment of Hanratty's traditional concept of femininity. She is an ideal woman to her husband. Rose has gathered from Flo and her father that,

A woman ought to be energetic, practical, clever at making and saving; she ought to be shrewd, good at bargaining and bossing and seeing through people's pretensions. At the same time she should be naive intellectually, childlike, contemptuous of maps and long words and anything in book, full of charming jumbled notions, superstitions, traditional belief. (60-61)

However Rose's father, with all his prejudices and half-baked attitudes still maintains that, women "can manage life some ways, that's their talent, its not in their heads, there's something they are smarter at than a man"

(61). Flo's husband here seems to repeat verbatim, the biased patriarchal notion about the 'second sex'.

"Wild Swans" is about Rose's journey to Toronto on the train for the first time on her own. Flo warns about 'White Slavers' and pick pockets. The worst according to her are "people dressed up as ministers", for both thieves and white slavers "commonly adopted this disguise" (73). The foreboding turns out to be true, and on the train, she becomes an object of the self-styled clergyman's indecent advances. Rose's responses are ambiguous. Despite her disgust and loathing at the stranger's groping fingers on her flesh, she cannot stop him. She shapes the words of rejection in her mind but is unable "to get them past her lips" (81). It is not surprising because traditionally women have been characterised by their silence, very often because of fear and embarrassment. However, here Rose is also a silent victim of her own indecision and curiosity. Her complex behaviour closely resembles that of Del's, in her first sexual encounter with Mr. Chamberlain. Both Del and Rose adopt a kind of double hermeneutics in their understanding and evaluation of the sexual experience. They are both objects and subjects at the same time. In fact they are self-conscious objects who are aware of their exploitation yet are victims of their own bodily curiosity. Even when Rose is struggling to express her disgust, she fails to do so. As feminist critics have repeatedly affirmed, there is a kind of women's

alienation from language, an alienation which very often works to their disadvantage. Thus the *soi disant* United Church Minister, old enough to be Rose's grandfather effortlessly slips into a casual conversation with the young girl and exploits his proximity with her. He apparently gains control over the situation because of the girl's silence.

Cameron, while discussing sexist language in her seminal work *Feminism and Linguistic Theory* (1985) endorses the feminist observation that society considers it "appropriate for men to treat women as if they were intimates or subordinates" (105). They use endearment terms or pay compliments to women and if the latter do not openly communicate disapproval, are treated as "open persons", and "if they ignore the remark or reply negatively, they may be accused of rudeness and/or showered with abuse". She says, "it is important to note that women do not have reciprocal rights to treat men in a similar way" (107).

Rose's behaviour is therefore partly the outcome of cultural conditioning. The minister's inquisitive fingers make her "feel uncomfortable, resentful, slightly disgusted, trapped and wary. But she could not take charge of it, to reject it. She could not insist that it was there, when he seemed to be insisting that it was not" (82). She feels upset and continues to think naively:

How could she declare him responsible, when he lay there so harmless and trusting, resting himself before his busy day, with such a pleased and healthy face? A man older than her father would be, if he were living, a man used to deference, an appreciator of Nature, delighter in wild swans. If she did say *'Please don't*, she was sure he would ignore her, as if overlooking some silliness or impoliteness on her part. She knew that as soon as she said it she would hope he had not heard.(82)

Munro is here closely analysing a common enough situation with all its embarrassing associations.

The mid-section of the novel starts with the "Beggar Maid", dealing with Rose's romantic love affair with Patrick Blatchford. Patrick is twenty four years old, a graduate student from a rich family in British Columbia, planning to become a history professor. He has "many chivalric notions" and wishes "to operate in a world of knights and ladies, outrages, devotions" (99). It is Rose's experience with a leg-grabber in the library that excites his "chivalric notions". He rescues her and fascinated by her poverty and country speech he falls in love with her. He casts her in the role of the archetypal Beggar Maid and himself as King Cophetua. Through Patrick, Munro foregrounds and subverts

the far-fetched and fantastic notions of chivalry and romance associated with academically successful males.

Like Del's aunts who adore and mock their brother at once, Dr. Henshawe, an English professor in her seventies pets and pities Patrick. She calls him "The poor young man, poor because he was in love and perhaps also because he was a male, doomed to push and blunder" (88). Through Dr. Henshawe, Munro provides the picture of an intellectual academic woman who yet maintains and cherishes the masculine values that guide and mould society. At the same time, she is also keen on the academic betterment of women. Rose is staying at Dr. Henshawe's. The scholarly atmosphere in her house irritates Rose who instinctively contrasts it with the "working class" background at her stepmother's house. Munro comments, "What Dr. Henshawe's house and Flo's house did best, in Rose's opinion, was discredit each other" (90). The title of a scholar does not seem to suit Rose's temperament for her ambition is to become an actress, "to perform in public" (93). When she tells Dr. Henshawe that "if she had been a man she would have wanted to be a foreign correspondent", Dr. Henshawe excitingly encourages her. Although Dr. Henshawe does not manifest an aggressive intolerance towards women's secondary social status like Mrs. Jordan does, she is in league with the latter in her optimism about the future empowerment

of women. She is at once a combination of the aunts and Mrs. Jordan in *Lives*.

The traditional notion that intellectual aspiration robs a woman of all her feminine, angelic charm is given expression to in the course of the story as ruminations in Rose's mind.

It seemed to be the rule that girl scholarship winners looked about forty and boys about twelve . . . there was a pall over them, she was not mistaken, there was a true terrible pall of eagerness and docility. How else could they have supplied so many right answers, so many pleasing answers, how else distinguished themselves and got themselves here? (94 -95)

The story also highlights how class differences operate in society and how radically it affects human relationships,⁵ especially between the sexes. Patrick is both rich and intelligent "a single man in possession of a fortune" (Austen 1) and one of the factors which makes him fall for Rose is her poverty. Therefore, he makes much of the title image of the Beggar Maid. Rose realises that "Poverty in girls is not attractive unless combined with sweet sluttishness, stupidity. Braininess is not attractive unless combined with some signs of elegance; *class*" (95). Rose watches with shy amusement how her

engagement to Patrick elevates her in the eyes of society; "Paths were opening now, barriers were softening" (119). Women and girls who are generally least interested in her, begin to stop and greet her on their way to admire her diamond engagement ring.

However "it was not the amount of money but the amount of love he offered that she could not ignore; she believed that she felt sorry for him, that she had to help him out" (103). When she examines the painting of King Cophetua, she finds the Beggar Maid "meek and voluptuous, with her shy white feet" (103). With her inherent theatricality and her superb talent for role-playing, she finds this imputed role easy to perform. Yet, she has her misgivings regarding her qualification to become a "wife" or a "sweet heart". She cannot imagine "those mild lovely words" being applied to her. She also realises that, "What made you wanted was nothing you did, it was something you had, and how could you ever tell whether you had it?" (104). With deft ironic strokes, Munro is here holding up to ridicule and thereby dismissing the entire concept of popular romances. Rose's attitude towards Patrick and her ardent desire to get married to him are evidently the result of socio-cultural conditioning. She is also conscious of her power over him and is moved by a sense of adventure. But despite the romantic and chivalric aura of their "sensible, unbearable" (107) marriage, it breaks up. Later when Rose accidentally catches sight

of Patrick in the Toronto airport nine years after the separation, she feels a surge of yearning for a possible reparation and reunion but is instantly shocked and restrained by the expression on his face. "It was a truly hateful, savagely warning, face; infantile, self-indulgent, yet calculated; it was a timed explosion of disgust and loathing (129).

Munro effectively subverts the traditional concepts of romantic love and perfect marriage, the fantasy of living happily ever after. The romance of Rose and Patrick identified with the archetypal images of King Cophetua and the Beggar Maid is thus deconstructed and dismissed. Munro shows that Rose cannot achieve selfhood through marriage, as in a popular romance. On the contrary, it is only by withdrawing herself from the world of fairy tales that she can move towards self-knowledge. As Martin rightly observes, "It is clear that she has made a serious mistake, that she is not ready for marriage with Patrick or with anyone else, because she is far from knowing the answer to the question, 'Who do you think you are?' " (110). The marriage only serves to illustrate that "treachery is the other side of dailiness" (22) especially in the inevitable 'dailiness' of marriage. Years later Rose reminisces that "she did respect Patrick, but not in the way he wanted to be respected, and she did love him, not in the way he wanted to be loved" (141). Munro suggests that marriage is not a woman's sole source of fulfilment and thereby deconstructs the received wisdom of

patriarchal culture. She here reveals what Nancy Walker describes as "consciousness of the ironic distance between the self as formulated externally by cultural heritage, and the self as an internal process of redefinition and discovery" (78).

In "Mischief", the longest among the stories, Munro deals with Rose's marriage to Patrick and her subsequent unfaithfulness involving treachery and "tender celebrations of lust, a regular conflagration of adultery" (150). She falls in love with Clifford, Jocelyn's husband who is a violinist in the Vancouver Symphony. Rose and Jocelyn meet in the maternity ward of the North Vancouver General Hospital after their confinements. Random revelations of personal details bring them closer. Rose finds Jocelyn very interesting with her scholarly background and habits. Her father was a psychiatrist and her mother a paediatrician. Rose finds her reading the Journals of Andre Gide. The latter offers a remarkable contrast to Rose concerning expectations and opinions. Munro creates a situation in the course of the story, where the two discuss women as artists. Jocelyn's youthful ambition was to become a writer but when she meets Clifford "a really gifted" artist, she feels that she would be "better off nurturing him" (138). She imagines that the marriage would grant her greater security and happiness. So rather than "fooling around" (138), trying to write, she opts for the conventional marriage and family life. She does not regret her decision

to give up the potential career of a writer, as it is prompted by the memory of her own earlier attempt at writing "a hideously precocious story called 'The Marvellous Great Adventures of Oliver the Grand Duck' which her mother actually got printed and distributed to friends and relatives at Christmas time" (137). She believes that "women usually aren't great artists". Munro's ironic comment immediately follows: "These were the ideas of most well-educated, thoughtful, even unconventional or politically radical young women of the time. One of the reasons Rose did not share them was that she had not been well educated" (139). Jocelyn in *Who* and Naomi and the aunts in *Lives* are women who are totally impervious to the historical position of women and the factual odds against them. As Beauvoir observes, "Personal accomplishment is almost impossible in the human categories that are maintained collectively in an inferior situation." Beauvoir further says that "one is not born a genius, one becomes a genius and the feminine situation has up to the present rendered this becoming practically impossible" (164).

In the course of the story, Munro gives a glimpse into the relationship between Jocelyn and her mother. Like Del Jordan in her adolescent days, Jocelyn bears a negative attitude to her mother. However, the similarity with Del is only superficial. While Del's struggle with her mother marks a decisive step towards a greater, a

more meaningful sense of identity and independence, Jocelyn's denotes a manifestation of mere temperamental incompatibility. Besides, the idea of a successful professional life is a disagreeable prospect to Joceyln's conventionality. Her sense of independence has nothing to do with the notion of selfhood. It is ironically related to the idea of submissiveness born of patriarchal indoctrination. Hence, despite her talent, Jocelyn takes the conventional road.

"Providence", the next story introduces Dorothy, Rose's friend at the radio station and Tom, a teacher at the University of Calgary, with whom Rose is "a little bit in love" (181). The section also deals with Rose's unsure attempts at playing the role of a mother. Dorothy has left her husband and is rejected treacherously by her lover, a journalist. The friendship between the two is "based mostly on their more or less single condition and their venturesome natures" (183). When Rose's affair with Tom ends in a fiasco, Dorothy comforts and reassures her, relating how her experiences with men repeatedly confirm to her, their lascivious animality. Munro provides several instances of treachery in man-woman relationships. One is that of a gentleman who hosts a party attended by Rose in the story "Simon's Luck." He "had shed a wife, a home, a discouraging future, set himself up with new clothes and new furniture and a succession of student mistresses". Munro makes a further comment "Men can do it" (210). Another old man with whom

Dorothy had an affair practised monogamy and maintained several mistresses at the same time (184). Yet another instance of civilised polygamy is that of Tom Shepherd with whom Rose had set up an exchange of amorous correspondences. Rose realises that he always maintains amorous connection with more than one woman – his wife, a beloved separated by distance, another woman he is "robustly bedding" (273).

In the novel Munro also explores the possibility of achieving ideal happiness in love, by women of "venturesome natures" (183) like Dorothy and Rose who leave their husbands for the sake of lovers. She suggests that when compared to men, women alone suffer the pangs of separation and the guilt of adultery. Men with all their adventures continue to lead a socially respectable family life without any qualms of conscience. Once on "an illicit jaunt" to Calgary to meet her lover Tom., Rose feels "the aura of sin . . . dancing around her like half-visible flames on a gas burner" (197). But men like Tom with their 'masculine self-centeredness' remain restful and contented, for male misconduct does not upset the patriarchal conscience. Rose and Dorothy on the other hand, are left in the lurch to spend the rest of their days in cynical discontentment, their psyche eternally taunted and tormented by the whore-image. The double standards maintained by society is clearly manifested in the different ways in which "illicit jaunts" affect men and

women. It is interesting to note that while the early Christian church regarded "even marriage as a concession to human frailty" (Beauvoir 129), the modern androcentric societies whose value systems are derived from the same source, confer a similar concessional status to male adultery.

Munro does not closely investigate Rose's relationship with her daughter. Her protagonist is not a conventional mother and reveals rather an unsentimental attitude towards the filial bond. Rose agrees with Patrick that "she was using Anna to give herself some stability rather than face up to the consequences of the path she had chosen" (203). At the same time she is fully aware of the traumatic effect of the broken marriage on the little girl. She knows that "for Anna this bloody fabric her parents had made, of mistakes and mismatches . . . was still the true web of life, of father and mother, beginning and shelter. What fraud thought Rose. What fraud for everybody" (181). So the little girl is sent to her father Patrick and stepmother Elizabeth. She makes her own child a 'motherless' stepdaughter like herself.

The novel moves towards its culmination in the title story, which is also the last one, "Who Do You Think You Are?" As in *Lives* the thrashing instinct of patriarchy represented physically and forcefully in the first section, dwindles into insignificance in the last segment. This

decisive shift is suggested through Ralph — a thin gray-haired spectre of a man, with shrunken shoulders and skinny shaking hands (273), whose life Rose feels "closer than the lives of men she'd loved, one slot over from her own" (277).

A similar analysis of Desai's novels reveal that forces of tradition are alive and active in every aspect of Indian life. In her interview with Yasodhara Dalmia (1979), Desai said, "The human condition is only superficially affected by the day-to-day changes. We continue to live in the same way as we have in the past centuries, with the same tragedies and the same comedies and that is why it interests me".⁶ Later in another interview with Florence Libert (1989), she remarked that the women protagonists in her fiction lead "traditional women's lives in India" and that she was mainly focussing on "home and family" in her novels (54). Desai's female heroes can therefore be understood only in the backdrop of Indian patriarchal tradition, which is ridden with inherent contradictions. The two selected works *Cry, The Peacock* (1963) and *Clear Light of Day* (1980) clearly illustrate the impact of the changing socio-cultural scenario on contemporary Indian women.

The twentieth century Indian women are precariously placed between the influences of their own past tradition, and the liberalist attitudes of the west, the former upholding the virtues of submission

and sacrifice, and the latter fostering the antithetical ideas of freedom and individualism. The Indian women have another rare distinction: they have actively participated in the freedom struggle on an equal footing with men. As J.B. Kripalani writes, "Indian women after independence were given equal opportunities with men in all spheres of national life Unlike their sisters in Europe and elsewhere, Indian women did not have to undergo a separate struggle to secure their rights" (397). But the ideas, which motivated the freedom movement, were not thought of by men, as relevant to their personal and familial relationship with women. Hence, the lives of Indian women are double bent by the unsavoury influences of the worst aspects of both traditions, eastern and western. Neither are they protected and honoured according to their own traditional social laws nor are they encouraged to chart their own way towards freedom and fulfilment.

Thus, the spread of Western education serves only to confuse the Indian women's predicament. For, it inculcates the biased androcentric socio-cultural values based on Judaeo-Christian thought as well as the ideas of self-fulfilment and sexual liberation inspired by the feminist movement. Neither of these points of view can be of help in the Indian context as each of them differs fundamentally from the Hindu outlook upon life.

As Malashri Lal observes, Western education has given Indian girls only "a fascination for the surface of life and distanced them from their heritage without offering any viable alternative" (251). In *Fire on the Mountain* (1977) through Ila Das, Desai makes similar remarks on the predicament of the urban Indian woman. "Isn't it absurd . . . how helpless our upbringing made us . . . we thought we were being equipped with the very best - French lessons, piano lessons, English governesses - my, all that only to find, it left us helpless, positively handicapped" (127). Thus, ironically enough, these women are alienated by their education. The ensuing conflict is projected with sympathetic insight in these two novels. They present a disturbing world where women silently suffer the slings and arrows of a biased tradition and an unsympathetic education. The Indian patriarchal society demands of them silent sacrifice and unquestioned obedience. Their unvoiced protests against the prohibitive milieu can be heard only by making a close reading of the texts, by reading between the lines as well as episodes in them.

According to Swami Chidbhavananda, in Indian tradition, a woman's *dharma* is interpreted as depending merely on her relationship to man as daughter, wife and mother and the word *dharma* is explained as the *karma* that is conducive to one's growth and progress (276). The concept of *karma* brings in a deterministic point of view, according to

which one's life is determined by one's deeds in previous life. Such an outlook upon life makes women accept suffering as their lot and gives them courage and endurance. Hence, traditional Indian women like the characters in Desai are cultural constructs in the strictest sense of the word.

Cry, The Peacock can be considered a dark and ironic *bildungsroman* as Maya's arduous strivings for self-fulfilment ends up in the total negation and destruction of her own life. Her inward journey brings about neither self-development nor regeneration, but culminates in self-annihilation. Unable to meet the demands of a conventional marriage, and disappointed in her attempts to gain love and understanding from her husband, Maya experiences only frustration in life. Although her inherent temperament accelerates her disaster, she is 'made' and 'unmade' by the socio-cultural context. Patriarchal restraints, and gender discrimination are partly responsible for bringing about Maya's tragedy.

Desai has admitted her interest in "characters who are not average but have retreated or been driven into some extremity of despair and so turned against the general current" (Dalmia 13). Maya undoubtedly belongs to this category. She is haunted for life by a mysterious curse indicated by the planetary positions in her nativity chart, according to

which four years after her marriage one of the partners will die "by unnatural causes" (30). This prophecy shapes the course of her life as well as that of the novel. The latter thus traces the predicament of an urban Indian woman in a hostile psychosocial milieu. It projects the dreadful isolation of a helpless woman who experiences "marital disharmony in a male dominated society" (Sharma 47).

The novel is divided into three parts. The first part sets the theme subtly and suggestively and serves as a Prologue to the second and main part of the novel. Part three in the like manner forms an Epilogue to the two earlier sections. The first and last parts are rendered in the third person narrative voice while the middle section follows the autobiographical mode and is narrated in the first person. The death of Maya's pet dog Toto and her unrelenting grief over the event, described in the first part of the novel, are symptomatic of the greater disasters that are to follow. The episode also serves to reveal the great gulf between Maya and her husband.

Maya is acutely sensitive and emotionally high strung. Gautama on the other hand, is a detached professional. He is a brilliant lawyer with an unsentimental and pragmatic approach to life. The inevitable marital incompatibility slowly and steadily ruins her, and brings about the catastrophe. Tormented by a complex familial environment and

driven by insanity, Maya murders Gautama and kills herself. It can be interpreted as the vengeance of a marginalised woman on the callousness of the 'other'. The catastrophe is however unwarranted except by assuming that Maya has turned totally insane.

Maya's disaster in the strict etymological sense of the word begins in childhood. She is motherless like Rose in *Who*. However, she is brought up tenderly by an over-indulgent father. He brings her up like a pretty bird in a golden cage proffering her abundant affection but caring little for her needs to grow up into a responsible individual.

Maya's later life harshly contrasts with her upbringing. Therefore whenever she is in despair she slips into nostalgic fantasies of her "princess" like life with her father in Lucknow, when "delight" used to make her "drowsy" (37). She recollects, "The world was like a toy specially made for me, painted in my favourite colours, set moving to my favourite tunes" (36). Her father is a man of order and discipline but he dotes on his daughter forgiving all her childish pranks. This single-parent bringing up significantly hampers her self-development. Being a traditional Brahmin, Maya's father considers marriage the only source of his daughter's happiness. However, his excessive love for her makes her unfit and inefficient to meet the challenges of adult life. Maya fails to outgrow her infantile relationship with him and for her, the father

becomes the point of reference by which Gautama, her husband, is judged. Like most Indian women, it is Maya's misfortune to grow up in an environment blind to her aspirations.

Arjuna, her brother is a non-conformist and a rebel. Their father is terse and cold with him when he breaks the law of the house (133). Maya aptly describes him as a "young hawk that could not be tamed, that fought for its liberty" (134). He revolts against the patriarchal edicts and sets himself free by absconding to New York. Years later, he writes to his sister denouncing the "elegantly lived" but "meaningless life" (137) with his father. Thus Arjuna attains liberty "from the societal shackles while Maya's womanhood is an insurmountable impediment to her development" (Clement 221).

Maya remembers Arjuna with love: "He had been a good brother, he had loved me and I him" (135). But the brother-sister bond in their case fails to produce any salutary effect on either of them, partly because of the indiscriminate treatment of the father. As Alladi comments the brother-sister bond has a profound influence "on a woman's identity and self-definition. The Indian woman knows that a man's protection is pre-requisite to her survival in a patriarchal society. Apart from her father, husband and son, she looks to her brother for support; this makes her feel secure enough to deal with the totally male

dominated world" (80). In Maya's case, no immediate familial relationship gives her any emotional sustenance or a sense of security. Only her role as a daughter or sister or wife is of any significance to the members of her family. None of them treats her as an individual.

Gautama accuses her of having "a very obvious father obsession" and considers it the reason why she agreed to marry him, "a man so much older" than herself (146). Gautama and her father had been friends. Maya reminisces:

. . . . Gautama [had been] almost a protégé of my father, who had admired him and, I believed still did Had it not been for the quickening passion with which I met half-way, my father's proposal that I marry this tall, stooped and knowledgeable friend of his, one might have said that our marriage was grounded upon the friendship of the two men, and the mutual respect in which they held each other, rather than upon anything else.(40).

Temperamental incompatibility weakens and wrecks their conjugal happiness. Maya is forced to live on an island of intense loneliness nourished only by nostalgic fantasies. She feels that Gautama knows nothing that concerns her. She muses:

Giving me an opal ring to wear on my finger, he did not notice the translucent skin beneath, the blue flashing veins that ran under and out of the bridge of gold and jolted me into smiling with pleasure each time I saw it. Telling me to go to sleep while he worked at his papers, he did not give another thought to me, to either the soft, willing body or the lonely wanting mind that waited near his bed. (9)

She also realises how discouraging it is to reflect on how much their marriage is "based upon a nobility forced upon [them] from outside, and therefore neither true nor lasting (40). Maya is intensely emotional and gets frustrated when her attempts to win her husband's love and desire continuously become abortive. Her loneliness is aggravated by the fact that she is childless. Cultural conditioning makes every Indian wife believe that dignity and respect in a patriarchal family can be obtained only by becoming a mother. In the words of Manu, "To be mothers were women created, and to be fathers, men.⁷ As for the veneration a mother receives, he says "A master exceeded ten tutors in claim to honour; the father a hundred masters but the mother a thousand fathers, in right to reverence and in the function of teacher".⁸ So Alladi makes the following observation on Indian woman:

[S]he turns towards motherhood with an overpowering zest, with the enthusiasm of a child discovering that it can walk. [In sexual matters] she has very little choice; her husbands needs must be fulfilled first . . . He does not think of her as a human being with whom he can have a conversation, can communicate. He visualises her as a sex object, someone he can enjoy in bed, . . . and one who can produce his children - at least one male child to continue his family line. In her anxiety to please, in her yearning to be recognised, in her desire to gain a prominent position in the family hierarchy, the woman longs for a son - her social redeemer, thus perpetrating male dominance and patriarchy. The son becomes a symbol of her power, a contorted or lopsided symbol nevertheless. (5)

Maya has neither the experience of being brought up by an honoured or powerful mother nor that of being one. The unbalanced single-parent nurturing in childhood and the emotional alienation she suffers since her marriage collude in ruining her life and in bringing about the violent end. Over-protection in childhood by contrast, aggravates her mal-adjustment in married life. Both father and husband, sharing the value system of a tradition, which in its decadence

devalues woman as an individual, are thus unintentional accomplices in destroying the helpless woman. Consciously and unconsciously patriarchal acculturation has made the men of India aim at keeping women in physical and psychological subjugation. Maya's life is thus a relentless march towards self-destruction unrelieved by ethical and familial support. For, like most middle class Indian women, Maya blindly accepts the law of her father and that of her husband. She is left helpless, when doubts and misgivings haunt her to the point of obsession.

Maya herself alludes to her misery at childlessness after the event of Toto's death. She feels the grief over the pet's death overwhelming, and consoles herself musing, "childless women do develop fanatic attachment to their pets, they say. It is no less a relationship than that of a woman and her child, no less worthy of reverence, and agonized remembrance" (10). Later when her friend Pom tells her that she is going to have a baby she "felt something that had always been strong in me, weaken suddenly and shiver at the memory (63).

She is aware that it is not her pet's death alone that plunges her in inconsolable grief, "but another sorrow, unremembered, perhaps as yet not even experienced, and filled me with this despair (8). Part II of the novel deals with the remembrance of this "unremembered sorrow", and

her eventual mental breakdown. Very little action takes place in this relatively lengthy middle section. Making use of the stream of consciousness technique Desai lays bare the unending tides of sensations and emotions waxing and waning in Maya's mind. She says in her interview with Atma Ram that she is primarily concerned with the "thought, emotion and sensation" of her characters".⁹ Her art is an effort to discover the significance of reality by "plunging below the surface and plumbing the depths, then illuminating those depths till they become . . . [an] explicable reflection of the visible world"¹⁰. For such a process, the stream of consciousness technique comes in handy and serves the writer as a powerful narrative instrument. For stream of consciousness fiction as remarked by Robert Humphrey is "greatly concerned with what lies below the surface" (4).

The entire novel is doomed by a pervading sense of death and decay introduced by the opening sentence: "All the day the body lay rotting in the sun." Toto's death sets in motion a series of obsessive fears in Maya's mind which cripples her sense of well being and turns her into a woman who is "aware of living on the brink".¹¹ Thus, the dog's death — the cause of which is not revealed in the story — acts as a goading "functional correlative" of the predicted disaster (Clement 218). The novelist in her interview with Srivastava says that the dog's

death is a symbol of "death, annihilation and the destruction of the vulnerable and the unprotected" (218).

Maya's existential fears arise directly from the disconcerting memory of an astrologer foretelling the death of one of the partners, four years after marriage. The prophecy was made long before her marriage.

The prophecy is significant thematically and structurally. While it slackens the marital bonds and widens the gulf between the man and wife, as a narrative device it serves as a packing cord, which can neatly tie up and bind the incoherent projections of Maya's mind. It thus plays an important role in the structure and structuration of the novel.

Cultural constraints in the guise of timidity prevent Maya from discussing the issue openly with her husband. Her father is so upset by the prediction that he burns the horoscope and banishes the word 'fate' from their household (75). However, he totally disregards or is ignorant of the ruinous impact that the gloomy words might have on the sensitive psyche of his daughter. He is opaque to the fact that traditional beliefs, very often misunderstood, enfeeble and handicap women more than men, as the former are untrained and ill-equipped to analyse their situations logically and objectively. As Desai remarks in her article "Women Writers", "however, unjust and unacceptable life

seemed, women are not supposed to change things any more than to criticize them, all they could do was to burst into tears and mope, never having taught any better" (42). The pent-up, unexpressed emotions are ventilated in the form of interior monologues throughout the novel.

The prophecy is thus an objective correlative for the forces of tradition, which are hostile and inimical towards women. Indian astrological scholarship believes in *pariharas* or remedies by which the malefic planetary influences can be removed or overcome.¹² Desai introduces the horoscope simply as an agent of fate, and makes much of the predictive part, but ignores the assuasive remedial measures suggested by the astrologer himself, "we are in the hands of God . . . God guides as all. He may guide you onto another path, if you pray for it to be so, offer sacrifices in order that it may be so" (31). In the rest of the novel the theme of the horoscope is therefore unconvincing. It is used in the novel just as a peg on which Maya's miseries are hung. Thus, familial and socio-cultural constraints that generally victimise women are given an additional accomplice in the novel in the form of the nativity chart. The resulting psychosocial environment alienates the victim from society, from family, and ultimately from herself. Her alienation is thus complete. It is such an existential crisis that Albert Camus describes in *Myth of Sisyphus* as a situation of absurdity, precipitated by a "divorce between man and his life, the actor and his

setting" (109). Maya is made to suffer, standing between an ill-digested tradition and an inadequate education, which ignore her development as thinking individual.

Desai seems to make an attempt to understand to what extent such a vestige of tradition can damage a woman's psyche. The prophecy operates as a dark negative force severely influencing Maya's perceptions and responses. It terrifies her, slowly and irrevocably deranges her mind, upsets her psychological composure and relentlessly leads to the catastrophe. The novel in fact, resounds with the wailing of the central character suggested by the symbolic title. The peacock's cry brings to her mind a rhyming interpretation, 'Lover I die'. She muses, "Are they not blood-chilling, their shrieks of pain? 'Pia, pia' they cry. 'Lover, lover, *Mio, mio*, – I die, I die" (95). Later she writes, "Now that I understood their call, I wept for them and wept for myself, knowing their words to be mine" (97). Maya is a pathetic victim of her nature and nurture, temperament and culture. In Maya's case, the prophecy functions as a virtual death sentence, which radically turns her life in to one of unrelieved despair. Even without such a prophecy, very often for an ordinary Indian woman, marriage initiates the process of slow self-annihilation. The astrologer and his prophecy are thus narrative constructs symbolising the Indian woman's predicament.

Marital discord has been haunting Maya right from the beginning. Gautama is an unequal husband for the emotionally fragile Maya who leads a life of "sensations rather than thoughts." He is a man of reason and good sense and very often keeps his wife in intellectual check by quoting the Bhagavad Gita profusely for his purpose. However, he has miserably failed to imbibe the essence of Indian tradition reflected in the texts. He fails to understand and protect his wife in times of distress. His apprehension of the world is purely intellectual. To him Maya remains "a wayward trying infant" (66) and Maya understands that Gautama "saw no value in anything less than the ideas and theories born of human and preferably male brains" (99). He has no faith in any esoteric branch of knowledge, astrology or palmistry. He says: "No educated adult can seriously be expected to believe that the patterns or the movements of the astral bodies. . . or the lines formed in the palms of your hands . . . have the remotest influence upon our deeds and actions in our everyday lives...."(79). But Maya does not feel convinced, as she is unsure about his feelings towards her. Her only recourse is to indulge nostalgically in fantasies about her lost idyllic childhood and her idealised father.

Maya's intense need to be loved, to flatter and define herself through her husband is never fulfilled. She knew that they "belonged to separate worlds" (102). She recollects: "In his world there were vast

areas in which he would never permit me, and he could not understand that I could even wish to enter them, foreign as they were to me" (104). She yearns for "the contact that goes deeper than flesh - that of thought" but all her attempts to express and communicate her feelings to him are futile (105).

As Deborah Cameron writes, for women "language does not in itself guarantee communication" and "words are often inadequate" (8). Such a situation produces a kind of woman's alienation from language. Maya's inability to communicate effectively thus aggravates her situation. Cameron in her book makes the readers aware of the fact that language is closely linked with the power structures of society and in patriarchal societies, language is wielded subtly and effectively to oppress women. Hence, lack of communication fragments Maya's personality. Gautama's unwillingness to treat his wife as an intellectual companion is intuitively cognised by Maya, and her wish to share her feelings often gets obstructed thereby.

Gautama calls her a "neurotic", pampered and spoiled by her father (115). He accuses her father of teaching her wrong things, making her believe in a fairy tale world of existence. Shulamith Firestone's observation that neuroses reacts from enforced subservience to the power of the father (105) has to be slightly modified in the case of

Maya, in whose life it is also because of the subservience to his fatherly indulgences and pampering. Gautama enjoys the company of his friends and appears to have a cheerful and pleasure-loving temperament in their midst, but his words are full of detachment and self-effacement in his wife's presence (111). The words of detachment serve only to disguise the lack of attachment he feels for his wife. Therefore, Gautama's charges against Maya's father boomerangs upon himself. For it is not only a doting father that spoils Maya's chances for self-development and teaches her "wrong things", a nonchalant husband contributes even more to bring about her psychic degradation. In Maya's life, the pendulum swings between abominable extremes - from over-protection in childhood to callous indifference in conjugal life.

Shoshana Felman's observation perhaps describes Maya's condition best. According to her mental imbalance is,

an impasse confronting those whom cultural conditioning has deprived of the very means of protest or self affirmation. Far from being a form of contestation, 'mental illness' is *a request for help*, a manifestation both of cultural impotence and of political castration. This socially defined help-needing and help-seeking human behaviour is itself part of female conditioning,

ideologically inherent in the behavioural pattern and in the dependent and helpless role assigned to the woman as such.¹³

In order to cope with the reality of experience, which in Maya's case is nothing but an actual death to herself or Gautama in a few months' time, her mind deviates into realms of fantasy and interior monologue. It is a therapeutic device to escape from her predicament at least temporarily. She is in a profound sense, a pathetic victim of self-righteous and unheeding patriarchy.

Mrinalini Solanki and Usha Bande have analysed the character of Maya, on the basis of framework provided by the Third Force Psychologists or Neo Freudians like Karen Horney and Abraham Maslow.¹⁴ Horney and Maslow maintain that neurotic trends develop due to uncongenial socio-cultural environment. Horney describes basic anxiety as "the feeling of being isolated and helpless in a world conceived as potentially hostile."¹⁵ While discussing detached individuals, Usha Bande makes intelligent conclusions based on Horney's analysis. "A detached individual strives for freedom. He lives in an ivory tower" and "resents any intrusion in his well-guarded citadel of privacy and feels consciously superior to others in his self-sufficiency, independence and stoicism. This is in fact a flight from responsibilities and is far from the healthy non-attachment eulogised in the scriptures"

(31). These insights are very helpful in understanding Gautama's character.

The novel also brings to the fore the callousness of the other members of the family towards Maya's predicament. Maya's mother-in-law is very much concerned about her own daughter Nila's divorce a subject she consults with Gautama. However, she is totally indifferent to Maya's suffering at the hands of her own son. Maya longs for her affection but she is frustrated in her attempt (164). Gautama's mother is also cool and detached like her son. Gautama's attitude towards Maya can therefore be traced to his heredity and environment as well. He is also a socially and culturally conditioned product like Maya. Gautama's father has been a freedom fighter and a political prisoner who "coursed along routes too swiftly for his family to follow" (49). His mother is a busy social worker (47) and there is little evidence in the novel to show that any strong marital bond existed between the two.

Maya is a credulous Indian woman profoundly disturbed by tradition and gender. As Shanta Krishnaswamy remarks, "An Indian woman feels more intensely, and experiences more deeply than her male counterpart. Her life is a consistent attempt to hurtle past the emotional block set up by an unheeding, insensitive social environment" (239).

The novel portrays Maya's failure in "hurtling past" the social as well as psychological blocks. Since the prophecy of the astrologer is Maya's death sentence, even her suicide does not permit her to prove that she is free. So like her alienation her bondage is also total.

The last section of this chapter is devoted to analysing the women characters in *Clear*, foredoomed to lead a life of submission in the patriarchal environment, with a special focus on the events that carve and mould the central character.

In this novel, Desai continues to explore the theme of the urban Indian women's battle against the bondage imposed upon them by society and culture. The central character Bim is entirely different in temperament and character from Maya in *Cry*. She is an unconventional woman independently mapping out her own destiny in a male-centred world. However, her apparently independent status does not make her comfortable. She is mostly a discontented woman, easily annoyed and at times quite peevish and grudging. This discontent arises due to a disturbing conflict in her mind between an internalised patriarchal value system and a contrary reality in which she finds herself. Unlike Maya, Bim is a career woman. She teaches history at a local college. Her career opens for her new vistas of experience.

But as Usha Bande observes, "The Hindu social code sees external ambition in women as detrimental and unnatural" (146)

The novel is set around 1947, a period when "men had a different kind of life open to them which was entirely shut to girls. Girls at that time did not even visualise having any kind of independent will to choose for themselves"¹⁶. Their lives were decided by wills other than their own. It is this helplessness of a woman watching her own life run according to the needs and demands of family and familial relationships that Desai projects through this novel.

The traditional code of social conduct in India does not respect an independent woman¹⁷. A woman is destined to marry and have children; her life is inextricably bound with her husband's family and familial obligations. Therefore, Bim, in rejecting marriage and motherhood, represents, in a sense, a counter construct. At the same time, she is conditioned by her Indian environment to be submissive. So when her parents die she willingly becomes the master of the house, "the moral and physical caretaker of the Das household" (Nabar 17). Being the eldest of the Das children, she easily slips into the role of a mother to the younger brothers and sisters. .

The lawgivers who have influenced the Indian psyche for ages, are mostly reticent regarding the life of a spinster pursuing a career in

order to look after the needs of the family she is born into. On the contrary they eloquently proclaim that marriage and gender specific roles alone confer honour and respectability to a woman. Manu condemns the father who does not give his daughter in marriage at the proper time ¹⁸. The responsibilities of a family never rested with a woman in traditional Hindu families. Therefore in order to understand or analyse Bim's character and attitude the traditional frame of reference is inadequate. Malashri Lal's comment on Ila Das in *Fire on the Mountain* seems more pertinent in the case of Bim. For, like Bim she was "brought up in the imitative gentility of the upper class Indians" and "then had to earn her livelihood because of decaying family fortunes" (255). However, the teaching career becomes her. She is intelligent, sensitive and hard working. Even as a young girl, she understands that Baba, her retarded brother, Raja in the grip of tuberculosis, and Mira-masi the helpless widow, are part of the household and therefore part of herself. She realises how much they all need her care and protection. Once she says to Tara "I won't marry. . . I shall never leave Baba and Raja and Mira-masi . . . I shall work I shall *do* things. I shall earn my own living and look after Mira-masi and Baba and be independent" (140). This is a frame of mind, which reveals heroism and courage. Tara, on the contrary, can never rise to such heights of nobility. The expression on her face at that time betrays her

admission that she, "closely attached as she was to home and family, would leave them instantly, if the opportunity arose" (140). Tara in temperament and character offers a direct contrast to her sister. Thus, Bim stands outside the matrix of convention, not simply out of personal preference but by compulsion of circumstances as well. It is her sense of responsibility, and love for the family that underlie her determination to remain single and independent.

Desai relates the theme of the novel in an interview with Sunil Sethi: "My novel is set in Old Delhi and records the tremendous changes that a Hindu family goes through since 1947. Basically my preoccupation was with recording the passage of time. I was trying to write a four dimensional piece on how a family's life moves backwards and forwards in a period of time"¹⁹ She clarifies the term "four dimensional piece" to Srivastava (224-25). She claims that she has created a "four dimensional world" the fourth dimension being **t**ime. That time is only another dimensional of space is a familiar concept in Eastern philosophy. The latter regards time and space as purely mental constructs. As D.T. Suzuki remarks, "there is no space without time, no time without space, they are inter penetrating"²⁰ This philosophic truth has been proved in relativistic physics. Desai wants time to be perceived by the five senses exactly like the spatial world around us. She also says that the novel is about "what the bondage of time" does to

people (Prasad 106). In fact, tradition is another term for 'the bondage of time'. A close reading of the text reveals the subtle and bewildering ways in which the patriarchal tradition restrains the development of the women characters.

Desai has also explained the layout of the novel to Srivastava. The novel is divided into four chapters. The first one deals with a family reunion and as in Eliot's play of the same name, the ghosts of the past haunt the characters through reminiscences, verbal or mental. In Desai's own words. "Like all family reunions, it is only partly successful . . . as there are many sour notes among the happy ones"(225). The second chapter makes a backward movement in time and deals with the eventful youth of the chief characters. The third " goes deeper down . . . into their childhood and infancy". The last chapter brings the characters back to the 'family reunion' with which the novel began, with a deeper resonance and clearer significance. The wheel thus comes full circle. The temporal shifts can be represented as $c \rightarrow b \rightarrow a \rightarrow c$. In her use of time and memory Desai is influenced by her favourite poets T.S. Eliot and Emily Dickinson, whose quotations are epigraphed on the frontispiece.

The novel uses partition of India as a backdrop. The partition offers a strong and effective parallel to the domestic situation and the

fate of the Das household. From a feminist point of view derived from Virginia Woolf, the larger political catastrophe can also be regarded as a contrast to the domestic situation. Virginia Woolf maintains that all socio-psychological disorders arise due to the operation of the male rational intellect. "Excessive virility " is responsible for the horrors of war. According to her "when the wife is permitted to administer the law of sympathy in the home, domestic harmony becomes possible. When women take part in national affairs, the evils of politics are mitigated."²¹. The hypothesis is proved true in the case of Das family, while the city was in flames, rumbling with the disturbing" sound of shots and of cries and screams," (44) it was Bim's binding force and her quiet administration of 'law of sympathy' in the house that makes domestic harmony and peace a reality for its members.

The novel portrays the hopes and frustrations of a typical post-independent Indian family consisting of two sisters and their brothers. Tara is married to Bakul, a diplomat in Foreign Service. Baba, the mentally retarded youngest son is looked after by Bim. Raja lives with his Muslim wife Benazir in Hyderabad. With Bakul on leave, Tara comes home on their way to Hyderabad to attend the marriage of Moyna, Rajas daughter. With an observant eye, Desai catches the various strands of disharmony inside a traditional family. As Shireen

Huq observers, "Desai explodes the myth of the happy Indian family, instead she seems to suggest that families are sick to the core " (203).

The post-nineteen forty-seven Indian society is a blind alley for women seeking selfhood and independence. They have fought on an equal footing with men for the nation's freedom. However, the concept of freedom has never been understood or realised inside the household. Fighting for nationhood did not guarantee selfhood for women. Ever since, they have remained sandwiched between a tradition that upholds blind obedience and submission to the law of the father, and the new ideal of individualism inculcated during the national movement. It is the dilemma born out of this precarious position that the women characters in *Clear* emphatically illustrate.

The reunion of the two central characters Bim and Tara after a long gap of time triggers off in each of them a multitude of reminiscences. The major events and situations of the past come alive in their conversations and personal ruminations. The house forms the pivotal point as well as the prime mover that sets in motion the flow of memories. The novel does have a four-dimensional impact and makes the space-time continuum a palpable experience.

What strikes Tara is the apparent changelessness of the house. It suggests a kind of stasis and evokes a sense of timelessness in time,²

sense of permanence amidst impermanence. Tara exclaims, "How everything goes on and on here and never changes! (4). These words form an unintentional observation on Bim herself whose identity is so much part of the household. The conversations between the two sisters bring out clearly the differences in their sentiments, beliefs and outlook. The effect of time on the two sisters has been totally varied. " To look at Bim, one would not think she had lived through the same childhood, the same experience as Tara" (23). As Nabar puts it, it is Tara's homecoming that "triggers off in Bim memories of a past that has lost much of its enchantment in the drab framework of the present." She continues, Tara's "tactless blundering into the past, her naive responses to the present forces Bim to face up to the real emptiness of her life" (15). Bim is aware of the incessant changes that life brings in its wake but she feels that no change has ever improved the drudgery of the present. Change for her is another word for decay. She says, "Old Delhi does not change. It only decays.... [I]t is a great cemetery, every house a tomb. Nothing but sleeping graves" (5).

The past is slowly resurrected in the first chapter through Tara's lyrical musings and Bim's dismal recollections. Memory touches upon happy as well as dismal events. The Das family gets focalised at different significant periods. The parents lead an anglicised life spending their time in clubs, playing bridge. Obviously there is no

emotional attachment between them and the children. The lack of attachment with the parents brings the children closer together under the protection of *Mira-masi*, a widowed cousin of Mrs. Das. *Mira-masi* "had been widowed at the age of fifteen and had lived with her husband's family ever since, as maid of all work, growing shabbier and skinnier and seedier with the years" (104). She was brought to their house to look after the mentally retarded son.

With the death of the parents the burden of the family falls on the shoulders of *Mira-masi* who voluntarily steps into the role of a surrogate mother to all the children. Later when *Mira-masi* turns into an alcoholic and is on the verge of a psychosomatic collapse, her mantle falls on Bim.

The theme of marital incompatibility emphasised in *Cry* is set aside in this novel. What Desai ventures to explore in this work is the traumatic experiences of *Mira-masi* and Bim - two traditional Indian women who happen to live outside the matrix of marriage in a world dominated by patriarchal institutions. Widowed at the age of fifteen, *Mira-masi* leads a life that is totally different from a conventional Indian woman's life of silent submission to the will of her husband. As for Bim, she is a spinster partly by compulsion and partly by choice. Nevertheless, her life has an isotopic similarity to that of *Mira-masi*. It is not marriage and a dominating husband that reduce

their lives to servitude, but their own temperament - their readiness to sacrifice their lives for others. Both Mira-*masi* and Bim take up the roles of guardians to the younger children with a heroic sense of personal sacrifice inculcated in them by tradition.

Mira-*masi* is a stereotyped Hindu widow. In the Manusmṛiti, contradictory views occur regarding the life of a widow. Since a woman is never fit for independence, a widow is a liability to society and a threat to the institution of marriage²². A widow is to remain chaste and lead a life of renunciation. Since Mira-*masi* lost her husband at a very early stage of marriage and was treated as a menial servant by her in-laws, she develops the characteristics of self-effacement and compliance as strategies of survival. "She had been twelve years old when she married and was a virgin when she was widowed" (108). Even her alcoholism and abnormal behaviour just before her death are her unconscious manoeuvres of crossing critical junctures in life. R.D. Laing says that all forms of psychosis are "special strategies that people invent in order to survive in unliveable situations²³."

A traditional Indian woman is self-effacing and submissive, silently embracing the misfortunes that life heaps upon her, whether she is a wife or a spinster or a widow. Suffering is her permanent badge. She rarely raises questions against her predicament or takes arms

against them. As Nabar rightly points out, "Bim saddled with her alcoholic aunt and retarded brother, accommodates them into her scheme of things. Her western counterpart in similar circumstances would have most likely dumped them both into appropriate homes in order to preserve her existential freedom" (17). The fate of Flo, Rose's stepmother in *Who* illustrates the statement. In the Oriental ethos, existential freedom has an entirely different connotation. Coomaraswamy observes, "Whatever the ultimate possibilities of western individualism, Hindu society was established on a basis of group morality . . . within a given class, the freedom of the individual is subordinated to the interest of the group." (122). So it is obvious how cultural upbringing has devitalised women like Bim and Mira-*masi* and has turned them literally into 'subject women'.

Munro's fiction provides a realistic glimpse into the lives of contemporary Canadian women, who boldly break free of cultural shackles and head towards freedom and fulfilment. Mrs. Jordan in *Lives* leaves her husband and goes to Jubilee to set up a life in town when the daily reality on the Flats Road seems to stand against her personal ambitions. Rose behaves in a similar fashion in *Who*. She leaves her husband Patrick and pursues her career as a television artist. Del Jordan too manages successfully to rid herself of patriarchal requirements by leaving Garnet French. She realises that her "real life"

lies in the pursuit of a career of her choice—that of a creative writer. Such radical moves are culturally offensive and unimaginable in the Indian context. Hence, women like *Mira-masi* and Bim find freedom in service and happiness in misery, bound as they are to the Indian traditional ethos.

Mira-masi is deprived of love and fulfilment in the traditional sense. But she becomes a living source of abundant love and showers it upon all the members, of her surrogate family. When her student husband caught a cold and died in England, the entire family blamed it upon her horoscope. Therefore, as in the case of Maya in *Cry*, *Mira-masi's* misfortune is believed to be caused by the malefic planetary influences in her horoscope. The aspersion makes the young girl feel guilty and it is this sense of guilt that makes her suffer the abject miseries of widowhood in early youth gladly. However "though widowed [she] could not be said to be abandoned. She was searched out by those whom misery attracted just as it nauseated others" (109). Raja and Bim try to make a future convert of her, but it was in vain. She only grew "more vague, absent minded" (109). To Tara, she was different. "She was solid as a bed, she smelt of cooking and was made of knitting" (109). Like the great aunts in *Lives*, the widow finds happiness in revolving round persons who matter—the younger generation of the Das family. She performs the role of subservience to a

fault, revealing a masterly gift in silently and undemandingly discharging her duties in a household that is not actually hers.

Like Toto's death in *Cry* the drowning of the cow fondly looked after by *Mira-masi*, foreshadows her own death which occurs "not hideously by drowning, but quietly in her bed pleasantly overcome by fumes of alcohol" (99). Her alcoholism and insanity might appear "bizarre and inappropriate and this transformation from self-effacing aunt to dipsomaniac slattern might be unconvincing" (Nabar 22). Nevertheless, the reason is not far to find. Desai's main aim and concern in the novel is the unrolling of the quotidian existence of the central character Bim and how, despite the frowns of fortune that darken her life, she steers clear out of it and in the end, reaches the clear light of day. *Mira-masi* on the other hand fails to rise above her condition and eventually succumbs to it. "Fumes of alcohol" might have offered her a needed diversion. With infinite endurance, she toils like a slave filling every moment of her life with selfless acts of love, like many other Indian women who find themselves placed in similar circumstances. She sacrifices herself at the altar of life's absurdity. Her life is a clear and forceful paradigm of how custom and convention can ruthlessly wreck the life of a helpless woman. *Mira-masi* is obviously the victim of a tradition that totally ignores that a woman, who is fated to be the widow, has any claim to personal fulfilment. Her endurance reaches a

point of saturation when the parents of the household die. Herself an orphan, *Mira-masi* is now left with the care of other orphans, although she was "handed to them like a discarded household appliance they might find to use" (105).

She can alleviate her suffering neither by an excursion into a nostalgic past nor by dreaming about a bright tomorrow. Perhaps the only compensation that life has mercifully granted her is the affection she receives from the children despite a feeling of condescension obvious on their part. "They were not beyond, even at that age, feeling the superiority of their position and extending their gratitude from that elevated position of power" (105). When she lies ill, Bim realises the intensity of the suffering *Mira-masi* has undergone.

Holding on to her aunt's small-boned and cold feet, she saw now what her aunt had suffered through their parent's deaths, through Raja's illness, Tara's going away and the perpetual sorrow over Baba. It was all scored over her face, about her quivering mouth and watery eyes, and Bim had not cared to see it,(89).

It was she who had looked after Baba and nursed Bim and Raja back to health when they were affected with typhoid.

When Mira-*masi* herself breaks down, the whole family leans on Bim. Dr. Biswas understands Bim's situation perfectly well. He tells her, "Now I understand why you do not wish to marry. You have dedicated your life to others - to your sick brother and your aged aunt and your little brother who will be dependent on you all his life. You have sacrificed your own life for them" (97). While Baba is a helpless and pathetic dependent on Bim, Raja only exploits her love and benevolence. Greer's words on women in general seem particularly applicable to those like Mira-*masi* and Bim. She says in *The Female Eunuch*, "women represent the most oppressed class of life-contracted unpaid workers for whom slaves is not too melodramatic a description. They are the only true proletariat left" (369). Even then the ethical situation in the Indian context invites a different kind of judgement. For, as Alladi remarks, in Indian culture, the brother-sister bond has a tremendous influence on a "woman's identity and self- definition.... Apart from her father, husband and son, she looks to her brother for support: this makes her feel secure enough to deal with the totally male-dominated world" (80).

Bim's devotion to Raja is endless. It is only the latter's ingratitude that wounds her. When he leaves for Hyderabad to the Hyder Ali's, Bim watches him go silently with remarkable composure. "She kept calm while Raja packed his bags, put away all his things, telling her that

now he would go to Hyderabad. Looking up at her as she watched silently, he shouted: 'I have to go . . . I have to begin my life some time, don't I? You don't want me to spend all my life down in this hole, do you? You don't think I can go on living just to keep my brother and sister company, do you?'" (100). Bim feels fatigue as well as relief when he leaves. She mutters to Baba, "So now there are just you and I left . . . Everyone's gone, except you and I." Her resilience is remarkable. She reassures Baba that there is nothing to be afraid of. "It's as if we were children again - sitting on the Veranda, waiting for father and mother, when it's growing dark and it's bedtime" (101).

It is the concern for Baba, the idiot brother that remains uppermost in her mind. Even when she is fully aware of the fact that he can never perform the duties of managing their father's business as a responsible officer, she wants Baba to go to office (13). This is not only a defeatist attempt to counter the forces of reality, by making things appear normal, but also a temporary projection of the residue of patriarchal tradition, which regards and looks up to the man of the house as the guardian and bread-winner of the family. Both brothers disappoint Bim- Raja by his selfish desertion and Baba by his childish dependency.

The pervading atmosphere in the Das household can be summed up in Bakul's words "so much sickness, so many worries" (71). The permeating illness - Mrs. Das's diabetes, the idiocy that dooms Baba to a life of stasis and dependence, typhoid that attacks both Raja and Bim, the attack of tuberculosis which keeps Raja bed-ridden for days together under the care of Mira-*masi* and Bim, and finally the alcoholism and abnormal behaviour of Mira-*masi* herself - is a metaphor that powerfully suggests the decadence of a suffocating tradition that can neither hold them together nor propel them in the right direction.

Tara alone makes an "escape" (156) from illness and stagnation. In one of the confessional exchanges between the sisters, Tara explains to Bim how disgusting the atmosphere at home had been when the parents were alive and when illness seemed to attack the family from all sides. She reminisces about the past situation with a kind of revulsion:

The kind of atmosphere that used to fill the house when father and mother were alive, always ill or playing cards or at the club, always *away*, always leaving us out, leaving us behind-and then Mira-*masi* becoming so - so strange, and Raja so ill - till it seemed that the house was ill, illness passing from one generation to another so that anyone who lived in it was bound to become ill and only thing to do was to get away from it, *escape...* (156).

She almost admits that her marriage to Bakul was an "escape".

Tara is a representative Indian woman, who seeks in marriage the sole meaning and dignity of a woman's life. Even as a little girl her ambition was to "be a mother and knit for [her] babies" (112). She was in many ways different from the older children Bim and Raja. With *Mira-masi* she had a special relationship "an affectionate, demonstrative one" while "Bim and Raja had maintained a silent and instinctive one" (112). Tara could identify herself readily with the Misra girls while Bim and Raja were scornful of them. Bim was a brilliant and hard working pupil but Tara like the Misra girls did not take her books seriously. While the school brought out Bim's natural energy and vivacity, school to Tara was "a terror and a blight" (136). The contrast between the sisters in their aptitudes and attitudes strongly echoes the contrast Munro develops between Del Jordan and Naomi in *Lives*. While Bim and Del have in them latent traits that would help them chart an independent, emotional and intellectual space irrespective of their relationship with men around them, Tara and Naomi develop a traditional feminine sense of complacency and dependence which obstructs their intellectual and psychological maturation.

Bakul is a Westernised Hindu husband who with a sense of superiority and self-importance takes his wife for granted. He is not indifferent to his wife but he is a male chauvinist, always conscious of

male supremacy. Like the legendary knights, he believes that it is his duty to rescue Tara from the psychological and physical maladies that seem to cripple her household. He tells her, "If only you would come with me, I would show you how to be happy" (18). Their relationship had a romantic beginning. However, Desai suggests that years of domestic servility become intolerable even to a temperamentally conventional woman like Tara. A time comes when she feels that "she had followed him enough, it had been such an enormous strain, always pushing against her grain, it had drained her of too much strength..." (18).

Jaya and Sarla – the Misra sisters represent yet another variety of Indian women - "two grey-haired, spectacled, middle-aged women-once married but both rejected by their husbands soon after their marriage." (30). They are often referred together as 'Misra girls' and are never once individualised. They run a nursery school and give dance and music lessons after the school closes for the day, "[I]t seemed they never ceased to toil and the pursuit of a living was unending" (30). Their father sums up their situation precisely while commenting on that of Bim. He tells Bim:

You work too hard. . . You don't know how to enjoy life. You and my two girls - you are too alike - you work and let the brothers

enjoy. Look at my sons there.... – fat lazy slobbs drinking whisky. Drinking whisky all day that their sisters have to pay for- did you ever hear of such a thing? In my day, our sisters used to tie coloured threads on our wrists on Rakhi bandhan day, begging for our protection, and we gave them gifts and promised to protect them and take care of them, and even if it was only a custom an annual festival, we at least meant it. But *they* - they let their sisters do the same ceremony, and they just don't care what it means as long as they can get their whisky and have the time to sit on their backsides, drinking it. Useless rubbish, my sons. Everything they ever did has failed . . . (32 - 33)

These words clearly point out the change that has taken place in many Indian families. Such situations render words like 'tradition' and 'patriarchy' meaningless and even ridiculous.

The fate of the Misra sisters also serves as an instance to show that for Indian women life outside the institution of marriage does not at all guarantee a life of independence and dignity. The callousness and selfishness of men keep them in subjection in unforeseen ways. *Clear* projects the helplessness that women suffered at the hands of men in almost every episode. Even Mr. Misra's complaints against his sons prove to be hypocritical. For with "desperate pride" he then refers to his

youthful viciousness. "When I was young, when I was their age - do you think I was any better? I can tell you, I was just as fast, as greedy, as stupid, as wicked as *any* of them" (34). The old father represents the callousness of an earlier generation. In the Das household, Raja pursues his own happiness at the expenses of his devoted elder sister Bakul never for once regarded Tara as an intellectual companion. Thus, it is the corruption of patriarchy with its concept of male domination that is highlighted in this work. The prevailing situation does not properly enable women to develop as socially respected individuals. Courageous women who have come forward to run the families in times of economic deprivation are deterred by the pull of a wrongly interpreted tradition proved meaningless in the contemporary world.

Each woman character Desai portrays in the novel has her share of sorrows and sufferings, married or not, divorced or widowed. *Miramasi*, Bim, Tara, Jaya and Sarla all are dissatisfied in one way or the other.

When lonely middle age stares Bim in the face, she is about to break down. Her untidiness and queerness noticed by Tara are symptomatic of her confusion and lack of self-confidence. She is not properly understood by any one in the family, for she proves herself a

rebel in terms of Indian tradition. Even the Misra sisters, whose fate has a homonymic similarity with that of Bim, are critical of Bim's self-willed personality. Jaya even accuses her of having "her own mind" (162).

Women in *Clear* present a study of alienation suffered by genteel middle class Indian women. Lack of sympathetic companionship generally deprives them of confidence and emotional strength to swim against the current. Even when they are not subdued by the clutches of marriage, they find that their personal destiny is inseparably linked with that of the other male members in their families. In the case of Bim as well as Jaya and Sarla, the brothers still hold the reins behind the curtains, whereby they shape and control the situations and events in the story. Women find it unable to shed the meekness and submissiveness acquired over years of acculturation. Even when the gender roles are reversed and sisters earn bread for their brothers, women as a class are not respected, as they should be. It is as if Bim, Jaya and Sarla have decided that their pursuit of existential happiness would work against and threaten the interests of their male dependants. Moreover, the spiritual and philosophical dimension traditionally attached to the family in the Indian psyche also hampers the development of selfhood even for talented women. Greer's words aptly summarise this situation and hold good in the Oriental situation as well. "It is impossible to escape from the stereotypical notions of

womanhood as they prevail in one's own society" (35) and the "stereotype is the Eternal Feminine. All she must contribute is her existence. She need achieve nothing, for she is the reward of achievement" (67).

NOTES

¹ Eva Figes, *Patriarchal Attitudes : Women in Society* (London, 1986)15 qtd in "Introduction: The Story So Far", in *The Feminist Reader: Essays in Gender and the Politics of Literary Criticism* Ed Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore (London: Macmillan 1989) 14.

² qtd in - K.K Ruthven, *Feminist Literary Studies: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1984) 59.

³ qtd in Nancy Walker A. *Feminist Alternatives: Irony and Fantasy in the Contemporary Novel by Women* (London: UP of Mississippi, 1990) 36.

⁴ Shoshana Felman, "Women and Madness: The Critical Phallacy." *The Feminist Reader: Essays in Gender and Politics of Literary Criticism*. Ed, Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore (London : Macmillan, 1989) 134.

⁵ See Munro's views on class system in her interview with Geoff Hancock, in "Alice Munro", *Canadian Writers at Work: Interviews with Geoff Hancock* (Toronto: OUP, 1987) 206.

⁶ The Times of India, 29 April 1979, 13

⁷ See Manusmṛti 9.96

*Prajānartham striyaḥ sṛṣṭaḥ santhānārtham ca mānavāḥ
Tasmāt sādharmaṇo dharmāḥ śrutau patnyā sahōditāḥ*

Since women are created to be mothers and men to be fathers, all sacred duties and obligations must be performed by man and wife together.

⁸ See Manusmṛti 2.145

*Upādhyāyān daśācārya ācāryāṇām śatam pitā
Sahasrām tu pitṛn mātā gauravēnātiricyatē*

⁹ Atma Ram "An Interview with Anita Desai ". *World Literature Written in English*. XVI. 1 (1977) 100.

¹⁰ See, "Replies to the Questionnaire." *Kakatiya Journal of English Studies*. 3.1(1978): 2

¹¹ See Jasbir Jain's Interview with Anita Desai in *Stairs to the Attic: The Novels of Anita Desai* (Jaipur: Printwell, 1987) 10.

¹² See Chapter 46 " Portentous Phenomena" in Varahamihira's *Brhatsamhita*, trans & ed, V Subrahmanya Shastri (Bangalore: MBD, 1947) 344-68.

¹³ Shoshana Felman,. "Women and Madness: The Critical Phallacy." *The Feminist Reader: Essays in Gender and Politics of Literary Criticism*, Ed, Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore (London: Macmillan, 1989) 134.

¹⁴ See "Third Force and Literary Characters" in Usha Bande, *The Novels of Anita Desai: A Study in Character and Conflict* (New Delhi : Prestige, 1988) 24-41.

¹⁵ Karen Horney, *Neuroses and Human Growth* (1951 London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965) 18, qtd in Bande, 26.

¹⁶ See Jasbir Jain, Interview with Anita Desai in *Stairs to the Attic: The Novels of Anita Desai* (Jaipur: Printwell, 1987) 12.

¹⁷ See Manusmṛti 5.148

*Bālye piturovāse tiṣṭhet pānigrāhasya yauvanē putrāṅām bhartari
prētē nā bhajēt stri svatantratām .*

A woman should be controlled by her father during her childhood, by her husband during youth, and by sons during widowhood. She should never be free.

¹⁸ See Manusmṛti 9.4. *Kālē ādatā pitā vācyō...*

¹⁹ qtd in Madusoodan Prasad Anita Desai: *The Novelist* (Allahabad: New Horizon, 1981) 106.

²⁰ D.T.Suzuki, "Preface", *Mahayana Buddhism*, by B.L.Suzuki (London: Allen, 1953) 33, qtd in Capra, *Tao of Physics*, (London: Flamingo, 1992) 189.

²¹ qtd in Herbert Marder *Feminism and Art: A Study of Virginia Woolf* (London: U of Chicago p. 1968) 3.

²² See Manusmṛti 9.3,

Pitā rakṣati kauntāre bhartā rakṣati yauvanē

Rakṣanti sthāvire putrā na strī svātanthryamarhati:

A woman is looked after by her father during childhood, by her husband during youth, and by her sons during old age. She should never be left uncared for. (This is perhaps the most oft quoted and most misinterpreted verse in Manusmṛti).

²³ See Fritjof Capra, *Uncommon Wisdom: Conversations with Remarkable People* (London: Flamingo, 1988) 98.

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Towards Freedom and Fulfilment

Jayasree Sukumaran “Feminist poetics in Alice Munro and Anita Desai ”
Thesis. Department of English, University of Calicut, 2000

Chapter 3

Towards Freedom and Fulfilment

The main thrust in *Lives* as well as in *Who* is on the delineation of a developing female character and her journey towards freedom and fulfilment. They establish Munro's genuine concern for gender-specific experiences. Rasporich calls her a "mapper of feminist territory" (89) as her fiction voices her perceptions of gender based inequalities in contemporary Canadian society and its deleterious dimensions which restrict and hamper the aspirations of women artists. They reflect in their content and structure the rapid socio-cultural changes taking place in Canadian life, inspired and informed by the ideology and objectives of the feminist movement during the last four or five decades.

As Rasporich states, the three separate but overlapping chronological phases or thematic indices identified by Elaine Showalter in her epoch making work *A Literature of Their Own - British Women Writers from Bronte to Lessing* (1972) "may be discernible and may even collapse into one another in the work of a single feminist author outside the British tradition, as they do in the work of Alice Munro" (xv). But Munro does not make her fiction a mere propagandist instrument of the feminist cause. However, her central characters struggle to confound the gender

stereotyping and resist the patriarchal prescriptions maintained and cherished by culture. She examines the veracity of the patriarchal notion that woman's destiny is biological destiny. Her fiction thus attempts to challenge what Firestone calls, "the oldest and most rigid class or caste in existence, the class system based on sex" (45).

This chapter focuses on the theme of feminist quest in the two selected novels, *Lives* and *Who*. The central characters Del and Rose undertake the quest disregarding the prejudices and unjust expectations of a resisting society. Freedom from the unjust and suffocating socio-domestic values cultivated in androcentric and androphilist societies is their destination. The quest is carried out at the personal as well as artistic level as both Del and Rose are also artists who find themselves in an environment hostile to art. As they grow up they recognise that there is an unbridgeable gulf between themselves, and their intellectual and cultural milieu. This intelligent perception of social reality makes them realise their 'outsiderness'. Their journey towards wholeness and self-fulfilment is therefore beset with unforeseen conflicts and calamities. It is their responses and reactions to increasing social pressures and their turbulent onward plodding along the untaken road towards freedom and self-fulfilment that Munro charts with remarkable insight in these two novels. Like Erica Jong, Munro writes about "women who are torn, as most of us

are torn, between the past and the future, between our mother's frustrations and the extravagant hopes we have for our daughters" ¹.

Lives narrates the story of Del and her trials of growing up female in the prohibitive milieu of the South Western town of Jubilee. Del's perceptions thread the segments of the novel together. The first two sections of the novel deal with her childhood, and project her as a precocious child carefully observing and understanding persons and events. Nothing escapes her observation. She watches all the peculiarities in the world around her. She is aware of the differences in attitude and outlook between her father and mother. Her "mother was not popular on the Flats Road. She spoke to people here in a voice not so friendly as she used in town, with severe courtesy and a somehow noticeable use of good grammar" (7). Her father "was different. Everybody liked him. He liked the Flats Road He felt comfortable here, while with men from town . . . he could not help being wary" (7). Del is also aware of the differences between her family and Uncle Benny. "Lying alongside our world was Uncle Benny's world like a troubling distorted reflection, the same but never at all the same" (22). Her receptive intelligence digests and records the experiences for constructive use in future.

Del's initiation into the adult imagination occurs when she begins to read the Gothic tabloids piled on Uncle Benny's porch. The exercise makes

her "bloated and giddy with revelations of evil, of its versatility and grand invention and horrific playfulness" (4). But these revelations of evil do not vitiate the little girl's spirits or engender a sense of gloom in her, as she feels secure and comfortable in the warmth and affection of her own house. She has understood that despite the temperamental incongruities between her parents, "they were connected, and this connection was plain as a fence, it was between us and Uncle Benny, us and the Flats Road, it would stay between us and anything" (22). So the vision of evil vanishes as she reaches her own house. This sense of discernment and discrimination revealed in her as a small girl stands her in good stead throughout her life and helps her resolve the dilemmas that confront her, at its different stages.

As she grows older she comes under increasing pressure to conform to sexual roles imposed by the community. She is caught between the conventional way of life represented by her father's aunts and the progressive feminist liberation vaguely projected by her mother. The subsequent conflict indicates a crucial stage in the movement towards self-fulfilment.

The nature of this psychological impasse has been sensitively analysed by Beauvoir: " . . . [F]or the young woman, there is a contradiction between her status as a real human being and her vocation as a female. And just here is to be found the reason why adolescence is for the woman

so difficult and decisive a moment. Up to this time she has been an autonomous individual; now she must renounce her sovereignty. Not only is she torn . . . between the past and the future, but in addition conflict breaks out between her original claim to be subject, active, free and on the other hand, her erotic urges and the social pressure to accept herself as a passive object" (336).

Del's mother plays a prominent role in her education. Munro has explained to Rasporich that "personal experience and maternal influence are quite clearly connected and important in her art" (14). In fact, women's issues are foregrounded in *Lives* by placing different generations of women in contrast to each other. Three generations of women are brought together. Del's great aunts, Aunt Elspeth and Auntie Grace who are clearly individualised and Mrs. Morrison whose presence is evoked through the words of her daughter Mrs. Jordan, represent the first generation women in the novel. They are placed against Mrs. Jordan, whose character and attitude are differentiated from theirs. At the same time the entire elderly generation of mothers is set against that of the daughters - Del and her contemporaries. While such an exercise serves to make a diachronic analysis of the changes that have befallen the lives of women, a synchronic evaluation is also possible as women who are hemmed-in by narrow domestic walls like Naomi, are set against those who venture out into the world of men like Mrs. Jordan and Del herself.

Mrs. Jordan is an accomplished woman proud of her intellectual and philanthropic pursuits and enthusiastic about the betterment of women's future social status. But she is a frustrated woman ridiculed both by her in-laws and by the public at large. Interestingly enough Mrs. Jordan's experiences afford a strong parallel to the early stage of the history of feminist movement itself. The sarcastic patriarchal insinuations annoy her but fail to crush her. Del on the other hand is humiliated by her mother's oddities. She feels the weight of her mother's "eccentricities" (54). So at first, she resists her mother's tutelage and oscillates towards the undisturbed ways and values of life cherished by the simple-minded aunts. The conflict between the two sides of Del's family thus becomes an objective correlative of the uncertainty emerging in Del's mind between the two divisions of her own personality - between conformity and dissension, between submission and resistance.

Del understands the positive and negative aspects of the contending attitudes very distinctly. "My mother went along straight lines. Aunt Elspeth and Auntie Grace move in and out around her, retreating and disappearing and coming back, slippery and soft-voiced and indestructible. She pushed them out of her way as if they were cobwebs. I knew better than that" (31).

But paradoxically, Del's displeasure with her mother suggests the inherent similarities between the two. Her words indicate that even without being consciously aware of it, Del always identifies herself with her mother and is acutely affected by her suffering. She says, "I shared my mother's appetite myself. I could not help it" (55), and acknowledges "I myself was not so different from my mother, but concealed it, knowing what dangers there were" (68). It is this exact comprehension of facts and situations and her pragmatic and analytical acumen that make her different from Mrs. Jordan and also from the girls of her age, like Naomi.

Del comprehends the male-centred value system from the aunts and the somewhat antithetical and progressive points of view from her mother. As a matter of fact her character is an inevitable synthesis of these two dissenting approaches. From the aunts she "learns a whole new language" (37), and from her mother, how the structure of this new language damages and obstructs the aspirations of an ambitious career woman. Each segment of the novel manifests how contending forces mature and mould human character especially that of a woman. In this context, Martin's observations on Munro are significant and worth quoting in full:

Munro develops a dialectical interplay that defines the relation between the contending opposites in a spiral movement that involves progress and retreat, affirmation and irony; to achieve this, she

typically places her protagonist between two forces or loyalties and the resulting creative friction produces the dramatic developments and solutions that we see in Del, Rose and others (25)

It is Del's willingness to observe and learn from diverse sources and her adaptability to changing circumstances, that facilitate her self-development and broaden her perspective as an individual and as a writer. Even Mary Agnes Oliphant, her slightly retarded cousin, enriches her understanding of life. She hates and considers Mary Agnes a bully. But she is amazed to discover that the latter does not share the feeling of animosity. This illogical nature of human affection and human relationships seems inscrutable to the young girl. Again when Mary Agnes fondles her "ferociously", Del is "amazed as people must be who are seized and kidnapped, and who realize that in the strange world of their captors, they have a value absolutely unconnected with anything they know about themselves" (35-36). This rather insignificant comment assumes importance much later in the Garnet French episode, which relates her decisive struggle to be free of him and his influences.

A major childhood influence, which has an edifying effect on Del in her zigzag development towards self-maturation, is certainly that of Uncle Craig. His "masculine self-centredness" seems to her a welcome diversion from the clashing and confining atmosphere enveloping the lives of her

mother and the aunts. His affirmative and impersonal outlook upon life sets her at peace with herself and the world (25). His fascination for history, his sense of connection between himself and the world and above all the meticulousness with which he gathers even the most trivial facts for writing the history of Wawanash County, create an indelible impression on the growing child. It helps her later in challenging life's apparent absurdities and pursuing her chosen intellectual life as a writer. It is Uncle Craig who initiates her into the world of letters. Later when she muses over her plans to write a novel involving the Sheriff family she is reminded strongly of Uncle Craig: "Voracious and misguided as Uncle Craig out at Jenkin's bend, writing his history, I would want to write things down" (210). As Barbara Godard observes, "write is the crucial word here, for until now, Del has been within an *oral* tradition of women"². Sherriff's story makes her realise that art and reality at times "coalesce" (210).

Munro's fiction is set in the "constricted atmosphere of false-fronted Puritanism that prevailed in provincial Canadian town in the mid-years of the twentieth century" (Singh 126). Sexual relationships are considered desirable yet dangerous for women as they afford the deadly risk of pregnancy out of wedlock. Mrs. Jordan warns her daughter not to be "distracted over a man. Once you make that mistake . . . your life will never be your own. You will get the burden, a woman always does" (147). This unequal view towards sexual responsibility gives rise to double

standards maintained by society and it exposes the "anarchy" and "mysterious brutality" of the moral conventions that prevail in the existing society (112). Hence Del's progress towards self-development can be best studied by analysing her attitude to love and sex. Rosaline Coward says, "for the male characters, sexual encounters represent access to power . . . a sense of the individual's power in having control over women's bodies." But "sexual experience in women's novels represents access to knowledge, rather than power. Sexual experience becomes the way in which a woman finds out about herself"³.

Her mother's repeated warnings not to "be distracted over a man" and her exhortation to use her brains make Del confront and resolve the eternal conflict between reason and passion - a conflict in which woman has rarely been "the protagonist in literature or life" (Rasporich 47). Del gathers information about all the finer and grosser aspects of sex from books and from conversations with Naomi, her adolescent friend and confidante. In actual life she goes through conflicting experiences, real, as well as imaginary. The first of its kind is her relationship with Frank Wales, the lead singer in the School Operetta, which proves to be a mere school girlish infatuation. Frank Wales does not go on to High School but ends up as a delivery boy for the local drycleaner. Later she meets Art Chambers, Dogherty's lover, who becomes "the vigorous obliging lecher of [her] day dreams"(144). He makes her witness a perverse sexual exhibition which is

"an impertinent violation . . . clean of sentiment" (135). The frightening and disgusting experience radically alters Del's perceptions and attitudes. It makes her discard "those ideas of love, consolation and tenderness nourished by [her] feelings for Frank Wales." She muses, "all that now seemed pale and extraordinarily childish" (135). Thus Del's first real confrontation with sex is a perverse and frightening experience.

Mrs. Jordan's attitude towards sex and sexuality is rigidly puritanical and she never openly discusses the subject with her daughter. But Fern her mother's boarder is completely at ease with sex. Thus Del is "initiated into two very different worlds - her mother's and Fern's. She finally rejects both, as neither offers what she seeks" (Packer 40).

At High School Del gets involved with Jerry Storey, an embodiment of academic ambition and excellence. They match intellectually but differ in temperament and outlook. She says, "The gymnastics of his mind I did not admire, for people only admire abilities similar to, though greater than their own" (163). Hence Martin characterises the relationship as "comically ambiguous" which "though real on an intellectual plane, is a sort of parodistic parallel to sexual intimacy" (70). The affair soon comes to an end as Del discovers that Jerry is motivated only by an imbecile teenage curiosity (171). She is slightly hurt and feels that her "need for love had gone underground like a canny toothache" (173). But what is remarkable

about Del, is her ability to enrich herself with other's experience, as well as her balanced assessment of crucial situations. Admitting that Jerry Storey is intellectually superior, she still "felt powerful enough in areas that [she] thought she could not see, where his ways of judging could not reach" (163). She tactfully conceals from him the contempt she feels for his absurdities and cynical frame of mind. As John Moss comments:

The feminine roles Del usually plays with Jerry have little to do, directly with sex. Experimenting with conventional behaviour, she fulfils his need of an appreciative audience for his displays of horrific knowledge. She in turn uses him as an uncompromising companion who will give her the room to grow into herself. Like any marriage of convenience, their relationship is adequate to its purpose and no more.(65)

With Garnet French, Del's relationship is purely physical. He is the opposite of Jerry Storey in almost every way. He lives on a distant farm past Jericho Valley but works in the Jubilee lumberyard. He is twenty-three and a converted Baptist, who once served four months in jail for assault. Driven by physical passion, Del is irresistibly drawn towards him. She loves "the dark side", "the strange side" of him (183). With him she is transported to "a country where there was perfect security, no move that would not bring delight, disappointment was not possible" (181). The

experience of intense physical sexuality however brings to a discrete and in a way enlightening realisation that sex is "all surrender - not the woman's to the man, but the person's to the body, an act of pure faith, freedom in humility" (181). It is this realisation which makes her master and later transcend the experience that clearly distinguishes Del from her immediate peers like Naomi. She proves that she is strong enough to go beyond this phase of bodily elation when challenged by a test of faith.

When Garnet insists that Del has to join the Baptist Church before she can marry and have children, she refuses to submit. With perfect confidence and self-control she foils his actual physical attempts at submerging her under water as part of the ritual. When she comes out free and unbaptised, from her temporary immersion in water, she is "claiming possession of herself, getting herself back together, as it were in body and mind [for] in giving so fervidly to the bodily enactment of love, she had come very close to giving herself away" (Moss 66).

This episode in Del's life has a great symbolic significance in the entire novel. Baptism is a sacramental ritual in Christianity signifying spiritual purification, which can be traced back to the concept of the Original Sin. Munro through this incident is subverting the ritual in its essence and application. For here it is Del's refusal to be baptised that indicates her maturity and purity as an individual. It also subverts the

myth of the superior male sanctified by Christianity. For Del successfully escapes the symbolic killing by powerful patriarchy and an equally powerful religion. Thus her coming out unbaptised from water is a triumphant recovery of her physical and spiritual self from the talons of patriarchy and its sacred accomplice, religion. This is also an outright rejection of the patriarchal notion that woman's destiny is biological destiny. The incident is a natural precipitation and a literal expression of the sense of suffocation experienced by the growing Del when faced with social compulsions to conform to its unwritten laws. After each experience, physical or psychological Del is seen making mental readjustments to accommodate the prevailing reality, in order to shape her own future.

Although earlier Del's decision was to reject her mother's advice never to make "the mistake of being distracted over a man" in the Garnet French episode it is the wisdom of her mother's words that guards and directs her. She realises that "the future could be furnished without love or scholarships. Now at least, without fantasies or self-deception, cut off from the mistakes and confusion of the past . . . I supposed I would get started on my real life" (201). Del's education ends here and her concern for the future fills the last segment in the novel, "The Epilogue".

The idea of writing a novel has always been in her mind and the plot of it is based on the Sherriff family, "a family that has had its share of

tragedy. One brother had died an alcoholic, one was in the asylum and Marion [their sister] had walked into the Wawanash River" (202). The details are however altered dramatically. The prospective novel has an evil-looking photographer without a name who takes exaggerated or diminutive pictures of people, which seem unusual and even frightening. The photographer has a symbolic function. He represents the creative artist who is indebted to life for his art, yet very often takes unwarranted liberties with it. Thus he connects and disconnects life and art. As David Stouck observes, "Here Munro has created a metaphor for her own kind of art - a documentary realism which reveals something of the mystery of existence" (269).

Del reaches a similar vision after her casual meeting with Bobby Sherriff during her last summer in Jubilee. As she walks past the Sherriff's house Bobby Sherriff surprises her by inviting her to tea. The ordinariness of the house takes her unawares and gives her a rare aesthetic insight. She contemplates on the sameness and difference between fact and fiction she is she filled with wonder at her own creative talent in making up the "whole mysterious . . . unreliable structure"(208) rise from this solid house. What strikes her most is the paradox that always lies at the core of life. She perceives that "[p]eople's lives, in Jubilee and elsewhere, were dull, simple, amazing and unfathomable - deep caves paved with kitchen linoleum" (210). The depth and complexity of the emotional life of simple and marginalised

human beings amaze her. Del's observations and responses clearly mark her as an artist in the making. The mutual dependence of life and art and the realisation that one is a natural extension and modification of the other is an ephiphanic experience and a manifestation of her mature artistic vision. As Bailey remarks "[t]hrough Bobby she makes the connection to reality that characterises Munro's art" (117). Before she leaves Bobby's house he wishes her good luck, then stands on his toes like a dancer and smiles knowingly and delicately at her. It is this gesture, though apparently unintelligible, which endorses and substantiates her vision of art, that people's lives are "dull" and "amazing," and at the same time, "simple" and "unfathomable". Instead of thanking him for his wishes Del replies in the affirmative. As Bailey observes, it signifies "recognition and acceptance of the obligation of the artist to speak for the Bobby Sherriffs – and for all the males and females in Jubilee and elsewhere who are prevented from achieving an integrated harmony within the self and thereby with society" (117).

Chronologically the story precedes the events mentioned in "Baptizing". But thematically the order of arrangement in the novel is perfectly justified because providing a perspective is certainly more significant than maintaining chronological accuracy. For it is after Del's refusal to be baptised into a conventional marriage that her decision to become a writer acquires greater significance, and it is in this last chapter

that "Del's development as a woman and as an artist reaches its natural culmination" (Bailey, 113).

Del's childhood perceptions are altered by her experiences in subtle ways slowly and gradually, and after a long and tedious process of adjustment and accommodation, she achieves a harmony of vision in life and art. It is her talent for adaptability - a practical negative capability - which stands her in good stead in resolving issues in life and art, as a woman. She is quick to learn "a whole new language" from all those whom she comes across - from her incorrigible aunts as well as from Garnet French and Bobby Sherriff.

As Del grows older, she throws overboard the residues of patriarchal influences one after another. Her mother has shown her the way. Mrs. Jordan had abandoned Flats Road, which symbolises the disabilities and securities of conventional life and moved to Jubilee, the Promised Land of independence and its challenges, during Del's childhood itself. Del's adolescence as well as early youth has been a period of separating the grain from the chaff. While Uncle Craig initiates her into the world of letters, Jerry Storey introduces her to the intellectual issues and concerns of the world. He also sharpens her self-understanding. From Uncle Benny and Bobby Sherriff she understands the warmth of simple human affection. The

three generations of women in the novel guide her directly and indirectly, by pointing out the things and ideas she should avoid or accept.

Achieving an integrated selfhood and a holistic vision she becomes truly 'an heir of the living mind', a part of all that she has met. Showalter remarks in *Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness*: "If a man's text, as Bloom and Edward Said have mentioned is fathered, then a woman's text is not only mothered but parented, it confronts both paternal and maternal precursors and must deal with the problems and advantages of both lines of inheritance"⁴. Del understands that not only similarities but differences also connect people and that in life and therefore in art, the dull coexists with the magical and the factual with the mysterious.

Mrs. Jordan's remark towards the end of the title story that "[t]here is a change coming I think in the lives of girls and women"(146) although qualified as an ironic statement by Munro, has a special significance not only because of its specific position in the novel, but also because of its prophetic import. The statement is proved true in the case of her daughter herself. For Del, art emerges as a means of objectifying and controlling experiences. She gets a taste of genuine human happiness and artistic enlightenment through Bobby Sherriff just as Rose gets a similar epiphanic experience through Ralph in *Who*. Accepting the responsibilities and obligations of a thinking individual she re-enters the social order with confidence "to go out

and take on all kinds of experiences" (147). As Beauvoir believes "[t]o emancipate woman is to refuse to confine her to the relations she bears to man, not to deny them to her; let her have her independent existence and she will continue nonetheless to exist for him also" (740).

The feminist theme is very much alive in *Who* also. The interrogative title, apart from its obvious feminist connotations, functions as an integrating element in the loosely structured novel. Each of the ten 'linked stories' deals with the growing-up experiences of Rose and her development up to and beyond sexual maturity. This work also reveals Munro's interest in discussing some of the disturbing issues that confront a woman artist in her middle age.

Like Del, "Rose wants to observe, taste and share everything, she is a typical Munro protagonist in that she wants to bring into one perspective, all the incongruities presented by life" (Martin 106). For the same reason her life comprises a series of conflicts which she has to resolve. But when compared to Del, Rose seems to be very often overwhelmed by the challenges and meets with little success in transcending them. Therefore the feminist quest and the protest against social conditioning is slightly muted and subdued in this work. This is not due to any shift in perspective, but entailed by two other factors, one associated with the theme and the other, related to the narrative voice.

Thematically in this fourth volume, Munro's choice falls on delineating the struggle of a performing artist and not that of a creative writer as in *Lives*. Del is a novelist in the making, and since the stories are rendered in a pseudo-autobiographical mode of narration, she gets ample opportunities to comment on her life, register her protest against life's injustices directly, and reveal her attitude to the issues that challenge her. Moreover, her profession grants her freedom and autonomy, which are denied to Rose as she is merely a performing artist, a television actress-interviewer, who is limited by the boundaries of the script and all the other related professional conventions which are beyond her control. Secondly since the narrative in *Who* is reported from the third person point of view, Rose is in a sense objectified for the reader. The omniscient authorial voice deprives the narrative of the sense of immediacy and intimacy available in the pseudo-autobiographic mode in *Lives*. However, the concern for the issues of women runs in this novel too as a strong undercurrent inspiring her attitudinal preferences and thematic leanings.

The first segment of the novel presents a distressing scene of young Rose being beaten by an apparently ruthless father the 'King', of the 'Royal Beatings'. The title connotes both an unmistakable ring of theatricality and cruelty, about this patriarchal reprimand instigated by her step mother Flo. Rose is described as "incoherent, insane, shrieking "(23). The wrathful patriarch stops beating the child only when he is out of breath. Then Flo

"retrieves" her and "shoves" her up the stairs (23). But Rose bears no ill will towards her father. She endures his cruelty, as she understands that her father is acting out a role just as she "is playing her part in this with the same grossness, the same exaggeration" (23). This element of theatricality sets the tone of the novel and proves prophetic as Rose becomes a successful television actress in the end. The tendency to dramatise events remains with her through out the novel and very often camouflages her true intents and responses. She enjoys story telling and acting right from her childhood onwards. Every day she brings home fantastic stories about what goes on in school, to be narrated to Flo. "The change in Rose, once she left the scene, crossed the bridge, changed herself into chronicler, was remarkable. No nerves any more. A loud sceptical voice, some hip-swinging in red and yellow plaid shirt, more than a hint of swaggering" (54). Later as a career woman she struggles hard to become a public personality. This leaves her very little time to make inward journeys with a view to understand and analyse her own self as Del does. Eventually she takes to acting as a profession and grows into a tolerably successful artist, ignoring and outgrowing the patriarchal taunts and restraints at several critical junctures.

Rose is motherless and her entire childhood is dominated by the presence of her stepmother Flo. The family lives behind a store in West Hanratty and somehow Rose develops a sense of "belonging nowhere" which

remains with her throughout her life (6). Munro does not provide her with a surname, which fact perhaps adds to her sense of peculiar outsidership in childhood. What her childhood experiences, direct as well as those gathered from the melodramatic narrations of Flo, teach her, is that "treachery is the other side of dailiness" (22).

In "Privilege" Rose is seen infatuated with Cora, an older girl in the Entrance class. The story is "feminist in its authentic depiction, of the young girls' romantic love for one another" (Rasporich 63). What Rose experiences is a version of "sexual love not sure yet exactly what it needed to concentrate on. There was some sharpness lacking, some urgency missing; there was the incidental difference in the sex of the person chosen, otherwise it was the same thing" (44). But Rose's sentiments are unrequited. Cora even insults her by returning the stolen candy, Rose's gift of love, to the store. The incident makes her realise that "[l]ife was altogether a series of surprising developments" (49). She comprehends fully the nature of humiliation and helplessness experienced by one rejected in love.

Later on, at high school, Rose gets a hint of social ostracization based on class distinctions. "Half a Grape Fruit" deals with the theme of social pretensions. Ironically it is her entry into the higher institutions of learning and acquaintance with the classics, that make her aware of her family's low

social status. Rose happens to be the only girl who represents the poverty-stricken West Hanratty at school. She desires "badly to align herself with towners, against her place of origin" (52). But her vain affectations make her a butt of ridicule at school and she realises how "we sweat for our pretensions" (53). The crudity and coarseness of her home and relatives fill her with shame. She becomes increasingly sensitive about her father's "country phrases" and "the country habits of teasing" (69). His words of warning when he finds her pre-occupied with books gives her a perceptive insight into the evils of class distinctions in society. He tells her: "Look out you don't get too smart for your own good"(60). The warning also bears a thematic link with the interrogative title of the book. Munro seems to suggest that class system is a double burden to a sensitive and intelligent woman belonging to the lower strata of society, and works against her self-quest in subtle ways.

As she observes the relationship between her father and Flo, she understands that Flo was his ideal woman who is "shrewd, good at bargaining and seeing through people's pretensions." She was also "naive intellectually, child-like, contemptuous of maps and long words and anything in books full of charming jumbled notions, superstitions, traditional beliefs" (61). This is the idea of the "Angel in the House" that prevails in provincial Canadian towns. Rose realises that part of her disgrace in his eyes is that she is not "the right kind of woman" (61). But

she also knows that if he is annoyed by her peculiarities, he is also proud of her. The self-contradictory nature of these revelations convinces Rose that gender is a crucial determinant not only in social relationships but in familial references as well. It affects the very core and foundation of all human connections, familial as well as non-familial and is detrimental to the aspirations and ambitions of women. Her father's attitudes represent views of androcentric societies. Hence his good-natured censure "not to get too smart" reappears as a pungent sarcastic taunt significantly in the first and last sections of the novel, through Flo and Miss. Hattie, Rose's teacher. These two women together represent Hanratty and its provincial wisdom. Del also says in *Lives* that country folks believe "that there are great supernatural dangers attached to boasting or having high hopes of yourself" (165). In fact, Rose's triumphant discovery of selfhood after a long and tedious fight against circumstances, is the answer to the teasing question.

As in the case of Del, Rose's changing attitude to religion and sex, as she grows older, clearly indicates the different stages in the process of her psychological maturation.

Flo's debunking estimate of the different orders of Christianity had a tremendous impact on Rose as a young girl. Likewise, the schoolyard sexual antics that she witnessed with other girls remained with her for

years. Her first sexual encounter of sorts occurs on a running train when she is on a visit to Toronto for the first time by herself. Flo's warning about "people dressed up as ministers" is partially actualised in this episode. Rose's response towards the indecent advances of a man who introduces himself as "a United Church Minister," is equivocal and ambiguous (81-84). She feels "uncomfortable, resentful, slightly disgusted, trapped and wary" but she finds it impossible to stop him (82). She is both "victim and accomplice" and appears to enjoy this perverse sexual excitement (84). As Martin observes, "just as Rose had not wanted and yet had helped to enact a Royal Beating, so here in her first sexual encounter . . . she cannot play a simple straightforward role" (108).

Thus the first four stories of the novel relate Rose's initiation into social relationships. The remaining sections are about her university days, her unsuccessful marriage, and the precarious middle age, which follows it. While in *Lives*, Del's story is traced only up to her youth and the beginning of her ambitious career, in this novel Rose's life till middle age comes under Munro's scrutiny.

In her relationship with Patrick, the rich university student whom she marries, she gets a chance to be theatrical once again. She plays out the typical archetypal feminine role of the Beggar Maid married to the courteous and chivalrous King Cophetua. Patrick, the young history

student planning to be a professor, is a romantic dreamer. Living in a world of illusions, he adores Rose in a typical courtly fashion and the affair ends in their marriage. According to Rasporich, Rose in her marriage to Patrick, proves herself "to be a victim of culture, her psychological need to be overpowered by him suggesting the impotence which is due to social conditioning" (64). But she also knows that she has power over him and that he is a vulnerable person in real life. "She could make him flinch at a vulgar word" (110). She marries him out of vanity and for a taste of power in human relationships, something, which has always been denied, to her (127). But she realises that marriage only makes her powerless. Therefore, later in her ruthless search for psychological and social independence she is able to leave marriage altogether, with little qualms of conscience. Here, as in *Lives* Munro subverts the concept of marriage and living happily ever after.

Rose seeks fulfilment in work, friends and social life. She realises that the comforts of passive domesticity or 'normal life' are antagonistic as well as deleterious to the concept of selfness that a female artist needs to sustain and fulfil. In an androcentric socio-religious structure an intelligent woman with artistic ambitions is a veritable instance of ungrammaticality, a hypogram. For the same reason, the beggar-maid role adopted and temporally and superficially indulged in by Rose does not have a familiar happy end. She wins the King, but the queendom is short-lived. Rose

herself knew that her marriage would not last long. "She had been planning at the back of her mind to do what she was doing now. Even on her wedding day she had known this time would come, and that if it didn't she might as well be dead. The betrayal was hers" (180). But she always needs men like Patrick as "looking glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting" her figure "at twice its natural size" in beauty and charm (Woolf, *A Room* 37). However, experiences make her disgusted with such superficial bonds, and she realises how inadequate and hollow such attempts are in the case of a woman who is struggling hard to create a space for herself. In an interview with Rasporich, Munro says that one of the things which is constantly interesting to her about a woman's situation is the contradiction between her desire for man's love and for independence (19) Rose is seen running from man to man seeking happiness in love.

Later, frustrated in her relationships with Tom and Simon she reflects "how many crazy letters she had written, how many overblown excuses she had found, having to leave a place on account of some man" (227). Each episode is an edifying experience. She realises that social relationships are based on conditioned role-playing. Her decision is to defy the stereotypical roles and chart her own way of independence.

Rose comes to know the reason for Simon's unexpected and abrupt termination of their affair only much later. The news of his terminal illness

and subsequent death jolts her into a new philosophical awareness about the meaninglessness of life, time and man's concept of power. While Rose has been under the belief that gender discrimination has made women powerless, the confrontation with the idea and event of death, makes her change her attitude. All her unfounded and imaginary rage against Simon vanishes when she realises that all power struggles and wretchedness fade into insignificance beside death. The news of Simon's death reaches her while acting in the role of an aged woman in a new television serial (231). The occasion also brings to her mind the disparity between tragedy on the stage and in actual life. People rarely make a connection between the two. Rose's imagined status as a victim is now shifted and it dawns upon her that the real victims are Simon and others like him. The situation is reminiscent of the one that Del faces when she watches the dead body of Uncle Craig and later when she sees her mother helpless with her illness. But the experiences differ in quality and intensity.

The ravages of time and the transience of life are again emphasised in "Spelling" the story that pictures the helplessness of Flo in her decrepit old age. The old people at the Home present a pathetic spectacle. They just continue to participate in the life of the world, "taking in oxygen and giving out carbon dioxide" (245). She realises that the process of ageing affects only the power of women. It also dawns upon her that woman can enjoy power only in art, not in life. She ruminates that one day "her flesh could

seem disastrous,... thick and porous, gray and spotty" and that time or age has taken away the power she once enjoyed with Patrick (228).

Rose shows signs of having achieved a greater sense of balance and maturity in "Simon's Luck". She accepts a teaching job at a community college up-country from Kensington (206) and gains social respect among academics and intellectuals. When Rose is abused by a drunken boy at a party, Simon rescues her and an ardent love springs up between the two. Simon teaches classics at the University and has tremendous acting talent like Rose ✓ Rose impulsively thinks that he is the man for her life. A fortune-teller in the neighbourhood endorses it predicting that he would change her life. But the words come true ironically. Simon changes her life by abandoning her, by his sudden disappearance. He rescues her from her own addiction to sexual love. Disappointed, she leaves her teaching job and becomes a full-time actress. She grows out of her past sense of diffidence and in the last two stories Rose returns to West Hanratty with maturity and wisdom gained from experience.

It is the news of Flo's illness that brings Rose back to her origins'. She volunteers to look after her stepmother who is suffering from acute arthritis. The voluntary home-coming indicates her willingness to be reconciled to her past, of which she was ashamed during her early years of sophistication. When she reaches home during two hundred miles through

blizzards, she finds that Flo fails to recognise her. The house remains the same, "the only eyesore left" in West Hanratty (237). The reality of the situation and practical difficulties make Rose's romantic vision of looking after Flo fade, just after two days at home. She is finally taken to the Country Home and here Rose is exposed to an entirely different kind of experience. The pitiable spectacle of women "orphaned" in old age shocks her. She comes across an old woman "crouched in her crib, diapered, dark as a nut" with an air of "demented hilarity" spelling out words thrown to her (246). She is celebrating life by uttering words, which have no semantic function. They simply signify life, nothing about life. In old age both men and women are conditioned more by pathology than by culture and environment. Human destiny is in a way biological destiny. The experience makes Rose ponder over the role of words and language itself as such, for she too is a performing artist involved in the game of words.

The last of the ten stories, "Who Do You Think You Are?" "is a composition of remembered episodes making up a sort of meditation expressive of a state of mind - the mind of Rose who is now mature and whole" (Martin 122). The story brings together Rose and an old friend Ralph Gillespie. Now in her middle age Rose is left alone. Flo is senile and with Brian her half-brother, her relationship was one of mutual dislike. Brian is working as an engineer living in Toronto with his wife Phoebe. Rose's daughter is away with Patrick and his wife Elizabeth. So she

reminisces nostalgically over her childhood friends especially Ralph and Milton Homer. Phoebe calls the latter "the village idiot"(258). Rose remembers the mutual affinity between herself and Ralph and the bonds of innocent friendship they shared as children. Ralph with his inherent talent to mimic people finds a kindred soul in Rose, the born actress. Their shortcomings and moods had also been similar. Beyond the "alphabetical closeness" of their names, "they did have something like a family similarity, not in looks, but in habits or tendencies" (266). Neglecting studies and homework, "[t]hey developed the comradeship of captures, of soldiers who have no heart for the campaign, wishing only to survive and avoid action" (267).

Ralph went to Halifax to join the Navy. Life was hard for him and after three years he returned home with a pension following an accident that left him with a limp. But he retained the same "diffident, watchful, withholding look" (273).

With imagination and insight Munro portrays the friendship between Rose and Ralph - a relationship of perfect mutual comprehension and compatibility. Rose's emotional growth and fulfilment is now complete. The days of wandering and groping in darkness are now past. The feminist odyssey is over and reaching 'Ithaca' she has reconciled herself to the place and its people.

Ralph emerges as a voice of assurance, warmth and understanding from the past. They have both been in one way or another actors in life, Rose in career too, but when these two actors meet no acting takes place. While Rose's acceptance of Milton Homer and Ralph Gillespie symbolises her own acceptance of herself and her origins, Ralph's friendship towards Rose after years of separation indicates Hanratty's acceptance of Rose as an individual. Not only has Rose obtained the answer to the question posed in the title, but Hanratty too has endorsed the answer.

Rose feels that his life is closer to her than the lives of men she had loved, "one slot over from her own" (277). The conversation she has with him during their last meeting is "unsatisfactory" (275) but she recalls "a wave of kindness, of sympathy, of forgiveness" which had nothing to do with "sexual warmth, or sexual curiosity. These seemed to be a feeling, which could only be spoken of in translation" (275). Rose gains a better understanding of herself after meeting him. The "peculiar shame which she carried around her"(275) and all the mistakes of her past life suddenly vanish. She enjoys the bliss of true human understanding, the harmony of selfless relationship. She realises that the holiest social relationship is friendship. When later she reads about his death in a local paper, she keeps the news to herself for she does not wish to "spoil" his memory by "telling" (276).

Rose understands the power and powerlessness of both men and women and their relationships. She also experiences the functional efficacy and inefficacy of words. She understands the futility of running to and from men too. Her meeting with Ralph thus gives her an epiphanic experience of understanding her inner self. She achieves selfhood and the real power to take her life in her own hands, uninterfered and undictated by the word of men. As Frank Davey remarks, the world of Munro's fiction is,

a chronicle of the familiar Canadian conflict between the talented sensitive adolescent and a rigid self-limiting society. But here is no rage or hostility toward the Protestant ethic. Her dominant attitudes are astonishment and compassion - astonishment at the unfeeling cruelty of the small town that denies joy and creativity to its people and compassion for those robbed and maimed.(20)

Munro's concern for women filters through the pages of the novel. She tells the truth straight or slant. While in *Lives* she expresses Mrs. Jordan's wishful thinking about a better future for women, not weighed down by the responsibilities of marriage and family, in *Who* she suggests how difficult it is to achieve it, even for a competent career-woman like Rose. However, Del and Rose represent Munro's attempts to study the impact of gender discrimination and patriarchal restraints on intelligent and ambitious women. Both these protagonists realise that the daily reality

of existence is full of unseen traps for the aspiring women artists. For, conventional society holds a peevish contempt towards women artists and their necessity for personal and artistic fulfilment. Only by defying the concepts and institutions of the androcentric system can women like Del and Rose find a space for themselves in society and culture.

In both these novels Munro examines and subverts the notion of woman's destiny as biological destiny. However they do not have a polemic mood and the protest against the patriarchal norms is perfectly under authorial control. Neither Del nor Rose imposes their views on their immediate circle or on society at large. The modes of reaching independence and identity are personal or subjective. Hence Munro's works cannot be classified as aggressively feminist writing. With mature comprehension and imaginative insight the novelist sees both sides of the coin. Although she foregrounds the experiences of women marginalised by society, she scrutinises with an objective eye the power and weakness of both genders. She also suggests however slightly and subtly that power seeking women in their pursuit of success repeat the same mistakes that men commit. Mr. Jordan living on the Flats Road in *Lives* and Patrick's concern for Anna's happiness in *Who* are cases in point. Munro seems to imply that societal happiness depends on the happiness of all its members, not men at the expense of women or vice versa. No wonder Rose and Del in their psychological maturity discover themselves as a composite of both

men and women who have shaped their lives (Rasporich 69). As Frank Birbal Singh observes, in Munro, "the realisation that women are dehumanised by traditional attitudes towards them . . . does not inspire anger or bitterness, it announces the need for reform". He continues, "Munro does not advertise or publicise the benefits of sexual liberation. She is less interested in the politics of feminism than in the concrete effect of feminist political agitation on relations between women and other women, men, children, parents and all" (131).

Like Munro, Desai subverts the patriarchal cult in fiction that celebrates the male hero. Mary Wollstonecraft in *Mary and the Wrongs of Woman* sums up the tendency that prevails in male-centred fiction. In them "the hero is allowed to be mortal and to become wise and virtuous as well as happy, by a train of events and circumstances. The heroines on the contrary are born to be immaculate and to act like goddesses of wisdom just come forth highly finished Minervas from the head of Jove" (73).

In the novels of women writers however the roles are exchanged. Women characters are brought to the centre but in their attempt to 'become wise and virtuous as well as happy' they do not always succeed. Their struggle against the existing order of things very often takes a heavy toll, as in the case of Maya in *Cry*. Neither do men in such fiction act like 'gods of

wisdom.' They in their obstinate perpetration of an androcentric pattern of life become instrumental in obstructing the aspirations of the female heroes.

Maya does not live in blissful ignorance of her situation like Del's aunts in *Lives*. She is acutely aware of her helplessness, her incapacity to live the way she wishes and her insignificance in a male dominated society. She is fully aware of her plight and feels restless about her situation. But this restlessness does not issue out in action but takes the forms of interior monologues and fantasies.

Shyam Asnani comments that Desai finds it impossible to whip up any interest in a mass of women marching forward under the banner of feminism(10). But had whipping up a feminist march been the objective of the novelist, she would not have chosen fiction as her medium. For strident didacticism or belligerent social criticism would certainly destroy the spirit and vitality of fiction as a literary genre. As Desai herself admits in her interview with Florence Libert, a writer can "only be a social critic quite unconsciously." (51). The power of fiction is of a different calibre. Desai writes, "A novel has the power. . . to convey the experience, the truth far more vividly and forcefully and memorably than any number of factually correct documents, exhaustively detailed histories or excellently documented biographies."⁵

Desai's novels are set in the typical Indian socio - cultural framework and she does lay bare the predicament of urban Indian women. In an interview with R.K. Srivastava she talks about her interest in feminism. "Any statement I wish to make on the subject [of women's emancipation] has been made in my novel in one form or another"(212).

The urban Indian women are poised between a prescriptive tradition remaining alive in the Indian collective memory, and the concepts of liberty and individualism introduced partly by the freedom movement and later on encouraged whole-heartedly by the feminist ideology from the West. This is a vulnerable position. Its impact on Indian women is totally different from the influence of feminist thought on the psyche of Canadian women like Del and Rose, in several fundamental aspects. Maya's life provides the best illustration of this situation.

Desai is primarily an introversive writer and her writings are based on "a private vision"⁶. So, greater thrust is given to the emotional life of her women characters. Therefore she makes abundant use of emotive and evocative language which makes her fiction lyrically charming. *Cry* is essentially a lyrical novel. It is Desai's penchant for lyricism and her concern with the inner life of her characters that keep the socio-political dimensions of the novels under a noticeable restraint.

The women of India had whole-heartedly participated in the freedom struggle. But the gender equality they seemed to enjoy outside the house was denied to them in the family sphere. The post-independent scenario is not much different. The newly won political freedom did nothing to improve the lot of women. The Indian Constitution theoretically grants freedom and equality of opportunities to women and regards them as independent citizens. But ironically this legal status eventually does more harm than good as it takes women's freedom for granted and conveniently connives at domestic inequalities.

Like the works of Munro, Desai's novels are also amenable to a feminist analysis adopting Showalter's labels demarcating the three stages in the evolution of women's writing. While in the case of the central characters, these thematic indices overlap and collapse, there are women characters in *Cry* and *Clear* who can be categorised into one of the three groups.

In *Cry* Maya's friends Leila and Pom represent women who abide by traditional conventions. Leila is devoted to her husband affected with tuberculosis. She finds freedom in the bondage of devotion. Pom and her mother-in-law are conventional Indian women who find glory in marriage and motherhood. Maya however makes subdued attempts to question patriarchal restraints, suffering panic and dejection in the process. Nila,

Gautama's sister, is a potential feminist, willing to initiate a course of action and change her life ignoring the expectations of society. She dares to break the bonds of marriage when they begin to suffocate her. She in her own way commences the struggle towards selfhood and independence. The cabaret girls are the scapegoats who are sacrificed at the altar of social chastity. Nila, Pom, Leela, Maya and the cabaret girls provide poignant examples of women suffering in divergent ways.

In Maya's life, an attempt at self-realisation is made in the manner of an inward journey through endless labyrinths of self-doubt, misgiving, guilt, hope and nostalgia. The major action takes place in Maya's mind. But she never achieves self-realisation. The novel is thus a dark and ironic bildungsroman, as her arduous attempts towards identity and selfhood end in total negation of life and the destruction of the self. There occurs no transformation or regeneration but only slow and steady disintegration of the character's mind. The process reveals emotional imbalances resulting from environmental pressures. In a way, the novel also parodies and subverts the traditional bildungsroman.

The bildungsroman or "the classic novel of self development" is traditionally "the story of a young man achieving maturity by testing himself against the values of his society and emerging as a distinct individual" (Walker, 76). A successful bildungsroman is difficult with a

female hero since apart from the general existential issues that confront both genders in common, the female hero has to put up an additional fight against the silence and alienation subtly imposed upon her by the laws of patriarchy. An androcentric world does not regard a woman's self-quest with sympathy, for in such a system as Greer remarks, "the stereotype is the Eternal Feminine. All she must contribute is her existence. She need achieve nothing. For she is the reward of achievement" (171). Beauvoir's observation effectively summarises and supports this view.

The young man's journey into existence is made relatively easy by the fact that there is no contradiction between his vocation as a human being and as a male. But for the young woman on the contrary, there is a contradiction between her status as a real human being and her vocation as a female.
(359)

In Maya's case there is an additional disadvantage. Not only is her socio-cultural environment hostile to her development, as an individual, but her own hypersensitive temperament works against her pursuit of happiness and denies her the possibility of self-fulfilment. So in this section of the chapter, only an assessment of Maya's cravings for attaining a meaningful life can be made, as her emergence as an independent individual never takes place.

However her dissatisfaction with the existing order of things can be pointed out by analysing her unfulfilled hopes and ambitions.

The prophecy of the astrologer actually sentences Maya to death in advance, cutting at the root of even her remotest chances for achieving self-hood. Since Desai makes use of the stream of consciousness technique in this novel, the positive aspirations of the protagonist can be deduced only from her ruminations and fantasies traced in the novel.

What is most striking about Maya's character is her innate sensitivity to the beauty of nature. Although she is haunted by the foreboding thoughts of an impending death, her lust for life is clearly revealed in her poetic responses to nature. (34-36). Life for Maya has been a series of losses and calamities, the first instance of which in the novel is the death of her pet dog Toto. Thereafter the novel traces her steadily aggravating neurotic condition. At the end of the novel she does not achieve psychological maturation, on the contrary even her sense of reason is completely toppled by abnormal patterns of thought. She makes endless retreats into the past and indulges in fantasies about her childhood. She is verily "torn between two worlds- the receding one of grace and the approaching one of madness. Her body breaks in the battle" (177). As Beauvoir says, "when the woman is in despair, she hastily retires to her surest refuge—herself" (339-40)

She is mortified with her status as an emotionally marginalised wife and strives for an ideal relationship with her husband. But her attempts do not bear fruit. Her protest is mute and Gautama's unfeeling rhetoric on detachment sounds life negating to her. His eloquence has an artificial ring about it. For in the Indian ethos, yogic detachment is considered relevant only after a meaningful family life or *grihasthasrama*. Gautama's understanding of Maya is imperfect and unsympathetic. J.S. Mill's words regarding man's inability to understand women are relevant in understanding Gautama's character. According to him "the knowledge that men can acquire of women. . . is wretchedly imperfect and superficial and will always be so until women themselves have told all that they have to tell"⁷. But Maya fails in communicating convincingly as she feels an alien in the patriarchal discourse. Her husband's attitude formed by the "self sacrificing years of study" is of no use in building up a healthy marital relationship (93). He calls her a 'neurotic' but does not help her over the stile. He ignores her as an individual and fails in his obligation as a husband, by traditional or even modern standards.

So Maya's yearning for an ardent companionship with Gautama is always frustrated. She is aware of the distance he coldly keeps from her "His coldness, his coldness and the incessant talks of cups of tea and philosophy in order not to hear me talk, and talking, reveal myself "(9). Even a simple gesture from his part would flood her with "tenderness and

gratitude" (11). But she sadly recollects, "there were countless nights when I had been tortured by a humiliating sense of neglect, of loneliness, of desperation, that would not have existed had I not loved him so, had he not meant so much" (201).

Maya is fully conscious of the differences between herself and her husband. When Gautama waxes eloquent on the philosophy of Gita, she listens to him only half attentively. "We strolled up and down the lawn, talking desultorily, not really listening to each other, being intent on our own paths which however, ran parallel and closely enough for us to briefly brush against each other, now and then reminding us or perhaps only myself - of the peace that comes from companion life alone . . ." (18). What Maya requires and never gets is "his closest understanding" (19). Her sad ruminations on the unfulfilled relationship are rendered in exquisite poetry (24-25). The poeticising has a beneficial therapeutic effect on her. She realises that Gautama "saw no value in anything less than the ideas and theories born of human and preferably male brains" (99) and that in his world "there were vast areas in which he would never permit me" . . . (104).

Like Del in *Lives* Maya understands that sex is a person's surrender to his body and how "hopeless, how impotent is sex where not union but communion is concerned" (104). At times verses from the Gita calm her down with their cool steadfast wisdom but she finds it impossible to keep

in check, her desire for love. "You know nothing of me – and of how I can love. How I *want* to love. How it is important to me" (112). Shulamith Firestone's observation that, "romantic love is the pivot of women's suppression " (121) is true to the letter in Maya's case.

Gautama brands Maya as an "occidental" (121). Although she was brought up in a Westernised manner of life, her father firmly believes, like Gautama himself, in the Hindu philosophy of life, which no Western education can radically alter. Maya's craving for excessive romance seems out of time with the sedate view held by her father or husband. She clearly remembers her father's words of fatalism.

The source of disintegration is the human beings' vanity in his power to act . . . The world is full of destruction that is born of the Western theory of life. We have been taught for generations to believe that the merit of accepting one's limitations and acting within them is greater than that of destroying them and trying to act beyond them. One must . . . accept.(54-55).

The inherent conflict between the Oriental and Occidental cultures makes the attempt of developing a comfortable self-identity almost impossible for the urbanised Indian women. As Nabar points out, the women Desai writes about, represent " a largely Westernised section" of Indian society and westernisation as seen in the novels, is a definite aspect

of Indian urban reality." (14). So women like Maya are caught between the "Western emphasis on personal uniqueness and the Oriental emphasis on connectedness" and acceptance (Walker 78).

In the early days of marriage, Maya is carried away by the myth of romantic love. But *Cry* cannot be classified among popular romances as it refuses to adopt the formula that obviously underlies the latter. In them the heroine eventually wins both the lover and a secondary selfhood through him. Maya gets neither. As Nancy Walker observes, the popular romances provide the central characters acceptable fantasies, endorsing rather than challenging cultural assumptions about women's nature and aspirations. They reinforce marriage as the sole requirement for women (5). In this novel Desai subverts the concept of marriage as the panacea for women's predicament. Maya's horoscope functions as a subtle instrument suggesting this process of subversion.

Maya easily slips into nostalgic memories of her idealised childhood, as she perceives that reality of experience would never provide her with a satisfactory sense of 'self' and that it only fragments her personality. So she escapes into the world of memory in times of distress. As Walker further observes, "Dissatisfaction with the self as contracted by others lead women to imagine alternative selves, a conceptualisation that extends into fantasy in the form of dreams, memory and even madness"(8). Memory thus offers

Maya an "alternate reality". Her reminiscences of a princess-like life in childhood by its very nature, sharply contrasts with the life of emotional neglect and alienation that she suffers at the hands of Gautama, and function as a tonic that relaxes her nerves. In her childhood, she could get whatever she wished for; she could communicate freely with her father who was then her guardian and protector. Above all she knew she had power over her father. So slipping nostalgically into the past world through memories gives Maya a sense of identity and power, which she sadly misses in her life with Gautama. It shifts her from the marginal status meted out to her by her husband to the centre, at least temporarily. Above all, it provides her a chance to re-live in a world of love and attachment, undisturbed by her husband's philosophy of detachment and indifference. The eagerness to live in an alternate reality is also an indirect and subdued expression of her disapproval of the prevailing mode of existence.

Walker remarks: "Madness and its 'variants' -dreams daydreams and fantasies become subversive ways of overcoming exclusion and silence"(60). Thoughts and emotions which a woman cannot express because they "will not be understood or accepted in the light of [her] marginal position in society emerges in fantasy. Contemporary women novelists use various forms of fantasy to show women attempting to take

control of circumstances from which they are excluded, to express what would otherwise be inexpressible" (60).

Maya is constantly haunted by "a distant apprehension of presence" (272). Maya is obsessed with the foreboding visions of the astrologer (94). She indulges in dreadful fantasies over the moon (28) and has premonitions signalling that the prediction of the astrologer would be fulfilled. Memories of childhood, therefore, have a soothing effect upon her high-strung nerves. They have a therapeutic value in restoring her temporarily at least to a normal frame of mind and thereby alleviating her loneliness. Very often Maya is imprisoned in her loneliness. As Greer comments, "Loneliness is never more cruel than when it is felt in close proximity with someone who has ceased to communicate. Many a housewife staring at the back of her husband's newspaper or listening to his breathing in bed is lonelier than any spinster in a rented room" (274-75).

Maya's life thus becomes a series of unequal and futile attempts at communication with her husband, punctuated by these sinister, hallucinatory fantasies. As she believes in the fruition of the terrible prophecy, future does not hold any hopes for her. For her, the past and the future merge and coalesce to become an intense part of present experience. It is therefore, as a survival strategy that Maya withdraws into the past and indulges in nostalgic fantasies when not threatened by the death-in-life

visions of the astrologer, Sexual repression and diffidence in facing unpleasant reality are temporarily overcome in moods of fantasy. "I had the happiest childhood. They were my happiest times" she tells Gautama (115). She remembers her childhood as "one in which much was excluded . . . and in which [she] lived as a toy princess in a toy world" (89). When Gautama extols a life of detachment as a panacea for human happiness she protests, "I don't care to detach myself into any other world than this" (117).

Nevertheless she understands perfectly well her brother's suffocating experience under her father's strict enforcement of discipline in the house. She recollects, "If I was a partridge. . . he was a wild bird, a young hawk that could not be tamed, that fought for its liberty" (134). When she conjures up the childhood game of flying kites she says, "mine were awkward kites that never lost their earth-bound inclination. Arjuna's were birds-hawks, eagles, swallows - in the wind" (135). It is her gender that blocks her yearning for freedom and works against her life.

Being motherless Maya longs for her mother-in-law's love. But Gautama's mother is a practical person having "no time for caresses" (163). In a patriarchal familial structure, the relationship between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law is generally not one of deep emotional attachment. It is the social structure that prevents the mutual understanding of these two

women. Gautama's mother is concerned more about her own daughter Nila's marriage. Nila stands in direct contrast to Maya. She is a victim of broken marriage and reveals the sensibility and courage to analyse her situation. She is determined to fight her cause, although her decision to get a divorce meets with her brother's strong disapproval (162).

Towards the end of the second part of the novel, just before the catastrophe Maya pauses in her narration to give the readers a warning. She casts doubts on the veracity of her own writing as she is tormented by intense psychological strain. This is obviously a narrative strategy whereby the reader is involved in the process of narration and is forced to sift the grain from the chaff. The novel thus offers a double narrative perspective and can, in a sense, be described as a post-modern novel. For the central character evidently presents herself as a fragmented personality. The reader has to find imaginatively the truth about her life and about her fantasies.

Maya's vocabulary is highly sensuous and emotive. It endorses Beauvoir's observation that women's vocabulary "is often more notable than their syntax" and that "they are interested in things rather than in relations of things" (719).

Maya is aware that she is "living on the brink" and finally in a moment of insanity pushes Gautama to death and later commits suicide. It

is her environment that works steadily against her life and denies her the possibility of harmonising its inner and outer layers. As R.D. Laing observes, "It is not simply an individual's bad luck in the genetic card game that leads to his madness, but the tricks of the other players that drive him crazy"⁸. Nature and nurture personal and social phobias, together, work as accomplices in bringing about her inevitable doom.

The cry of the peacock is the burden of this lyrical novel. It is Maya's own cry projecting the unfulfilled desire for affection and identity gnawing at her heart. She is a pathetic victim, both of a patriarchal culture influenced by Western ideas and her own hypersensitive psyche. Although Maya does not attain selfhood like the central characters in Munro, her life has been an intense struggle against her environment.

The novel *Clear* recounts the exceptional life of Bim, a courageous woman who renounces the ordinary pleasures of life to help and support the lives of those who are dependent on her. R.S. Sharma clearly and accurately sums up the significance of the novel in the Desai canon. He says, it is

by far the most affirmative of Anita Desai's novels. There is anger and bitterness, but there is also an effort to reconcile and accommodate. All the elements that threaten to disrupt the pattern

of life in all its aspects are brought under control through love, understanding, forgiveness and mutual acceptance.(130).

Born and brought up in a traditional Hindu background, Bim realises not too late, that craving for individual happiness at the expense of others would not give her a sense of fulfilment. This realisation has a profound impact on her. It clears her mind of the cobwebs of tension. In a sense, her life illustrates the paradox that a stoic or yogic acceptance of life's absurdities, rather than an aggressive protest against it, leads one towards selfhood and identity. As she opts out of stereotypical gender roles, the traditional socio-cultural reference points are inadequate to assess her character or motives. Neither can her life be fully analysed against a set of criteria derived from the feminist vision, which advocates a liberated life for women ignoring familial or social expectations. Towards the end of the novel we find that Bim develops into a wholesome individual, a morally and psychologically evolved human being. *Clear* traces this unique evolution.

Her life exemplifies the Oriental philosophy of acceptance emphatically expressed by Maya's father in *Cry*:

The source of disintegration is the human being's vanity in his power to act. Not realising the futility of his rebellion, he steers himself further and further out of the orbit in which he was

born to act, and destroys himself . . . We have been taught for generations to believe that the merit of accepting one's limitations and acting within them is greater than that of destroying them and trying to act beyond them. One mustaccept.(54-55).

It may be argued that Maya's loneliness and the final catastrophe: occur partly due to her ignoring the truth of her father's statement. In Bim's case, on the other hand, the stillness and serenity achieved towards the end of the novel is certainly the result of her understanding its wisdom.

As in *Cry, Clear* too has female discontent at its core. But here the agonies and frustrations of the central character get sublimated primarily because her life is not confined to the narrow and narrowing walls of domesticity. She has found for herself new pastures as a career woman in the academic field. Moreover, her innate compassion for the suffering members of the family keeps her occupied in their service, giving her life a purpose and direction.

As a young girl, Bim was ambitious at school, working hard to win honours in the examinations. For her it was the only way out from "the unsatisfactory atmosphere of their house" (130). Home for the Das children was always associated with anxiety and distress. Ever since her childhood, her mother's illness, and her brother Baba's hopeless future had been

haunting her. She feels that it is her duty to take care of them. So with the sense of responsibility of an eldest child she decides to remain unmarried so that she can attend to their needs. She tells Tara, "I won't [marry]. I shall never leave Baba and Raja and Mira-*masi*. . . . I shall work - I shall *do* things I shall earn my own living - and look after Mira-*masi* and Baba and be independent" (140). Her "natural energy and vivacity" (123) was encouraged at school though the same qualities were out of place at home. Later in a mood of recollection, she tells Tara "Father never bothered to teach me. For all father cared. I could have grown up illiterate and - *cooked* for my living or *swept*. So I had to teach myself history and teach myself to teach" (155).

The threads of connection that the children had with their parents were broken all over. It was a totally disturbing and unsatisfactory relationship. Bim is always conscious of this lacuna in her life. Later when Dr. Biswas speaks highly of his mother's love, she replies, "I wouldn't know . . . I didn't have one" (84). The children in the Das household always resented the long absence of their parents at home. They were generally aware only of their exits and entrances.

Desai sketches Bim's portrait with meticulous care and understanding. Teaching history at a local college, she is firm of mind, agile, practical and dominating. She is also irritated, peevishly sullen and

introspective at times. For her each day is exactly like the other, "plodding stretching, uneventful" (42). Her life therefore is one of stasis and stagnation, forming almost an extension of the walls of their dilapidated house. She would not even travel to New Delhi "where things happen" (5).

Her choices in life have all been decided by the compulsion of circumstances. For the same reason, she emerges as an independent woman not strictly in the Western feminist sense by realising that one's prime duty is toward oneself, but in a spiritual sense by shouldering the burden of other lives with creative and salutary resignation. Her nature and character are devoid of Raja's sentimentality and Tara's escapism. Bitterness, anger and insult have only made her stronger.

Raja's abandonment has hurt her more intensely than any other misfortune. She has preserved an old letter of his, which is patronising and supercilious in tone, as a token of his callous ingratitude. He is now the new landlord of the Das house as he inherits Hyder Ali's property on marrying his daughter Benazir. The letter grants Bim the privilege of occupying the house at the same rent. He writes, "I shall never think of raising it or of selling the house as long as you and Baba need it" (27). The latter snaps the already weak bond between Bim and her brother. Bim is evidently wounded beyond words. With defensive sarcasm she asks, "How can I enter his house - my landlord's house? I, such a poor tenant? Because

of me, he can't raise the rent or sell the house and make a profit - imagine that. The sacrifice!" (28).

To Tara this reaction is unimaginable. She urges Bim to tear up the letter and forget the incident. But Bim is "defiant" and "martial" (28). She feels she is justified in taking offence as he has so mercilessly insulted her who has always been more than a mother to him.

Bim is ill understood in her immediate family circle as she always communicates in "an alphabet" that they do not understand (*Lives* 211). Even Tara takes her for a resentful spinster and sympathises with Raja who has gone adrift from Bim.

Once Tara watches Bim indulgently fondling her pet cat displaying an extravagance of affection. Tara's embarrassment and wonder at such a display, catches Bim's attention. The latter reacts with a sense of bruised pride: "You are thinking how old spinsters go ga-ga over their pets because they haven't children. Children are the *real* thing, you think . . . But you're wrong . . . You can't possibly feel for them what I do about these wretched animals of mine" (6-7). Tara feels a slight sense of remorse but she reflects that how even in childhood Bim was so sensitive and touchy that she usually went too far with all their encounters. The sisters have exchanged tense moments of coldness and bitterness "seething with unspoken speech" (9).

However, the experience of being misunderstood by others paradoxically helps Bim achieve a better understanding of her own self. For the experience leads to moments of intense self-doubt and tormenting self-analysis.

Dr. Biswas who attended both Raja and Aunt Mira during their illness, has only admiration for Bim's courage and determination to take up teaching after her studies (86). But his "timid respect" (68) and his mild attempts at courting fail to make any impression on Bim. She has "no patience with weakness". Their thoughts belonged to "different continents" and moved to "different tunes" (85). His sympathetic observations on her life invite only derision and contempt from her. His conclusions about her life are ill conceived and immature: "Now I understand why you do not want to marry. You have dedicated your life to others - to your sick brother and your aged aunt and your little brother who will be dependent on you all his life. You have sacrificed your own life for them" (97). These thoughtless comments from him put an end to their brief and clumsy acquaintance. Desai effectively describes Bim's reaction to these words. "Bim's mouth fell open with astonishment at this horrendous speech so solemnly, so leadenly spoken She even hissed slightly in her rage and frustration - at being so misunderstood, so totally misread, then gulped a little with laughter at such grotesque misunderstanding, and her tangled emotions twisted her face and shook her, shook the thought of Biswas out

of her. Later, she never acknowledged, even to herself, that this ridiculous scene had ever taken place" (97). Since then Bim remains a solitary individual without any male connection. She does not hanker after amorous experiences as do the young Canadian protagonists in *Lives* and *Who*.

Gaining economic independence and taking care of a stagnant family, Bim effortlessly performs the stereotypical gender roles traditionally associated with both genders. By doing so, in a way, she transcends them. But it gradually devitalises her. So Tara on her visit home after a gap of three years finds tremendous changes in Bim. Like Munro, Desai is here catching people in "snap shots" and examining the changes in their natures as well as in their relationships. Tara sees her muttering to herself when alone. The changes in Bim are effectively expressed through her reflection. "She had always thought Bim so competent, so capable. Everyone had thought that - Aunt Mira, the teachers at school, even Raja. But Bim seemed to stampede through the house like a dishevelled storm, creating more havoc than order" (148). The contrast is overwhelming. Tara knows that it is Raja's dereliction that gnaws at her heart. She intervenes as a mediator to patch up the estrangement. She compels Bim to attend his daughter Moyna's wedding as a cordial gesture and to forget the past injuries. But "too long a sacrifice can make a stone of the heart"⁹. Bim replies with an edge in her voice, "I am *bored* with Raja. Utterly bored. He

is too rich to be interesting any more, too fat and too successful. Rich, fat and successful people are *boring*" (143).

Paradoxically it is Raja who becomes directly or indirectly instrumental in bringing about Bim's emotional development. Of the male characters in the novel, he therefore occupies a key position and is more individualised than the others. After his recovery from tuberculosis, he moves to Hyderabad, marries Benazir, their landlord's daughter, and becomes prosperous. Years of strain that Bim suffered on account of him is conveniently forgotten. His shift of role from brother to landlord, distances him further from his sister, and aggravates her feeling of bitterness towards him. The hostility between them thoroughly upsets Tara. More so, because she too retains at the back of her mind the cinders of guilt for having deserted Bim in times of need. An incident from the past during a picnic in Lodhi gardens is used as a leitmotif to suggest her guilt. While the girls walked in to one of the smaller tombs they were attacked by a terrible swarm of bees. Bim was besieged and stung by the huge black swarm while Tara fled to hide herself in safety. Haunted by a stinging sense of guilt, Tara regretted the act later; but she never had the courage to apologise openly to Bim till this visit (136-37). She vaguely realises that the episode is symbolic of her self-centredness and selfishness. In a mood of penitence, she makes a confession of it but it fails to have any serious impact on Bim.

Bim is more perturbed by Tara's attempts to bring herself and Raja together, to resurrect their relationship. She notices that Raja has become more closely attached to Tara and he has turned his back on her. "Bim saw all their backs, turned on her, a row of backs turned . . . They had come like mosquitoes . . . only to torment her and mosquito - like, sip her blood. All of them fed on her blood, at some time or the other had fed Now, when they were full, they rose in swarms, humming away, turning their backs on her" (153). Bim's musings suggest how close to neurosis her mind is, before she comprehends and accepts the state of reality she is in.

A terrible sense of insignificance takes possession of her. She compares herself to "an heirloom . . . not valuable, not beautiful, but precious on account of age" (153). Realisation dawns upon that Baba, her retarded brother is the only human being left for her as a companion, refuge and hope. But she knows he is "unaware of her, as unaware in waking as in sleep" (153). Immersed always in his gramophone records, he never notices, "if she were gay or sad, grey or young" (153). These reflections fill her with darkness and despondency. The vanity and futility of life stares this middle-aged woman in the face.

The story reaches a climax when the time comes to settle the matter concerning their father's business. Tara's suggestion that the other members of the family should be consulted sounds preposterous to Bim.

She expresses her annoyance indirectly: "How my students would laugh at me. I'm always trying to teach them, *train* them to be different from what we were at their age - to be a new kind of woman from you or me - and if they knew how badly handicapped I still am, how I myself haven't been able to manage on my own - they'd laugh . . . They'd *despise* me" (155). The words reveal her inner turmoil; she thinks that she might be compelled to listen to Raja's opinion as well.

Bim is both traditional and non-traditional, she is both inside and outside of patriarchy. She is willing to sacrifice her life for those whom she loves. But not like the traditional 'feminine' women who according to Greer "are self sacrificing in direct proportion to their incapacity to offer anything but this sacrifice." *Greer* ironically points out that such women "sacrifice what they never had, a self" (171). Bim, on the other hand has an evolving 'self', evolving in direct proportion to her capacity to help those who lean on her. She is an intelligent career woman who is committed to her profession. But she finds it difficult to define her feelings in "a language which is chiefly made by man to express theirs" (Hardy 415). The tradition in which she is born is incapable of solving the issues that confront her. At the same time she is restrained by its invisible shackles and finds it impossible to break free of situations, which stifle and suffocate her. The conflict between the demands of a family that takes Bim for granted and her aspirations for freedom and selfhood, takes a heavy toll of her emotional health, and

leaves its imprint on every aspect of her character. Nabar's observations on Bim endorse this point of view. According to her, Bim feels "hemmed in" and sees her life as "a kind of sacrifice" because, her decision to devote her life to her family is "a matter of defensive mechanism that makes her project herself as self sufficient and satisfied with her mode of living" (20).

The settlement of their father's business triggers of several unpleasant associations in Bim's mind. Reflecting on the gloomy domestic atmosphere she gives expression to one of her morbid and nagging fears. Referring to the well associated with the drowning of Aunt Mira's cow, she tells Tara, "I always did feel that I shall end in that well myself one day" (157). In these words she not only reveals her despair, but also suggests how closely she identifies herself with Aunt Mira, their surrogate mother whose life she feels offers a strong parallel to hers.

In this novel Desai seems to subvert the myth of glorious motherhood traditionally encouraged by patriarchy. She projects the manifestations of motherhood in their full complexity through surrogate mothers. The fate of Mira-*masi* and Bim indicate too well that mothering can at times be a severely traumatic experience.

Tara understands her sister more than anyone else. She has seen the tips of a complex personality lurking disguised behind a seemingly complacent facade. She is fully aware that it is the memory of "old grudges"

that makes Bim's life miserable. When once Bim's restlessness remains unappeased she vents it out on Baba. The turbulent scene that erupts is sensitively drawn by the novelist.

In a moment of exasperation, overcome by a fit of rage, unintended words of bitterness escape her. Baba appears shocked and confused without having any idea of their import. She says she is going to sell their shares of the firm to Sharma, their father's assistant and that he can spend the rest of his life with Raja. The narrator at this point intervenes to explain Bim's reaction:

She had not known she was going to say that till she had said it. She had only walked in to talk to Baba - cut down his defence and demand some kind of response from him, some kind of justification from him for herself, her own life, her ways and attitudes, like a blessing from Baba. She had not known she would be led into making such a threat or black mailing Baba. She was still hardly aware of what she had said, only something seemed to slam inside her head, painfully. (164)

Baba's response to the outburst is characteristically passive. He only drew back from her "as far as he could and his mouth was drawn array, as if he had been slapped hard". He "never told what he thought. No one knew of the thought" (164).

The attack torments Bim even more, when she realises the harm she has done. She is filled with remorse, and with remorse the dark clouds of gloom vanish. She moves a step forward in the direction of self-understanding. She realises why she chose Baba instead of others as a target of her pent-up fury. Desai with an arresting poetic image, explains Bim's state of mind:

It was Baba's silence and reserve and otherworldliness that she had wanted to break open and ransack and rob, like the hunter, who, moved by the white bird's grace as it hovers in the air above him, raises his crossbow and shoots to claim it for his own - his treasure, his loot - and bring it hurling down to his feet - no white spirit or symbol of grace but only a dead albatross, a cold package of death.
(164-65)

The striking and poignant image of the albatross immediately conjures up the picture of Coleridge's "old man", his penitence and the subsequent revelation of the holiness and harmony of nature. The literary allusion serves to enrich the significance of the context.

The remaining eighteen pages of the novel trace the process of transformation that has already commenced in Bim's mind, to its completion. The thought of Baba's helplessness fills her with great compassion. In this high tide of affection and compassion, she suddenly

realises how much she loved all those who lived with her. She realises that "[t]here could be no love more deep and full and wide than this one No other love had started so far back in time and had had so much time in which to grow and spread" (165). She comes to a mature understanding that, all those who lived with her, "were really all parts of her, inseparable, so many aspects of her as she was of them, so that the anger or disappointment she felt in them was only the anger and disappointment she felt at herself" (165). Love and forgiveness fill her to the brim.

This moment of self-realisation is also the moment of her liberation. The storm raging inside her subsides. "Calm of mind, all passion spent," Being experiences the peace of relaxation. She "lay absolutely still, almost ceasing to breathe, afraid to diminish by even a breath, the wholeness of that love" (165). It is a moment of meditation and ecstasy achieving a stillness of mind experienced only by the Rishis - rendered in memorable poetry by Wordsworth in his Tintern Abbey Lines.

Bim seems to be going through a mystic experience, which floods her consciousness with a surge of soothing light. Leaving darkness behind, she has moved towards the 'clear light of day'. Desai describes the moment of enlightenment in effective words:

Although it was shadowy and dark, Bim could see as well as
by the clear light of day that she felt only love and yearning for

them all, and if there were hurts, these gashes and wounds in her side that bled, then it was only because her love was imperfect and did not encompass them thoroughly enough, and because it had flaws and inadequacies and did not extend to all equally. (165).

Similar moments of epiphanic experience have been undergone by Del and Rose towards the end of *Lives* and *Who* respectively. But the similarity is only superficial. They vary greatly in character and intensity. While Munro lays emphasis on the intellectual perception of the self with respect to her protagonists, Desai leads Bim to a transcendental experience achieved through infinite love and compassion.

Just before Bim goes to bed that night she reads the passage dealing with the Emperor Aurangzeb's death in his biography. The last words of the Emperor, which are highly contemplative and philosophical, set her tired nerves at rest. She reads: "*Strange that I came with nothing into the world and now go away with this stupendous caravan of sin*" (167). Desai's description of the effect of the passage on Bim illustrates the novelist's talent for writing exquisite poetic prose: "She felt tears seep from under her eyelids involuntarily . . . They left a map of river beds in the dust, trickling a little and then drying" (168). The metaphor renders the experience a universal dimension. Bim decides to lighten the "bark" of her life by jettisoning all

the rage and bitterness accrued over the years, which might otherwise sink it. As a physical gesture expressive of her new found peace, she tears up all the old records and letters she has preserved sentimentally for years. Thus the morning that follows, literally and figuratively, marks a new course of life for her. The daybreak and the sense of joy associated with it are evocatively described in the novel. Desai harmonises the scene perfectly with the mood of the protagonist. The feeling of youthful mirth is then symbolically introduced through the arrival of Tara's daughters Maya and Mala on the scene. Overwhelmed by emotion she touches their laughing faces and kisses them. "Their young faces loomed, their brightness and pinkness filled her vision" (170).

Tara is delighted at this change of mood in Bim. She promises to bring the girls back home after the wedding in Hyderabad so that they can have a happy family get together. But when Tara inadvertently recalls *Mira-masi* in connection with Bim, the latter gets upset temporarily casting a shadow across the clear light of morning. Desai continues the metaphor of light and darkness to graph the change of mood in Bim. She writes, "The bright light of day cut into her temples, leaving a wake of pain" (172).

The last pages of the novel have a pervading sense of calmness which silently proclaims that 'forgiveness is all'. With a mind reconciled

with itself and others, Bim sees Tara and family off to Hyderabad with a request to bring Raja back with them.

Symbolically the novel closes with a musical concert at the Misra household. It happens to be Moyna's wedding day too. Bim listens to the music impressed by the contrast between the voices of Mulk and his aged Guru. The old man's voice contained "all the storms and rages and pains of his life" while Mulk's voice "had been almost like a child's, so sweet and clear" (182). Bim is reminded of a line in Eliot's *Four Quartets*, a copy of which Raja used to have. The line, "Time the destroyer is time the preserver" seems to carry a profound significance, which is manifested in the concert. She recognises the lyric to be that of Iqbal, Raja's favourite Urdu poet. Desai seems to introduce this reference deliberately to suggest that the reconciliation between the sister and brother is perfect and absolute.

Thus Bim slowly and eventually moves from discontentment and despair to hope and fulfilment. Although bitterness and discontentment have been annoying her for years, she overcomes them and achieves a sense of identity and dignity towards the end. It is her steadfast commitment to familial bonds that brings about this transformation. Paradoxically she finds freedom in bondage.

A close reading of the novel reveals how differently the sisters and brothers respond to their gender-based acculturation. Bim's self-realisation

in terms of Indian ethics is a fulfilment of *Swadharma* (ones own vocation). As Coomara Swamy observes "Hinduism justifies no cult of ego-expression, but aims consistently at spiritual freedom" (119). The Canadian concept of individualism, on the other hand, operates on a different cultural value system based primarily on a materialistic vision. Hence the achievement of Bim varies profoundly from that of Munro's protagonists.

Siddinathanandaswami's interpretation of the controversial verse of Manu seems relevant in this context. He comments that Western feminist ideology aims at liberating women only from the point of view of *artha* and *kama*. The holistic Indian tradition on the other hand takes into consideration '*dharma*' and '*moksha*' also as different psychological stages in the life of man or woman. Bim's conflict between the self and the other is resolved strictly in this transcendental plane of Indian ethics. As Nabar rightly points out, "It is not the setting, nor the character's nationality that makes the novel Indian - its central conflicts and situations can be explained or interpreted only in an Indian context (16).

Bim therefore, is an embodiment of submissiveness not in the Victorian or specifically Patmorian sense; her humility has a strict spiritual dimension. Paradoxically her resignation enables her to extend and establish a positive connection with all around her. Tears make her vision clear and sharp. Through sacrifice she achieves a 'self'.

NOTES

¹Erica Jong qtd in Nancy Walker, *Feminist Alternatives: Irony and Fantasy in the Contemporary Novel by Women* (London: UP of Mississippi, 1990) 14.

² See Barbara Godard, " 'Heirs of the Living Body' :Alice Munro and the Question of a Female Aesthetic," *Canadian Literature. Perspectives*, Ed, Jameela Begum (Madras: Macmillan, 1994) 78.

³ Rosaline Coward , " How I Became My Own Person" , *The Feminist Reader: Essays in Gender and Politics of Literary Criticism*, Ed, Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore (London: Macmillan 1989) 45.

⁴ Elaine Showalter, "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness" *Modern Criticism and Theory; A Reader*, Ed, David Lodge (London: Longman, 1988) 349.

⁵ "Replies to the Questionnaire." *Kakatiya Journal of English Studies*. 3.1(1978) 2.

⁶ Anita Desai, "The Indian Writer's Problems", *Perspectives on Anita Desai* Ed, Ramesh Srivastava (Ghaziabad: Vimal Prakashan, 1984) 3.

⁷See Germaine Greer, *The Female Eunuch* (London: 1970. Flamingo, 1993) 15.

⁸ R.D.Laing qtd in Sunaina Singh, *The Novels of Margaret Atwood and Anita Desai: A Comparative Study in Feminist Perspectives* (New Delhi: Creative, 1994) 69.

⁹ W.B.Yeats, "Easter 1916", *The Faber Book of Modern Verse* Ed, Michael Roberts (London: Faber and Faber, 1965) 57.

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Politics of Relationship

Jayasree Sukumaran “Feminist poetics in Alice Munro and Anita Desai ”
Thesis. Department of English, University of Calicut, 2000

Chapter IV

Politics of Relationship

The novels of both Munro and Desai are attempts to re-define familial and social relationships between men and women, with their narrative focus falling on the women protagonists. To examine the nature of relationship portrayed in their fiction - sexual as well as non-sexual, both inside and outside the family structure, - the framework has been derived chiefly from Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* (1970). She uses the term "politics" to refer to "power structured relationships, arrangements whereby one group of persons is controlled by another" (23). She maintains that the relationship between the sexes throughout history has been "a relationship of dominance and subordination" and that sexual dominion is perhaps "the most pervasive ideology of our culture and provides its most fundamental concept of power" (25).

Munro is acutely aware of the radical changes affecting the relationship between the sexes as a direct outcome of the widespread influence of the women's movement. She scrutinises in her fiction the dynamics of human bonds and bondages with respect to adolescent romance, marriage, sexuality, divorce and the sexual life of unattached women. She is not vociferous about the feminist concept of sexual liberation. What fascinate her as a woman writer are the complexities of

man-woman and woman-woman relationships in the rapidly changing social scenario. Gender relationships have become an interesting area of exploration for contemporary women writers. Munro's fiction deals with the restrictive Canadian provincial societies of the thirties and forties in which the relationship between the sexes had been based directly on the patriarchal concept of 'dominance and subordination'.

Kate Millet makes perceptive observations on the role of the family as an agent of patriarchy in perpetrating its ideology. She says:

Patriarchy's chief institution is the family. It is both a mirror of and a connection with the larger society, a patriarchal unit within a patriarchal whole. As the fundamental instrument and the foundation unit of patriarchal society, the family and its roles are prototypical. Serving as an agent of the larger society, the family not only encourages its own members to adjust and conform, but acts as a unit in the government of the patriarchal state which rules its citizens through its family heads Women are ruled through the family alone and have little or no formal relation to the state.(33)

In such a situation man is installed as the breadwinner and the head of the family. All human relationships develop within such a system in accordance with patriarchal demands regarding the role and status of its

individual members. Family is thus a dynamic social system, which perpetuates both harmonious and conflicting connections between its members.

Munro provides a solid familial setting in both *Lives* and *Who*. The family is of immense importance to her as an agent that socialises its young members into "patriarchal ideology's prescribed attitudes towards the categories of role, temperament and status" (Millet 35). She also stresses the sense of harmony, warmth and connectedness that emanate from the house, which instils into the young a feeling of security and a sense of belonging. The house physically keeps and connects the family together. It is the pivotal point towards which all the members gravitate at some time or other in the course of their life. Since it is where all kinship begin, develop and disintegrate, the house is of great emotional significance to women and women writers. As the narrator in the story "The Office" explains, "a house is not the same for a woman She is not someone who walks into the house, to make use of it and will walk out again. She is the house, there is no separation possible" (*Dance of the Happy Shades* 60).

A significant truth that Del Jordan discovers very early in childhood is that her house protects its inmates against all weather and that it is a permanent shelter of comfort and refuge for all of them. She remembers, "we were in a house as small and shut up as any boat is on the sea, in the

middle of a tide of howling weather" (22). The verbal picture she paints of her parents is replete with the warmth and innocence of a child's love: "My mother sat in her canvas chair and my father in a wooden one; they did not look at each other. But they were connected, and this connection was plain as a fence, it was between us and Uncle Benny, us and the Flats Road, it would stay between us and anything" (22). The 'connection' between the parents makes the childhood home secure against all possible misfortunes.

Del encounters a broader aspect of the same feeling of 'connectedness' during her association with Uncle Craig. She finds him extending this feeling of 'connectedness' beyond the narrow personal frontiers. He sees a "simple connection" between himself and the outside world (26) and is engaged in finding out the 'connections' that his ancestors maintained among themselves in order to write the family history. This broader sense of kinship which is an aspect of his "masculine self-centredness" attracts Del's attention as a unique quality which makes him "restful to be with" (26). Later in Jerry Storey she comes across an almost similar characteristic of self-confidence and composure. Their restfulness is certainly due to the ease with which they can pursue the careers of their choice without any conflict or tension that restrains a woman in traditional androcentric society.

As early as in childhood, the little girls realise that they are treated differently from boys inside the house. The stories in *Lives* and *Who* contain numerous instances to illustrate this phenomenon. Both Del and Rose are expected to be gentle in behaviour, submissive to authority, and humble about their accomplishments. Their place is with their mother. As they grow up they discover that gender is a crucial factor in determining and directing their relationship with the outside world as well. They find that their talent and competence are not deservedly recognised. Intellect and ambition in women are considered suspect in their society. Del's great aunts in *Lives* and Flo in *Who* are held forth as models of femininity by general consent. Such double standards permeating in androcentric societies affect all aspects of human life, especially the realm of familial and social relationships.

In an interview with Rasporich, Munro says that she is constantly interested in the eternal "contradiction" between a woman's "desire for a kind of attachment to a man . . . more intense than the attachment men feel for women" and her craving for "independence". She explains, "the attraction is not more intense, but the desire to attach, not to lose, not to let go of, is" (19). Generally the men in these novels like Mr. Jordan and Rose's father appear to be contented and independent of women. But women like Rose and Del, even when they seek independence are seen ironically dependent on men for their very existence. As Munro tells Geoff Hancock

"the whole subject of what men and women want of each other" never gets exhausted. "This is endlessly interesting and you keep discovering more things about it as a person and as a writer" (222). For the same reason in her fiction the battle of the sexes is presented in mild and subdued tones. Nevertheless both *Lives* and *Who* unfold the protagonists' struggle to break free of the conventional power structure lurking in every aspect of the patriarchal social system.

The essential temperamental disparity between Mrs. Jordan and her husband is subtly pointed out in the novel, at the very beginning, through Del's assessment of their natures. In spite of the 'connectedness' between the parents, she notices the alarming contrasts between their attitudes. Her father does not share her mother's rather prudish intolerance of social depravities and vices that surround them on the Flats Road. He "felt comfortable there" (7) while her mother was totally unpopular. They had both been raised on country farms but Addie had shed her rustic past. She is ambitious to lead an independent life in town. So she rents a house in Jubilee and lives there with her children. Mr. Jordan is not portrayed as a dominating husband. Yet Mrs. Jordan opts for the town life, as she is fully conscious that the prescriptive provincial life in the country would hamper the fulfilment of her intellectual and social ambitions. She refuses to be at the mercy of a rural male-dominated society. Dismissing social ridicule that

confronts her at every stage, Del's mother with determination and grit achieves success at least in small measure, by rising above her climate.

The house at Jenkins Bend where Mr. Jordan's aunts lived is a typical patriarchal place. The aunts are chronic spinsters, and are doomed to a life of servility. They are 'patriarchal women' who are complacent about their slavish existence [31-32]. They find great pleasure in living under a man's influence and in looking after him. However in their case it is not the shackles of marriage that has made them bonded women but the bonds of blood. In their house, the two worlds - the masculine one of Uncle Craig and the female world of their own - have nothing in common; what connects them is the 'relationship of dominance and subordination.'

In her relationship with Jerry Storey, Del understands that "intellectually competitive world"(163) is one that is projected by the male. She realises that, "He was in touch with the real world, he knew how they had split the atom. The only world I was in touch with was the one I had made with the aid of some books, to be peculiar and nourishing to myself" (165). But like Naomi, Del does not succumb to the dictates of the man who does not respect her as an individual. She is aware of the possibility of different levels of perception. Jerry Storey convinces Del that his superiority of intellect grants him power over her. She believes in his judgement but says "I still felt powerful enough, in areas that I thought he

could not see, where his ways of judging could not reach" (163). Jerry Storey is also a product of patriarchal culture and has imbibed its values and viewpoints. Hence social prejudices begin to operate and become visible even in adolescent relationships. The "comically ambiguous" (Martin 70) relationship however ends in a fiasco. She comes out of this affair wiser and happier.

Later in her passionate relationship with Garnet French she experiences carnal pleasure in its perfection. She had a "floating feeling, feeling of being languid and protected and at the same time possessing unlimited power" (181). But the passion, pleasure and power leave her when Garnet French demands her baptism as a necessary requirement for their marriage. His tyrannical move is effectively foiled by Del's stubborn refusal to comply with his demand. The incident becomes a turning point in her emotional and intellectual life. With a surer comprehension of her own self, she remains steadfast in her decision. She recollects:

I felt, amazement, not that I was fighting with Garnet but that anybody could have made such a mistake, to think he had real power over me. I was too amazed to be angry, I forgot to be frightened, it seemed to me impossible that he should not understand that all the powers I granted him were in play that he himself was - in play, that I meant to keep him sewed up in

his golden lover's skin forever, even if five minutes before I had talked about marrying him.(197-98)

Del's "real life" begins when she comes out victor in the fight (201). Traditionally patriarchy drowns women into passive domesticity, and very often against their will. Here Del emerges triumphant over Garnet French's attempts to baptise her into a life of submission endorsed and propagated by an androcentric society and its religion. She has gained sufficient self-confidence to seek and find a space for herself as a writer, without being cowed down by patriarchal strategies of love or religion. For her this is a real moment of power she has gained over her circumstances.

In her relentless journey towards wholeness and self-fulfilment she comes across several men - from Frank Wales through Chamberlain, Jerry Storey and Garnet French, eventually to Bobby Sherriff. Her actual meeting with Bobby Sherriff based on whose family she has been planning to write a novel in the Gothic tradition, gives her a new insight into life and its relationship with art. She finds the neurotic son of Mrs. Sherriff safe enough for effective communication. She accepts his good wishes in the right spirit as an equal, not in the traditional feminine manner of treating them as compliments from a patron. Her relationship with Bobby is untainted by any feeling of sexuality or dominance. There is understanding between

them and neither craves or demands the other's attachment or attention. It is a perfectly balanced and harmonious connection.

In the early sections of the novel Del is dominated and influenced mostly by women. Among them, the closest relationship is with her mother. The mother-daughter relationship is minutely and delicately analysed in the novel with perceptive insight. Munro has acknowledged her interest in delineating the mother-daughter relationship in her interview with Geoff Hancock. She says, "It probably obsesses me the way fathers obsess some male writers" (215). Del is at once similar to, and different from her mother. Hence she is both critical of, and sympathetic towards Mrs. Jordan. They are like each other in thoughtfulness courage and determination to succeed. But they widely differ from each other in their approach to life and its problems.

Mr. Jordan is blatantly devoid of practical sensibility and analytical acumen. They harbour different views about the primary aspects of life like work, love, sex and family. Mrs. Jordan appears to be a conservative feminist patiently and hopefully looking forward to a better future for women. In her relationship with her husband's aunts, the predominant feeling is one of hostility. She is quite intolerant of the blind and unthinking acceptance of patriarchy at Jenkins Bend. A somewhat similar feeling of intolerance Del herself maintains against her mother. The estrangement

between the two, begins in the section "Heirs of the Living Body" and steadily grows worse until Del completely overthrows "the maternal power" (Godard 85) when she seeks an outlet for sexuality through Garnet French. Her choices of the Anglican Church and the Baptist lover are indirect assertion of her disapproval of her mother and what she represents.

Del's search for God is also a powerful and hostile gesture against Mrs. Jordan's prudish atheism. Mrs. Jordan lacks a sense for the mysterious, and is therefore incapable of being influenced by any religious or mystical experience. Del, on the other hand, comprehends the factual and the mysterious; the prosaic and the miraculous. She knows that contraries very often co-exist. It is this fascination for the unknown that helps her transcend the quotidian existence, and makes her a creative writer. Her mother on the other hand is sadly devoid of the magic powers of imagination and observation. What grieves Del most is the low social estimate her mother gathers from those around her. She understands that her mother faces social rejection because of her lack of tact and diplomacy. By opposing Mrs. Jordan, Del reaches a stance not unlike that of Mrs. Jordan's own relationship with her mother Mrs. Morrison. The daughters rebel against their mothers. The deliberate, yet disturbing rebellion is but an inevitable stage in Del's progress towards maturation. It is at the same time symptomatic of her inner struggle against a hostile environment. Her

ambivalent attitude towards her mother and the resulting conflict is therefore a natural outcome of their likeness and similarity.

Mrs. Jordan is contrasted with her husband on the one hand, and with her brother Bill on the other. She does not share her husband's rustic simplicity and integrity. Her immature preference for sophistication and gentility clearly distinguishes her from him. Her attitudes differ from those of her brother too. While she is rational and scornful of her mother's religiosity, her brother Bill considers his mother as "some sort of a saint on earth" (72). Del seems to inherit her father's practical good sense and her uncle's sensitive nature along with her mother's potential for fighting against odds.

The exploitation of woman as a sexual object gets adequate representation in the novel chiefly through the lives of Fern Dogherty and Miss Farris. Fern is sexually exploited and deserted by Chamberlain, the middle aged pervert. Miss Farris is drawn to commit suicide and her lover leaves the town in gay abandon. Only women seem to become scapegoats of fake and immature sexual relationship in a patriarchal environment.

Del eventually reaches the conclusion that all relationships do matter, and that her own character and outlook is moulded by the character and outlook of all those she has come across in her life, men as well as women.

In *Who*, apart from Rose's relationship with the several men who move in and out of her life, Munro also analyses her connection with her stepmother Flo and her daughter Anna. In neither of these works does the writer carefully look into the brother-sister relationship.

Rose gathers her early lessons in socialisation from Flo. All the local gossip is preserved in her mind for ready narration. Most of them she had gathered from her customers who came to the store, behind which the family lived. Later Rose too becomes a "chronicler" (54) of events at school. Munro says, "Flo and Rose had switched roles. Now Rose was the one bringing stories home, Flo was the one who knew the names of the characters and was waiting to hear" (54). These exchanges cement the friendly relationship between the two in spite of the great differences that exist between them in terms of intelligence and aptitude.

Rose's apparent interest in books and reading (59-60) invites her father's strong disapproval. Flo who has a congenital "hostility" toward all books (59) is his idea of a perfect woman. Munro gives a slight parodical twist to the romanticised Victorian picture of "the Angel in the House" when she makes Rose's father, a provincial upholstery worker render his version:

A woman ought to be energetic, practical, clever at making and saving; she ought to be shrewd, good at bargaining and

bossing and seeing through people's pretensions. At the same time she should be naive intellectually, child like, contemptuous of maps and long words and anything in books, full of charming jumbled notions, superstitions, traditional beliefs.(60-61)

Rose knows that Flo has power over her husband and very often his "uncontrollable irritation" towards Rose is motivated by his desire to please his wife Rose intuitively understands that at heart "he had another set of feelings about her. She knew he felt "pride in her . . . that he would not have her otherwise and willed her as she was" (62). Perhaps he is being diplomatic, he feels that Rose's peace can be assured by humouring Flo. "He had made a decision, it seemed. Safety lay with Flo" (60).

Rose's relationship with men begins when Patrick falls in love with her. The prospective history professor with his exaggerated notions of chivalry and romance considers the affair a re-enacting of the king Cophetua-Beggar Maid episode. The traditional story gets subverted when the affair with all the elements of a fairy tale fantasy, culminates through marriage in divorce. Initially she derives immense self-satisfaction from her association with this rich university student from British Columbia. Coming from a rural working class background, Patrick's excessive romantic attention is strange and new to her. She finds her position getting

an unexpected social elevation through him, which fills her with a new sense of power. He is "the most vulnerable person [she] had ever known" (88). She knows love has made a fool of him. Later on she realises that "it was really vanity, it was vanity pure and simple" (127) that made her finally marry him after having impulsively broken off their engagement once. Munro analyses their relationship in detail to explore "what men and women want of each other". When the relationship turns fragile, Rose makes intense self-analysis: "Later she thought that she did respect Patrick, but not in the way he wanted to be respected, and she did love him not in the way he wanted to be loved" (141). Munro is here hitting the nail on the head. They remained in marriage for ten years and "during that time the scenes of the first break-up and reconciliation had been periodically repeated" until the final separation (127). Nine years after the divorce when she meets him in Toronto airport she has an irresistible yearning to patch up and return to him but she was stopped by his "truly hateful, savagely warning face" (129). She was shocked into a new awareness that someone like Patrick could hate her so much.

Before leaving Patrick she has had an illicit sexual intimacy with Clifford, Jocelyn's husband. The section "Mischief" deals with this "betrayal" (180) on her part, which eventually gets precipitated, in the divorce. Her futile relationships with Tom and Simon follow in quick succession. Munro observes, "Without this connection to a man, she might

have seen herself as an uncertain and pathetic person" (192). Rose on self-examination finds herself immature and foolish in her desperate need for a man's love and protection. Munro says, "she thought how many crazy letters she had written, how many overblown excuses she had found, having to leave a place, or being afraid to leave a place, on account of some man. Nobody knew the extent of her foolishness, friends who had known her twenty years didn't know half of the flights she had been on, the money she had spent and the risks she had taken" (227). In *Who*, Munro traces the life of her protagonist up to middle age, after she has established herself as a successful professional television artist. She lays bare Rose's adolescent sexuality, her problem-ridden married life leading to a divorce, her illicit sexual jaunts with another married man, and finally her futile sexual adventures after divorce.

Finally in the last section as it happens in *Lives*, Rose gets a new awareness into gender relationship through her association with Ralph Gillespie, an old school friend. Ralph is a figure from the past and he has a talent for mimicking people. She finds him easy and comfortable to communicate with. She felt "[Ralph's] life, close, closer than the lives of men she'd loved, one slot over from her own" (277). In accepting Ralph and in being accepted by him, she understands who she is. Rose, who in her adolescent days had been ashamed of her origins, now looks at Hanratty with a new understanding and acceptance. None of the men she had striven

after in Vancouver and Calgary could proffer her the kind of profound happiness she seems to derive from her contact with Ralph, who belongs to her own place. The relationship is an example of man-woman friendship untainted by any shade of sexuality.

With her stepmother Flo, Rose has very little in common but they mutually understand each other. Her relationship with her stepmother is perhaps closer and deeper than that between Del and Mrs. Jordan. Her trust in Flo is so profound that it works as a powerful influence in making her decide to leave her own daughter Anna in charge of her step mother Elizabeth, Patrick's second wife. When Flo becomes ill, it is Rose who volunteers to go back to Hanratty and look after her. Flo's own son Brian and his wife Phoebe reveal merely a perfunctory attitude to her. Here Munro projects Rose as a mature woman who has reconciled herself with her past. She now shakes the dust off her gypsy feet and comes back to Hanratty with an inner harmony and balance. Her transformation is complete through her meeting with Ralph Gillespie her "alter ego" (Martin 124).

Rose's relationship with her daughter Anna is fraught with anxiety and helplessness. She knows that the broken relationship of the parents has made life traumatic for the child. Munro writes, "Yet for Anna this bloody fabric her parents had made, of mistakes and mismatches that anybody

could see ought to be torn up and thrown away, was still the true web of life, of father and mother, of beginning and shelter. What fraud, thought Rose, what fraud for everybody" (181). Finally Rose agrees with Patrick and allows Anna to live with her stepmother Elizabeth, Patrick's second wife. From her own experience with Flo, she knows that, for her child, a stable life with her stepmother would be better than "a poor picturesque gypsying childhood" (203) that she might be able to provide for her.

It is rather with an objective air that Munro assesses the power and powerlessness in gender relationships. Her quests are rooted in relationships. Therefore her protagonists are never obsessed by existential angst or metaphysical questions regarding the absurdity of existence. They do not crave nostalgically for a lost world of innocence like the protagonists in Desai's fiction.

In her conversation with Jasbir Jain, Desai says, "all human relationships are inadequate. Basically every one is solitary . . . involvement in human relationships in this world invariably leads to disaster" (11-12). Desai's fiction is an exploration into the obligatory and intricate family relationships and meaningless marriages set in the urban Indian context. Through her fiction she unravels the plight of upper middle class women of urban India, in relation to their socio-familial bonds. In the Indian environment women are victimised by unkind traditional norms,

while their husbands enjoy absolute freedom to determine the course of their own lives as well as those of their wives. The entire decision-making power rests with men. Women are brought up to be passive and powerless.

In *Cry* as well as in *Clear* Desai portrays dull matrimonial bonds devoid of health and vitality. The subtle and ambiguous aspects of man-woman relationships have been minutely analysed in several of her fiction. In *Cry*, the greatest emphasis is laid on the temperamental incompatibility between husband and wife.

Maya-Gautama relationship culminates in disaster mainly because of their 'inadequate' understanding of each other. Gautama being a pragmatic person, and a lawyer by profession, is impervious to the psychological trauma that steadily gnaws at the heart of his wife. He is temperamentally incapable of comprehending the complexities of experience that Maya passes through. The relationship between them is therefore an incessant conflict between acute sensitivity and prudent pragmatism.

Maya's contacts and connections with the outside world are rather tenuous. Her alienation from Gautama dooms her to be on a lonely island of misery and helplessness. She knows they belong to "separate worlds" (102) and that "he knew nothing that concerned [her]" (9). She reflects, "His tenderness was the cathartic I desired" (11) and weeps when she listens to the cry of the peacocks. Identifying her situation with theirs, she is touched

by "the mortal agony of their cry for lover and for death". She "wept for them and wept for [herself], knowing their words to be [hers] (97).

Maya keeps to herself the dreadful prophecy of the astrologer, as she knows Gautama's rational male brain would only dismiss it with scorn. She suffers horrific isolation, as she has no one to turn to for help. She is motherless and fails in her attempt to win the love and confidence of either Gautama's mother or sister. She merely "awed" her and "attracted" her (158).

Interestingly enough, the relationship between Gautama's parents is also slightly investigated in this novel. Maya says, "In Gautama's family, one did not speak of love, far less of affection"(46). They discussed only public events. His father was a visionary, a freedom fighter and his mother, a shrewd social worker. No reliable connection existed between the romantic dreamer and his practical wife. The connection is still missing when the roles seem to be reversed as in the case of Maya and Gautama - a dreamer wife and a practical husband.

The novel also mentions in passing the broken marriage of Nila, Gautama's sister. Despite Gautama's admonitions, Nila consults another lawyer on her own, to proceed with her divorce. Her sarcastic scorn towards her husband bursts forth in her words to Maya. "After ten years with that rabbit I married, I've learnt to do everything myself" (162).

Desai portrays two instances of happy marriages- those of Maya's friends Leila and Pom who are "sisterly" (59) towards her. Like the legendary heroine Leila this young girl marries for love. Her husband is a handsome young man dying of tuberculosis. She teaches Persian literature in a Girls' college and looks after her ailing husband. Her parents had abandoned her after the elopement. Maya is touched by her devotion towards her husband awaiting death. When one day she watched Leila tending her husband she "saw in her movements an aching tenderness subdued, by a long sadness, into great beauty and great bitterness"(59). Maya also notices that endless suffering has darkened her vision. Pom, on the other hand, is good humoured, sanguinary and optimistic. She is devoted to her husband Kailash and diplomatic towards her parents-in-law. In her anxiety to have a son she sets aside her rational thinking and is even willing to obey her mother-in-law's advice and placate the gods. Pom is a typical Indian wife who enjoys her marriage and domesticity.

Desai in this novel gives us only sparing glimpses into the brother-sister bond. Maya's connection with Arjuna is fragile. The rift between her father and her brother affects the understanding between the children. The cracks in familial bonds cause indelible damages on the sensitive psyche of Maya and remains with her. Later, when on the verge of a psychological collapse, a letter that Arjuna sends her from New York does nothing to alleviate her misery or avert her tragedy. The white

envelope on the table only reinforced her disturbing memory about the "horoscope on yellow parchment [which] had gleamed thus in the light upon [her] father's desk in a very different room"(143).

Maya's neurotic frame of mind gets aggravated by the fragile familial and social bonds. The gruesome catastrophe with which the novel closes is therefore its natural conclusion. In *Clear* on the other hand, the house functions as a powerful unifying agent in ultimately bringing together the members of the family on the basis of shared affection and loyalties.

The Das household has also been a persistent site of conflict, mainly of two kinds - one between individuals and the other between individual and collective interests. The estrangement between Bim and Raja since the latter's marriage to Benazir is of the former kind. The hostility between the two is in direct proportion to their youthful attachment. Later in middle age when Bim passes through a series of agonising experiences, she develops a feeling that the rest of the family stands against her. She compares them to blood-sucking mosquitoes that had "fed on her blood" and left her "turning their backs on her" when they were filled to exhaustion (153). The morbid sensation corrupts her vision and fills her with frustration and despair. It is her infinite compassion for her retarded brother Baba that finally brings her round and makes her accept the present with an unclouded perception.

The solid bond between the sisters has also been a vital source of resurgence, which finally leads Bim to her epiphany and the consequent transformation of character and vision. However it is the brother-sister bond - that between Bim and Raja and between Bim and Baba - that gets the predominant focus in the novel. The mutual devotion that Raja and Bim had for each other in their early youth is bitterly contrasted with the discord that erupts between them in later years.

The lack of attachment between parents and children is presented quite realistically in the second section of the novel. The bonds between them are so weak that, the death of the parents, least affects the children. They were so much accustomed to their absence from home. The children are thus robbed of the warmth of parental affection associated with childhood. The lacuna however is compensated abundantly by the presence of *Mira-masi* in the house. She takes up the role of the surrogate mother, and the relationship she builds up with the children of the family is a rare example of genuine human affection. The relationship is emotionally fulfilling to each of the children, as well as the mother.

With the death of *Mira-masi*, Bim assumes the role of the head of the family. She is its heart too. She elevates herself to the role of a matriarch and effortlessly performs the role of a dominating 'master of the house'. At the same time the other members of the family seem to exploit her

generosity. The pattern of sex role stereotyping is broken in the case of the Misra sisters also. It may even be said that the presence of exploited women haunt the pages of this novel. The Misra girls - "the two grey-haired, spectacled middle-aged women - once married but both rejected by their husbands soon after their marriage" (30) present the wretched plight of divorced wives in the Indian context. They work hard and support their brothers - "fat lazy slob" who enjoy themselves "drinking whisky all day that their sisters have to pay for" (32).

The marital bonds and estrangements that Desai delineates in this novel are singularly Indian. Tara and Bakul are representative Indian husband and wife. Their marriage was the culmination of a brief romance. In their relationship the entire power rests with the husband. His attitude towards Tara is one of condescension (17). Although apparently theirs is a tolerably happy relationship there are moments when Tara, in spite of her love for domesticity, feels discontented and her husband's company irksome. Desai comments, "she felt she had followed him enough, it had been such an enormous strain, always pushing against her grain, it had drained her of too much strength, now she could only collapse, inevitably collapse" (18). Nevertheless, of all the marital bonds that Desai portrays in *Cry* and *Clear* that of Bakul and Tara comes closest to the concept of a happy marriage.

What emerges ultimately from these two novels is that, not only women's predicament but their familial relationships too are conditioned by the environment to which they belong.

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The Dynamics of 'Writing Women' - A Note on the Narrative Strategies of Alice Munro and Anita Desai

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Chapter 5

The Dynamics of 'Writing Women' - A Note on the Narrative Strategies of Alice Munro and Anita Desai

Language has been used both extensively and intensively as a dominant weapon of patriarchy to marginalise, oppress and silence women. It has been propagating an androcentric and even misogynist worldview through vocabulary and syntax. It is now common knowledge in linguistic theory that language speaks us, just as we speak language. Feminist critics like Dale Spender and Deborah Cameron have convincingly established that it speaks men and women differently. The latter makes perceptive observations on the subject in *Feminism and Linguistic Theory*. She remarks, ". . . speech and writing have been credited with a malign power to regulate social relations in ways we are not aware of and to disguise important truths in a cloud of misleading rhetoric" (1).

Hence, opting for the profession of a writer of fiction is itself problematic for a woman. For, she has to work within a system of signs inimical towards her for centuries together. As Mary Jacobson observes, in a patriarchal society, the greatest difficulty for a woman writer lies "in speaking both for and as a woman (rather than like a woman)"¹. For in an androcentric milieu, there is every possibility that "language may reinscribe the structures by which they are oppressed"². Therefore she

maintains, "within male discourse, women's writing is a ceaseless attempt to deconstruct it, to write what cannot be written"³. Therefore when a woman writer attempts to mark her place in the literary world, she has to subvert or/ and delete those features of language, which are suggestive of male hegemony and patriarchal dominance. The contours of her narrative style evolve in the process.

This chapter discusses the challenges faced by Munro and Desai in adapting the traditionally androcentric modes of writing to the articulation of women's predicament in the contemporary world - 'to write what cannot be written'. There are similarities and dissimilarities between the two writers in their fictional style. Each of them represents the gender specific experiences from her own cultural perspective in a manner that best suits her genius. They bend the traditional structures to suit their end as women writers 'writing women'.

Virginia Woolf in "Women and Fiction", comments on the essential difference between the stories that men and women write, ". . . both in life and in art, the values of a woman are not the values of a man. Thus when a woman comes to write a novel, she will find that she is perpetually wishing to alter the established values - to make serious what appears insignificant to a man, and trivial, what is to him important" (49). This shift in emphasis would influence both the structural and thematic features of their fiction.

Rasporich observes, "Munro's life has been that of meeting the challenges of shifting roles for herself, and her fiction has been, and continues to be that of cathartic feminism Unlike a Mary Wollstonecraft, a Virginia Woolf or a Sylvia Plath, she, as a female author . . . is a survivor" (12). Her attitude to narrative style is typically unconventional and anti-theoretical. To Hancock she said, "I don't recognise a style . . . I would call it away of telling a story" (219).

A similar anti-theoretical stance is evident in Desai's attitude to art as well. In her interview with Atma Ram (1977) she said, "I start without having very much of a plot in my mind or paper . . . I prefer the word pattern to plot as it sounds more natural and even better" (101).

Munro's 'way of telling a story' is obviously a deviation from the conventional narrative patterns. Each of the fictional texts *Lives* and *Who* consists of separate, fully individualised story segments, each complete in itself, carrying an independent title, yet corded together thematically into a single text. This unique patterning has invited continual critical controversy as to whether Munro can legitimately be identified as a short story writer or as a novelist. She herself considers *Lives* as an "episodic novel" and *Who* as "linked stories" (Martin, 216). She even says that *Who* can in no way be judged as a novel. But as each of these narratives has a reliable thematic coherence and an "architectonic"⁴ compactness, each of them can be

analysed as a novel especially in the post modern literary scenario, which is characterised by the dissolution of traditional boundaries of literary genres. If need be, they can be qualified as 'fractured fiction'. Martin in his analysis of Munro's novel maintains that *Who* has a more satisfactory form than *Lives* "which is generally given the dignity of a novel" (74).

Munro believes that the distinction between a novel and linked stories is rather ambiguous. She does not feel that "novel is any step up from a short story"⁵. In fact her predilection for linked story sequences or anecdotal narratives corresponds to her manner of observing life and her perception of time.

Her attitude to life and fiction frequently finds expression in her interviews. To Hancock she explains in detail:

I like looking at people's lives over a number of years without continuity-like catching them in snapshots. And I like the way people relate or don't relate, to the people they were earlier. This is the sense of life that interests me a lot. . . . I am not drawn to writing novels because I don't see people develop and arrive somewhere. I just see people living in flashes, from time to time.(200)

To Rasporich she says, she cannot work in continuity because she does not actually find it in life (28). As her words clearly reveal, Munro is capturing

in her fiction the texture of non-linear psychological experience. She cannot observe continuity in life or work because of her being a woman writer. A woman writer with familial concerns and responsibilities is often forced to work in the midst of endless distractions. Virginia Woolf believed that most women took to writing fiction as it is easier to write and because it requires less concentration. Its pliable form is adaptable to the delineation of countless topics and variety of themes (*A Room* 67). Rasporich while commenting on Munro's preference for short stories expresses a similar point of view. "Munro's affinity for the short story is natural because of her female 'status' and was undoubtedly conditioned by her years of writing apprenticeship daily interrupted by the care of her children" (169).

In this context Sandra Gwyn's remarks in "Women in the Arts in Canada" seem highly relevant. She says that women are greatly "handicapped by their deeply ingrained conditioning to serve others, which deprives them of the ruthlessness to become major artists and by their time consuming roles as wives and mothers"⁶. In the light of these observations, it is not surprising why Munro's stories are, like deliberate fragments tagged up by thematic connection. They are discontinuous segments with great time gaps between them. Kermode's definition of a Sartrean novel as "discontinuous, unorganised middle, without a beginning and an end" (140) seems to suit the dis/organization of these works as well. They are not well knit in the conventional sense

In several of her interviews, Munro has also explained the genesis and composition of her works - *Lives* was begun as a "much looser novel" but was changed into 'self contained segments' as the plan did not work (Gibson, 263). The abandoned novel in the re-written form became the middle section of the book, from "Princess Ida" to "Lives of Girls and Women". The two opening stories were written next, followed by "Baptizing". "The Epilogue" was added still later after much hesitation.

In this connection it will not be out of place to examine certain divergent critical opinions regarding the form of *Lives*. For Marigold Johnson, *Lives* is just "a scrapbook of anecdotes"⁷. Macdonald, on the other hand, believes that the writer's "vision integrates the novel"⁸. John Moss maintains, "consummate use of point of view gives the novel its 'cohesive resonance'⁹. (Tim) Struthers, perhaps best describes the form. He calls *Lives* "a story cycle" and "one of a fairly wide ranging variety of 'open form', an organised book of prose fiction, made up of autonomous units which take on extra resonance and significance when combined with other related units" (122).

Like the sixteenth century sonnet sequences, each segment is complete in it self, yet is related thematically to the rest of them and can be treated together as a single text. *Who* also has a similar structure. Helen Hoy traces the tortuous composition of this work¹⁰. The collection was first

entitled *The Beggar Maid* but was changed to *Who*, a well-known adage in rural Ontario, as the former appeared to be "a very still title" (Hancock, 203).

Susan Gubar makes the observation that the distance between a woman artist and her art is minimal¹¹. A distinctive feature of Munro's style is the strong autobiographical current in her fiction. Her interviews make it clear that her fiction is drawn on, and reflects her life experiences. In a speech she gave in China in 1981, she said, "I write about myself because I am the only truth I know" (Rasporich xix). Hence while estimating the relationship between Munro and her art it is necessary to be acquainted with some of the important facts about her life. As a girl she lived in Huron country in rural South Western Ontario, which is the location in most of the stories in *Who* and *Lives*. Her father was a fox farmer like Mr. Jordan in *Lives*, and her mother, a businesswoman. She had also been a teacher in her youth. Alice was a sensitive child, shocked by her school experience, by the terrific violence and vulgarity of its elementary life. "Like her heroine Del Jordan, she began to distance herself from the immediate environment, the patriarchal and prohibitive society at an early age, losing her religious faith when twelve or thirteen (Rasporich 7).

Some of these autobiographical instances frequently seep through her fiction. *Lives* employs the pseudo-autobiographical mode as well, with its first person narrative voice. In "How I Became My Own Person" Rosaline Coward observes how novels about women and written by women adopt a pseudo-autobiographical or confessional mode, presenting a worldview which slowly develops through the eyes of a child protagonist. She says, "these novels frequently attempt a recreation of this childish world of eccentricities, anecdotes and the sense of haphazard happening"¹². Hence they are characterised by a lack of causal explanations. This explains and justifies the episodic narrative sequences written by Munro. Coward further distinguishes the role and significance of sexual confessions in women's novels from those of men's works with male characters. "For men, sexual encounters represent access to power, a series of encounters and experiences which build up a sense of individual's power in having control over women's bodies". On the other hand, "sexual experiences in women's novels represent access to knowledge rather than power. Sexual experience becomes the way in which a woman finds out about herself"¹³. The sexual experiences of Del and Rose in *Lives* and *Who* respectively thus remain crucial landmarks in the process of their achieving selfhood - the process of 'becoming their own persons'.

The 'pseudo-autobiographical' or confessional mode becomes a handy instrument for women writers because they distrust the images of

women in literature created by patriarchal imagination. The extremely vicious as well as victimised patriarchal models are unsuitable for contemporary women writers. Their aim is to liberate women characters from the traditional sexual roles, society forces them to play out in their lives. So women writers like Munro and Desai have to draw on their own experiences, observations and memories to model their women characters and narrative situations. Hence their fiction has a highly subjective narrative strain. As Nancy Walker remarks, the use of a pseudo autobiographical mode is closely linked with the writer's struggle to find a communicable voice and expression which in turn is part of the narrator's struggle to achieve selfhood and identity (21). This device therefore has a significant relevance thematically as well as structurally. It is a means by which personal emotions are transformed to artistic ones through the process of defamiliarisation. In her interview with Rasporich, Munro says, her characters are very real to her "because they are aspects of [herself] "They are all" drawn very much from life". She further says that "one of the completely created characters" in her fiction is the "mother in *Lives*" (27). In the same conversation she also admits that the aunts in *Lives* are modelled. Flo she calls a "folk character" lifted up from the Flats Road of the lower town "the kind of milieu [she] grew up in" (27). Munro said to Metcalf that her writings are autobiographical in "emotion" but not in "incident" and about *Lives* in particular, she said, "This novel is autobiographical in form,

but not in fact" (58). David Stouck observes that *Who* is also an autobiographical novel (269). He says, "In most of her Ontario stories, Munro mines her own past, especially adolescence with its disquieting memories of inarticulate, aborted relationships and personal failures" (262). All the stories in *Lives* and *Who* except the middle section in *Who* which portrays Rose as a married woman living in British Columbia have a background closely associated with that of South Western Ontario. James Carscallen remarks that her stories "add up to a picture of rural Ontario" in which she grew up (74). Martin makes an interesting observation in this connection. "She has put rural Ontario on the map . . . to answer the riddle identified by Northrop Frye, 'Where is here?'" (192). In her interview with Hancock she admits that she has used extensively the region where she grew up (200). She further says, "The school in the second part of *Who* is the school I went to. It's the most autobiographical thing in the book" (206).

Desai's fiction too underscores the women writers' tendency to draw on materials from their own personal experiences. In her interview with Srivastava, she says: "Usually minor incidents and minor characters tend to be drawn from real life and the major ones from the imagination I do restrict myself to writing about people and situations I know or can understand. Ila Das and Nanda Kaul in *Fire on the Mountain* are characters based on real life." (211-12). She considers lack of experience in the outer world the reason for the presence of autobiographical elements in women's

fiction. The presentation of scene and setting has a rich realistic flavour in Munro's fiction. With meticulous attention to details she paints a photographic picture of the region. This is in keeping with her admission in her interview with Gibson, "I am . . . very excited by what you might call the surface of life . . . It seems to me very important to be able to get at the exact tone and texture of how things are" (237). As Rasporich intelligently observes, "Mapping the details helps a woman writer to pin down her fiction." (125).

In *Lives* the description of the Flats Road and the map of the journey undertaken by Uncle Benny to trace his eccentric wife Madeleine, the details about the Jordan family tree, all illustrate the "documentary" quality of her fiction (Stouck 260). In *Who West Hanratty* is presented with an equal photographic fidelity.

Documenting the landscape, which is only one of the aspects of Munro's style, is very much related to her main concern of delineating the process by which women break free of the constraints imposed upon them by society. So Rasporich calls the place in her fiction a "maternal mythscape" (122). According to her Munro is "able to authenticate a fictional female world by expanding her characters' inner lives into place, and by manipulating place as feminist enquiry" (122). For Del and Rose the landscape is part of their identity despite the irony that the same place had

restrained and restricted their moves in the past. At the end of either of these novels, we find the protagonists returning home literally or symbolically through other characters. The bond of understanding that develops between Del and Bobby Sherriff gives her an insight into the relationship between life and art, and gives her a better understanding of uncle Craig and all that he stands for - Jenkin's Bend and its associations. Similarly Rose returns to West Hanratty and to Flo and feels a sense of being accepted by the place and its people. She achieves this experience of recognition through Ralph Gillespie.

With regard to scene and setting, Desai's fiction does not seem to share this documentary quality. In *Cry* she is more concerned with mapping the inner terrain of Maya's disturbed psyche. Hence it is the psychological, not the physical space that is traced with fidelity in this novel. If Munro is fascinated by "the surface of life" , Desai on the other hand is interested in discovering "the true significance of things by plunging below the surface and plumbing the depths" ¹⁴ Hence her themes have a psychological quest working as a powerful undercurrent, which is obvious, both in *Cry* and *Clear*. She characterises her writing as "purely subjective" and depending on "a private vision" rather than on "observation" (Indian Writers Problems 3). R.S. Sharma therefore qualifies her as a "novelist of moods" (166).

Therefore, the description of the spatial details rarely finds a place in *Cry*. Instead the novel abounds in picturesque descriptions of nature which gives it an exotic poetic flavour. Maya rejoices "in the world of sounds, senses, movements, odours, colours, tunes" (92). Exquisite poetic passages are scattered all over the work. She describes the "curved arc of a bird's wing"(91) and "the sweet odour of a ripe pineapple, freshly sliced"(92) with a Hopkinsian insight into the beauty of things. The description of the dust storm is also intensely evocative (187-89).

Cry is a psychological novel where she employs the stream of consciousness technique so that she can reproduce without an authorial intervention, "the full spectrum and the continuous flow" of Mayas' mental process (Abrams 22). The novel employs both the omniscient third person narrative voice and the pseudo autobiographical first person form. It is divided into three parts. The stream of consciousness technique is employed in the middle section divided into seven chapters and consisting of about two hundred pages. The first and the last section, which serve the purpose of a prologue and an epilogue, are rendered in the third person narrative form. Desai uses interior monologue to lay bare the intricacies of Maya's psyche. The interior monologue attempts to give "a direct quotation of the mind", a mode of representation of human consciousness, focusing on the random flow of thought and stressing its illogical, ungrammatical 'associative' nature" (Prince 93).

Clear consists of four parts. The basis of division, is however different from that of *Cry*. In several of her interviews Desai has furnished detailed information, regarding the structure of the novel as it emerged in her vision. She describes it as an attempt to write "a four dimensional piece on how a family's life moves backwards and forwards in a period of time" (Nabar 15). Each of these parts deals with different periods in the lives of the main characters. The first and last parts are set in the present, while in the middle section the scenes continuously shift between the past and the present. The journey into the past brings about a new awareness in the minds of Bim and Tara regarding the present. Hence the structural pattern facilitates the thematic progress although it has at times a strong artificial aura about it.

Both *Cry* and *Clear* break the strict chronological sequence in their structure. For it is the psychological time not the clock time that supervises the arrangement of incidents in these works. Desai reveals superb sense of artistry in the construction of these novels.

Munro, too does not adopt the traditionally accepted chronological patterning of events in her fiction. *Lives* and *Who* have a broad chronological sequential connection, but inside the individual segments, the organisation of events is blatantly non-linear. Since *Lives* is a reminiscential narration, the story is punctuated by several flash-forwards and flashbacks.

The episodes in the novels are united chiefly through memory, which transcends all criteria of man-made time. In "Heirs of the Living Body", the second segment in *Lives*, the protagonist delves into the remote past through a family photograph of her ancestors, the oldest of whom takes her far back into the seventeenth century. Then she travels 'back' to the future to the days of her childhood - the time about which the adult Del is narrating. Soon after effecting this shift, Del again moves fast forward to another point of time in future: "When I read years afterwards about Natasha in *War and Peace*, . . . I had to think of Aunt Elspeth and Auntie Grace" (27). The narrator thus makes the time of narration undergo rapid shifts, which make demands on the process of reading. In the same section Del speaks of Auntie Grace's days in the Jubilee Hospital, an event that takes place years after the incidents narrated in the beginning. Del's memory works as a kaleidoscope which at every shake, arranges the past into a novel pattern bringing before the eyes shades and shapes unseen so far. The third section "Princess Ida" follows a similar structure. The story moves spatially and temporally from Flats Road to Mrs. Jordan's rented house in Jubilee. Then it takes a distant journey into the past, to her mother's childhood. After moving to Flats Road once again the story ends in Jubilee. The space-time shifts continually occur in each of the following sections. Munro shows the readers how things "intersect" in time, in order to prove that the concept of "continuity" in life is a myth (Rasporich 29).

The linear chronology is totally disrupted in the title story "Who do You Think You Are.?" The story presents a number of episodes continually projected through the narrator's mind. The chronological order is set aside here, as Munro seems to make an attempt to present the state of mind of the protagonist - her reconciliation with Hanratty and herself and the new sense of identity she has achieved.

The traditional linear concept of time is not of much use for a woman writer as it is associated with the record of patriarchal evolution in which woman is only an invisible component. Since she is generally concerned with mapping the psychological evolution of her protagonists, linear time offers her no direction, it fails to mark or measure her approach to life. As Rasporich points out it is "time as Flux, with amorphous boundaries" which may satisfy her (178). Both Munro and Desai respond to such a concept of time in their fiction. Memory marked by psychological time, becomes a strong structuring device in their work. The past and present, the inner and the outer world, fantasy and reality are all woven into their fabric making it a meaningful and evocative tapestry. By mixing them together haphazardly, the novelists subvert the concept of continuity as well as separation between them.

In *Cry* apparently the three parts of the narrative follow each other in chronological succession. But the inner structure refuses to be dominated

by clock time. The real codifying agent here is the prophecy of the astrologer. Repeated journeys into the past world of childhood occur in *Clear* also and unroll the narrative content. Hence chronology itself becomes meaningless and insignificant in these two novels.

Asha Kanwar has carefully made a comparison between Desai and Woolf with regard to their usage of time¹⁵. She maintains that polytemporal time shape frames the narrative structure in *Cry* (9-10). In polytemporal structure, time is shuffled illogically so that a reader loses track of all time references

Since *Lives* traces the story of the protagonist's individual and artistic growth, in a thematic analysis it can be considered a bildungsroman and a Künstlerroman at once. Bildungsroman which literally means 'formative novel' is traditionally "the story of a young man achieving maturity by testing himself against the values of his society and emerging as a distinct individual" (Walker 76). In the hands of a woman writer like Munro, it becomes naturally a story of a young woman's quest for identity and her consequent psychological development. In her interview with Hancock, Munro expresses her wish to write such a novel of development. "I wanted the kind of thing about a young girl's sexual experience that had often been written about boys" (112). She fulfils it in *Lives*. J.R.(Tim) Struthers

considers *Lives* as a sort of feminine counterpart of Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*¹⁶.

A *Kunstlerroman* is a subspecies, which traces the development of the artist from childhood to maturity and later (Abrams). *Lives* does not completely fall in this category as the novel ends just when Del begins her life as an artist.

Writing a 'bildungsroman' is problematic for a woman writer, as the concept of identity, which is a pre-requirement for this particular mode of writing, is itself problematic for her. The writer would find it difficult to presume that the female hero has a unique identity. This thematic snag would considerably affect her narrative strategies. J.K. Gardiner observes that female identity is "a process" and that identity for women is more flexible and relational than for men (Walker 347). The "fluidity of identity" is also caused by the protagonists' awareness of the difference between the self as formulated externally by patriarchal outlook and the self as an internal process of discovery. This awareness is projected symbolically in *Lives* through the distance between the Flats Road and Jubilee. Mrs. Jordan's shifting of residence symbolises her discontent with the sense of self as created in the prescriptive provincial locality and her desire to develop an alternate self with which she can live comfortably. Del on the other hand vacillates between the views of self as created on the Flats Road

represented by the aunts, and the sense of self projected by her mother. She ends as neither. Her development as an independent individual writer is made possible because of her talent to test continually the patriarchal images against the reality of her experience.

Lives however ends with a sense of incompleteness. For although Del has escaped from the tyrannies of patriarchy, and the temptations of the "normal life", represented by Naomi, it does not, communicate a sense of neat conclusion. For she has just begun her "real life"(201). Its reminiscential nature is partly the reason why it begins and ends abruptly, taking the readers for granted. Since she is about to begin her real life, the novel is not entirely a real bildungsroman either. *Who* also shares this characteristic. The text ends rather abruptly, although in this work, Munro traces the life of the protagonist beyond her finding and establishing herself in the career of her choice.

Several feminist critics have pointed out that a general feeling of endlessness is a characteristic of the woman's text. Helene Cixous makes an insightful observation on this phenomenon: "A feminine textual body is recognised by the fact that it is always endless, without ending: there is no closure, it doesn't stop The manner of beginning towards the end marks a feminine writing. A feminine text starts on all sides, all of once, starts twenty times, thirty times over"¹⁷. This process of 'starting over'

characterises the lives of Rose and Del. It is at the same time a direct expression of the disruptions that have occurred in traditional life patterns in recent years. Munro has expressed her opinion in several interviews that continuity and neat conclusions are absent in real life situations.

Chronological inconsistencies caused by abrupt breaks in the narratives also correspond to broken relationships, which characterise contemporary familial and social life. *Lives* and *Who* broadly trace how their protagonists Del and Rose break free of each of their patriarchal bonds and bondages.

Desai's fiction does not seem to fit in this category of "endless" fiction. A somewhat neat conclusion occurs at the end of both the novels under consideration. This may be primarily due to a difference in Desai's perspective and perception as an Indian woman writer. The Oriental mind is always conscious of that the outer reality with its fragmentary nature is merely an illusion and that at the deeper spiritual level there is perfect unity and integration. Cixous' argument, therefore, does not seem to hold good in the Oriental context especially in the case of a writer like Desai, who in several of her interviews has repeatedly expressed her interest for the deeper layers of life. Anecdotal digression abounds in Munro whereas it is only sparingly and perfunctorily used by Desai. Characters like Uncle Benny, the aunts, and Mrs. Jordan in *Lives* and Flo in *Who* weave yarns

effortlessly in the course of the main narration. Uncle Benny's story of Sandy Stevenson's marriage (Lives 7-8) is a perfect example of an inset anecdote. The story gains a unique significance as it thematically points to Uncle Benny's own calamitous marriage. Indirectly these two stories together set the marital mood of the main theme. Mrs. Jordan leaves her husband to fulfil her individual ambition (58) and Del achieves her "real life" after leaving Garnet French and crushing his hopes of baptising and marrying her (201). The inset anecdotes thus foreshadow the parallel experiences for the protagonist.

Similarly in *Who*, Dorothy's account of her disastrous love affair with a journalist (191) is echoed in Rose's own desperate chasing of her undependable lover Tom. A more interesting example is provided by the story "Wild Swans". Its narrative content is just an adroit verbal expansion of Flo's warning to Rose to guard against indecent sexual advances of men especially "people dressed up as ministers". Rose was about to make her rail trip on her own to Toronto for the first time (73).

Inset anecdotes very rarely occur in Desai. In *Cry*, the incident of the pet dog Toto's death may be considered as one. But here the incident reduces itself into a poignant symbol and the symbolic effect overrides any other.

Although Munro declares herself as a writer, "working in a pretty traditional way" (Gibson 256), metanarrative signs frequently appear in her fiction. Her excursions into narratological intricacies well deserve another detailed research. This analysis focuses only on the special narrative features informed and influenced by the writer's gender. However in order to understand her ingenuity in narrative artistry as a woman writer, standing outside the dominant tradition, it would not be irrelevant to point out certain prominent metanarrative features in her writing.

Del's role as an internal author in *Lives* may be analysed as an example. Writing her story leads to her preparations to become a writer herself. Del is thus both part of and outside the narrative framework. Her narrative speech act is reminiscential and therefore structurally retrospective, written from beyond the end of the plot sequence. Del is thus an authorial surrogate. The authorial control is therefore camouflaged under the adopted voice. This is obviously "an aspect of ventriloquism" (Currie 66).¹⁸ The hidden and the revealed voices operate simultaneously in a univoice. That is Del's self-understanding as well as her sense of power is Munro's too.

W.J. Keith brings under his meticulous scrutiny the metafictional aspects of her works in *A Sense of Style*. He comments on the "complex Chinese-box effect" in "The Epilogue". Keith observes that, the epilogue of

Lives is a brilliant comment on the complexity of fiction and its relation to "real life" - "a problematic relation that has exercised Munro throughout her writing career" (162).

Munro must have intensely experienced the complexities of life, its prejudices, treacheries and its hypocritical value system; for being a woman writer, she is twice removed from the outward reality, which is basically man-made. Metafictional techniques therefore become a handy instrument for a woman writer to translate and transform aesthetically, her life experiences and emotions into the realm of fiction. They offer her the freedom to deviate from tradition, from the norm. Struthers makes a similar observation on Munro's style. He remarks that her fiction is one "that investigates itself, self referring fiction, stories about story telling metafiction".¹⁹ For a woman, especially for a woman writer this self-reflexiveness is an inevitable aspect of growing up. A *Kunstlerroman* in the manner of *Lives*, therefore constantly projects self-referring experiences.

Desai's writing on the other hand moves on a different aesthetic plane. Metafictional aspects do not appear to be prominent in her 'pattern' of writing. Her concern is deeper and with the inner conflicts of her protagonists. Hence she chooses the stream-of-consciousness mode in *Cry*. However, the frequent temporal shifts she makes in her novels may be viable to a narratological analysis.

In their attempt at articulating the unspoken and putting across their resentment against patriarchal concepts, women writers frequently subvert them. One such concept is the popular faith in marriage as the sole source of security and happiness for women. Munro subverts this fantasy through the stories of Del and Rose. In *Who* especially the gap between fantasy and reality is exposed suggestively through the ironic metaphor of the Beggar Maid in the section bearing the same title. Both these works narrate how the protagonists struggle out of marriage and men in order to assert their individuality.

Del's attempt to disentangle herself from patriarchal assumptions supported by religious texts is subtly suggested by Munro in the stories "Lives of Girls and Women" and "Baptizing". In the former, Naomi's father reads out to Del and Naomi, the parable of the Wise Virgins in the Bible (129-30). Through Del's train of thought that follows, Munro suggests the impact of the parable on the father and the girls, each differing from that of the other. Del's interpretation, which is logical and straightforward, is that of Munro herself. She says, "I had always supposed, this parable which I did not like, had to do with prudence, preparedness, something like that. But I could see that Naomi's father believed it to be about sex"(130). Naomi on the other hand was disgusted not only with her father's attitude, which she was well aware of, but also by its poetry. "She was so offended by all this that she could not even enjoy the word virgins" (130). Such a casual

exegesis verging on sacrilege is indicative of the girls' intolerance towards patriarchy. Again, in "Baptizing", the patriarchal notion of marriage is blatantly dismissed by Del, when she rejects Garnet French and his plea for conversion.

Nancy Walker argues that women's novels from the late sixties to mid nineteen eighties have certain common narrative devices, one of which is the creation of "alternate worlds"(4). For in the "alternate" world, women can be autonomous and be their own 'masters'. It also gives rise to a double perspective running within the entire narrative corpus. *Lives* provides a suitable illustration. The narration embodies a double perspective created by the imagination of the child and that of the adult Del. Since the story has a confessional reminiscential tone, the narration is obviously carried out by an older Del, and since it is at the same time autobiographical, the vision of the child is also of paramount importance in relating childhood anecdotes. As Moss observes, "The Del who remembers and relates is not the same person in a different point of time, but another person who includes the known and unknown complexities of the younger Del within her" (56). *Lives* can in this sense be regarded as employing a variation of "the frame story technique" which according to Cuddon is "a story in which the novelist is actually writing the story we are reading" (152).

The double perspective keeps Del both inside and outside the story. This helps Munro project the same female consciousness at different points of time corresponding to different, growing modes of perception. This is an instance of superb artistry, where the theme and the technique – the process of becoming and the process of narration, coalesce and merge.

In *Who* however, the projection of double perspective is not obvious, mainly because the narrative voice is shifted from the first to the third person.

In *Cry* the child's vision enters the narrative only occasionally, when Maya submerges into her fantasies. For Desai's aesthetic target is entirely different. She seems to aim at projecting a cross section of Maya's inner psyche, in order to reveal the harsh and malefic impact of an ominous prophecy on an isolated Indian woman. In this novel, fantasy is frequently employed as a narrative device. The subjective, emotional experiences of Maya find expression through her fantasies. An ironic perspective, which is common in women's fiction, is not obvious in Desai. On the other hand Munro very often uses irony in her stories. To subvert patriarchal notions, an ironic mode is very useful in women's fiction. The anecdote relating to Sandy Stevenson in "Flats Road" is full of irony (8). The windfall bride in the story anticipates ironically the story of Madeleine, the bride who brings a windfall of disasters on her husband. There is greater irony in "Baptizing"

in Garnet's expectations of Del. When Del fights under water to get free of him, she says, "I felt amazement, not that I was fighting with Garnet, but that anybody could have made such a mistake, to think he had real power over me" (197). In *Who* irony is inherent in Rose's eternal running towards and away from men in the process of seeking a definition of the self. Finally, it is through Ralph that she gains an understanding about life. Another ironic situation is depicted through the Franny episode. The traditional male model of romanticising the prostitute in books and movies is suggested ironically through this episode. Again, the ironic contrast between vigorous youth and senile old age is pointed out in "Spelling". In the old age home, merely spelling words signifies survival. An instance of keen verbal irony can be found in the opening statement of the story "Privilege": "Rose knew a lot of people who wished they had been born poor, and hadn't been. So she would queen it over them, offering various scandals and bits of squalor from her childhood" (31).

Grotesque elements can be seen scattered over Munro's fiction. The story of Madeleine, the suicide of Miss Farris, the bizarre tragedy in the Sherriff family, the description of the photographer (all in *Lives*) and the Becky Tyde episode in *Who* are a few striking examples. The grotesque is used in fiction to denote "aberrations from the desirable norms of harmony, balance and proportion" (Cuddon, 296). Naturally Munro finds the method useful as a woman writer as she is engaged in communicating the

untraditional fictional stuff which would appear "aberrations" from the patriarchal notions of 'harmony and balance and proportion'.

The photographer in *Lives*, who takes "unusual, even frightening pictures"(205) intimidating the community, seems a more Gothic than a grotesque element. The Gothic as Abrams observes, "opens up in fiction, the realm of the irrational and of the perverse impulses and the nightmarish terrors that lie beneath the orderly surface of the civilised mind . . ." (69). A gothic element in women's writing exposes the 'perverse impulses' held legitimate in an androcentric milieu. The frightening visions about the astrologer and his fatal prophesy that frequently torment Maya in *Cry* can perhaps be cited as examples of the Gothic element in Desai's fiction.

The photographer in Munro's story also serves to symbolise the mutual relationship between life and art. Munro herself has expressed her interest in "catching [life] in snap shots" through her stories. The camera does exactly that, transforming life into art, its dynamism into stasis. Translating experiences into linguistic expressions is an equivalent activity, which has a unique fascination for Munro. To Gibson she said, "I just experience things finally when I do get them into words. So writing is a part of my experience" (244). At the same time like all sensitive women writers, Munro is aware of the treacherous potential of words and their proclivity to falsify truth.

She projects her ideas through Del who is unwilling to take words for granted. She examines them semantically, delineates them on an onomatopoeic dimension and measures their impact physically and emotionally.²⁰

Godard has made an interesting study on this subject in " 'Heirs of the Living Body', Alice Munro and The Question of a Female Aesthetic". She observes that the question "how to write as a woman?" lies at the heart of *Lives* and that Munro "write[s] from the senses, from the reality of her female body" so that she can "bridge the gap between experience and a literary tradition which has objectified or effaced her sexuality" (66-67).

Godard's opinion echoes that of Helene Cixous, who has vociferously argued that woman's language, integrally related to her body is essential for woman's emancipation. In the "Laugh of the Medusa", she maintains that patriarchy has exiled women from language as well as from their bodies. So she encourages full expression of the female experience as a powerful subversive force against an inhibitive male domination. Female writing is closely related to female biology and women have been proselytised traditionally to be guilty about both-her body and her expression. So Cixous believes that unless women muster up courage to claim and proclaim both biology and language, they cannot hope to change

the prevalent social structure. In this sense, Munro's use of words indicates a tendency on her part to step out of conventional style.

Verbal experimentation is rarely found in Desai's fiction. It may be because she is using a language other than her own mother tongue. An Indian woman writer, writing in English would normally be doubly disadvantaged as the androcentric assumptions of two different cultures could create complex problems for her. Desai herself in "The Indian Writers' Problem" has discussed this issue. She says, "I did not choose English in a deliberate and conscious act. If it did not sound like a piece of arrogance, I would say, perhaps it was the language that chose me".²¹ Evidently her language has a rich Indian flavour. It is profoundly poetic, in keeping with the nature of her fiction. For her novels are "purely subjective", and depends on a "private vision". Writing for her "is a matter of instinct, silence and watching".²² It is not surprising therefore that her fiction uses evocative and emotive language, reflecting the sensitive and withdrawn mind of an Indian woman writer. Both *Cry* and *Clear* have attractive lyrical texture. She has admitted in her interviews with Libert that poetry has always been the model for her writing (48). Her writing therefore abounds in poetic images, which can clarify and communicate the moods and sensations of her women protagonists.

Simone de Beauvoir's findings on women writers' vocabulary seem in a way to be apt in Desai's case. She observes: "women's vocabulary is often more notable than syntax, because they are interested in things rather than in relations of things, they do not aim at abstract elegance, but in compensation, their words speak directly to the senses" (719). Desai's words 'speak directly to the senses' but she is at the same time interested in 'relations of things'. It is this interest that prompts her to choose the stream-of-consciousness technique in *Cry*, which can project the disjointed fantasies, and nightmares of Maya and at the same time relate it to the outside social and familial order.

Leaving aside the specificity of individual genius, it may be found that the fiction of both Munro and Desai reflect their endeavour to subvert the fictional modes of the great tradition in order to communicate effectively the complexities of women's experience. An analysis of their narrative devices conclusively proves that the structure and structuration of their fiction are profoundly influenced by their gender.

NOTES

¹ See Mary Jacobson, "The Difference of View", *The Feminist Reader: Essays in Gender and Politics* Ed, Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore (London: Macmillan, 1989) 55.

² Mary Jacobson, "The Difference of View" 50.

³Mary Jacobson, "The Difference of view" 52.

⁴ Matthew Arnold in "The Choice of Subjects in Poetry", *English Critical Essays* Ed, Edmund Jones (1916 London:OUP,1968)313. He refers to Goethe's remark that what "distinguishes the artist from the mere amateur is *architectonice* in the highest sense, that power of execution which creates, forms, and constitutes".

⁵ Greame Gibson, *Eleven Canadian Novelists. (Interviewed by Graeme Gibson)* (Toronto: Anansi 1973) 258.

⁶ Sandra Gwyn, "Women in the Arts in Canada", *Gyno Critics: Feminist Approaches to Canadian and Quebec Women's Writing*, Ed, Barbara Godard (Toronto: ECW, 1987) 7.

⁷ Marigold Johnson, "Mud and Blood" *The New Statesman* 26 Oct 1973, 619, qtd in Rasporich 160.

⁸ Rae Mc Carthy Macdonald, "Structure and Details in *Lives of Girls and Women*" *Studies in Canadian Literature* 3 (1978):210 qtd in Rasporich 160.

⁹ John Moss, qtd in Rasporich 160

¹⁰ Helen Hoy, " 'Rose and Janet': Alice Munro's Metafiction." *Canadian Literature* 121 (1989): 59-83.

¹¹ Susan Gubar, " 'The Blank Page' and the Issues of Female Creativity" *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women's Literature and Theory*, Ed Elaine Showalter (London:Virago, 1986) qtd in Rasporich

¹² & ¹³ Rosaline Coward, " How I Became My Own Person", *The Feminist Reader: Essays in Gender and Politics of Literary Criticism*. Ed. Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore (London: MacMillan, 1989) 42.

¹⁴ Anita Desai, "Replies to the Questionnaire." *Kakatiya Journal of English Studies*. 3.1(1978) 2.

¹⁵ Asha Kanwar, *The Novels of Virginia Woolf and Anita Desai: A Comparative Study* (New Delhi : Prestige, 1989) 9-10.

¹⁶ See JR (Tim) Struthers, "Reality and Ordering: The Growth of a Young Artist in Lives of Girls and Women " *Essays on Canadian Writing* 3(1975): 33-46.

¹⁷ Helene Cixous, "Castration or Decapitation " trans. Annette Kuhn *Signs* 7.1(1981) 53.

¹⁸ Mark Currie, "Snow Me Again. A Post -Structuralist Narratology of 'Snowed Up'", *Literary Theories: A Case Study in Critical Performance*, Ed, Wolfreys, Julian and William Baker (London: Macmillan, 1996) 17.

¹⁹ J R (Tim) Struthers, "Alice Munro's Fictive Imagination". *The Art of Alice Munro: Saying the Unsayable* Ed, Judith Miller (Ontario: U.of Waterloo P, 1984) 18.

²⁰ See *Lives of Girls and Women* 37, 39, 45, 181, and 201.

²¹ See Anita Desai, "The Indian Writer's Problems". 1982. *Perspectives on Anita Desai*, Ed, Ramesh Srivastava. (Ghaziabad: Vimal Prakashan, 1984) 1-2.

²² See Anita Desai, "The Indian Writer's Problems" 3.

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Conclusion

Jayasree Sukumaran “Feminist poetics in Alice Munro and Anita Desai ”
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Conclusion

The study of the selected novels of Munro and Desai reveals remarkable similarities in their attitude and vision. They have derived their material primarily from subjective inward experiences. Yet their fiction cannot be termed merely subjective, since their themes have a profound socio-cultural significance. They have succeeded in capturing the transitional phase of the rapidly changing roles of contemporary women in Canada and India. Their approaches to the theme and techniques of narration also bear close resemblance. The divergences between them emerge only when the individual works are set against the specific socio-cultural background. For creative writing cannot but reflect the diverse complex aspects of society and culture from which it emerges.

Munro and Desai are self-conscious artists. Their fiction substantiates the feminist critical argument that the content and structure of fiction by women writers are influenced by their gender.

The comparative study of these women writers with the help of feminist poetics has shed light on several not-so-visible aspects of each of them. Just as in genetics the double helix or the parallel spiral formations contain the secret of life, in a comparative study of fiction the parallel areas reveal the fundamental unity of human perception, especially women's perception. Munro and Desai show that the images of women in life and literature are culture made, and for the same reason they can be altered.

They discard the patriarchal notion of women as mere emotional beings and argue that women can succeed in traditionally male centred realms. Their heroines prove that it is possible to integrate the rational and intuitive modes of consciousness.

Del for instance with perseverance and determination grows into a responsible, independent individual and a creative writer. In the same way Rose establishes herself as a successful television artist, braving and transcending a hostile psychosocial milieu. In the world of Desai one finds Bim passing through severe psychological turmoil and achieving an integrated personality. These heroines refuse to be subdued and oppressed by male domination. Maya alone succumbs to socio-familial pressures, as she is handicapped by an extremely fragile sensitivity. Her self-development is therefore thematically impossible. She is enfeebled not only by tradition but also by her own constitution. Nature and nurture make her ill equipped to confront the challenges of life.

Munro and Desai have captured in their fiction the socio-cultural changes that have radically affected the lives of women and therefore of men, since the fifties. The omnipotent self-styled patriarchy is divested of its age-old domination in their fiction. The four novels that have been minutely explored clearly expose the daily injustices and the continual exploitation that women undergo in androcentric societies. In their fiction women characters are brought to the centre stage. Men are made to occupy

the fringes of life. At the same time the novelists reveal a keen awareness of the power and powerlessness of both genders.

Both these writers have questioned the male myths regarding gender relationships. They have pointed out the ironic distance between patriarchal expectations about women and the harsh realities of life. In order to do so both of them have adopted and altered the conventional narrative techniques.

However there is a notable difference between the two writers with respect to the attitude of their central characters towards sex and sexuality. While Munro's women seem to regard their sexual adventures with profound personal significance, Desai's characters do not seem to think in similar lines. The latter generally appear to be tradition bound in their approach towards sex and marriage. The reason lies in the differences that exist in the Western and Indian concepts of individual and social morality. In the Canadian context, the spiritual dimension of the family does not seem to be of great significance. But in India family as a social institution continues to have an undying spiritual influence on its members. While for Munro's women the concept of self-enquiry is limited to the world of matter, for Desai's characters it is qualified by a deep sense of ethics and spirituality. Nevertheless, in the ultimate analysis, Munro's characters also realise that mere sexual relationship does not lead to self-fulfilment. As Del reminisces in *Lives*, "sex...[is] all surrender-not the woman's to the man but

the person's to the body....'(181) In Desai, the women characters seem to reveal a desire for a deeper union of minds in conjugal relationship. Maya makes a clear statement to this effect in *Cry*.

The fiction of Munro and Desai seems to challenge the power structure that dominates in familial and social relationships. They insist that society should modify its attitude towards the concept of power. They aim at a non-hierarchical egalitarian social structure which would guarantee individual fulfilment to all its members, women as well as men.

Both Munro and Desai have shown that language can be powerfully and effectively employed to write women's lives. At the same time their characters seem to suggest its inadequacy to express their needs and desires in a predominantly androcentric milieu. Del's experiments with words and Maya's failure in communication suggest that it is necessary that women should have full participation in the determination of meaning. The arrangement of incidents in their fiction defies linear chronology. The temporal disruptions in the thread of narration indicate their distrust of traditional patriarchal concept of time and development. Their interest lies in capturing the non-linear psychological experience, which influence and direct the lives and personalities of their characters.

Their techniques of narration have certain common characteristics. They are (1) subversion of conventional chronological narrative structures with neat closures,(2)ironic delineation of patriarchal expectations about

women and marriage,(3)the crossing of boundaries of literary genres and (4)an inevitable realism. They are at the same time traditional and non-traditional. They also reveal a tendency to narrate the stories of their characters in the authorial voice, which gives their fiction a pseudo-confessional mode.

Obviously their novels are inspired by the liberating power of feminist awareness. However the vision that emerges from their fiction is that of compromise and acceptance and not that of a belligerent protest. They seem to aim at a social structure that is congenial to all humanity irrespective of their gender. With deep imaginative insight, they trace in their novels the lives of contemporary women realistically, retaining at the same time the sense of wonder and mystery that lies at the root of existence.

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