

**ANITA DESAI AND MARGARET ATWOOD AS INTERPRETERS OF THE  
EXISTENTIAL PROBLEMS OF WOMEN – A COMPARISON**

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**Abstract**

Anita Desai and Margaret Atwood, contemporary writers belonging to two different continents writing in English have commonly shared views and perspectives on the role of women in the society and the problems they confront in the process of their attempt to get emancipated and thus get empowered. These two writers in their respective works have located women in different contexts and have portrayed the inner psyche of the women protagonists in their respective works. Though the two writers have not declared themselves as feminists they are concern for the women folk is borne out of their compassion and sensitivity to the circumstances around which a women's life gets shaped besides their sensitivity to the women's consciousness. This article attempts to look at how the two writers concur with each other on the issues that women confront for their existence and survival in the midst of a society that has marginalised this gender for a long time.

**Keywords:** diaspora, feminism, feelings, emotion, victimised

Anita Desai is a rare example of an Anglo Indian writer who achieves that difficult task of bending the English language to her purpose without either a self-conscious attempt of sounding Indian or seeking the anonymous elegance of public school English. If the fiction writers of the West presented her with general criteriology for her choicest field, the poets and their poetic heights of the East furnished her with the charm of rhythm and style.

“Anita Desai is an essence of true human soul busy trying to develop and reframe her both as a person and writer while she is on her path in her own courier light.” (M.K. Naik, p 13-15)

Anita Desai is one who feels that, to an extent, all writing is self-indulgence and therefore one has to observe, a certain discipline, set oneself certain limits.

“If I didn't the stream of consciousness would become a dangerous method for me. Then there is another reason; I didn't wish to exclude the prismatic quality of life from fiction...I found it too interesting and a finely subjective method of writing would make it impossible.” (Atma Ram, p 40-45)

Her forte is the exploration of sensibility, the particular kind of modern Indian sensibility, which is ill at ease among the barbarians and the philistines, the anarchists and the moralists. Since her pre-occupation is with the inner world of sensibility rather than the outer world of action, she has tried to forge a style supple and suggestive enough to convey the fever and fretfulness of the stream of consciousness of her principal characters.

Influenced by D.H Lawrence, Virginia Woolf, Henry James and Proust, Anita Desai wrote in extraordinary delicate lucid English which put many English authors to shame and thus became a rare example of an Indo-Anglican writer who could achieve that difficult task of bending the English language for her purpose without either a self-conscious attempt of sounding Indian or seeking the anonymous elegance of Public English School. She wrote with a focus.

“All my writing is an effort to discover, to underline and convey true significance of things. Next to this exploration of the underlying truth and the discovery of private mythology and philosophy, it is style that interests me most and by this I mean the conscious labour of uniting language and symbol, words and rhythm....one must find a way to unite the inner and the outer rhythms, to obtain a certain integrity and to impose order in chaos.” (Anita Desai, Contemporary Novelists, p 48-49)

To her the founding and nurturing of individuality, the establishing of individualism has been the aim.

Anita Desai's pre-occupation as a novelist has been the delineation of character. In the character portrayal, she is primarily interested in the projected of female protagonists living, in separate, closed, sequestered words of existential problems and passion, loves and hates. Each of her individual is an unsolved mystery. Her concern for the delineation enables her to offer an unexpected glimpse into the deeper psychic state of her protagonists. A story imposed from the outside according to her, simply destroys their life, and reduces them to a string of jerking puppets on a state, whatever action there is in her novel.

Anita Desai is always primarily occupied with the subjective experience of her people, their sensations in the presence of one another, but at the same time she is aware of how they look from the outside of their tone and manner, the setting in which they play their parts, what they think, say and do; of all that gives them objective reality. It is therefore

impossible for her to maintain strictly the point of explicit reflections of the visible world. Anita Desai perhaps the finest blend of Indian and European sensibilities.

In 1983 talk titled, "Indian Woman Writers", given to the London Commonwealth Institute, Anita Desai outlined the complex characteristics of feminine standpoint in literature, like hers. Pointing out that women writers "tend to place their emphasis differently from men, that their values are likely to differ,.....whereas a man is concerned with action, experience, and achievement, a woman writer is more concerned with thought, emotion and sensation," yet she admitted that this is by no means always so, especially in the West. Citing Henry James and D.H Lawrence as examples of exquisitely feminine writers and Doris Lessing, Muriel Spark, and Iris Murdoch as examples of writers who display much the same concerns and style as contemporary male writers do, Desai, following Coleridge-as well as Virginia Wolff, advocated an androgynous literature as the ideal. However, She was quick to point out that in India, social, culture and political conditions were still not conducive to the production of such literature, so Indian women novelists were 'still exploring their feminine identity and trying to establish it as something worth possessing,' and writing about feminine subject matter, which makes the reader, whether man or woman, understand and feel what it is to be a woman, know how a woman thinks and feels and behaves... probing into layers of consciousness and exploring what is at the core at the root of being.

Anita Desai wrote purely subjective, psychological novels, which employed introspective language. One of the post-independence urbanised and westernized elite women writers in English, who display immediately identifiable predominant nationalist sentiment or populist revolt in her works, Desai was generally seen as an exponent of private themes and as a proponent of a feminine sensibility rather than masculine ideas. For example, Salman Rushdie, in 1984, noted that the subject of Anita Desai's fiction has, thus far, been solitude.

As Desai portrays the discord between chiefly ratiocinate, stolid male characters and predominantly sensitive, introspective female protagonists, she documents the pernicious gender-based polarities of intellect and instinct, rationalism and passion, culture and nature prevalent in modern India. But amid the traditional structures of patriarchy, she also charts the evolving sensibility of the new middle-class Indian woman, delineating degrees of female resistance in her fiction.

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The issues Desai deals with in her novels include

- Love, Marriage, Divorce.
- Social taboos and inhibitions.
- Cruelty and Violence to the female sex.
- Problem of rehabilitation after divorce.
- Extent of liberty and freedom to the female sex.
- Recognition to the female sex.
- Crisis of conscience and values.

The theme of crisis of Conscience and Values is not a sporadic, a passing reference but a recurrent, pervading strain in all Anita Desai's works.

Voices in the City are a tale of struggle by men and women of Calcutta for higher life of conscience and values. Nirode the protagonist aspires for a life full of values. In fact, he solicits

Dharma's friendship for something unique; astonishing valuable. Monisha is enthralled by music and aesthetics. The recital of sitar transports her to a higher region of ecstasy and placid happiness.

“wander in this labyrinth at will and blessedly, we never touch, merely remain in mystic communion with each other.”(Voices in the City, p 123)

Writing, for Anita Desai, is an effort to discover and then to underline and finally to convey the true significance of things. Her novels deal with the terror of facing, single-handed; the ferocious assaults of existence. Desai's protagonists are persons for whom aloneness alone is the sole natural condition. Aloneness alone is the treasure worth treasuring. They are mostly women, who, though they have reached different stages in life, are all fragile introverts in their own skins. Their emotional traumas sometimes lead to violent death.

^ In Voices in the City, Desai cries unsuccessfully to make her setting, Calcutta, City of Kali, Goddess of Death a contribution factor in another tale of alienated individuals. Nirode and his two sisters, Monisha and Amla are rebels against the stolid conventions of middle class life and long for creativity and self-expression. Each comes to grief: Nirode ends up as a drifting bohemian, Monisha commits suicide and Amla is heart-broken when her love is rejected.

Monisha, in this novel is endowed with higher feminine sensibilities, which is self-evident when she is self-evident when she is attuned to music in the conference hall.

Fire on the Mountain, which won the Royal Society of Literatures' Winifred Holtby Memorial Prize and the 1978 National Academy of Letters Award, has been considered as the sharp, refined descriptive and symbolic novel. The title refers to the works of Raka, the granddaughter of Nanda Kaul who says:

"Look, Nani, I have set the forest on fire. Look, Nani, look the forest is on fire." (Fire on the Mountain, p 153)

"These words are expressive of Raka's resolve to destroy a world where a woman cannot hope to be happy without being unnatural." (R.S. Sharma, p 127)

It is symbolic of fire which burns in the heart of an old lady, a great grandmother Nanda Kaul. Anita Desai explores Nanda Kaul's inner emotional world in the novel. It is her problem of existence. It is her cry and agony for she had too much of the world and so longs for a quiet retired life. It explores the alienation of Nanda Kaul and her granddaughter Raka. The theme of isolation plays an important role in this novel. That's why Nanda Kaul wants to be in isolation after the death of her husband.

At one time, Desai, now with 16 books under the belt, said her life was not big or broad enough as it was all about family and neighbours. Now, people see a window into their life through her works. In an interview to Zia US Salam, Anita Desai has the following to say about her works.

"Risking a break was important to me. I could have chosen to remain confined within the limits of my world or to risk a break and step into the unknown. I chose the latter. It was challenging, at times frightening, because it separated me from what I knew intimately and well, but for most part, it was exhilarating and stimulating." (The Hindu, October 5, 2008)

An air of melancholy runs through most of her works. If in *In Custody* there is a brooding darkness, in *Fire on the Mountain*, she talks of estrangement and a sense of loneliness in solitude.

"I am not at all sure I understand the distinctions you make between being glad/happy/ gay. But I am prepared to understand that the new generation that reads my works will respond to differently from the way my own generation did." (The Hindu, October 5, 2008)

She also just says:

"Oh, I never go back to a story once it is in print. If I did, I would want to re-write it entirely and at that stage cannot." (The Hindu, October 5, 2008)

Maybe she does not need to rewrite at all! And her life, once said to be confined and limited, now has enough shades to give us more stories Unhurried, untapped, unpublished.

Atwood has said that “Writing is like life in that you don’t know where you are until you look back”. “Unlike life, however, writing provides the opportunity to revise or abandon a journey even after it’s been taken”. Margaret Atwood poses a provocative question in her novel, “The Blind Assassin” How much are the bad turns of one’s life determined by things beyond our control, like sex and class, and how much by personal responsibility? Unlike most folks who raise this question so that they can wag their finger – she’s made her bed, and so on- Atwood’s foray into this moral terrain is complex and surprising. Far from preaching to the converted, Atwood’s cunning tale assumes a like-minded reader only so that she can argue, quite persuasively, from the other side.

The book is set in the fictional Ontario town of Port Ticonderoga and in the Toronto of the 1930’s and 1940’s. It is a work of historical fiction with the major events of Canadian history forming an important backdrop. Greater verisimilitude is given by a series of newspaper articles commenting on events and on the novel’s characters from a distance. The Blind Assassin addresses a variety of issues, most of them depressing: Sacrifices that go unrecognized, love that goes unrequited, the tolerance of pain and loss, and the horror of growing old are just a handful of them. It’s no wonder that Atwood had to provide such a rich backdrop of history and setting behind her stories: Without it, the narrative would just feel like one long scream.

The work was awarded the Man Booker Prize in 2000 and the Hammett Prize in 2001. It was also nominated for Governor General’s Award in 2000, Orange Prize for fiction and the International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award in 2002.

The novel centres on the protagonist, Iris Chase, and her sister Laura, who grow up well-off but motherless in a small town in southern Ontario. As an old woman, Iris recalls the events and relationships of her childhood, youth and middle age, including her unhappy marriage to Toronto businessman Richard Griffen. The book includes a novel-within-a novel, using an excerpt from Laura Chase’s novella, The Blind Assassin, posthumously published in 1947. It deals with an affair between a wealthy young woman and her lover, a radical on the run for.

“I looked back over what I’ve written and I know It’s wrong, not because of what I’ve set down, but because of what I’ve omitted. What isn’t there has a presence, like the absence of light.” (The Blind Assassin, p 56)

Margaret Atwood’s new novel is made up of three strands. There are the memoirs of Iris Chase, tracing her progress from prosperous beginnings, daughter of a button factory owner, through a loveless marriage to a plutocrat to a solitary and brooding old age.



The story of the Chase family begins with the wealthy industrialists whose rise and fall reflects shifts in Canada's ruling class over the last century. Iris and Laura are the pampered but isolated children of a button manufacturer. Unravelling why her sister drove off a bridge at 25, and why she is still consumed by guilt and bitterness half a century later, Iris pens this 521- page letter to her estranged granddaughter. Interspersed with Iris' own words are newspaper clips and vignettes through which Atwood also lets the story unfold. A small-town newspaper reports on the annual button factory picnic, the last before the onset of the Depression and labour trouble; the Toronto Star society page notes Iris' marriage to her father's rival. A bleak honeymoon follows. More Chases are born; more Chases die.

The main novel is a mixture of first person narrative and third person limited omniscient. Much of it is told in the voice and remembrance of Iris Chase Griffen, narrating the Chase family history and leading readers along down her own aging path. It is from this perspective that the audience learns who all of the players are and their connections to the story and to port Ticonderoga.

Then there are the pulp science-fiction stories the hero of Laura's book tells his lover in the dingy rooms where they meet. He is a leftist on the run, convenient scapegoat for a factory fire that was presumably an insurance fraud, while she is a prisoner of privilege, sneaking away from her watchers for a few risky hours of pleasure. The sub-novel is told from the woman's point of view but not in first person.

The novel takes the form of a gradual revelation illuminating both Iris' youth and her old age before coming to the pivotal events of her and Laura's lives around the time of the Second World War. As the novel unfolds, and the novel-within-a-novel becomes ever more obviously inspired by real events, we learn that it is Iris, not Laura, who is the novel-within-a-novel's true author and protagonist. Though the novel-within-a-novel had long been believed to be inspired by Laura's romance with Alex, it is revealed that *The Blind Assassin* was written by Iris based on her extramarital affair with Alex, Iris later published the work in Laura's name after Laura committed suicide upon learning of their affair. The novel ends as Iris dies, leaving the truth to be discovered in her unpublished autobiography that she leaves to her sole surviving granddaughter.

Iris, the elderly protagonist who narrates this story of her family's life, starts with a dispassionate observation: "Ten days after the war ended, my sister Laura drove a car off a bridge." When a police officer suggested that the brakes failed, Iris says, she nodded in agreement, but believed otherwise. "It wasn't the brakes, I thought. She had her reasons. Not that they were ever the same as anybody else's reasons. She was completely ruthless in that way." Iris speculates about her sister's last moments: "The white gloves: a Pontius Pilate gesture. She was washing her hands of me. Of all of us."

This family saga is sketched with Atwood's trademark dark humour and deft hand. For example, the Chase family's precipitous rise during World War I is explained thus:

War is good for button trade. So many buttons are lost in a war and have to be replaced – whole boxfuls, whole truckloads of buttons at a time. They're blown to pieces, they sink into the ground, and they go up in flames. The war takes two of the Chase boys and irreparably damages the third, but it makes the family rich. And this money, insidious, corrosive but empowering to the family, ultimately makes Iris herself powerless.

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Growing up in small-town Ontario without a mother, Iris was expected to look after Laura. But the younger girl's guileless intensity inspired exasperation and jealousy, as well as affection. In the 1930s, the sisters managed to hide a young radical, Alex Thomas, in the family attic before he escaped to Spain; they both fell in love. But at age nineteen, Iris is forced to enter a joyless marriage to wealthy Richard Griffen out of obedience to her father who hoped that the union would save his factory. It did not.

Laura is bossed by the politically ambitious Richard and his domineering sister, Winifred. Defiance and maternity allow Iris to carve out her own space within the confines of the social situation. But she is increasingly estranged from the romantic, inscrutable Laura who is eventually sent to an "asylum" where she has an abortion. Upon her release, the sisters reconnect, only to hurt each other with painful revelations.

The other two of the three stories stem from Laura's acclaimed novel "Blind Assassin," parts of which are interspersed. On one level, it relates the passionate affair of a refined woman (very like the author) and a political fugitive (very like Alex) who meet in his sordid hiding places. On another level, it is an Ali Baba-esque fairy tale, invented by the lovers, about a cruel society in which child-labour, ritualistic rape, and human sacrifice are routine. The killers are children who have been blinded by their enforced work knotting beautiful rugs.

Commentary in this compelling novel, seemingly placid, patrician, mid-twentieth-century America emerges as that very same strangely cruel society in which child-labour, ritualistic rape, and human sacrifice are routine. The "killers" are blinded by love, family, duty, jealousy, vengeance, and other inescapable, socially defined tyrannies that comprise the fabric of life.



Complementing the historical plotline of Iris and Laura's coming -of- age between the world wars, Atwood braids in two other strands that keep her tale moving at a brisk clip. One is Laura's posthumously published novel of dystopia, the futuristic story of a city's demise at the hands of a blind assassin and his mute lover. This novel-within-a- novel picks up on the interplay between optimism and despair being dramatized politically on the streets of Canada during the depression. The other story of Iris' contemporary life, that of an elderly Canadian woman whose mundane treks to the converted "Button Factory Mall" and the donut shop mask her monumental struggle for independence and status in a suburban culture in which she's deprived of both.

Of a male family friend who, after assembling a fan for Iris, says, "That should fix her," she observes: Boats are female for Walter, as are busted car engines and broken lamps and radios - items of any kind that can be fiddled with by men adroit with gadgetry, and restored to a condition as good as new. Why do I find this reassuring? Perhaps I believe, in some childish, faith-filled corner of myself, that Walter might yet take out his pliers and his ratchet set and do the same for me.

Iris, alas, is forced to live her life in a kind of purgatory of regrets, never quite "fixed". Awareness, or sight, comes to her too late. In presenting Iris's story, Atwood culls from all the themes and styles she's explored in the past. There is a little of "The Handmaid's Tale" in the science-fiction dystopian novel-within-a-novel and much of "Cat's Eye" in the protagonist's reflective journey back in time. "The Blind Assassin" takes Atwood fans to all their favourite places – and ups the ante. This is a dark masterpiece in which tension comes from the sharp juxtaposition of words and in which futuristic fantasy interrupts and reflects a disquieting reality.

Margaret Atwood has chosen an unlikely guide for the journey. "The Blind Assassin" is one of those tricky novels that features a near-distasteful hero or heroine, because Iris has moved through her life in a fog of others' expectations, incapable of identifying her own needs and responsibilities, the impulse to grab her by the shoulders and shake her is strong particularly when she sleepwalks into an arranged marriage and passively permits her sister's institutionalization in a mental hospital.

The Blind Assassin is, indeed, a world of women. Most of the novel comes from Iris Chase Griffen's perspective. Her primary interactions are with Laura, her sister; Reenie, her housekeeper; and Winifred, her husband's sister. However, this is a world of women run by men. Richard's happiness and good reputation are the women's primary concern; although Winifred seems to hold the reins of the family, I would argue that because she focuses solely on Richard's desires, she is not really in control. The success of worlds run by women

appears in *The Blind Assassin*, but there is really no success involved, considering the ultimate domination of the male characters and the tragic ending.

The idea of the “human male as an alien form” is particularly prevalent in *The Blind Assassin*. Early in the novel, Iris and Laura shelter Alex Thomas in their attic as the authorities search for him in relation to a fire at the Chase button factory. This is an adventure for the girls; they sneak food and books up to Alex as though he is an illicit pet of theirs more than a fellow human. Both seem fascinated by his existence, but in the awed way you might observe a tiger at the zoo. As Richard’s wife, Iris merely endures his advances in a way that suggests she will never really understand his powerful sex drive. Portrayal of men continues in this vein throughout the rest of the novel: the women tolerate the men’s presence and quirks the way they would a pet’s: long suffering, and with little understanding.

*The Blind Assassin* also touches on the importance of daughters and the importance of the woman as the individual creator. The first comes through towards the end of the novel, when it becomes clear that Iris is writing this autobiography for her granddaughter, Sabrina, whom Winifred has stolen from her. Iris hopes that this will make some amends for how awful her daughter Aimee’s life was, and that as a result Sabrina will understand that Iris always loved her. This seems like a pointless undertaking, as Iris dies not long after finishing-but without reconciliation. However, her dedication to maintaining this relationship is reflected.

The internal dialogue leads us right back to the question of responsibility. Is Iris culpable, or is she a pawn, innocent of wrongdoing in her sister’s death? Since the notion that Laura accidentally drove her car off the bridge was never a plausible scenario, the haunting question at the book’s heart becomes, did she jump or was she pushed-by Iris?

Iris Chase emerges from the story as one of Atwood’s most memorable characters to date. There is the reminder of Margaret Laurence’s primary character in *The Stone Angel*, Hagar Shipley, in Atwood’s *Iris*; perhaps homage or perhaps coincidence. Like Hagar, Iris is a woman near the end of her life, reflecting on the path she’s taken to old age. Like Hagar, as well, Iris is in some ways oblivious to her own hand in the downward turn. A victim to whom fate has not been kind, but whose ills- like those of many victims of circumstance – are largely of her own making, even if her contribution is one of complacency. Iris is more likeable than Hagar, however, and owns more understanding of the role she’s played in her fate. There are glimmers of it: the things she might have done, the things she perhaps should have done. But there is also slick satisfaction with some of the things that fate arranged that felt like payback.

Laura Chase is killed instantly in a car accident. Laura's sister must go to the morgue to identify the body, Laura is careful, deliberate, and knows that she must dress appropriately in case newspaper reporters are nearby. She must do anything fitting her position as the wife of Mr Richard E Griffen. Especially since the car in which Laura died belongs to Mrs Griffen.

Laura's sister decides to wear black of course and she must also wear gloves, a veil, and should bring a handkerchief. When Iris opens the drawer in her dressing room, she comes across a stack of school examination notebooks that have been bound in kitchen string. When she lifts the notebooks out the shock of Laura's death hits her. There is some speculation in the town that Laura committed suicide.

Details are dropped into the narrative like toppings on an ice-cream. Sundae the colour of the woman's dress, the kind of tree that sits outside her bedroom window - and these things will be clues to the identities of the man and woman later on. Additionally, news clips, interspersed between vignettes, keep reader on a linear time path with the main novel. The woman and man meet each other several times and in varied places: over lunch, in a park, at night under a bridge.

In June 1998 Iris is about to present the Laura Chase creative writing award to a graduating senior at Port Ticonderoga high school. Iris reminisces about her sister's life how the story in the sub-novel created a town furore worthy of book banning, and how Iris has withstood the worst of this upset for the past 50 years. Yet, Laura is also seen as a genius taken in the prime of her life-a genius that Iris wears like a hair shirt.

There are two main characters in the sub-novel: the man and woman. Clandestine meetings occur between them and the relationship is in its infancy. The woman is described as "nervous". She is married but he is single.

The man and the woman continue to meet in secret. At a cafe, she is uncomfortable because of the part of town in which it is located, and he is uncomfortable with the "fancy" way she is dressed. Their togetherness, for him, is about sex, their togetherness for her is about what is missing in her marriage: love and respect.

The two of them leave the café and go to a room he is borrowing from a friend. It is threadbare and shabby. The woman is again uncomfortable in this environment but is so needy for what the man can give her that she stays. They make love and he continues telling her the science-fiction tale about the residents of Sakiel-Norm. In another instance, at another time, the man and woman meet in a friend's apartment where they again make love, and again he continues telling the story.

Liliana Chase died after the premature birth of her third child. Iris is saddled with caring for Laura and knows that it is going to be a full-time job. Even though Reenie acts in a motherly fashion toward both girls, it is Iris who tends to Laura's everyday needs. They must be each other's best friend, because they are not permitted to go off the grounds of Avilion alone. It is during this time that Iris tries to figure out why her mother died as well as how to explain to Laura what happened to the "unfinished" baby.

The man and woman continue to meet in a variety of borrowed places: a dingy room, an opulent apartment and a janitor's storeroom in the basement of a building. The woman is clearly out of her element and comments so to herself while she goes to meet the man. She feels out of place in body and spirit: her clothes are too fancy, her walk is too refined and her attitude is too uptown for the downtown surroundings.

However, she clearly loves this man, or certainly loves the image of him. He tries to appear nonchalant, but even he grows restless when he thinks she is not coming to meet him. Theirs is a relationship that starts out purely physical but melds into one of need. In addition, as the book continues, readers are left to wonder who this woman is: Laura or Iris.

More of Iris's mystery begins to unravel with the opening of Chapter 7. She possesses a steamer trunk - one from her 1935 honeymoon trip to Europe with Richard Griffen - full of handwritten text and a couple of first edition books. It is hinted that Laura wrote these, but the question does arise: did Iris actually write stories, including the sub-novel? Many have written to Iris in hopes of interviewing her about her dead sister but she has steadfastly refused. She keeps the existence and contents of the steamer trunk a secret from the world. Home - the one she shared with Richard as a newly married woman. It is still there, and now has tendrils of ivy fingering up the brickwork.

The man and woman continue meeting and telling each other stories. They debate over the ending of the story of the blind assassin and the tongueless girl. The woman wants a happy ending, where the two will live out their years together; the man would like to see everyone, including the lovers, annihilated. The storytelling between the man and woman is intellectual foreplay.

The title of the book - both the one we hold in our hands, and the one that Iris had published after Laura's death - comes from one of his improvised serials, about a planet where children are forced to make carpets until they lose their sight. Then they are recruited as silent killers.

One blind assassin, though, falls in love with the sacrificial virgin he has been sent, as part of a planned coup d'état, to kill. She has had her tongue cut out, as tradition demands,

so that she can't disfigure the ritual of her sacrifice with comments of any kind. The heroine of the story-within-a-story finds this tale harsh, although it is an exaggerated account of her own plight, and her lover's: ours also is a planet where the poor are sacrificed to the rich, and where the system continues to find uses for those it has destroyed happiness instead. He tells her about two battle-weary fighters who find themselves on a planet where all their needs are taken care of, by the doting Peach Women of Aa'A, women who grow on trees, on a stem running into the top of their heads, 'picked when ripe by their predecessors'. The moral of the story is that a paradise that you can't get out of can only be hell.

At another rendezvous, the man tells a nicer story, at the urging of the woman. It is about the Lizard Men of Xenor and their coupling with women of Earth to create a super race. The woman tells the man that she is going away on the maiden voyage cruise of the Queen Mary. It is becoming clearer that the woman is Iris Griffen.

The man tells the woman that he has sold the story called the Lizard Men of Xenor - she is quite proud. The elderly Iris is losing the battle all older people fight: to maintain independence at home. Iris's mind is still sharp but her body is letting her down. She cannot even do her own laundry in the basement without fearing she will fall and be hurt.

Elderly Iris is also fighting off the ministrations of Myra who dotes on her as though she inherited her from her mother, Reenie. Myra means well but smothers Iris all the same. Her latest idea is to hire someone to clean Iris's house and do laundry for her. However, Iris does not want a stranger touching her underwear.

The woman misses the man desperately and looks high and low for some sign of him; something to tell her that he is safe. She finds their story, The Lizard Men of Xenor, in a newsstand at a train station. She secretly sneaks it home and cherishes it as though he were reaching his hand out to her and her alone.

Waiting for him to return from Spain seems interminable and, to pass the time, she imagines him imagining her. In her mind's eye, she sees him on trains, in stations and in diners. Her salvation is that he is on his way home to her, only her, and that he will soon emerge through the mist of a departing train to save her from her own life.

Laura Chase is institutionalized for the first time in a psychiatric facility at Richard's insistence. Richard has decided that Laura needs treatment. As the story progresses, readers are treated to little hints, tiny secrets here and there. Iris likes to visit the middle stall in the washroom of a local doughnut shop. That is where the best graffiti is written (including some about Laura) - and where she would like to add some of her own. She checks into that stall regularly to see what has been written there, as one would get a weekly update to a

news item. Laura was sent to a different school - same temperament, different uniform - and plans were laid by Winifred for Laura's debut the following year when she turned eighteen. Laura grudgingly attended school but hated it. Once Laura started to be a bigger burden than Winifred wanted Richard to bear, it was decided that Laura should be married. It is at this time Iris realises that she is pregnant.

The man returns from the war in Spain and is greeted at the train station by the woman. Because he has not yet rented a room, they go to a seedy hotel to be alone together after such a long time apart. The room in the hotel is the worst place they have ever been together. It smells bad, the furniture is tacky and ripped and there is no fresh air. She tells him that she found The Lizard Men of Xenor and waited, impatiently, for the next episode so that she knew he was all right. She had worried about him dying in the war, and he tells her that nearly happened.

It is the spring of 1936; the Civil War had begun in Spain, King Edward had abdicated the throne for the Duchess of Windsor, and Laura had headed off to school. There were new staff members — hired by Winifred, of course. World War II is now in full swing and the woman has decided that she cannot live without the man. She has fantasized over how she will leave her husband and what she will do to next.

Just before World War II, Iris' marriage to Richard was getting worse. She had suffered two miscarriages and learned that Richard had enjoyed his share of mistresses. She assumed these dalliances were with his secretaries who were always very young and very pretty. They kept up marital appearances by going to parties and gatherings and Iris was grateful that Richard was no longer bothering her for marital obligations. Once World War II broke out, Richard and his business were in a bad place. He had been too friendly with the Germans prior to the war and stood to lose a lot of money. Following the end of the war, Iris receives a call from Laura. Back in Toronto, Iris sees Laura at Diana Sweets, one of Iris's favourite shops. Laura told Iris that she had stayed at Avilion after escaping from Bella Vista.

Iris finds old school exercise books after Laura dies. In the mathematics book, there appears a long column of numbers with words opposite some of them. Iris recognizes the numbers as dates. The first date coincides with Iris's return from Europe and the last day was just a few months before Laura was sent to Bella Vista. Iris concludes that these are the dates Richard raped Laura. Iris was grateful that Laura had never seen Aimee because she would have known right away that Aimee was Alex Thomas's daughter and not Richard's. Iris keeps all of Laura's notebooks, bound together with string, plus other manuscript pages in the steamer trunk once used in her wedding trousseau. After Laura's funeral, Iris leaves



Richard. She sends the steamer trunk out to Port Ticonderoga and then takes Aimee away while Richard is gone on business.

Iris is seen cherishing the photo of her and Alex Thomas at the Button Factory picnic that hot, humid Labour Day in the mid-1930s. The picture was of happiness, but the ensuing story was not. By the time Iris dies, readers have experienced first-hand, how hard it is growing up with wealth and material possessions in a town that has little; how easy it is to lose those possessions; how a human being can become someone else's possession, and how family is all one has.

Just before her death, Iris has one last daydream. It is of reuniting with Sabrina, one in which Sabrina does not blame her for her fate. Sabrina calls Iris, comes to her house and sits with her. On May 29, 1999, Iris Chase Griffen dies at the age of 83. Shortly thereafter, Sabrina returns from travelling abroad to see to her grandmother's affairs. Readers are left with a sad taste in their mouths as they learn that Sabrina comes to see her grandmother only after Iris has died. Will she read any of Iris's manuscript? Will she publish it under Iris's name?

The truth that emerges is, in fact, eminently neat, in a murder-mystery sort of way. The surprises have the effect of further flattening out the characters, the villains becoming blacker, the martyrs yet more devoted. More of a grey area would be welcome. The demands of Atwood's tricky plot have produced a curiously reactionary world picture, in which men have political convictions, while women's lives contain nothing more serious than love.

To close, one could say that *The Blind Assassin* is written by a woman—and women either write, live, or dictate its many layers within the novel itself. Why, then, do women appear in traditionally sexist roles throughout the novel? Or do they? Since the novel is historical, one cannot expect a 21st century independent female character, but hopefully the novel's women would at least not fall into science fiction-esque stereotypes. The women in *The Blind Assassin* do the best they can with what they are given. For example, Iris's decision to marry Richard—however inevitable it may have been—was an incredible sacrifice on behalf of her sister, even though this choice ultimately turned tragic. There are a number of true women in *The Blind Assassin* who live as best as they can in the face of societal pressures and fickle winds of fate. Atwood uses her unique novel to bring feminism and science fiction together in new and intriguing ways.

Canadian writing was stimulated by renaissance of interest in literature and culture with special focus on women's writing. Women's writing in contemporary Canada has been always characterised by the urge to throw the story line open to question and to implement disarrangements which demand new judgements and solutions. However obliquely such

challenges may have been written into women's texts. Most of the women's stories about the lives of girls and women between the 1950's and 1980's in Canada are concerned with exploration and survival, crossing boundaries challenging limits and having glimpse of new prospects. Many of the stories and novels have women writers as protagonist engaged in a struggle with language and inherited literary convention to find more adequate ways of telling about women's experiences fighting their way out of silence to project more authentic images of how women feel and what they do. Shifts of emphasis are evident in their subject matter and their story telling methods.

Women down the centuries have been subjected to subordination and insinuation. All cultures expect women to be secondary to man within the paradigm of gender, she is man's antithesis; he is active she is passive his realm is the public's sphere; hers is the private. His accomplishments are seen. The male dominated society has marginalised and excluded women from power.

In Canadian history and literature there are several categories of women. Conservative but endowed with independent nature, assimilated women who easily reconcile to their predicaments and liberated ones who have extricated themselves from patriarchal clutches are some of these categories.

Canadian writers in their words have attempted to portray these different categories of women in their novels and other works. Margaret Atwood in most of her works has always tried to portray an autonomous woman. Simon De Beauvoir conceals a woman as hesitating between the role of object, other which is offered to her and the assertion of her liberty. If this other has to assert her liberty to express, her subdued subjectivity, she has to speak through the gaps and learn to exploit the contradictions within a system that cannot afford to acknowledge its own self division.

Margaret Atwood's protagonists face this dilemma of creating an identity of their own as they confuse themselves in multiple roles and creates a chaos around them. Through ways differing from one another they come to realise their denied liberty and struggle to come out of the muddy puddles that surround them.

Margaret Atwood in all her novels pleads for a balanced, harmonious man-woman relationship in which the two are viewed as complimentary and not as a battle of sexes. Her novels reveal an intense awareness of women's relation between bonding and bondage i.e between women's for connection with others and an equally strong need for freedom and independence. She is concerned with the treatment of women as a normal human being. She criticises the social system that assigns roles for and label them as inferior or superior, sinful

or chaste. She is intentionally preoccupied with women fighting against the females' norms of life - sexuality, dichotomy between career and the demands of the family. Atwood exposes the silent and hidden operation and confronts in politics, thereby recommending the rewriting of women's history. She demands a demolition of gender system and hopes for a new world in which men and women are equal. Margaret Atwood depicts history as a partial, often subjectively and politically shaped construction and exposes gendered roles, social and cultural constructions, utilising different forms of expression and different discourses. Atwood exposes constraints suggesting that behaviours, roles, representation and versions could be different.

In *The Blind Assassin* the protagonist Iris Chase exposes her husband's treachery through her story telling. It's a laid text exploring the lives of two sisters'. Its complex form, tells us that it's a novel within a Novel-within-a-Novel.

*The Blind Assassin* is a multi-layered, narrative collage which won the Booker Prize in 2000 and the international IMPAC doubling literary Award in 2002.

Nearly 20 years ago, in speaking of her craft, the novelist Margaret Atwood observed that "a character in a book that is consistently well behaved probably spells disaster for the book". She might have asserted the more general principle that consistent anything in a character can prove tedious. If we apply the old Forsterian standard that round characters are one's capable of surprising in a convincing way, "Atwood's new novel, for all its multi-layered story-within-a-story construction, must be judged flat as a pancake. In "The Blind Assassin", overlong and badly written, our first impressions of the dramatis personae prove not so much lasting as total.

Both Anita Desai and Margaret Atwood have been sensitive to the pangs of their respective women fold. Though Anita Desai has not claimed herself to be a champion for the cause of women, her awareness of the problems confronted by women can be seen in abundance in her novels. Atwood on the other hand has been a well acclaimed feminist on not just writing about women but offering solutions to the problems and argues for an acceptance of the gender and offer solutions for their self-empowerment.

For all the horrors produced in Margaret Atwood's fiction, the dystopic view of society in *The Handmaid's Tale*, the corrosive and treacherous relationships in *Surfacing*, the grisly murder in *Alias Grace*- Margaret Atwood remains a hopeful writer. Behind every act of her writing, there is this belief in meaning and this hope that communication is a meaningful activity. Margaret Atwood offers as metaphoric proof often hopefulness her habit of writing as a slant. That tells what an optimist she is.

Like Anita Desai, Margaret Atwood also deals with the interior journey of a human being - specially the woman who struggles for a new pattern of order. Their women try to re-discover a creative possibility within the layers of their self. They try to find their mornings to extricate themselves from their anguished state.

Margaret Atwood's writings have amply demonstrated her talents as a passionate and intelligent feminine observer of Canadian life. A constant focus in her work is the potentially destructive nature of human relationships.

The feminine sensibility in the writers selected for the study, it is observed that the protagonists of Anita Desai seem to find comfort in themselves. On the other hand, in Margaret Atwood, the main character is a woman living a professional life who is forced to engage in a radical process of reassessment when the props supporting her carefully constructed version of herself are knocked out from under her. Anita Desai's fiction is meaningful and is true to reality; Margaret Atwood's, on the other hand is a vivid description of reality. Atwood's heroines transcend the stereotypes and awaken from a male defined world of the greater terrain, to the great potential healing and joy of a world defined by the heroine's own feeling and judgment. Margaret Atwood makes her protagonist achieve an identity which is cultural and natural, whereas Desai's protagonists, in general, continue to suffer with the dictates of tradition and culture to which they belong.

Anita Desai and Margaret Atwood delineate human relationships in their works. Their theme invariably seems to be one-(i.e) the portrayal of the hazards and complexion of man- woman relationships, the founding and nurturing of individuality and the establishing of individualism of their characters. However, Atwood does not want to overturn patriarchy and replace it with women's dominance. She wants to transform non-violently the structures of male dominance and restore a kind of balance and harmony between women and men.

Anita Desai represents the creative release of the feminine sensibility. The Voices in the City, is an exemplification of the terror of facing single handed the ferocious assault of existence. So is the Fire on the Mountain which focusses on the sharing of features of two individuals.

Margaret Atwood on the other hand, goes beyond the creative urges of womanhood. Anita Desai has the ability to discern the fundamentally coercive nature of seemingly benevolent institutions like arranged marriages or the joint family system by portraying them as causes of mental disease as illustrated in Voices in the City.

To conclude, it can be further said, that both Anita Desai and Margaret Atwood have tried to raise the feminine consciousness in their protagonists and shown them the way forward in the process of getting empowered themselves.

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