CHAPTER - 2
THE CHANGING FAMILY STRUCTURE
DEPICTED IN THE NOVELS OF
ANITA DESAI.

INTRODUCTION

Anita Desai (1937 - ) is a well-known and distinguished Indian English woman novelist, who is not only recognised in India but in abroad as well. Winner of Sahitay Akademi Award and thrice nominated for the prestigious Booker Prize, Ms. Desai has experimented with the various facets of literature such as short stories, novels, literature for children, etc.

Her works are:

Cry, the Peacock (1963)  
Bye, bye Blackbird (1971)  
Fire on the Mountain (1977)  
Clear Light of Day (1980)  
In Custody (1984)  
Journey to Ithaca (1988)  
The Golden Dust (2000)  
Voices in the City (1965)  
Where Shall We go this Summer? (1975)  
Games at Twilight and Other Stories (1978)  
Village by the Sea (1982)  
Baumgartner’s Bombay (1985)  
Fasting, Feasting (1999)
As stated earlier, Ms. Desai was born in 1937 in an Indo-German family. Her father was a Bengali and her mother was a German. Ms. Desai did her education from Delhi. Among her several published works, Fire on the Mountain has won her the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1978 and the Royal Society of Literature’s Winfred Holby Memorial Prize. While, Clear Light of Day, In Custody and Fasting, Feasting have been short – listed for Booker Prize. Ms. Desai is a member of the Advisory Board for English of the National Academy of Letters in Delhi and a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature in London, of the American Academy of Arts and Letters and a Fellow of Girton College, Cambridge. She was the Neil Gunn International Fellowship for 1994. Ms. Desai is married and is a mother of four children. Presently, she teaches in the Writing Programme at M.I.T. and divides her time between India, Massachusetts and Cambridge.

Ms. Desai’s intellectual background has played a vital role in her growth of scholarship as a writer. With her early childhood developed with Bronte, she has imitated the colours of the West in her writings. For instance, the female characters of Ms. Desai like Maya, Monisha, Bim, and Sita prefer to rebel and choose their own way out rather than succumbing to their adverse situations. The outcome of this rebellion may not have been good but certainly these women are following the west rather than the east, by either choosing to kill their life partners as in Cry,
the Peacock or committing suicide in Voices in the City or remain unmarried for the sake of brother as in Clear Light of Day.

At the age of nine, Ms. Desai read Wuthering Heights which turned her towards literature. In her twenties, Ms. Desai was very much into the world of Lawrence, Woolf, James and Proust and then, later, more and more modern poetry and poets such as Rimbaud, Hopkins, Lawrence and Kawbetta. These writers played a vital role in her journey of literature.

Though all the works of Desai have the theme of an individual’s craving for his or her identity in the modern world and the changing familial relationships in accordance to the changing times, this research concentrates only on those novels of Desai which deal with changing family structure as the main theme. These novels are:

1) Cry, the Peacock.
2) Voices in the City.
3) Where Shall We go this Summer?
4) Fire on the Mountain.
5) Clear Light of Day.
6) Fasting, Feasting.
Apart from discussing the changing family relationships with reference to the changing world, this research also aims to find out the different strata of relationships and the changing roles of an individual.

1. **CRY, THE PEACOCK**

**INTRODUCTION**

*Cry, the Peacock* is a maiden novel by Anita Desai, written in 1963. This novel is considered to be the first psycho – analytic fiction in Indo – Anglican Literature, since, it introduced the new idiom and direction to it.

*Cry, the Peacock* is Maya’s story and her married life with Gautama. the entire novel is divided into three parts. While, the first section is the prologue and third the epilogue, the middle section deals by which Maya passes from sanity to insanity.

The basic theme of the novel is the disharmony and incompatible union of husband and wife viewed from the wife’s point of
view. *Cry, the Peacock* deals with a sterile woman married to a promising, prosperous and over busy practitioner of law.

In the novel, Maya hates her husband Gautama to death since he fails to come up to her expectations. The result is evident – not enough to save Gautama from death and Maya from madness.

The novel is a deep study of human relationships in the light of modern world which is full of loneliness, lack of communication, aching heart and the progressive disorientation of people like Maya. It deals with the urge of a modern educated woman for love from her own husband.

*Cry, the Peacock* is a perfect example of Desai’s concern for changing values of family structure in contemporary society. Post-independence era is an era which saw the destruction of the traditional joint family system which was so intact before independence but which totally collapsed with the modernisation of society. Hence, in a society, which has an ultra modern look with the new values and ideals, the role of an individual becomes important. The best part of such a change is the progress in science and technology but the worst part is the rise of depression, alienation and neurosis. *Cry, the Peacock* by Ms. Desai deals with the relationships rather delicately, and the life of the main protagonist which gradually becomes a victim of neurosis due to the absence of relationships in her life.
In a contemporary society, an individual emerges clearly as a fragmentary one which is so prominent in characters of Ms. Desai. They are deeply engrossed in the discovery of their inner selves. They try to attain wholeness by sticking to their world, not letting themselves open with others and explore a new world of happiness which happens with Maya in the *Cry, the Peacock*.

My aim of analysing this novel is to discuss the problems which play a major part in the novel thus destroying the whole chord of human relationships. These problems are basically the problematic relationships which form the basis of the novel discussing the drastic changes which have become an inseparable part of modern family structure of the ultra modern society. These problematic relationships are:

1) **Husband – wife relationship.**
2) **Brother – sister relationship**
3) **Father – daughter relationship**
4) **Mother – daughter relationship**
5) **The relationship of friends**
6) **An individual’s relationship with the society**
1. **Husband – wife relationship**

It is really strange to see that a great writer like Elizabeth Gaskell names one of her novels as *Wives and Daughters*. But if we go in depth, we will find that in any society woman has many roles to play, primarily the role of a wife and a mother or daughter. In *Cry, the Peacock*, Maya is trapped in husband – wife relationship which indicates that this novel deals with the marital discord.

In this novel, the relationship of wife (Maya) and husband (Gautama) is a total failure at all levels since it is a marriage between a hyper sensitive wife and a practical worldly husband.

The world of *Cry, the Peacock* is an ambivalent one where mutual harmony is only longed but never achieved. As Madhusudan Prasad points out:

1. *In Cry, the Peacock, Desai explores*

   *the turbulent world of the neurotic protagonist, Maya, who smarts under alienation, stemming from marital discord, and verges on a curious insanity* (p. 3).
But, Dr. Q. F. Inamdar differs from the opinion of Madhusudan Prasad by stating that:

2. Maya’s neurosis does not entirely arise out of her marital discord in which Gautama is entirely to be blamed. On the contrary, he desperately tries to understand her problem. Moreover in her hours of tension he is very much concerned about her perturbed mind and acts as a nurse. He is her guide and protector. The marital discord arises out of her neurotic personality in the face of which she is herself helplessly struggling to extricate.

Madhusudan Prasad has overstated the fact that Maya’s struggle is a representation of contemporary longing for love in which man is responsible for driving her mad and compelling her to commit suicide (p. 23).

The world of Cry, the Peacock observes the desire to love and live, at times violently which is very much evident in the end of the novel when Maya kills Gautama and at times with stillness and withdrawal.
which is again shown in the beginning of the novel in the form of death of Maya's dog. Love, caring, obsession, passion, feeling, emotions are the outdated worlds of the day to day routine of the modern world. Hence, the feelings of solitude and loneliness become an integral part of the life of an individual specially with a character like Maya who is much sensitive and has grown without any love, specially maternal. Hence, her neurosis becomes the main core of the novel. As Dr. Q.F. Inamdar comments:

3. *The thematic nexus of the novel is in Maya's neurosis arising out of various reasons, such as her growth and development without maternal love* (p.23).

For a hyper sensitive and neurotic female like Maya, her husband Gautama is entirely different. He is cold, feeling less, preoccupied with his work, efficient but indifferent to her presence, knowing nothing of what concerned her and someone who:

4. *Saw no value in anything less than the ideas and theories born of human and preferably, male brain, who remained always untouched, unscalded* (p.p.99 - 100)

There are many aspects of Gautama revealed through his relationship with clients, people, his school day friends, mother and sister and his own actions. He also tries in his own way to help his wife and keep away some of the problems of life. For instance, when their dog dies,
he handles the matter of Toto’s burial and tries to distract her attention. Once he comes from a poetry session and gently chides her with having run away. Gautama’s life is worth striving for, but Maya fails to realise that it is not the body, not the feeling, not even the desire, but the intellect that should meet him halfway. But, she is able to realise that her version of her husband is in several ways one sides and so she warns the readers:

5. 

*But do not presume, no one must presume, that our marriage was an empty one, a failure. Nor that Gautama was no more than a figure of granite to me, a mound of books that smelt faintly of mouldy rice and wisdom. For he was more, so much more ( p. 201 ).*

Gautama is not only a good and successful practitioner of law but he is also a genuine person with his own limitations. Most of the incidents in the novel project him acting as a guardian and a protector of his wife and a very good but a typical husband. A typical husband is a mixture of protector, guide and sometimes a dictator too, but never can be a friend or a companion. And this is one facet in which Gautama lacks miserably. Owing to this, Maya is lonely and alienated and this alienation is leading her gradually from sanity to insanity and no one is there to take her out of it. She says:
6. One of us would be left alone to always pour out his or her tea in loneliness, and I felt the shroud of death blur my vision...(p.).

This fear of Maya basically indicates her being neurotic. And her neurosis is an outcome of her failed marriage. But another strong reason of this problem is the dissatisfying sexual relationship between the husband and the wife. In the novel, Maya longs for her husband and his companionship but Gautama utterly fails in it. Hence, when Maya craves for his touch and wants desperately to have sex with him, he merely touches her hair and leaves. His treating her merely a child not a woman makes her hopeless.

Cry, the Peacock is a novel which is entirely dominated by the Freudian concept which views sex as the prototype of all pleasurable experiences of life. Sex in marriage is an important concept since it not only acts as an intense refresher in a person’s life but it also brings a renewed vigour with a hope in an otherwise sterile life. Maya in Cry, the Peacock is a sterile woman and hence, for her, sex is more important than any other normal being but she is deprived of it. Its easy to imagine that had she been married to a person of her age, her situation would have been much better than her present state.
In a modern society like the present one, sexual relationships have gained a lot of importance. This is the reason why it is absolutely natural. Its absence in Maya’s life in *Cry, the Peacock* makes her neurotic. Ammu in *God of Small Things* goes to a person much inferior to her own status for sexual satisfaction.

Besides being deprived of physical relationship, Maya’s sexual involvement is devoid of any emotions. Hence, it brings no passion with it. It results into, as Dr. M. Rajeshwar points out:

7. **The image of fighting and mating**
   peacocks, apart from being the
central motif of the novel underlines
Maya’s sexual frustration too (p.45).

In *Cry, the Peacock*, animal imagery is specially used to highlight the dissatisfaction and the agony of Maya, who, out of rage beats her pillow at the night and can’t sleep due to hallucinating visions:

8. **But sleep was rent by frenzied cries of**
   peacocks pacing the rocks at night–
   peacocks searching for mates, peacocks
tearing themselves to bleeding shreds
   in the act of love, peacocks screaming
   with agony at the death of love. The
   night sky turned to a flurry of
   peacock’s tails, each star a staring eye (p.67)
In spite of all these beautiful descriptions of Maya’s desperation and her acute sexual dissatisfaction, the novel doesn’t evoke Maya betraying Gautama by turning to another man to satisfy her sexual needs unlike the main protagonist of Roy’s God of Small Things. The moral and spiritual bondage of the marital relationship in the novel is perhaps its strongest point. Faithfulness to the spouse is the vision of the novel. Ms. Desai brings out the Indian marital mode despite several marital discords. In Indian society, couples still do not betray the marital bond. Hence, in this respect, Cry, the Peacock re-establishes and maintains the tradition of family in Indian society. Maya, in this novel, is utterly dissatisfied in her sexual life but her culture and values don’t allow her even to imagine her betraying her husband. But, at the same time, her sensitivity also doesn’t allow her to adjust entirely with the situations, like her friend Leila, who is entirely and selflessly devoted to her husband who is a patient of tuberculosis. This inability at every level ultimately leads her to barrenness at every level turning her neurotic at the end. In this relation, M. Rajeshwar points out:

9. A continuous frustration of the body’s sexual needs can be disastrous to somebody like Maya, given her instinctively. A healthy emotional and sexual life would have given her a sense of security and stopped her psyche from decaying (p. 46).
This view acquires validation from Freud’s observation which says

10. *Experience shows... the women, who as being the actual vehicles of the sexual interests of mankind, are endowed in a small measure, with the gift of sublimating their instincts, and who... when they are subjected to the disillusionment of marriage, fall ill of severe neurosis which permanently darken their lives (p.224).*

Thus, *Cry, the Peacock* portrays the failed married life of Gautama and Maya especially in the case of sexual relationship which later become one of the main causes of Maya’s neurosis.

Yet, it is a good example of alienation where the main protagonist craves to be loved and resists surrender and involvement. This novel also depicts the craving of Maya for her husband, Gautama. This craving is so strong that on an occasion, she turns her thoughts to the papaya tree in order to be recognised in the male world:

11. *I contemplated that, smiling with pleasure at the thought of those long streamers of bridal flowers that flow out of the core of the*
female papaya tree and twine about
her slim trunk, and the firm, wax
petalled blossoms that leap directly
out of the solid trunk of the male ( p. 156 )

Her main problem is her emotional trauma and her neurosis which further increase her emotional insecurity ultimately leading her to take an unusual step at the end and breaking all the chords of a traditional family system.

Thus, here comes a haunting sage of a failed marriage which worsens with the absence of a child. Even after four years of marriage, Maya is childless and this barrenness leads her to love her dog like her own child. She herself admits :

12. The fanatic attachment which childless often develop for their pets. It is no less a relationship than that of a woman and her child ( p.201 ).

All these factors worsen the state of Maya turning her neurotic with every passing day and leading towards a dreadful end of going to an extent of killing her husband in a state of insanity :

13. And then, Gautama made a mistake his last decisive one. In talking,
gesturing, he moved in front of me, thus coming between me and the worshipped moon, his figure an ugly crooked grew shadow that transgressed its sorrowing chastity, 'Gautama!' I screamed in fury, and thrust out my arms towards him, out at him and past him, saw him fall then past through an immensity of air, down to the very bottom (p.p.225-226).

Thus, it could be said that the basic and traditional relationship of husband and wife is an utter failure in this novel. In a traditional country like India, marriage is considered the rebirth of a girl and hence, it is always taken care that her marriage should be saved at any cost. This very fact is visible in works like Music for Mohini by Bhabhani Bhattacharya in which the young girl Mohini does even those things on which she hardly believed to save her so called marriage. Similar is the theme of The Suitable Boy by Vikram Seth which is all about choosing a suitable groom of the main protagonist, Lata. The novel revolves around her and observes her at the end getting married to a guy of her caste and community in spite of her being madly in love with a Muslim guy with whom the only problem was of caste. Both, Lata and Mohini are educated females like Maya but their reactions are entirely different from her. The impulsive reaction of Maya of killing Gautama is a manifestation of a modern woman who doesn’t finish herself for the sake of keeping her marriage but instead chooses a way out. This way could either be extreme
like that of Maya or the way of Ammu in *God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy opting for a divorce and going for an illegitimate relationship with another man simply to satisfy her own physical needs.

The relationship of Gautama and Maya as man and wife is undoubtedly a revolutionary one since, through their relationship, Ms. Desai has tried to bring out the modernity of traditional relationships and the individual’s reaction to them.

2. **Brother – sister relationship**

In a country like India, the very traditional relationship of a brother and sister takes a back seat in *Cry, the Peacock* since there are very few instances of Maya’s brother, Arjuna, who is the so called rebel of the family, revolting against his own father, unlike his sister, Maya who idealises him. The decision of Arjuna of escaping from the family and the surroundings basically indicate his being different and highly decisive just opposite to his sister. In fact, it is his letter to his sister which finally pushes her over the edge of sanity. Arjuna is a live example of a sensitive male who can understand but have in some measure moved outside conventional male roles of authority and power unlike the brother like Nirode in *Voices in the City* who gives his sister the essential protection and is dependent upon his sister’s love. But it’s the other brother Arun, who comes close to Arjuna of *Cry, the Peacock*, who leaves all his brother and sisters to go abroad to become a successful man and ultimately, proves himself not an escapist but the most successful of all.
In *Cry, the Peacock*, Rai Saheb, in his autocratic life style, has protected Maya, and Maya has willingly submitted to it. But Arjuna, her brother, had rebelled against it. He had defied the unwritten rules of the house and was therefore disowned by his father. Arjuna’s exile is so complete that his brother-in-law doesn’t even know of his existence (p.143). The tussle and the rift which Rai Saheb had created between the brother and the sister becomes powerfully evident when Arjuna’s letter arrives from New York and rakes up the past memories. There is the wide gap between Maya and Arjuna about which she feels that he had never been a part of their family or even remained her brother, but merely had restricted himself to be a visitor. She says:

14.  

*his world was never ours, he had merely been a visitor, and had now taken his leave* (p.132).

Ms. Desai once again hits back the traditional familial structure by depicting a very cold relationship between a brother and a sister which is nothing but the outcome of the modern society which is essentially empty of feelings and dead. At the same time she also prepares a concrete background for the works like *God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy which portrays the sexual relationship between twins indicating that the mutual love and caring have been exhausted long ago. What remains now is merely a sexual urge which converts every relation into man and woman.
3. **Father – daughter relationship**

The portrayal of the father in the fiction of Ms. Desai is highly selfish and tyrannical. Along with the study of psychological conflicts and motivations in the study of the autocratic fathers like Rai Saheb of *Cry, the Peacock*, who is a tyrannical Brahmin father, over protecting their kids. The relationship of Maya with her father in the novel is a very strange one since, her father is a person who is reluctant to forego his possession of womenfolk. Yet, the memories of Maya of her father are positive and affectionate. And she remembers about the idyllic surroundings of her father’s house in Lucknow. She also remembers their yearly exodus during the summer heat, of the pampering she had received from him. She thinks of him as a neat and tidy person, used to being obeyed, a man who had stepped out of his male role to look after her. Thus, she says:

15. *He has looked after me alone, and his beam is, especially tender, his attention especially loving* (p.p.57 - 58).

for Maya his love has been immaculate. It is *open love* (p.39)

The relationship of Maya with her father is the basic problem in the novel. May is obsessed with her father and idealises him. She is so
impressed by him that she even agrees to marry a man double of her age simply because she thinks that her marriage will bring back her childhood and perhaps that’s the reason why, she could so easily switch her love and affection to Gautama in spite of a huge age difference.

For Maya, Rai Saheb is extremely principled. She thus compares him with garden of her maternal house which was neat and tidy and misses it in her own house:

16. *With its garden, its arbours, and roses and azure necked pigeons,*
*and then to the summer home in Darjeeling* (p.39).

Thus, it could be said that Rai Saheb is the only character in the novel with whom Maya shares a special bond. This bond is essentially of love, affection and respect. Hence, *Cry, the Peacock* once again reconfirms the most affectionate relationship of father and daughter.

4. **Mother – daughter relationship**

In *Cry, the Peacock*, Desai stresses on the character of a mother and her role in building a family. It is evident that if Maya’s mother were alive, she would have been bred in her care. As Sudhir Kakkar comments:
17. *For a girl’s emotional preparation for marriage, and subsequent motherhood, a counsellor in the bewildering years of adolescence is the mother* (p. 58).

In his research on Indian culture which is based on psycho-analytic point of view, Kakkar says that the unconscious wish for the eternal presence of the mother is always there and if it is not fulfilled, a person feels alienated and thus, develops a tendency to react with fear and the thrust of being left alone.

In *Cry, the Peacock*, Maya never speaks out for her need for mother but the vacuum is quite visible through her reactions. In fact, the feverish obsession, she has, for her father is the outcome of the absence of her mother. She also tries to fulfil this gap with her mother — in — law which is visible in her urgency to meet her:

18. *Those filthy stairs to the dismal flat... And kiss the mother’s hand...*(p.67).

But, she forgets that in a traditional Indian society a mother — in — law can never replace a mother. In the novel, Gautama’s mother returns Maya’s love with an absent smile and asks her: 19. *When will your father send me another cheque, Maya* (p. 67)? For her, monetary gain is more important than her daughter — in — law. At such moments, the
situation of Maya gets unbearable and she longs for her mother sub
consciously but in her conscious mind, she with fiercest desire thinks of
her father.

Thus, it could be said that mother forms an important matrix in
Cry, the Peacock. She may not be present in the action of the story, but
she remains just near the surface of the consciousness of the main
protagonist to influence her life. As Usha Bande points out:

21. Anita Desai gives us a kaleidoscopic
view of lives affected by mothers
and mother figures some positively
and some negatively. ‘She seems to
believe that mothers are after all
the central figures in one’s life.
her plots do not necessarily have
the presence of mother, but this
relation is significant for the
growth of a person. Desai seems
to agree with Devaki Jain that,
‘Everything life – giving is mother’ (p.33).
5. **The relationship of friends**

The relationship of friends is significant in *Cry, the Peacock*. Maya is depicted as an extremely alienated female who doesn’t have many friends except a couple of friends, Pom and Leila. While, Pom is shown as a typical woman with typical feminine obsessions with jewellery, clothes, colours and looks, Leila is a contrastive study to Maya, since, in the novel, she marries a patient of tuberculosis against the wish of her parents. Both Maya and Leila believe in destiny but their approaches and reactions to the incidents are entirely different from each other. While, Maya gets disturbed with the prediction of albino priest of the death of either Maya or Gautama in the near future and desperately wants to change it, Leila has accepted her destiny and has absolutely no complaints about it. She is quite logical and submissive when she says *It was all written in my fate long ago*. This constructive study is meant to focus the vision of Desai. One could lead a meaningful life like Leila and make the most of life or destroy it like Maya. The relationship of Maya with her friends are specific and formal might be due to the difference between them. Hence, the relationship of friends is important in *Cry, the Peacock*. 
6. **An Individual’s relationship with the society**

Society never plays a direct role in *Cry, the Peacock*. It remains hidden all the time, yet it plays a major role in the novel. Ms. Desai has very firmly affirmed the place of society in a person’s life since it is the very society which is absent in Maya’s life giving her an alienated life which makes her a patient of neurosis. Thus, through Maya, Desai depicts that even in a modern society which has the business like attitude of *I, me, myself*, society is still essential. And hence, *Cry, the Peacock* stresses on the importance of society in an individual’s life.

**CONCLUSION**

Among all the novels of Anita Desai, *Cry, the Peacock* is the best novel which deals with a sensitive character, Maya. *Cry, the Peacock* deals with number of problems of the family structure at different levels. The basis theme is the failure of marital relationship but in the light of marital discord it also covers the various human relationships like brother – sister relationship, friends’ relationship and father – daughter relationship. Arjuna and Maya relationship is a very different relationship comparing to normal brother – sister relationship having all the negative shades of the rivalry between siblings. While, Maya’s relationship with her father contains the oedipus complex or father fixation. Maya’s suffering of father fixation in *Cry, the Peacock* also proves that Ms. Desai is deeply impressed by *Sons and Lovers* by D. H.
Lawrence thus bring the same element in her maiden novel. The obsession of Maya for her father leads her to marry Gautama in spite of a big age difference since she thinks that her relationship with him would be similar to that of her relationship with her father forgetting the basic fact that a husband can never replace a father. There will always be a remarkable difference of intensity of feelings between the two. While, a husband views his wife as a female who is possessed by him, for a father, a daughter is a part of his body and blood and therefore, the most treasured thing. In *Cry, the Peacock*, Gautama views Maya simply as a female whom he has married. He respects her but he cannot change for her. On the contrary, he expects her to change for him and that is evident in the countless words and advice which he keeps on giving to Maya throughout the novel. This basic difference of expectations kills the rapport between them leading Maya towards the state of neurosis. Though, *Cry, the Peacock* is all about abnormalities, it cannot be ignored that Maya basically is a representative of the modern society woman who is extremely sensitive, well aware, educated and who comes to life with every dawn and loses life with every dusk. As Desai herself says:

23. *All solitary and introspective females are always very aware of living on the brink. I suppose, everyone of us in a sense aware of living on a brink. anyone of us might one day face an experience which may push one over to the same condition but perhaps my introspective character is more*
aware than others are of what lies on the other side (p. 10).
REFERENCES


3. Ibid; p.23.


5. Ibid; p. 201.

6. Ibid; p. 122.


12. Ibid; p.201


15. Ibid; p.p.57 – 58.


17. Ibid; p.58.


20. Ibid; p.47.


2. VOICES IN THE CITY

INTRODUCTION

*Voices in the City* is the second novel written by Ms. Desai in the year 1965. The theme of tragedy and the absolute failure in a vital relationship like marriage continues in *Voices in the City* in which the main protagonist, Monisha ultimately commits suicide, unable to stand the strain of her failed marriage. But, it is noteworthy that apart from talking about the failed husband – wife relationship, *Voices in the City* is a beautiful saga which discusses the other relationships with equal care and concern like the most loving relationship of siblings (Monisha – Nirode – Amla). In an interview, Ms. Desai herself comments about the novel as:

1. *the terror of facing single-handed, the ferocious assaults of existence* (p. 13).

Like her earlier novel, *Voices in the City* is also essentially an existentialistic novel which deals flawlessly with the importance of existence in a monster metropolis which is essentially the “City of Kali – Goddess of Death”. Calcutta in *Voices in the City* is the central insight which has been depicted as a place of din and muffled voices, teaming up with the meaningless conflicts that ultimately ends with termination of relationships and sometimes, individuals themselves. About *Voices in the City*, Madhusudan Prasad opinionates:
2. Desdi delves deep into human psyche and tries to explore very adroitly the dim domains of the conscious and the subconscious of the major characters in this novel (p. 22).

It is a known fact that Anita Desai is an expert in depicting the inner emotional world of her characters and is at her best in portraying the silent introspection and retrospection of her characters. In this regard, K. R. Srinivas Iyengar points out:

3. In Anita Desai's two novels, the inner climate, the climate of sensibility that lours or clears or rumbles like thunder or suddenly blazes forth like lightening, is more compelling than the outer weather, the physical geography or the visible action. Her forte, in other words, is the exploration of sensibility – the particular kind of modern Indian sensibility that is ill at ease among the barbarians and the philistines, the anarchists and the amoralists (p. 464).

Voices in the City is a novel divided into four parts – Part I deals with 'Nireode', Part II is about 'Monisha', Part III has 'Amla' while
Part IV deals with 'Mother' but it is Nirode who is the main protagonist of the novel and who dominates the entire atmosphere till the end.

*Voices in the City* is a novel which is highly acclaimed by the critics. Some critics have found the title itself very technical and have observed that in this novel, for the first time Desai has concentrated much on the depiction of the city than on her characters thus comparing the novel with Dicken's *London* and Hardy's *Egdon - Heath*. In this relation, A.V. Krishna Rao thinks:

4. *Thus, although one may be tempted to consider Nirode as the hero of the Novel, the city of Calcutta is indeed the invisible protagonist of the novel. Calcutta, conceived as a force of creation, preservation and destruction is ultimately identified as a symbol for the goddess Kali* (p. 175).

Thus, the blurb of the text says:

5. *Based on the life of a middle class intellectuals of Calcutta, it is an unforgettable story of a Bohemian brother and his two sisters caught in the cross currents of changing*
social values. In many ways the story reflects a vivid picture of India's social picture of India's social transition—a phase in which the older elements are not altogether dead, and the emergent ones not fully evolved (p. 464).

Hence, it could be said that **Voices in the City** is another novel by Ms. Desai which concentrates its attention on the familial relationships with reference to the killing city of Calcutta. The impact of the external factors are great enough to turn the familial relationships sour and painful rather than fulfilling. The familial relationships shown in the novel is of two types—own's family and parents and family of in—laws whose worst victim is Monisha who has to commit suicide at the end, failing miserably at both levels.

There are various problematic relationships discussed in the novel with which the three protagonists—Monisha, Nirode and Amla are tied. These problematic relationships are:

1) **Husband—wife relationship.**
2) **Parents—children relationship.**
3) **Siblings’ relationship.**
4) **An individual’s relationship with friends.**
5) **Lovers’ relationship.**
6) An individual's relationship with in – laws.
7) An individual’s relationship with society.

1) **Husband – wife relationship.**

The husband – wife relationship in *Voices in the City* is a repetition of Desai’s earlier work, *Cry, the Peacock* since, even in this novel, while Monisha is another Maya, her husband Jiban is another Gautama, though less vocal. While, Monisha is of an intellectual type who carries her personal library to her in – laws’ place, Jiban is depicted as a middle – class government officer who has no time for his wife and her feelings. Ms. Desai has depicted the typical Indian boy who loves to go married and want to possess a wife at his own terms in the form Jiban in *Voices in the City* who is a person who expects a lot from his wife but in return gives her absolutely nothing. He is very much under the influence of his large joint family and his love for his family is evident from the incident that when his wife, Monisha is suspected and charged wrongly of taking money from his pocket, he simply believes his family members and doesn’t even care to ask her the reality.

Through the failed relationship of Monisha and Jiban, Ms. Desai has stressed on the fact that it’s not the size of the family that effects the relationship of husband and wife. Since, if it is said that the main reason of the failure of Maya’s marriage in *Cry, the Peacock* is a nuclear family and absence of family members, then, according to this view, in *Voices in the City*, the relationship of Monisha and Jiban should have been the most
perfect relationship in the world since, Jiban’s family is a large family over – crowding the house. But, in spite of the presence of other family members, the relationship of the husband and wife deteriorates. Basically, its not the family but it’s the level of understanding and sensitivity which runs a relationship, thus provoking an individual to live. In **Voices in the City**, the companionship of an insensitive husband and the stress of the joint family pushes Monisha to the verge of breaking point thus provoking her to commit suicide by self – immolation. As N. R. Gopal comments:

6. **Through Monisha, Anita Desai has portrayed the psyche of a sensitive intellectual woman who is suffocated in uncongenial atmosphere of her in-laws’ house. She is happy neither with her husband nor with his family members. She seems to have been transplanted in the wrong soil** (p. 25).

In **Voices in the City**, we witness the conflict between sensitivity and insensitivity. The problem of Monisha in this novel is that she cannot adjust herself with the typicality of her husband’s house. Such a maladjustment makes her restless and more disturbed, turning her towards spiritualism and religion in order to find some meaning in her life, but the feeling of the nothingness of life makes her brood like anything:

7. **To pretend to have forgotten, to pretend to believe in these trivialities,**
these pettiness of our mean existence, is that right?... I have no faith, no alternative to my confused despair, there is nothing I can give myself to, and so I must stay. The family here, and their surroundings, tell me such a life cannot be lived - a life dedicated to nothing - that this husk is a protection from death. Ah, yes, yes then it is a choice between death and mean existence, and that, surely, is not a difficult choice (p.121 – 122).

This existentialistic approach of Monisha is one of the focal points of the novel. However, even this approach doesn’t help her much on the contrary intensifying her mental agonies and making her feel more and more tormented:

8. Is this what is then, my life? Only a conundrum that I shall brood over forever with passion and pain, never to arrive at a solution? Only a conundrum – is that, then, life (p. 124 – 125)?

The main problem of Monisha in Voices in the City is that she is unlike any other ordinary female like Mohini of Music for Mohini who,
in spite of being a city bred girl, adjusts herself entirely with the village life, after her marriage or Lata of *A Suitable Boy* who, ultimately, succumbs to her mother’s wishes by marrying a guy of her mother’s choice and sacrificing her own love whose only problem is that he came from a different caste. About, Monisha’s marriage with Jiban in *Voices in the City*, Jasbir Jain comments:

9. *Monisha’s marriage is an act of revenge on part of her parents, also an act which is an act of sacrifice for the atonement of their own sensuality: the family ghosts refuse to come out in the open, they do not bear being talked about and are entangled in a net of unfulfilled desires* (p. 71).

In *Voices in the City*, Monisha’s problems in many ways is similar to the problems of any sensitive female whose barrenness invites criticism from her husband and her in-laws. While, in *Cry, the Peacock*, the similar problem makes Maya neurotic and she ends up in killing her husband, in this novel, it provokes the main protagonist to commit suicide. The only difference between the two characters is that one takes life while, the other gives life for the same cause. However, it cannot be ignored that ultimately, it’s the pain and suffering of Monisha which is more appealing and tragic in comparison with Maya. In this relation, the agony of Monisha in *Voices in the City* is well explained by Madhusudan Prasad, who says:
10. The insufferable cacophony of overcrowded, apathetic Calcutta, Monisha's claustrophobia and oppressive lack of privacy, her incapacity to bear a child, her total in-communication with her nonchalant husband, the absence of love in her life and the resultant tormenting loneliness within, and the suspicion of her in-laws who look on her as a thief - all this terribly tortures her mentally and she shrieks in agony, "There is no escape from it" and makes her feel the futility of her hollow existence and ultimately drives her to suicide (p. 27).

In direct contrast to the failed relationship of husband and wife in Monisha's case, is the husband - wife relationship of Sarla, a minor character who is the wife of one of the friends of Nirode who lives a luxurious life and is fond of drinks, and is described by her husband as:

11. A voluptuous porpoise of ebony flesh (p. 34).

Sarla belongs to the category of people who are insensitive and believe in living life. Although, she is certainly not in the category of the
cabaret girls described in *Cry, the Peacock* but she undoubtedly comes in the class of people who believe in the single motto of “Eat, Drink and be Merry”.

Another failed husband – wife relationship is the relationship of Monisha’s mother with her husband. Monisha’s mother, in the words of Amla is:

12. *The most beautiful woman in the world, and very accomplished. None of us is like her; so polished and balanced and contained like a well – cut jewel* (p.209).

She is a woman who is highly aesthetic, mannered and sophisticated with a refined taste for flowers, music and good food. But to her utter dismay, her husband is a direct opposite to her. He is crude, shabby, short tempered and a sadist who derives special pleasure in teasing her and causing her pain. He had married her for her money but her sophistication and style always made him much inferior thus making him despise her. The sour relationship between the two is evident from the incident that after his death, instead of getting depressed and living further with his memories, she feels free and liberated and opts to carry an extra marital relationship with her neighbour caring the least about her children or her age.
2) Parents - children relationship.

In *Voices in the City*, the parents – children relationship is a failed relationship, since the Rays fail utterly in understanding their children. While, the father has always remained a figure who is hated and disliked by his own children, the mother did provide them with love and care but failed entirely in infusing in them the very sweetness of life and the joy of living which is so very essential for the survival. But in all the four children, it is the complex parental relationship of Nirode which is perhaps the most ambiguous relationship of the novel and which attracts the attention. While, for father, he only feels hatred and disgust, for his mother, Nirode is full of mixed feelings. While, he hates her, he also adores her. She is both her ideal as well as an object of repugnance. Nirode’s mother is both heroine and vamp for her son. Right from his childhood, he had adored his mother deeply and treated her as a goddess:

13. “Like an Antique Goddess” reminding him that as a small boy he had fawned at her feet almost grovelling over her long white toes, while she fastened her ear-ring and glanced with the smile of pride from his little bowed back to her reflection in the mirror (p. 252 – 253).
Even later, when apparently he hates, he is still not free from her charm and attraction. There is a slight hint of mother—fixation in the relationship of Nirode with his mother:

14. .. to think that all through his life he had despised his father and adored his mother, only to turn, after his father's death, to pity for him and loathing of that same, unchanged mother... this moved him now (p.).

This point is further emphasised by the fact that unlike his own sisters or any other normal son, in the absence of his father, Nirode hates his mother for her adultery and dreams of forbidding her to carry on her affair with Major Chadha:

15. Anger and impotence tore at the light sheet of his sleep...she turned to greet, with a ravishing smile, her neighbour, that retired Major, or Brigadier who, with his bestial jaws and small eyes and hairy hands repelled Nirode, made him shrink away... He turned over, away from her, and in his sleep groaned, for with Nirode sleep was no deeper than the thin
sheet that covered him, and it
was riddled with holes spanned
by ineffectual darning (p. 27–28).

The difficulty which Nirode faces in accepting the love affair of
his mother with a man other than his father unlike his sisters who try to
understand their mother, in spite of knowing about the affair, is well
explained by Usha Bande who says:

16. In Voices in the City, the girls have a
silent sympathy for their mother,
Nirode has nothing but hate. It is
because girls do not idolise mother
- figures, while boys do. Adoring
her as an idol and placing her on a
pedestal is a typical male construct (p. 32).

The hatred of Nirode is well evident from the incident of his
disowning his family and not using even the family surname. Nirode is
shown as a rebel, a critic and a vitriolic who is courting a life of penury
and denial which is nothing but the outcome of his hatred towards his own
parents. After his mother getting widow, he doesn’t care for her and
doesn’t even bother to open her letters, refusing her demands for sending
money, yet when he meets her towards the end of the novel, in the funeral
of Monisha, he is again spell bound by her charms:
17. *Still beautiful. And her beauty compelled him to embrace her. The stately and precise figure... (from whom) he could not take his eyes off or, he watched her, petrified, as she came up with her exact and measured walk straight towards him, she stops, stood out as a work of art in crowded, stuffy gallery* (p. 252 – 253).

While, the relationship of Nirode with his mother is quite stormy and full of ups and downs, the relationship of the two sisters – Monisha and Amla with their mother is quite static. It is generally seen that for girls, mother is an unquestioned support. Such is the case with these two sisters, who in spite of knowing about their mother’s affair, only feel sympathy for her. This relationship of mother – daughters is basically a traditional relationship, since, almost every girl is able to understand her mother and thus, support her irrationally. While, in *Shadow Over Ladakh* by Bhabhani Bhattacharya, Suruchi, Sumita’s mother provides her daughter with the same affection and support, safeguarding her till the end, and Suruchi, in return, understanding her mother entirely without her need to explain her daughter about herself, in *Voices in the City*, it is Amla who feels for her mother deeply and secretly emulates her and supports her, thus proving the fact, that after a certain age, the best guide and friend for a girl is her own mother. In this relation, Usha Bande comments:
18. *Girls require mothers to train, guide and protect them. The benign presence of mother is enough for their psychological satisfaction.* (p. 32)

3) *Siblings’ relationship*

The relationship of siblings is the main highlight of *Voices in the City*, since this is the relationship, which in spite of all the odds, remains intact till the end. It is the relationship of Amla, Nirode and Monisha, which is the most affectionate and loving relationship, one witnesses in the novel.

As discussed earlier, *Voices in the City* is the story of Ray children, who are four in number. The family, who is a resident of Kalimpong, is essentially a feudal family where mother is the head. While, father is an inferior character who is drunk most of the times, the kids grow on the basis of a single parent in the form of their mother. Ray kids are four in number – 2 brothers and 2 sisters – Nirode, Arun, Monisha and Amla. After sometime, while Arun leaves for England for further studies, Nirode, Monisha and Amla is left alone to themselves, thus coming close to each other. The exclusive rapport which Monisha shares with Nirode, her brother is in direct contrast with the cold relationship of Maya with her brother Arjuna in *Cry, the Peacock*. Nirode is been depicted quite close to his sister to whom he even gives his one act
play to read about which he hardly talks to anyone else. Later, it is the
death of Monisha which drives him into action. Jasbir Jain, points out the
feelings of Nirode, effectively at the time of the death of Monisha:

19. He brings away her dead body from her
husband’s home. As he waits for their
mother to arrive; he washes himself
clean of hatred and anger, ready to
offer love and sympathy (p. 63).

It could be said that its basically the introvert nature and the
immense sensitivity between the three that binds Monisha, Amla and
Nirode together. The three brother and sisters are able to share their inner
most secrets with each other as well as understand each other wholly. For
instance, when Nirode gets disturbed because of their mother’s illicit
relationship with Major Chadha, he instantly shares it with Amla:

20. I know of their little Monopoly
and mah-jong games, she wrote
herself. I can see them, the major
with bushes of hair bristling in his
ears, bushes of hair tickling inside
his nose, and his red pop eyes
trying to nudge the sari off her
shoulder. I can see her leaning
across to give him a good look
into her blouse, saying “Ah-ha,
ah–ah, I have you now”, the
way she does... (p. 64).
While, Nirode shares his utter dissatisfaction with his sister, Amla, on the other hand could also understand her brother well. The existentialistic approach of Nirode and his detachment from the world is well explained by Amla in the novel:

21. .. in his state of purely detached acceptance of a world not worth realising, nothing could matter enough to trouble him. In fact, it was easier for him to live here where he could rest, in such anonymity, upon the heave, swell and drift of great black wave, a part of the crusted flotsam on its crest, allowing it to carry him, in perfect indifference and without any certitude of destiny, moving only because the tide made it move, continuing only because it continued. One day it would break on the shore and, with it, he would sink quickly, silently into the sand (p.185 – 186).

Along with the relationship of brother – sisters, **Voices in the City** depicts the relationship of sisters quite effectively in the form of Monisha
and Amla. The relationship of the two sisters is quite healthy and is one of understanding and equal sensitivity level unlike the relationship of Bim and Tara in *Clear Light of Day* or Uma and Aruna in *Fasting, Feasting*. The beautiful chemistry between the two sisters is evident from the incident when Amla comes to Calcutta and visits her sister and finds some changes in her instantly:

22. *Something has laid its hands upon her*  
   *(Monisha), scarred and alerted her*  
   *till she bore only the faintest resemblance to the quiet subtly uncaring elder sister Amla had remembered* *(p. 150)*.

Although, Amla is been portrayed differently from Nirode and Monisha but it is her hyper sensitivity and her intimate bond with her brother and sister which makes her one with them.

However, one does witness the cold relationship of siblings in the form of relationship of Nirode with Arun. Nirode relates with Arun through a love – hate relationship for which, their father is the only responsible person. In *Voices in the City*, Arun is his father’s favourite while Nirode is much closer to his mother. In this relation, Jasbir Jain comments:
The situation is entirely reversed in *Voices in the City* (from that of *Cry, the Peacock*) – it is the father's pet who is sent abroad for studies and the mother's pet who turns into an outcast (p. 60).

However, the character of Arun is negligible in the novel, and is hardly, mentioned by their mother. He appears only at the beginning of the novel when Nirode has come to see him off. Unlike, his other brother and sisters, Arun is full of happiness, enthusiasm and zeal for life. When, Nirode comes to see him off to the airport, he discovers that Arun:

24. *Is like a bird poised on the roof's edge*  
   *For flight, each feather alert and trained for it, vivid in this moment of gigantic expectation* (p. 55).

4) **An individual's relationship with friends.**

Like *Fire on the Mountain*, which features the relationship of Nanda Kaul with her friend Ila Das, *Voices in the City*, also depicts the relationship of Nirode with his friends – Sonny, Jit Nair, Dharma and David Gunny. With these friends of his, he shares all his secret dreams and aspirations and even his failures, for instance, if he feels obsessed with failure and a repulsion for success in love, he openly shares with his friend David:
... I want to fail—quickly. Then I want to see if I have the spirit to start moving again, towards my next failure. I want to move from failure to failure, step by step to rock bottom. I want to explore that depth. When you climb a ladder, all you find at the top is space, all you can do is leap off—fall to the bottom. I want to get there without that meaningless climbing. I want to descend quickly (p. 40).

The relationship of Nirode and his friends is definitely very intimate and it is his friends only who accompany him, till the end in spite of all his failures and abnormalities. The novel beautifully describes his stay at Calcutta with his friends, discussing vehemently in the coffee house which is:

26. The notorious gathering—place of the displaced and dangerous literate of Bengal (p. 13).

Thus, it could be said that out of the few positive relationships depicted in the novel, Nirode’s relationship with his friends is certainly one of them.
5) **Lovers’ relationship.**

In *Voices in the City*, we find the a couple of lovers’ relationship out of which one is of Nirode’s mother with Major Chadha, after her husband’s death which is not clearly, though, many times mentioned in the novel, through the disgust of Nirode. And the second relationship is of Amla with Dharma, one of the friends of Nirode who is married and an artist by profession. Though, Amla’s affair doesn’t form the central motif of the novel, it is surely an intimate study of human understanding, of the understanding of an artist and his model. This relationship is not been given a stereotyped treatment and the whole relationship is depicted through various paintings of Dharma and his changing techniques of painting. However, this relationship does end at a pathetic note, as Madhusudan Prasad points out:

27. *Amla’s relationship with Dharma*

*manifests her most shattering experience of the life* (p. 29).

Thus, it could be said that despite the depiction of a couple of lovers’ relationship, Ms. Desai doesn’t agree to the relationship of lovers rather whole heartedly thus, giving not much importance to it in *Voices in the City*. 
6) **An individual’s relationship with in – laws.**

In *Voices in the City*, Monisha is in contrast with the average Bengali daughter – in – law because of her immense sensitivity and intellect. Unlike an average girl, who sacrifices her whole life for the sake of her husband and his family like Mohini of *Music for Mohini* by Bhabhani Bhattacharya who succumbs entirely to her husband and his mother, Monisha refuses to do and thus, is never happy and ultimately, burns herself to death.

The main problem of Monisha with her in – laws is the difference of the sensitivity level. While, Monisha prefers to live in the world of books and is deeply influenced by writers like Kafka, Hopkins or Dostoevsky, the other women in the family are extremely feminine and pedestrian, preoccupied and talking always of common womanly things like sarees, jewellery and children. Their intrusion in Monisha’s life destroys her privacy entirely and the problem worsens with the sterility of Monisha since, she is utterly criticised and troubled by her the other woman folk for whom, the biggest achievement in life is to become a mother. as a result, Monisha craves for privacy even in her own room since, it is always overcrowded with girls and women of the family, thus, she says:

28. *Alone, I could work better, and I should feel more– whole. But less and less there is privacy. Even my own room, which they regarded at first as still bridal, now no longer is so (the tubes are blocked,*
it is no good), and sisters – in – law lie
... Kalyani Di throws open my
wardrobe... and sees.. my books ...She
laughs ...I see that.. there is nothing to
laugh at ...But I wish that they would
leave me alone, sometimes, to read ( p. 78 ).

Voices in the City is a beautiful description of a sensitive female
who is entirely trapped in the house of her in – laws, sick of them and of
her own sterility. She finds that she is in a viscous circle which has no end
in it and cries frenziedly: 29. There is no escape from it ( p. 113 ).

In a house which is nothing but a prison to Monisha, her duties are
confined to the typical duties of a so – called respectful daughter – in –
law such as:

30. Serving fresh chapatis to uncles, as
they eat, of listening to my mother
in – law as she tells me the
remarkably many ways of cooking
fist, of being Jiban’s wife ( p.p. 111 – 112 ).

Though, Monisha is well aware of the fact that she is far more
better than her husband and his family and is someone who cannot walk
five paces behind her husband and cannot be caged like a bird, she is
absolutely helpless in rectifying the things which makes her rebel in the
form of killing herself. In this relation, Jasbir Jain comments:
31. Meeting death halfway is part of Monisha’s rebellion, of her defiance against her mother-in-law. It is as much an escape as her escapades to the roof to watch the stars, or the dark sky, the unlit waste around her. (p. 73).

Thus, here, we come across a typical Indian mode of life where after marriage, in-laws are those ghosts which hover around the new bride every time. These relatives are many times faceless and nameless but their continuous presence in the life of a sensitive female like Monisha does lead her to the point of committing suicide.

9) An individual’s relationship with society

It is mostly observed that the characters of Ms. Desai are essentially “Nay-sayers” who are bound to conflict with the society and its norms. Nirode of Voices in the City is one such character who is a misfit as a social being. In this relation, N. R. Gopal comments:

32. Desai’s characters do not fit smugly in the socially allotted slots, they are no mere cogs in the machinery called society (p. 55).
However, these characters when rejects the norms of the society, they have to pay a heavy price for that. It cannot be ignored that an individual’s life and personality is most affected by the norms of the society which are imposed on him / her and demand conformity but when an individual refuses to conform society, it ostracises him / her, thus demanding a pound of flesh in return and life of that individual, itself. Such is the case of Monisha, another non-conformist of *Voices in the City* who is loaded with such a conflict between her identity and the identity of others, that she ultimately breaks down, thus being pushed down and being provoked to commit suicide.

In *Voices in the City*, the very same society is been depicted in the form of Calcutta which remains as the backdrop of the novel and almost all the characters are affected by it. The existence of society is well depicted in the form of the characters’ feelings for the city which is nothing but the extended form of society. The disgust of characters and their revolt is evident from their feelings such as Amla observing the ugly aspect of Calcutta everywhere:

33. *At every turn, on every road, the city thrust its ugly apathy at her ... Every where there was the tip-tilted rubbish bin, the nude child playing... the vast confectioners stirring great cauldrons of milk, while perspiration made their*
bare torsos glitter metallically...
women set out little braziers to
catch stray bits of breeze and fan out
into those quilts of dung cake smoke
...She saw no glimmer, no shade, no
sound of love... (p. 193).

In *Voices in the City*, Calcutta is been depicted very minutely with the mention of all its important landmarks and its authentic milieu of the early sixties with Ms. Desai describing, very minutely its social life led by the “hard – drinking, golf – playing bourgeois boxwallah”

It is a known fact that a city is nothing but a compilation of a society, hence, when an individual rejects the city, he is actually rejecting the society which is the case with Nirode, Monisha and Amla in *Voices in the City* however, they forget that in spite of all its odds, the importance of society cannot be ignored. Society is an entirely abstract concept which runs through the members of the society who are husbands, fathers, brothers, in – laws and other persons. Thus, it exercises its influence and control on the individual through such members and social values. However, when these values get perverted, it becomes suffocated for the individual even to survive in such a life – sucking atmosphere, making him a psychological cripple living in the hinterland of reality and fantasy. Ms. Desai is a specialist in depicting this conflict and thus, stressing the role of a society in the life of an individual. In this relation, N. R. Gopal comments:
34. *Anita Desai is not merely a domestic novelist writing about family and man – woman relationship but at times goes beyond the limits of family exploring and portrayal of social prejudices and perverted social values that affect the individual. There may be various kinds of such social biases and values that affect the individual. They may be communal or socio – political* (p. 56–57).

**CONCLUSION**

Ultimately, it could be said that *Voices in the City* is the gripping saga of some sensitive persons like Monisha, Nirode and Amla who are caught by the misfortunes. It is unquestionably a very powerful novel and is equally significant to the maiden work of Ms. Desai, *Cry, the Peacock*. Apart from the characters, Ms. Desai is been able to catch the mood of Calcutta rather effectively. The city has played a major role in the novel as the city of destroyer which is essentially heartless and killing. All the three major characters are the victims of this city and thus, bear a disgust for it. While for Monisha, it’s a city which has no place for sensitive females like her, Nirode finds it ugly along with Amla. There are some beautiful descriptions of Calcutta through the medium of Monisha, Nirode
and Amla like this one in which Monisha describes some of the significant topographical details of Calcutta in an arresting manner:

34. ... I see the great Belur Math, the Jain temple, the Kali temple, and then the newest and the biggest and most popular one of all - new Market that was once known, more appropriately, as Hogg Market...stores of jewellery and silk, confectionery and fish, hardware and fruit... Quick, quick, out of here, out on the street... The rickshaw coolie, the street sweeper, the tanner, the beggar child with his limbs cut off at the joints, the refugee who litters the platforms of Sealdah Station with his excrement and offspring ...( p. ).

Like *Where Shall We go this Summer?* which is a beautiful description of the teeming hustle and bustle of Bombay, *Voices in the City* has Calcutta with all its crowd and the metropolitan faceless culture with absolutely no feelings. This nameless and faceless crowd stops for nobody and thus, the city moves on in spite of the death of some Monisha somewhere and some Nirode getting neurotic.
But apart from this, it's the theme of prey and predator which dominates the novel. Like *Cry, the Peacock*, this novel again depicts the intimate relationships turning sour to the level of burdening and killing the individuals. In short, it could easily be concluded that *Voices in the City* is one of the best works of Ms. Desai in which she has depicted the human relationships rather effectively along with flawless imagery and textual richness. As Madhusudan Prasad comments:

36. **Desai's effective existentialist approach,**

*her successful attempt to bring to life*

*a crowded metropolis like Calcutta in all*

*its disgusting ugliness and sordidness, her deep probing into the inner dim*

*domains of her major characters, her striking symbolism, her telling imagery*

*and the resultant textural density of the*

*novel – all reveal her uniquely original*

*genius as a powerful novelist. In short,*

**Voices in the City** *is a proud addition to*

*the fast swelling corpus of Indian –*

*English fiction.*
REFERENCES

1. Anita Desai in an interview, The Times of India, April 29, 1979
5. Anita Desai, Voices in the City ( Delhi : Orient Paperbacks ) 1965.
7. Anita Desai, Voices in the City ( Delhi : Orient Paperbacks ) 1965.
8. Ibid
11. Anita Desai, Voices in the City ( Delhi : Orient Paperbacks ) 1965.
12. Ibid
13. Ibid
15. Ibid
17. Anita Desai, Voices in the City ( Delhi : Orient Paperbacks ) 1965.


22. Ibid


25. Ibid


29. Ibid

30. Ibid


32. Anita Desai, *Voices in the City* (Delhi: Orient Paperbacks) 1965.


34. Anita Desai, *Voices in the City* (Delhi: Orient Paperbacks) 1965.

3. Where Shall We Go This Summer?

INTRODUCTION

Where Shall We go this Summer? is a fourth novel written in 1975 by Ms. Anita Desai. This novel is essentially an existentialist novel. It’s a wonderful poetic trip to the intense lyrical fervour of Ms. Desai but which remains under a curious discipline.

Hypersensitivity is one of the most important factors of the novels of Ms. Anita Desai but in Where Shall We go this Summer? she has dealt with it quite differently. The argument of this novel is sensitivity itself. According to Desai, being sensitive to violence is understandable but getting psychic on the very sight of it, is a sign of neurosis with which the main protagonist, Sita of Where Shall We go this Summer? suffers. However, the psychological probing is not as detailed as in Cry, the Peacock, it can easily be stated that both Sita and Maya are not normal if not abnormal and both suffer from childhood obsessions. For both of these females, the past becomes a psychic residue in their personal unconscious, the backdrop of their lives. As Dr. Mani Meitei comments:

1. In Where Shall We go this Summer?
   the suffering of Sita is caused by factors
psychical in origin. The betrayal of her unconscious inclination to preserve and uphold traditional values of an integrated life in face of the chaotic values of modern city civilisation is at the root of her unhappiness and loss of identity (p. 32).

Where Shall We go this Summer? can easily be compared with the masterpiece, To The Lighthouse by Virginia Woolf. But, at the same time it is noteworthy, that it is a fabulous depiction of Desai’s flawless mastery on the manipulation of time and space. In this context, Madhusudan Prasad comments:

2. this novel, though strikingly similar reveals Desai’s superb mastery of the stream-of-consciousness technique which is obviously her strongest forte and which has been so frequently resorted to in almost all her novel (p.64).

Where Shall We go this Summer? discusses relationships at different levels, thus trying to find the problems of different characters and their amount of success in relationships. The problematic relationships which dominate Where Shall We go this Summer? are:

1) Husband – wife relationship.
2) Father – daughter relationship.
3) Mother – child relationship.
4) Relationship with in – laws.
5) An individual’s relationship with the society.

**Husband – wife relationship**

The relationship of husband and wife in *Where Shall We go this Summer?* is more or less like those of the earlier novels of Ms. Desai like *Cry, the Peacock* and *Voices in the City*. But this fact can’t be ignored that this relationship culminated to a positive side in comparison with the husband- wife relationships of the earlier novels. In this novel, Sita’s leaving of her husband Raman, is very disgusting, for Raman who finds his wife reacting rather abnormally to her pregnancy as if she was bewitched:

3. *She had escaped from duties and responsibilities, from order and routine, from life and the city, to the unliveable island. She had refused to give birth to a child in a world not fit to receive the child. She had the imagination of offer it an alternative—a life bewitched* (p.139).
Raman is a creature of society who is extremely extrovert, accommodative, apathetic and highly enterprising businessman and a very loving and affectionate father unlike his wife Sita who is hypersensitive, introvert and a pessimist. The marriage of Raman and Sita is a failed marriage at every level. Sita hates her husband for his lack of understanding her and thus in that despair, she takes to smoking, abuses her children for no reason, reacts irrationally most of the times, shouts at servants without any reason. Like Stephen Dedalus in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* by James Joyce, Sita chooses three things for herself – exile, silence and cunning which are basically the representation of her ultimate rejection of her husband, his family members and the values they practice.

Both Raman and Sita stand for binary oppositions in *Where Shall we go this Summer?* since their crisis is essentially the crisis of identity. Sita is fed up with her husband since her dreams of getting love and affection from him are completely shattered due to his ignoring her instincts and her likes and dislikes thus turning Sita, the proud mother of four children:

4. Sensual, emotional and Freudian (p. 31).
5. A woman of rage, fear and revolt (p. 32).
6. Control... had slipped out of her hold (p. 32).

The marital discord in *Where Shall we go this Summer?* is basically a manifestation of male chauvinism unleashed against the
feminine instinct which is effectively symbolised by the eagle-crow fight. While Sita is the eagle, Raman is the crow that attacks the helpless eagle:

7. On the ledge that jutted out below their balcony (p. 38).

Sita's desperate effort to save the eagle from the attacks of crows is basically her struggle against the typical male value represented by her husband.

However, Ms. Desai has gone for a positive outlook which is highly encouraging and refreshing when Raman succeeds in convincing his wife the realities and takes her back with him to Bombay. About this relation, Madhusudan Prasad points out:

8. One of the salient features of this novel is its positive ending which is highly encouraging and life-enhancing (p. 72).

The end of Where Shall We go this Summer? has an entirely different tone in which Sita realising that her life is false, compromises and returns with Raman. This change in Sita is basically the manifestation of her acceptance of realities and life itself. As B. Ramchandra Rao comments:

7. The tragedy in Where Shall We go this Summer?
arises out of inability of the characters to connect
the prose and passion in their lives. They have only
in fragments. The novel ends with a defeated and
despondent Sita unable to rediscover the passion
unable to rediscover the passion of life & deciding
to accept the prose of life, but the book ends with
the implicit comment that this need not have
been the only ending. It could have turned out
otherwise (p. 78).

Hence, it could be said that in Where Shall We go this Summer? Ms. Desai has dealt with the problematic relationship of husband and wife, rather differently. While, in her earlier novels, Cry, the Peacock and Voices in the City, the fault of husbands are greater, in this novel, the fault lies with Sita who remains stubborn and highly insane all the time, refusing to adjust at all with her husband, in spite of Raman trying to adjust with her at every level. But fortunately, Raman doesn’t ignore her like Gautama or accuse her like Jiban but on the contrary, gets highly considerate and tries his level best to understand her and make her happy even at the cost of his family members and traditional values, for instance, he doesn’t utter a single word when he finds Sita smoking openly in front of his family members and friends, though he never smoked. He belonged to a traditional Hindu joint family where smoking is considered a taboo. Not only that, he also takes a separate flat to avoid further tensions. Though, the in-laws of Sita are considerate to a large extent, yet Sita fails to realise it till the end. Hence, it could be said that the best thing in the life of Sita is her marriage with Raman who is her father's
friend’s son but Sita fails to realise this fact till the end. As N.R. Gopal points out:

10 *Sita’s in laws are accommodating and considerate but she takes perverse delight in teasing them. Sita is childish and petulant and worse than Maya since here is a woman who lives in her own world of fantasy putting all her family members to trouble in Sita’s case, it is a case of bad familial relationship* (p. 43).

In spite of Sita’s ignorance of getting a good husband, the love and the rapport which is seen between herself and her husband, though rare, is a striking example of an almost happy marriage of the two. Sita expects love from Raman, love in the face of death and in the face of human limitation. When she escapes to the island, and then when the **news of his** likely visit arrive, she first experiences a sense of grief and then a : 11. A **warm expansion of relief, of pleasure, of surprise** (p. 131).

And when he arrives, she wants to lay down her head and weep on his lap: 12. *My father is dead – look after me* (p. 131).

She expects him to come for her and gets utterly dejected when she learns that he has come for Maneka, and not for her:

13. *Their betrayal had torn her open with such violence, now violence poured from*
her like blood. Invit was also the shame, 

disappointment, he had not come to fetch 
her, as she had supposed; he had come 
because Maneka had called him. He had 
betrayed her too. They had all betrayed 
her. Why (p.p.132 – 133)?

The expectation of Sita from Raman coming only for her is basically 
the manifestation of love and the strong chord of affection which she feels 
for her husband. Thus, here we come across a woman who at the outer level is undoubtedly a rebel revolting against her husband, in –laws, 
children and society, but at the inner level, she is a woman, extremely feminine and vulnerable, deeply attached to her family and husband and 
thus, accepting her own feebleness and her cowardliness of escaping from realities of life.

Another husband – wife relationship which could be seen in this novel is the relationship of Sita’s mother and father. Their relationship was one of estrangement, since while her mother deserts her father by going to Banaras never to return, her father, a mystical figure spends his life with his so called chelas and continues an affair with a mistress. The loosening bond of husband – wife relationship is perhaps the main characteristic of this novel. As Dr. Mani Meitai comments :

14. Sita’s escape to the island is an unfailing
echo of the earlier husband – desertion motif in her identification with her mother, a “ghost in while” (p.87) which cannot be exorcised by her.

2) Father – daughter relationship

In Where Shall We go this summer? the relationship of father and daughter could be seen at two levels. First, it is the relationship of Sita with her father while the second relationship is the relationship of Maneka with her father, Raman. The relationship of Sita with her father is full of all emotions. Sita’s father was a legend at Manori who wanted to create on the island a rural community uncontaminated by the forces of progress and civilisation, where he could put his social theories into practice. Though, Sita has high respects for him she is filled with some unanswered questions and confusions for him, moreover, she is in direct contrast with him which distraught their relationship further more. As Madhusudan Prasad comments:

15. Both Sita and her father stand in sharp contrast to each other and symbolise existentialist necessity and nullity respectively. Although both look for an earthly paradise free from want, disease, fear and anxiety, their approaches and attitudes differ (p. 69).
Sita finds her father as a messianic figure doing wonderful things on the island which includes bringing water and teaching the people the more effective ways of farming. But despite all his goodness, there is an air of mystery in him and that's the reason, Sita finds him fishy in many ways. Apart from this, his relationship with Phoolmaya is also a dark side for Sita.

On the other hand, the relationship of Raman and Menaka is absolutely a very clean, typical and healthy relationship of father and daughter, for instance, when Menaka writes to her father from Manori about coming and taking them back to Bombay because she wants to apply for medical admission, her father simply comes.

Mother–child relationship

The theme of motherhood is repeated in Where Shall We go this Summer? but this time, the depiction is entirely different from Cry, the Peacock and Voices in the City. While in earlier novels, the problem was the childlessness of the main protagonists, Maya and Monisha, this novel deals with an entirely opposite problem of Sita who already have four children and is now pregnant for the fifth time which she doesn't want. Sita is a strange case of neurosis. She is simply shattered by the very thought of the process of giving birth to a child:
16. *Children... through her mind flowed a white, flapping succession in nappies, vests... that world have to be gathered together. She could see the expressionless faces of the night nurses in the gynae world... in the greenish and night light...She could see the impressive faces of nurses who would stay by her in the theatre, now and then glancing at her large flat watch, bored by yet another woman's panic stricken labour (p.p. 153 – 154).*

In *Where Shall We go this Summer?* Sita is deeply upset and carries the void within her. She remains entirely bewildered and repulsive at the very thought of giving birth to her fifth child which indicates, that somewhere, she is failing in her role as a mother:

17. *Baffled as she is by her own predicament as a woman, as a human being.*

The disturbing thought of her pregnancy and the child within makes her so worse that she escapes to an island called Manori. Here is a woman who is sensitive, emotional with a sharp existentialist sensibility and explosive emotionality. As Madhusudan Prasad comments:

18. *Sita’s flight to Manori is actually ascribable to her deep – seated reverence for life and to*
her unwillingness to accept violence that
pervades all existence (p.70).

Ms. Desai has very effectively indicated the purpose of Sita’s visit to Manori island by quoting some lines from D.H. Lawrence’s poem **End of Another Home Holiday**:

19. The wild young heifer, glancing distraught
    With a strange, new knowing of life at her side
    Runs seeking a loneliness.
    The little grain draws down the earth, to hide
    Nay, event he slumbrous egg as it labours under the shell
    Patiently to divide and sub-divide
    Asks to be hidden, and wishes nothing to tell (p.150).

But unfortunately, the mental dilemma of Sita has nothing to do with her two kids with whom she flies to the island, Manori. Karan and Maneka remain utterly uninvolved and fail to adjust to the primitive life on Manori and long to go back to the world they are used to. The conflict between kids and the mother is clearly evident in many parts of the novel but it is the sharp contrast between Sita and her daughter, Maneka, which attracts the attention of the readers, perhaps because it remains unresolved till the end. There are many incidents where both mother and daughter debate each other to the point of quarrelling specially in the scene in which both discusses about the poverty of science and opulence of art:
20. Sita: Science can't be as satisfactory. Its all figures, statistics, logic. Science is believing that two and two make four - pooh ... it leads you to a dead end. There are no dead-ends, now, in art. That is something spontaneous, Maneka, & alive, and creative...

Maneka: that's all nonsense (p. 116).

and then, when Maneka invites her father to take them back to Bombay without informing her mother about her letter which not only irritates Sita but also gives her the feeling that her own daughter has betrayed her:

21. their betrayal had torn her open with such violence, now violence poured from her like blood (p.131').

The relationship of mother - daughter is an absolute failure at all levels in Where Shall We go this Summer? since even Sita's own relationship of her mother has been empty. Her mother had run away from home leaving her children to the care of a father whose concern lies outside the family. Sita had imagined she came into the world motherless - and the world was:

22. Crowded enough so......(p 84).
3) **Relationship with in laws**

In an Indian society, marriage is the most important factor in a girl’s life and its almost an unwritten rule that a girl who is getting married has to adjust herself with the family of her husband by changing herself entirely according to their expectations. This fact is repeated by Ms. Desai in almost all her novels right from *Cry, the Peacock* to *Fasting, Feasting*.

The same concept is repeated in *Where Shall We go this Summer?* however, this novel presents altogether an entirely different scenario. Sita’s relationship with her in laws is not at all smooth. It’s a relationship similar to the relationship Monisha had with her in laws in *Voices in the City*, however, it can’t be ignored, that in *Where Shall We go this Summer?* its Sita who is on the wrong side not her in laws or her husband.

After marriage when Sita begins to live in the house of her in – laws, she feels suffocated and finds everyone disgusting and family life insufferable. For her, living in : 23. *Their age – rotted flat* ( p.48 ).

They all live *like pariahs* a life of : 24. *Subhuman placidity, calmness and sluggishness* ( p.48 ).
Without any capacity for introspection and inwardness. Suffocated by their:


and also afraid that: 26. *Their subhumanity might swamp her* (p. 49).

She begins to rebel and starts speaking:

27. *In sudden rushes of emotion, as though* flinging darts at their smooth, unscarred faces (p. 48).

For Sita, Raman's parents have adjusted entirely to the society which is at large dehumanising norms and values. Thus, they have relegated themselves to the state of animals:

28. *They are nothing – nothing but appetite and sex. Only food, sex and money matter.*

*Animals* (p. 47).

And then, she says:

29. *My pet animals – or wild animals in the forest, yes. But these are neither – they are like periahs you see in the streets, hanging about drains and dustbins, waiting to pounce and kill and eat.* (p. 47).
Thus, it could be said that the hypersensitivity of Sita doesn’t allow her to adjust herself with her in – laws thus resulting into an absolute bad relationship which ends in Raman ultimately taking a new flat for them.

4) **An individual’s relationship with the society**

It’s a known fact that society plays a vital role in the life of an individual both directly and indirectly. The desire for alienation or the longing to be a part of the crowd is basically the relationship of an individual with the society. In *Where Shall We go this Summer?*, Sita’s return to Manori is basically the withdrawal or an act of rejection to the violence and destruction of the modern life which has become a vital part of the urban civilisation:

30. *To certain people there comes a day
When they must say the great Yes or
the great No (p. 37).*

And in Sita’s life, such a day has come when she has to say No. she has failed utterly to adjust herself with the norms of the normal society and the complacent routine of life and has longed for alienation and the sensitive approach of others. Her defiance has been manifested earlier also in various incidents of the novel such as her provocative attitude with the women folk of her husband’s family and in her opting for smoking.
Basically, Sita's problem is not only the violence around her but the violence of the society at large:

31. They all hammered at her with cruel fists - the fallen blocks, the torn watercolours, the headlines about the war in Viet Nam, the photograph of women weeping over a small gavel, another of a crowd outside a Rhodesian jail; articles about the perfidy of Pakistan...They were hand-grenades all, hurled at her frail gold fish-bowl belly and instinctively she laid her hands over it... (p. 55).

The destruction overwhelms her so much that she goes to Manori in order to lead a new life and form a new society of her own. Sita's refusal to continue life as it comes to her is basically the evidence of her rebellion. The trip to Manori depicts that Sita has revolted against the society which is so cruel and which is essentially torturous for the sensitive human beings like Sita. And thus, she longs to establish a life of her own with a very small group of characters of her choice, who could allow her to give her that essential alienation for which she longs:

32. Physically so resigned, she could not inwardly accept that this was all there was to life; that life would continue thus, inside this small,
enclosed area with these few characters
churning around & then past her,
leaving her always in this grey, dull-lit
empty shell (p. 54).

But Sita forgets that the society cannot be separated. It is an integral part of the life of an individual. She discovers that even on the island, situation is more or less the same. Manori is basically her childhood nostalgia and she returned to it as a form of escape. All her life, she had struggled to break herself free from the magic spell of her father but now after twenty years, the island life has again gained an ascendancy over her. The island has become a symbol of a private refuge and it is her only route to escape:

33. she could think of the magic island
again as of release. If the sea was
so dark, so cruel, then it was better
to swim back into the net. If reality
was not to be borne, then illusion
was the only alternative. (p.101)

Sita’s return allows her to see the reality and also makes her able to differentiate the importance of society and the meaning of existence. She realises that in essence there can be no running away from reality. The magic of the island is no more there and if it all, it had ever existed, its:
It was now buried beneath the soft
grey-green mildew of the monsoon,
chilled and choked by it (p. 103).

Basically, Sita’s withdrawal is an indication of the need for love and freedom. Back on the island, after twenty years, she is filled with happiness, worry, of defensiveness and justification. But the realisation of the absence of magic compels her to think that what exactly is true, the life at Bombay or the life at island:

35. Which half of her life was real and which unreal? Which of her selves was true, which false? All she knew was that there were two periods of her life, each in direct opposition to the other...... she shook her head angrily at the confusion, the muddle of it all. Neither sea nor sky were separate or contained – they rushed into each other in rush of light and shade, impossible to disentangle (p.153).

Society has always remained so for all whether it’s neurotic Maya or the hypersensitive Monisha, or a near to insanity Sita. It provides a peculiar mode of life and expects an individual to go accordingly. Now it’s the choice of individual whether he / she wants to accept such life or not. However, this choice is hardly any choice because at the end, lies the
eternal fact that life has to go on whether one wants it this way or another. Such is the case with Sita in *Where Shall We go this Summer?*. On this relation, Jasbir Jain comments:

36. For Sita in *Where Shall We go this Summer?* the problem is manifested as a choice between continuing life or not, the question being whether or not to participate in the act of birth. She realises in the end that however much much she may wish to stand still, it is not within her power to do so. There are other claims of life and family which have to be answered (p. 28).

Thus, at the end, Sita realises that life must flow on, and she must have courage, as Raman has, to flow on with life. She admits to herself what Raman has felt:

37. ...Life must be continued, and all its business Menaka’s admission to medical college gained, wife led to hospital, now child safely brought forth, the children reared, the factory seen to, a salary earned, a salary spent ... (p.p. 138–139).
CONCLUSION

It could be easily pointed out that *Where Shall We go this Summer?* is a deep psychological study of the innermost recesses of mind of modern man in quest of identity in the contemporary world. Life is a continual process which cannot be stopped. It has to go on. And it is also a process which demands a continuous sacrifice, adjustment and compromise. *Where Shall We go this Summer?* is a beautiful record of the post-war state of reality, characterised by a sense of muddle, confusion, meaninglessness, pervasive horror and fear. The sufferings of Sita in this novel is psychical in origin. The rejection of her values in the modern day society is basically the root of her unhappiness. The modern world is a wasteland which entirely rejects the values of Sita and thus, there is no concentration or focus in the present day life so as to ensure a common mode of living. The world in *Where Shall We go this Summer?* is entirely different from what Sita had thought. It’s a world entirely deviating from the institutional values, dogmas and old certainties, it is also not at all magical but it is a world which has a total degenerated and degraded life.

As R. S. Pathak suggests in his study of *The Alienated Protagonist in the Indo-English Novel*, the world depicted by Anita Desai in this novel is the present age which:
38. *Has shrunk in spirit languishing in confusion, frustration, disintegration, disillusionment, meaningfulness and rootlessness.* (p. 69).

Thus, it could be concluded that *Where Shall We go this Summer?* is a study of the identity crisis of a husband and wife which along with this familial theme presents the intense identity crisis of the central character for whom past becomes a psychic residue and her obsession which gives her enough strength to leave her home in order to search her real self opts for escape only to find out the hollowness and the meaningless of the ultimate reality.

**REFERENCES**


3. Anita Desai, *Where Shall We go this Summer?* (Delhi, Vikas Publishing House) 1975.

4. Ibid; p.31.

5. Ibid; p.32.

6. Ibid; p.32.

7. Ibid; p.38.


12. Ibid; p.131.


17. Ibid; p.


21. Ibid; p.132.

22. Ibid; p.84.

23. Ibid; p.48.
24. Ibid; p.48.
25. Ibid; p.49.
26. Ibid; p.49.
27. Ibid; p.48.
28. Ibid; p.47.
29. Ibid; p.47.
30. Ibid; p.37.
31. Ibid; p.55.
33. Ibid; p.103.
34. Ibid; p.153.
35. Ibid; p.p.138 – 139.
4. **FIRE ON THE MOUNTAIN**

**INTRODUCTION**

Desai's sixth novel, *Fire on the Mountain*, published in 1977, fetched her the prestigious *Sahitya Akademi Award* and brought her into the category of other *Sahitya Akademi Award* winners of those times such as Bhabhaní Bhattacharya, R. K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Ananad, Raja Rao and Chaman Nahal.

Like *Clear Light of Day*, *Fire on the Mountain* also deals with an existentialist theme with consummate delicacy and dexterity. In this novel, Desai skillfully explores the inner world which is essentially emotional and which is the hallmark of existentialist literature. It's a world which belongs to the great grandmother, Nanda Kaul. Apart from the theme of existentialism, this novel also deals with the traditional theme of the deteriorating relationship of husband and wife in the form of Raka's parents and Nanda Kaul and her husband. Like, the earlier novels of Ms. Desai such as *Cry, the Peacock*, *Voices in the City* and *Where Shall We go this Summer?*, the thematic nexus of *Fire on the Mountain* is undoubtedly the husband - wife alienation but with the proceedings, it has been quietly left behind so as to avoid creative repetition and concentrates more on the theme of loneliness and isolation which is nothing but the
outcome of anger and agony in the life of the main protagonist, Nanda Kaul. About Fire on the Mountain, Madhusudan Prasad comments:

1. Fire on the Mountain, carefully constructed, is a model of structural perfection that speaks volumes for how skilfully Anita Desai can shape her fluid fictional material into an artistic whole, laying due emphasis on structuralism in the novel as an art form. From its deceptively calm opening, the novel moves slowly towards its violent climatic end...

Fire on the Mountain is undoubtedly a momentous novel of a very high order, revealing Desai’s stupendous capacity to spin a yarn without having much material. (pp. 99)

It is a known fact that Desai is not much interested in depicting ideal characters, instead, her main aim in all novels has been to present a deep psychological analysis of her characters and try to find a reason of their peculiar behaviour. Fire on the Mountain is one such novel in which Desai has concentrated her attention on a child character, Raka, who is perhaps the most complicated and mysterious child character in the entire Indo-English literature. The name “Raka” means Moon, but unfortunately, the child, Raka doesn’t have even a single quality of moon. Unlike moon, she is radiant, aggressive, square faced and wild. For her great grandmother, she is:
2. one of those dark crickets that leap up in fright but do not sing, or a mosquito, minute and fine, on thin, precarious legs. (pp. 39)

The depiction of Raka with all her alienation and her act of setting fire on the mountain, as a revenge of her disturbed childhood is the focal point of Fire on the Mountain. In this connection, Dr. B. B. Chary comments:

3. Raka alleviates her suffering by resorting to violence. It is a means of escape for her. By the act of setting Fire to the forest, she saves her ideal self from being totally destroyed. Like a rubber ball hit hard against the wall, Raka bounces back on the cruel and false world with a vengeance. (pp. 95)

In this novel, the scene shifts to a hilly station called Kasauli, consisting mainly of three characters, Nanda Kaul, Ila Das and Raka. These three characters, though physically near to one another, live in their own separate loneliness, making feeble and vain attempts to establish bridgeheads of understanding. This novel also portrays the clash of two generations. The characters hug their privacy, lacking total sincerity. Every move for understanding is just a move ahead in frustration. This novel basically depicts the futility of life, marriage and spinsterhood. In this novel, Raka ultimately, suffers from a mental breakdown as a result of the mismatched marriage of her parents.
Fire on the Mountain is divided into three parts. While Part I deals with “Nanda Kaul at Carignano”, Part II has “Raka coming to Carignano” and the III and last Part is “Ila Das Leaving Carignano”.

Fire on the Mountain has several problematic relationships depicted in it through the medium of three characters and their roles in those problematic relationships. These problematic relationships are:

1) Husband – wife relationship.
2) Mother – daughter relationship.
3) Parents – child relationship.
4) Extra marital relationship.
5) Relationship of friends.
6) Grand daughter – Grand mother relationship.
7) An individual’s relationship with the society.

1) Husband – wife relationship.

Like her other novels, the husband – wife relationship is again a failed relationship in Fire on the Mountain. But, unlike, the earlier novels like Cry, the Peacock, Voices in the City and Where Shall We go this Summer? the relationship of husband and wife doesn’t enjoy the same important status in the novel, though it forms the backdrop of Fire on the Mountain since it is the same relationship which acts as the root
cause of the disturbing childhood of Raka and the alienation of Nanda Kaul. There are two husband – wife relationships depicted in the novel. The first relationship is of Nanda Kaul with her husband Mr. Kaul. All her life, Nanda Kaul had to live according to her husband’s wishes and desires. Though, she appeared to very contended and happy at the surface level in her silk saree managing the household duties, the stillness and silence and the very painful realisation of having zero identity has created a vaccum in her life that even at the juncture of being old, she needs absolutely nobody:

4. *Have I not done enough? I want no more.*

*I want nothing. Can I be left with anything?* (pp. 17)

Through Nanda Kaul, we witness a feminine psyche who adjusts and changes herself with the situations and her husband’s wishes but at the end is left alone with an increasing loneliness. But at the same time, this female psyche is careful enough not to throw or allow anyone to throw herself in the scene. Nanda Kaul in *Fire on the Mountain*, is basically the future of Monisha, Maya and Sita whose main problem is their hyper-sensitivity. Had they been able to adjust with their surroundings and in the most vital relationship of husband and wife, they would have certainly survived but at the end, might have been felt in the same way like Nanda Kaul in Fire on the Mountain. Wife of a Vice – Chancellor of Punjab University who has an illicit relationship, and a mother of many children, Nanda has always performed her duties well. She has led a very busy life, ordering servants and dealing with many children but unfortunately that didn’t appeal her at all since: 5. *its crowding had stifled her.* (pp. 29)
and she suffered from: 6. *the nimity, the disorder, the fluctuating and unpredictable excess.* (pp. 30)

But now, she finds essential to question her former roles but she is also well aware of the fact that she can’t escape since escape means committing suicide like Monisha of *Voices in the City*. Hence, she prefers to live in a fantasy world which is artificially constructed by herself but which gives her absolutely nothing:

7. *She now lives like a recluse out of vengeance for a long life of duty and obligation.* (pp. 36)

All her life, Nanda Kaul, in the midst of a very busy schedule had tried to fortify and steady herself by an hour of stillness everyday which basically is a manifestation of a woman who in spite of being submitted entirely to the requirements of her husband’s status and his wishes, craves to be alienated and identified as a separated entity:

8. *She had practised the silence, this composure, for years, For an hour every afternoon: it was an art, not easily acquired. She remembered how she had tried to shut out sound by shutting out light, how she had spent the sleepless hour making out the direction from which a shout came, or a burst of giggles. All was subdued, nothing was ever still.* (pp. 2)
Thus, through Nanda Kaul, we again come across a sensitive woman who sacrifices herself for the sake of her husband and his family since revolt is a synonym of death to her.

The second husband – wife relationship is the relationship of Raka’s parents which is only mentioned through third person narrative in the novel. Through the disturbed state of Raka, it is clearly evident that her parents’ relationship is in storms. With a sick mother and always drinking father, who are least worried about their daughter, the future of Raka is at stake. There are various evidences through Raka’s memories, of their unhappy married life and the total absence of rapport between the two. In this connection, Dr. S.P. Srivastava points out:

9. *The present state of Raka clearly indicates that her parents have led a very disturbed and an entirely negative marriage which they both want to discontinue but cannot due to certain limitations.* (pp. 39)

2) **Parents – child relationship**

Childhood is the most beautiful and the most learning period of an individual’s house. But at the same time, it is the most vital stage, too since, the feelings of love and affection and the attitude towards life is learnt in the very same stage only. Thus, it becomes the responsibility of the parents to provide their children that essential love and support by creating a suitable environment at home which should compliment in their
children’s growth. An unhappy home environment not only creates feelings of fear, insecurity, distrust and anxiety in the growing children but it also gives them a very negative approach towards life which kills them later. Such is the case with Maya of *Cry, the Peacock*, who, like Raka, is a product of a not so balanced childhood, thus growing into a hyper sensitive, neurotic female, expecting too much from life. In fact, the environment, a child witnesses becomes the backdrop of his/ her life later on. In this relation, Dr. Sudhir Kakkar comments:

10. *An individual’s identity and merits are both enhanced if he or she has the good fortune to belong to a large harmonious and close knit family.* (pp. 121)

In *Fire on the Mountain*, Raka is deprived of a healthy environment but on the contrary, it is a nightmare, violence and terror which she witnesses so closely in her house, almost every night:

11. *Her father, home from a party, stumbling and crashing through the curtains of night, his mouth opening to let out a flood of rotten stench, beating at her mother with hammers and fists of abuse harsh filthy abuse that made Raka cover her bed clothes and wet the mattress in fright, feeling the stream of urine warm and weakening between her legs like a stream of blood, and her mother lay down on the floor and shut her eyes and wept.* (pp. 71–72)
Like any other carefree and unconcerned child, Raka also craves for happiness and lives in a dream world of her own where she can be happy:

12. *I’m shipwrecked, Raka exulted. I’m shipwrecked and alone. She clung to a rock—my boat, alone in my boat on the sea, she sang.* (pp. 61–62)

But, unfortunately, all her dreams and natural urges diminishes because of the violence around her. Her unusual childhood has gifted her a weird imagination and a bent for strange things unlike normal children who love fairy tales, adventures, butterflies, flowers, toys, hills and chocolates:

13. *She was not like any other child she (Nanda) had known, not like any of her children or grand children. Amongst them, she appeared a freak by virtue of never making a demand. She appeared to have no needs.* (pp. 47)

The failed parent-child relationship in *Fire on the Mountain* reveals the importance of childhood and the happy environment vital for it. Till now, a lot has been discussed about the failed husband—wife relationships but never before, it is being analysed that how the failed husband—wife relationship can affect the off springs of the family converting them into neurotics and mentally imbalance people for the rest of their lives. In such a case of hostile relationships of parents, the easiest
escape left for the kids is the withdrawal which exactly Raka does in *Fire on the Mountain*.

The other parent – child relationship depicted in the novel is the relationship of Nanda Kaul with her kids. In this case, the situation is entirely opposite, since Nanda, all through her life had looked after her children and had taken a special care in bringing them up. But, when her husband dies and she is left alone, its her own child who escorts her to Kasauli to live alone instead of taking her with them since :

14. *they all had families, and employments to tend,*  
    *they could not stay with her, they left her alone.* ( pp. 29 )

Though, Nanda Kaul enjoys her privacy and has absolutely no complaints in being left alone, since, she had always ached for this privacy, the selfishness on the part of her children cannot be ignored in this part of the novel.

3) **Extra marital relationship.**

The concept of extra marital relationship is introduced for the first time in *Fire on the Mountain*, comparing to the other novels of Ms. Desai, though there is only an indication of such relationship. The depiction of extra marital relationship in *Fire on the Mountain* is in the form of the illicit relationship Mr. Kaul, Nanda Kaul’s husband had with a woman. However, there is no mention of the reasons or the intensity of this relationship. There is not even a single incidence depicted but there is
a mention of such relationship in the novel a couple of times which shows that even in a traditional country like India, where husband – wife relationship is the most possessed relationship, the emergence of a third person in this intimate relation has now started.

4) **Relationship of friends.**

The most nostalgic relationship depicted in *Fire on the Mountain* is undoubtedly the relationship of Ila Das and Nanda Kaul. Ms. Desai has depicted the two old ladies as very good childhood friends, thus giving much strength to the character of Ila Das and dedicating the last part of the novel to her. Ila Das is depicted as a family friend of Nanda Kaul right from childhood. Ms. Desai throws light on their relationship by depicting their earlier days which were full of happiness and positivity:

15. *Nanda Kaul could not imagine it, she could remember the time. She and Ila Das had played together as children, children’s games like Oranges-and-Lemons and cooking dolls’ meals under the gol-mohur trees, with scarlet blossoms and yellow pods for food.*

*They had gone to school together, solemnly cycling down the quiet roads to the convent, while the happily illiterate urchins cheered them, yelling Parr-ot, parrot sing us!* *(pp.111 – 112)*
As earlier stated, Part III of *Fire on the Mountain* witnesses the arrival of Ila Das to Nanda Kaul’s house depicting the painful similarity between the two friends in the form of a painful present of Ila Das in direct comparison with the pathetic past of Nanda Kaul. However, the relationship between the two is still intact like the earlier times. The present Ila Das is a direct contract of her personality at childhood. On seeing her, Nanda Kaul gets shocked since she finds her : 16. *That last little broken bit of a crazy life, Fluttering up over the gravel like a bit of crumpled paper* (pp. 112).

Even the glorifying of past done by Ila Das doesn’t effect Nanda Kaul but on the contrary she gets frozen due to overburden of her “overloaded past”. But, this is also a fact that Ila Das and Nanda Kaul have seen some glorious days together. Ila Das came from a nice family which is a well – to – do family but unfortunately, after her father’s death, the situation becomes worse and in that crucial time, its Nanda Kaul who comes for the rescue of the family of her childhood friend by insisting her Vice Chancellor husband to appoint Ila Das as lecturer in Home Science College. *In Fire on the Mountain*, there is a beautiful description of the whole incident which is done by Ms. Desai flawlessly:

17. .. *Her mother lay rotting in bed with a broken hip that would not mend, and her father was dead of a stroke. The family fortune, divided amongst three drunken, dissolute sons... When he (the*
father) died, not one of them came to the funeral. They knew there was nothing left for them to inherit. They pestered their mother and two sisters then, for the last of the jewellery... Eventually, blessedly, they died. Or disappeared.... As for Ila, there was nothing for it but for Nanda Kaul suggest to her husband, the Vice Chancellor, that he create a job for her in the Home Science College. (p.p. 123 –124)

Through Ila Das, Ms. Desai has also thrown light on the meticulous and highly practical relationship of brother and sister in this novel in the form of Ila Das’s brother and an ever lasting bond of sisters in the form of Rima and Ila.

However, coming back to Ila Das herself, her life has been full of miseries since the moment Mr. Kaul was replaced by a new Vice Chancellor, Ila Das was harassed by not being made the principal and out of disgust, she resigns and becomes a social worker. With her friend, she shares some “hair raising stories of her experiences as a welfare officer” out of which there is a story of a widower whom she had prevented marrying her seven years old daughter who later rapes her and kills her.

The relationship of Nanda Kaul and Ila Das is perhaps the only positive relationship of Fire on the Mountain, since, in spite of breaking all the bonds with other people, Nanda Kaul is still deeply attached with
her childhood friend. That’s the reason, when she gets the news of the rape and murder of Ila, she gets absolutely shocked and dazed:

18. But Nanda Kaul had ceased to listen. She had dropped the telephone. With her head still thrown back, far back, she gasped: No, no, it is a lie! No, it cannot be. It was a lie – Ila was not raped, not dead. It was all a lie, all. She had lied to Raka, lied about everything... All Ila had lied, too. Ila, too, had lied, had tried, No, she wanted to tell the man on phone, No, she wanted to cry, but could not make a sound. Instead it choked and swelled inside her throat. She twisted her head, then hung it down, down, let it hang... (p.p. 145)

The self-revelation of Nanda Kaul on the death of Ila Das and her ultimate realisation of the falseness of the world which she had made is basically a beautiful manifestation of her intimate relationship with her friends. It’s a known fact, that the feelings get affected only on the loss of someone near and dear either resulting into deep agony or into a deep painful probing of the reality of life. Similar is the case with Nanda Kaul who realises the futility of her existence and her lies on the death of her friend Ila Das which basically shows the most treasured relationship between the two.
5) **Great grand daughter – Great grand mother relationship.**

The relationship of Nanda Kaul and Raka forms the thematic nexus of the novel, *Fire on the Mountain*. As discussed earlier, Nanda Kaul, all her life, had longed to stay alone. Her dreams get fulfilled in the form of Carignano at Kasauli where she stays only with one servant who cooks for her. Hence, when she receives a letter from her daughter Asha, telling her about sending Raka to her place, she is disgusted since that is the last thing, she now wants – an unwanted responsibility:

19. *All she wanted was to be alone, to have Carignano to herself, in this period of her life when stillness & calm were all that she wished to entertain.*

All her life, Nanda Kaul has served for people and now at the old age, she wants to be alone. But, she is compelled to take the responsibility of Raka. The arrival of Raka is an intrusion to her privacy and thus, she moans with “self pity and pain”:

20. *Hanging her head miserably, it seemed too much to her that she should now have to meet Raka, discover her as an individual, and, worse as a relation, a dependant... She would never be able to sleep, Nanda Kaul moaned to herself, how could she sleep with someone else in the house? She was so unused to it, it would upset her so.* (p. p. 35)
While, Part II deals with the visit of Raka, it also manifests the reaction of Nanda Kaul towards her unwanted guest. Their first meeting was full of hostility and dejection for each other. But to her utter surprise, Nanda Kaul discovers that it’s not she alone who is disturbed with Raka but the reaction and feelings of Raka is also more or less same, since unlike normal children, Raka prefers to avoid her company:

21. *She ignored her so calmly, so totally that it made Nanda Kaul breathless. She eyed the child with apprehension now, wondering at this total rejection, so natural, instinctive and effortless when compared with her own planned and wilful rejection of the child.* (p.p. 47)

Gradually, it is Nanda Kaul who gets drawn towards the child. While, earlier her feelings are mixed, one of anxiety and eagerness in the absence of Raka and of reproachful in her presence, later, Nanda Kaul discovers that Raka is:

22. *the finished, perfected model of what Nanda Kaul herself was merely a brave, flawed experiment.* (p.p.

Nanda Kaul discovers that Raka is in many ways like her. Like her, Raka also doesn’t love company and prefers to be alone. Nanda Kaul has not much expectations towards life and similar is the case of Raka. She hates to socialise and mix with people and loves darkness. That’s the reason, she doesn’t even like the company of her great grandmother and her friend and prefers to avoid going with Nanda Kaul anywhere, for
instance, when Nanda Kaul accompanies her to the Monkey Point, Raka doesn't like her company:

23. She had planned to come to Monkey Point alone, on a solitary afternoon expedition, without anyone's knowing. secrecy was to have been the essence of it, she relished it so - Raka had all the jealous guarded instincts of an explorer, a discoverer, she hated her great-grandmother intently watching her ascent, clenching her hands with tension when the goats nearly knocked her off her feet or when she slipped on the loosed pebbles. (p.p. 60 61)

Even the constant encouragement of Raman Lal, the servant fails to socialise Raka. On the contrary, when she is sent to a club, she slips into the ballroom only to get much shocked and disturbed, never ever to return to that place again:

24. She wished she could close her eyes. She wished she were a million miles away from the bend. She tried to think that she was asleep & this was a nightmare. (p.p. 69)

While, Raka prefers to live in her own world with all her abnormalities, Nanda Kaul finds this aspect of hers quite strange and quite unlike who prefers to be alone, and who never makes any demand and who is a freak child, quite different from any other child she has known:
25. **Raka was not like any other child she had known,**

*not like any of her own children or grandchildren.*

*Amongst them, she appeared a freak by virtue of*

*never making a demand. She appeared to have*

*no needs... Raka wanted only one thing - to be*

*left alone and pursue her own secret life*

*amongst the rocks and pines of Kasauli.* (p.p. 47–48)

The strange temperament of Raka and the shock which she
gets in the club when she witnesses an orgy and is reminded of her own
drunker father and which is clearly sensed by Nanda Kaul and then the
letter from Asha, her daughter, Nanda Kaul feels much responsible for
Raka and thus realises her dependence on herself:

26. **But it gave her an increased sense of Raka's**

dependence on her, Nanda Kaul. She was not

*sure if it was poignant, ironical, or merely*

*irritating that Raka herself remained totally*

*unaware of her dependence, was indeed as*

*independent and solitary as ever... Nanda Kaul*

*wondered if she at all realised how solitary*

*she was. She certainly never asked nor*

*bothered to see if there were a letter for her,*

*or news. Solitude never disturbed her.* (p.p. 79–80)

Thus, Nanda Kaul tries her best to establish a rapport between herself
and the child but very soon realises:

27. **her failure to comfort children,**
her total inability to place herself in another’s position and act accordingly. (p. 89)

The inability of Nanda Kaul in dealing with Raka is clearly evident in the incident when Raka asks about her mother and Nanda Kaul, mindlessly, tells her the reality but soon discovers that after all a Raka is a child and she is still too young to handle the reality:

28. ... Fantasy and fairy tales had their place in life, she knew it so well. Why then did she tell the child the truth? Who wanted truth? Who could stand it? Nobody. Not even herself. So how could Raka. (p.p. 89)

Nanda Kaul’s failure to be friendly with Raka is evident from the fact that till the end, Nanda Kaul finds Raka a “wild creature” who cannot be mended or changed. In spite of this fact, Nanda Kaul tries to tell her the stories of her own childhood which Raka finds totally unbelievable, as Dr. B. B. Chari points out:

29. For Raka, childhood means a nightmare, terror and violence, because she has seen them taking place in her house and they have left an indelible impression of her tender consciousness. It is because of this, when Nanda Kaul tells about her childhood as being happy and her father being affectionate, Raka concludes that they are perfect lies. Raka’s final act of setting fire to the
mountain is then not merely an act of violence, but also an act of purification as it might burn away the lies and make - believe world of Nanda Kaul and the mental agony of her own. (p.p. 95)

For Nanda Kaul, Raka wants solitude alone and nothing else and is more drawn towards destruction as compared to creation. Even the presence of Ila Das, her friend fails to change Raka who tries to fib Raka in her own way but which doesn’t interest Raka even to a minute level:

30. 
Raka wilted. She hung her arms between her knees and drooped her head on its thick stalk.

It seemed the old ladies were going to play, all afternoon, that game of old age...that she had never cared to play with. She very much wanted to eat her tea, for once to have something to eat at tea, but it seemed she would have to pay for it. (p.p. 116 – 117)

Thus, it could be said that the relationship of Nanda Kaul and Raka in Fire on the Mountain is the love – hate relationship going through all odds yet not improving till the end. The act of Raka, at the end, setting fire on the mountain and exclaiming:

31. 
Nani, I have set the forest on fire. Look, Nani

– Look – the forest is on fire. (p.p. 145)
reveals the fact that in spite of her entire devotion, Nanda Kaul has been unable to wipe away the past memories of Raka. Her inability to do so the futility of their relationship which is a failure at all levels in the absence of understanding, love and affection.

6) **An individual’s relationship with the society.**

The relationship of society of an individual in *Fire on the Mountain* is more or less similar like the other characters of Ms. Desai. Like Maya, Monisha and Sita, Nanda Kaul and Raka wants alienation from society. They try to run away from people instead of resolving and facing them. First, it’s Nanda Kaul who does it by coming to that house at Kasauli which hardly has any visitors. Living alone far from society, and the crowd she is more than content:

32. Everything she wanted was here, at Carignano, in Kasauli. Here, on the ridge of the mountain, in this quiet house. It was the place and the time of life, that she had wanted and prepared for her all her life — as she realised on her first day at Carignano, with a great cool flowing of relief & at last she had it. She wanted no one & nothing else. Whatever else came, or happened here would be an unwelcome intrusion and distraction. (p.p. 3)
Unlike any other normal individual who craves for company and companionship, Nanda Kaul is very happy and contended to be with herself and gets irritated even at the sight of a postman:

... the sight of him, inexorably closing in with his swollen bag, rolled a fat ball of irritation into the cool cave of her day, blocking it stupidly: bags and letters, messages and demands, requests, promises and queries, she had wanted to be done with them all, at Carignano. She asked to be left to the pines and cicadas alone... (pp. 3)

While, society plays the role of a major support in the life of an individual, in the case of Nanda Kaul and her great-granddaughter Raka, it is something they want to avoid wholly. That’s the reason, when Raka goes to a club and a ballroom instead of enjoying, she gets terrified and wants to run away from there. The craving for loneliness and alienation of both the characters reveal that society is the least needed thing in their lives.

In Fire on the Mountain, society is been presented in a very negative form. While, it is badly avoided by Nanda Kaul and Raka, it is the same society which tortures a genuine person like Ila Das who is ultimately forced to die a tragic death. Thus, Ms. Desai presents a scenario of people and society where things don’t come always in a golden platter and the real face of life in the form of these three main characters.
CONCLUSION

Fire on the Mountain is a haunting and gripping saga of Nanda Kaul who is much older than other heroines of Anita Desai and who is different from them in terms of living life. Like Tara of Clear Light of Day and Uma of Fasting, Feasting, she submits herself to the situations but also possess a sensitivity like Maya of Cry, the Peacock and Monisha of Voices in the City, thus finding a way out in the form of an entire alienation from everybody by shifting to Kasauli and living entirely alone there.

This Sahitya Akademi Award winner is a beautiful depiction of the impulse of human being and talks about its intensity since, it is the same impulse which provokes Maya to push Gautama off the roof to save herself in Cry, the Peacock, which inspires Monisha to commit suicide in Voices in the City, convinces Sita to elope to a deserted island Manori in Where Shall We go this Summer? and makes Raka set the forest on fire in Fire on the Mountain.

Withdrawal and alienation is the main theme of this novel and the whole story revolves around these two themes. Defending of privacy is highlighted in this master piece in the form of Nanda Kaul’s reluctant welcome to Raka and then Raka’s preference of living alone.
Apart from these themes, the novel also concentrates its attention on the characters like Ila Das who because of their sensitivity are the worst victims of the present hostile situations around.

Being sensitive to violence and brutality in the world is a normal gesture but to be affected by it so much as to turn violent is certainly a mental disease which is the case of Raka in Fire on the Mountain. Childhood has never been portrayed so strongly as it is portrayed in this novel. The traumatic childhood experiences resulting into some dehumanising effects on the little child is perhaps the speciality of Fire on the Mountain. As Dr. B. B. Chari comments:

34. Fire on the Mountain is one such novel in which Desai seems to assert in it that if a child is denied love and affection owing to negligence and to negligence and irresponsibility on the part of the parents, he or she may turn out to be a problematic, maladjusted child. (p.p.90)

Thus, through the medium of Fire on the Mountain, we come across a novel dealing with the theme of existentialism mixed with the unhappy relationships of the characters and discussing about their alienation and longing to be recognised in the world which is essentially hostile and full of vengeance.
REFERENCES


5. Ibid; p.p. 29.


7. Ibid; p.p. 36.


10. Dr. Sudhir Kakkar, *The Inner World: A Psycho – Analytic Study of Childhood and Society in India* (Delhi: OUP) 1981.


20. Ibid; p.p.35.


27. Ibid; p.p.89.

28. Ibid; p.p.89.


32. Ibid; p.p.3.

33. Ibid; p.p.3.

5. CLEAR LIGHT OF DAY

INTRODUCTION

Clear Light of Day is again a powerful work by Ms. Desai. Published in 1980 and nominated for Booker Prize, this novel surpasses all other novels of Ms. Desai as it breaks all the rules and deals with an existentialist theme of time in relation to eternity, hitherto unexplored in Indian – English fiction. Desai returns to the theme of family drama covering two generations of a family in Clear Light of Day. The theme of the novel is essentially the familial structure and freedom struggle and independence of India. Ms. Desai has very effectively pointed out that how the freedom struggle of the country affected the families of common people of India. Its an effective stirring of the putrid drain of the unconscious, the sudden insights and the nameless regrets which are essentially concerned only with the failure of relationships at every level. But what is more significant is Desai’s usage of time as the fourth dimension in the novel, depicting unavoidable emotional turmoil in the main protagonists through the fundamental swift rhythms of life, adds a thematic freshness, a newness to Indo – English literature.
The main motif of *Clear Light of Day* is deeply influenced by T.S. Eliot’s *Four Quatrets* from which Desai quotes in her novel:

1. *Time, the destroyer is time the preserver* (p. 182).

*Clear Light of Day* is a four dimensional novel in which Desai endeavours to plumb the depths of time “as a destroyer” and “as a preserver”, holding the mirror of the present to the past with a view to connecting the mighty changes, distortions and revelations that the two realities bring about in the lives of the siblings depicted. As Desai, herself explains:

2. *I was trying to write a four-dimensional piece on how a family’s life moves backwards and forwards in a period of time. My novel is about time as a destroyer and as a preserver, and about what the bondage of time does to people. I have tried to tunnel under the mundane surface of reality* (p. 142).

*Clear Light of Day* doesn’t have any tangible story yet it’s a beautiful mingling of some sharp, inter-linked, episodic splinters of a shattered family life, discussed or recollected after a long period of time by the two sisters – Bim and Tara. The novel is neatly divided into four parts. Part I and Part IV are the mixture of past with present tormenting
Bim and Tara, while Part II deals with the distant past with reference to Partition of India and Part III is all about the childhood of the main characters. The whole novel is a beautiful saga of two brothers and two sisters who grew up in a house in Old Delhi. As Jasbir Jain points out:

3. *While, the families in the earlier novels grip and destroy and the past unveils itself as an evil force which holds them & invades their lives, in Clear Light of Day, the pattern is reversed. The family holds them, it allows them to go. And when, the past is probed, it acquires a new life of its own and has a happiness which had escaped their notice* (p. 74).

In *Clear Light of Day*, Das family is the family of intellectuals with four children. While, Tara is comparatively naïve and feminine in comparison with her sister Bim, Baba is shown mentally retarded as a direct contrast to her brother Raja, who is highly intellectual drawn towards sophistication and poetry.

The novel has various problematic relationships which run at various levels at the same given length of time thus creating a tension and an unavoidable intense moments at various places and incidents. These problematic relationships are:

1) **Husband – wife relationship**
2) Brother – sister relationship
3) Parents – child relationship
4) Sister – sister relationship
5) Lovers’ relationship
6) An individual’s relationship with in – laws.
8) An individual’s relationship with relatives.
9) An individual’s relationship with society.

**Husband – wife relationship**

In an Indian society, it is said that when a woman gets married, she gets a new life. Perhaps, the basic reason behind this statement is the fact that a woman has to leave everything of hers including her peers’ home and change entirely for the sake of her husband and in-laws. The extent of adjustment gets so intense that in some Indian communities, even the name of the bride is changed. When a woman fails to adjust or change herself, either she gets neurotic like Maya in *Cry, the Peacock* or turns into ashes like Monisha in *Voices in the City*. The very theme of adjustment in marriage is beautifully depicted in *Clear Light of Day* through the medium of the marriage of Tara with Bakul. Tara’s marriage with Bakul was a love marriage yet after several years, Bakul dominates her and still she doesn’t mind it. The adjustments of Tara in the novel is a clear depiction of her the adjustments of the several women in this country after marriage.
In *Clear Light of Day*, unlike Maya and Monisha, Tara is not unhappy in obeying her husband, but sometimes, a question does arise in her mind, "how long?" The very realisation of doing something which she personally dislikes makes her analyse the situation:

4. *She felt, she had followed him enough, it has 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* (p. 18).

And then, she analyses her own position when she was young and hopeful girl, in love with Bakul:

5. *I must have used him as an instrument of escape. The completest escape I could have made – right out of the country* (p. 157).

This is the fact that Tara has used Bakul as a means of escape in the form of marrying and going away from the situations she wanted to run from. Thus, she tries to reason her act and also justifies it by saying:

6. *Bakul was so much older; and so impressive, wasn't he? And then he picked me, paid me attention— it seemed too wonderful, and I was overwhelmed* (p. 156).
The attention that Bakul used to pay to her before their marriage became the main cause of Tara’s falling in love with him because this was the attention, she had always craved for but never got at her home. Thus, she became feeble enough to elope with her love and her submissiveness and deference were later used to keep her at the level of a docile and unquestioning wife. She is a wife who doesn’t want her husband to bend for her but rather she wants to reach for him. The submissive nature of Tara in *Clear Light of Day* is in sharp contrast with the earlier characters of Ms. Desai such as Maya, Monisha and Sita and even Tara’s own sister Bimla, other major character of the same novel.

The return of Tara to her home could be compared with Sita’s elopement to Manori in *Where Shall We go this Summer?* However, in *Clear Light of Day*, Tara’s return is in the nature of visit and not purely a journey in search of meaning, or a miracle. While, Maya and Sita look for personal clarifications, Tara is looking for an overall pattern of life and familial relationships. Her husband Bakul is in the Foreign Service and she is distanced in many ways from the house in Delhi. While, Bakul is a beautiful representation of modern India – well mannered, meticulous and methodical, Tara still has that young girl alive in her who still lives in her childhood which irritates her husband very much.

Thus, it could be said that Tara’s marriage, seen as an escape, liberates her in several superficial ways. When she eloped with Bakul, she
was childish, feeble and undecided but when she returns to her old home, she is socially poised, more confident, and less nervy but the moment she comes back, she slips into her old grooves which irritates her husband very much, for instance, when Tara refuses to accompany Bakul to his uncle’s house in New Delhi, he getting annoyed, in a huff, remarks:

7. So, I only have to bring you home for a day, Tara, and you go back to being the hopeless person you were before I married you.

And you won't let me help you. I thought I had taught you a different life, a different way of living. Taught you to execute your will. Be strong. Face challenges. Be decisive. But no, the day you enter your old home, you are as weak-willed and helpless and defeatist as ever (p. 17).

This remark of Bakul relevantly reflects the total personality of Tara but it also indicates that Bakul is a husband who is not only well aware of his wife’s feelings and nature but has also tried his level best to improve her and change her for better.

While, Tara represents several females who are married, Mira Masi is the representation of those females who in spite of getting tortured at every level, doesn't revolt through her depression and sense of
defeat leads her to turn towards alcohol. The very theme of depression due to circumstance is manifested through the character of Mira Masi in the novel who is the surrogate mother of Das children. In the novel, she has been portrayed a senile female who is a widow and must have been sexually harassed by her husband’s brother. The feeling of rejection and loneliness has built an aggression in her which is very violent and which turns her to alcoholism. With the passing time, she gets so much used to it that when she doesn’t get it, she steals it. The act of Mira Masi of tearing her clothes and getting naked in a drunken state depicts her wounded femininity which has been left and insulted so badly by her husband:

8. ... she tore at her clothes as if they were a net, tore at invisible things that seemed attached to her throat and fingers and hair, even screamed "Let me go — let me jump into the well — let me!" She screamed that intermittently all through the night, like an owl, or night jar starting out of the silence, waking  

Bim (p. 91).

Even with Das family, tension enwraps her making situations more worse which she fails to cope up with and ultimately dies. Thus, ends a pathetic saga of a female who longed all her life to be a wife, yet, couldn’t make it till the end since, according to the worldly terms, she was an entire misfit for the role of a wife: 
9. *Aunt Mira would not have made a wife.*

*What does make a wife? Why, they felt,*

*A wife is a someone like their mother who raised her eyes when the father rose from the table and dropped them when he sat down; who spent long hours at a dressing table before a mirror, amongst jars and bottles that smelt sweet.... Aunt Mira had none of these attributes* (p. 110–111).

Contrary to Mira Masi’s failure in life, it’s the relationship of Bim’s parents which proves to be a happy marriage to a large extent. In fact, their marriage is one of the few happy marriages portrayed by Ms. Desai. Tara’s mother, an ailing diabetic patient has been carefully looked after. Her father who used to inject insulin daily to her body. This relationship further strengthens by Tara’s mother getting pregnant for the fourth time. Ms. Desai seems to be obsessed with the concept of undesired pregnancy since the same theme is repeated in *Where Shall We go this Summer?* where Sita gets pregnant for the fifth time without any desire and need. Such is the case with Tara’s mother who is fast aging and a diabetic patient. She herself admits:

10. *If one becomes pregnant so late in life—and yes, there were strands of grey thickening and spreading in her hair above her ears—and that, too, when one was so severely diabetic, one would have to be careful* (p. 104).
The relationship of Das couple is so strong that when mother dies suddenly, after some time, her husband also dies in a car accident, thus, proving that they were in real sense made – for – each – other couple.

Another husband – wife relationship is of Mishra sisters, though, there is only a reference of that. Both the sisters: 11. *Grey-haired, spectacled, middle-aged* (p. 24).

Were:

12. _Once married but both rejected by their husbands_  
   _Soon after marriage_ (p. 24).

The experiences of these two sisters are identically similar to that of Uma in *Fasting, Feasting*, thus resulting into the same outcome.

Another husband – wife relationship depicted in the novel, though not clearly is the relationship of Raja with her wife Benazir. Raja married Benazir, the only daughter of his landlord and settled down in Hyderabad in the house of his father – in – law. Though, there is no mentioning of his relationship with his wife, there is a clear indication, that Raja’s marriage is certainly not a marriage on rocks but on the contrary his relationship with his wife appears to be satisfactory at every level.
2) **Brother – sister relationship.**

The most significant relationship or the relationship stressed in *Clear Light of Day* is the relationship of brother and sister. The relationship of Tara, Raja and Bim is the main highlight of this novel. But it is the relationship of Bim and Raja which catches the attention of the readers right from beginning since this relationship witnesses many storms and thunders.

The first part of the novel is especially dedicated to the special bond shared between Bim and Raja. Unlike Tara, both Bim and Raja shared many common interests and thus there are countless special moments of their childhood:

13. *yet, when they come together it was with a pure and elemental joy that shot up and stood straight and bright above the surrounding dreariness. There were still those shining summer evenings on the banks of the Jumna when they went together, Bim and Raja, barefoot over the sand to wade across the river, at that time of the year no more than a sluggish trickle to the melon fields on the other bank to pick a ripe, round one and cut it open with Raja’s pen*
knife and bite into the juice – suffused slices ...( p. 110–111 ).

But unfortunately, this relationship diminishes when Raja decides to leave his home, promising to return and look after Bim and Baba. But his guilt is evident of leaving his most loved sister in his angry justification of his action, provoked by Bim’s silence which is more effective than any other reproof:

14. 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. Now I can go. I have to begin my life sometime, 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? ‘I never said a word’, said Bim coldly. ‘You don’t have to. It’s written all over your face. Just go, go, take your face away. Don’t sit there staring. Don’t stop me.’ ( p. 87 ).

‘Charity begins at home’ yet people who portray themselves as highly charitable are the most narrow minded people at home. Raja comes from the same category of people who get turned on by the poetry of Iqbal
yet when he decides to marry Benazir, he hardly cares about his sister Bim and his brother Baja to whom he especially owed certain responsibilities. Ms. Desai becomes highly ironical in the portrayal of Raja which is perhaps the most beautiful part of the novel. This selfishness of Raja breaks Bim into pieces and the relationship between the two freezes till Tara comes and Raja’s daughter Moyna’s marriage invitation card arrives. The sour relationship of Bim and Raja is evident from the invitation letter of Raja which was addressed to Tara not to Bim and Raja did not even mention Bim’s name in it thus, Bim realising that ultimately, Raja has established a new relationship with his another sister Tara whom he had always neglected in his early days because of Bim and now, he neglected Bim for good with whom he had always shared an intimate relationship. Utterly neglected and dejected, Bim is forced to muse painfully on how the passage of time has changed the patterns of relationships entirely:

15. ...At last the adored, the admired elder brother was paying attention to her, whom he had always ignored, for now he had turned his back on Bim. (p. 153)

But, blood relationships always remain same in life. Similar is the case of Bim and Raja in Clear Light of Day when at the end, in spite of all the traumas and being left alone by her brother, Bim realises that she still loves him:
16. 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 (p. 165–166).

While, on the other hand, Raja’s feelings are no different, as Vrinda Nabar points out:

17. Raja’s letter is a means to prove to Bim that he still cares for her, that he wishes to help. It is characteristic of his ego—ridden temperament that he can only make reparations in this clumsy, hurtful way. (p. 20)

Before falling asleep that night, Bim clears away all the dreadful debris of the past by tearing all the old letters including that offensive letter of Raja and gets ready to forgive him. And when Tara is about to leave, she tells her with an eagerness not with repentance:
18. tell him how we’re not used to it – Baba and

I. Tell him we never travel any more. Tell him we couldn’t come – but he should come. Bring him back with you Tara – or tell him to come in the winter. All of them. And he can see Sharma about the firm – and settle things. and see to Hyder Ali’s old house – and repair it. Tell him I’m – I’m waiting for him – I want him to come – I want to see him ( p. 175 – 176 ).

Thus, here we come across a brother sister relationship which is highly emotional and the most sentimental relationship of the world. Like Monisha, Amla and Nirode in Voices in the City, Bim, Raja, Baba and Tara also share a special bond between them which keeps their relationship get going.

Another brother – sister relationship depicted in Clear Light of Day is the relationship of Mishra sisters with their brothers. The relationship of brother and sister in this case is an absolute failure, since the three grown up idle brothers who grow obese and dull drinking whisky and arranging musical soirees which they can hardly afford care hardly for their sisters who run a nursery school for the earning, in order to feed their old father and three brothers. In this regard, what the old Mishra tells Bim, is worth considering:
20. 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. Look at them – fat, lazy slobs, drinking whisky..., they just don’t care care... 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... (p. 32 – 33).

Thus, here comes a direct contrast of the traditional brother – sister relationship. Through the brother – sister relationships of Arjuna – Maya in Cry, the Peacock and Mishra sisters – brothers in Clear Light of Day, Ms. Desai has very effectively brought out the modern society relationships which stand on the base of selfishness and I – me – myself attitude.

3) Parents – child relationship.

The Parents – child relationship in Clear Light of Day is in two forms – one in the form of real parents and the other in the form of Mira Masi who is the foster parent of the three kids who plays the role of an ayah or a distant aunt rather efficiently, as Vrinda Nabar comments:
21. The role of an elderly aunt or an ayah as children's most constant companion was and is an all-too-familiar feature of Indian family life. This presence is usually bound up with a sense of the person's smell. In later years, it is this smell that remains as a memory, not so much the way a person looked or dressed. (p. 20)

In Clear Light of Day, its Tara who associates Mira Masi with that very same smell of hers:

22. ...she was solid as a bed, she smelt of cooking and was made of knitting... Tara could wrap herself up in her as in an old soft shawl. Wrapped in the folds of Aunt Mira's white cotton sari, or into her loosely knitted grey shawl, or the plump billows of the plum-coloured quilt in winter, she became baby again, breathing in her aunt's smell, finding in it a deep, musty comfort (p. 87).

Not only Tara, Mira Masi is a surrogate mother for the other three also and acts like a tree for them who gives shelter to the Das children:
23. *She was the tree, she was the soil, she was the earth* (p. 111).

The character of Mira Masi is a strong point in the novel since she is someone on whom all the four children rely. She often acts as a saviour for Tara when the older two tease her and is a steady support to Raja and Bim. She has also brought up Baba steadily. She brings life and charm to the Das house which is otherwise dull and soulless. On the other hand, Mrs. Das; the real mother of the four kids is entirely different and hardly fits into the role of a mother. Children think of her as:

24. *spending long hours at a dressing – table before a mirror, amongst jars and bottles that smell sweet... who commanded servants and chastised children and was obeyed like a queen* (p. 111).

On the other hand, Mira Masi is nurturing, supportive and docile. As Usha Bande comments:

25. *She is like the ever - smiling divinity that Erikson calls the "numinous element, the sense of hallowed presence". She is simple, and unassuming; and she feels elated to see the children growing up, "as the leaves and flowers and fruits of the earth. So beautiful, she murmured, touching, watching – so beautiful and strong and living* (p. 33).
The relationship of parents and children is essentially of being owned and owning. Unfortunately, this fact is understood by Mira Masi in *Clear Light of Day* than the real parents:

26. *They crowded about her so that they formed a ring, a protective railing about her. Now no one could approach, no threat, no menace. They owned her and yes, she wanted to be owned* (p. 109).

Tara’s brooding over past and her childhood and her remembrances of her childhood basically are the depictions of her relationship with her parents. The memories of childhood make her dead parents come alive in her mind:

27. *...here they still sat, crouched about the little green baize folding table that was now shoved into a corner with a pile of old *Illustrated Weeklies*... her parents had sat, day after day & year after year till their deaths, playing bridge with friends...*(p. 21–22).

It is clearly evident in the novel, that Tara has been deeply attached to her parents and a great part of her present behaviour is an
outcome of her childhood memories. For instance, in a pensive mood she recollects how her father kept on injecting her mother which, as she thought, killed her:

28. and she had seen him lean over her mother's bed and quickly, smoothly press a little shining syringe into her mother's arm that lay crookedly on the blue cover, press it in very hard so that she tilted her had back with a quick gasp of shock, or pain—Tara saw her chin rising up into the air & the grey head sinking back into the pillow and heard a long whimpering sigh like an air bag minutely punctured so that Tara had fled, trembling, because she was sure she had seen her father kill her mother (p. 22).

This fear of Tara becomes a major obstacle in her relationship with her parents and ultimately, she decides to quit from the situations. But its Bim, who not only looks after her handicapped brother Baba but also makes it a point to serve her parents till the end.
4) **Sister – sister relationship.**

The relationship of Bim and Tara is another point of focus in *Clear Light of Day*. Both Bim and Tara share a special bond between them, yet there is a sharp contrast between them which is well brought in Part III of the novel. In school days, while Tara was dull and was always admonished by her teachers, Bim was bright. While, to Bim school was a "a challenge" to Tara, it was "a terror":

29. *Whereas school brought out Bim’s natural energy...school to Tara was a terror, a blight, a gathering of large, loud, malicious forces that threatened and mocked her fragility... To Bim, school and its teachers and lessons were a challenge...Tara, on the other hand, wilted when confronted by the challenge, shrank back into a knot of horrified stupor and tended to gaze to gaze dully at the teachers when asked a question, making them wonder if she were not somewhat retarded... (p.123–124).*

At school, every Thursday, the girls were sent to a Mission Hospital to distribute blankets and fruits. While, this affair is appealing to Bim, Tara finds it utterly disgusting and costing "genuine physical
agonies” and thus, consequently, refuses to go to school on Thursdays. This episode is the manifestation of the contrast between the two sisters, as well as, it also predicts their future. Later, after growing up, while, Tara prefers to get married and become a housewife, Bim decides to follow the steps of her ideas like Florence Nightingale and Joan of Arc by remaining a spinster through out her life. While, Tara prefers to elope with Bakul who is much older to her and get married to him, Bim opts for a difficult step of serving her parents and her mentally retarded brother and Mira Mausi till the end of her life.

While, the earliest years witnessed Tara as a weak and feeble girl, running and escaping from the realities, the later years show her as a complete woman who is full of happiness and joy. When she returns to her old home, she is full of life and happiness, while, on the other hand, it is Bim who is fed up and tired by the happenings. However, the relationship between the two is full of love and affection. While, Tara is full of guilt of running away from the responsibilities leaving her sister alone, Bim is full of guilt of not giving her sister that love and affection which she deserved. The sacrifice of Bim for the family is undoubtedly felt most by her sister and hence, when she discovers that her sister has changed and is going feeble with the passage of time, she begins to think:

30. She had always thought Bim so competent, so capable. Everyone had thought that – Aunt Mira, the teacher at school, even Raja. But Bim seemed to stampede through the house
like a dishevelled storm, creating more havoc than order. Tara would be ashamed to run a house like this. Bakul would have been horrified if she did. Then how had Bim acquired her fine reputation? Or had her old capability, her old competence begun to crumble now and go to seed? Tara saw how little she had really observed — either as a child or as a grown woman. She had seen Bim through the lenses of her own self, as she had wanted to see her. And now, when she tried to be objective, when she was old enough, grown enough and removed enough to study her objectively, she found she could not — her vision was strewn, obscured, and screened by too much of the past. (p. 148)

And with deep agony, Tara says to her husband: 31. Only that I had noticed nothing before. (p. 149)

Thus, on seeing Bim loosing strength, it’s ultimately Tara who picks up the broken threads and tries to rekindle the relationship of Bim and Raja in spite of Bim’s earlier disgusting remarks, she at last succeeds in convincing her and thus, reuniting her sister and brother and ultimately, making her sister alive again.
The lasting bond and the inseparable relationship between the two sisters is perhaps the most haunting speciality of the novel. This bond is a silent companionship and understanding like that of Uma and Aruna in *Fasting, Feasting* or like that of Monisha and Amla in *Voices in the City*, but certainly, the relationship of Bim and Tara has much depth than the other sisters' relationships depicted by Ms. Desai.

The other sisters' relationship depicted in *Clear Light of Day* is the relationship of Mishra sisters who are spinsters like that of Bim but not much is concentrated on the mutual relations between the two sisters except the fact, that they both work in order to feed their useless brothers and sick father.

5) **Lovers' relationship**

The relationship of lovers in *Clear Light of Day* is seen at many levels. First, it's the love marriage of Raja with Benazir who is his landlord's daughter, then it's the relationship of Tara and Bakul and lastly, the relationship of Bim with Dr. Biswas.

While, the relationship of Raja with Benazir has more materialistic approach than love, the relationship of Tara with Bakul is
basically a means of escape for Tara. Utterly disgusted with the happenings at home and the negligence of the family members, Tara turns towards much elderly Bakul and gets that love and affection from him which she always longed for and thus, the relationship between the two ends in marriage. However, its ultimately relationship of Dr. Biswas with Bim which attracts the attention of the readers. Dr. Biswas, after the death of Bim's father is sent to Bim's house for the treatment of Raja. With the illness of Mira Masi, Dr. Biswas has to visit their house almost daily which makes him silently get attracted towards Bim who sometimes discusses the family problems with him. On the invitation of Dr. Biswas, Bim sometimes accompanies him to concerts and even to the tea party to his mother at his place. But the typicality of Dr. Biswas's mother doesn't appeal Bim and she feels utterly disgusted, thus feeling ill of Dr. Biswas too. When on return Raja asks her about the visit and teases her that whether she has been approved by Dr. Biswas's mother as her daughter—in—law, she replies:

31.  

Daughter—in—law ?? Dr. Biswas's mother—just

Don't talk to me about her—about them—I hope I

never have to see Dr. Biswas again—he gives me

the creeps—he's—he's—just... (p. 94)

Basically, the problem between Bim and Dr. Biswas is a huge difference of sensitivity level. While, the intellectuality of Bim doesn't allow her to appreciate the typicality of his mother, for Dr. Biswas, her refusal of his proposal is the most surprising thing. Its only when one day, he comes to her house and observes her devotion for her aunt, Raja, and
Baba, he is able to see her in real perspective and then realises why she doesn’t want to marry him, he says:

32. Now I understand why you do not wish to marry. You have dedicated your life to others— to your sick brother & your aged aunt and your little brother who will depend on you all his life. you have sacrificed your own life for them (p. 97).

Thus, here we come across a beautiful relationship which is full of love and mutual affection, yet its deeply haunting and hurting since it demands sacrifice at both levels. The relationship of Bim and Dr. Biswas is a relationship standing on the pillars of love and deep attraction but is entirely crushed by the cruel storms of reality.

6) **An individual’s relationship with in–laws.**

*Clear Light of Day* is a novel which concentrates not much attention on the relationship of an individual with his / her in–laws. There is only one such relationship shown in the novel and that is the relationship between Bakul and Bim. Tara’s husband, Bakul is essentially a diplomat and a highly materialistic person, yet, he is also not entirely reluctant and ignorant of his sister – in–law’s sacrifices hence, if he
doesn’t appreciate her, he doesn’t condemn her too. The relationship between the two is extremely neutral and cold.

7) **An individual’s relationship with society.**

Society plays a vital part in *Clear Light of Day* since the theme of alienation from the society dominates the atmosphere of the novel. According to Desai, alienation is nothing but the outcome of too much intellectuality and extreme sensitivity. Such is the case with Bim in the novel who is the victim of the adverse situations and has gone so averse with them that she denies to be social and is contended with her own world, but society is also present in the novel in the form of Mishra family to whom Bim frequently visits. Mishra family is a beautiful depiction of the deteriorating cultural life in Old Delhi. Society, for some people has always remained the same while, for some it kept on changing. While, for people like Bim, society is the most mobile thing in the world, for Mishras, it is stationary since nothing has changed over the years, neither people nor the values, as the old Mishra tells Bim:

33. *When I was young, when I was at their age – do you think I was any better?... I can tell you, I was just as fat, as greedy, as stupid, as wicked as any of them. A boozer, a womaniser, a bankrupt – running after drink, women, money – that was all I did, just like them, worse than them, any of them... (p. 34).*
But, society has a major role to play in *Clear Light of Day* since the background of the novel is the theme of identity crisis of Indians at the time of freedom struggle. The terror and the dejection in the form of death of Mahatma Gandhi in Part II which is a monotonous outcome of the after effects of Partition has been relived in a fresh manner.

Apart from that, the novel also witness the mentality of an individual when he observes the life style of the people of other community when he himself is searching for his own identity. Such is the case of Raja whose early schooling in Urdu and his instinctive love for the language and Muslim culture brings him closer to the family of Hyder Ali, thus mesmerising to the point of getting addicted:

34. *As he grew older and more sure of himself,*

he began to take part in Hyder Ali’s family life...Coming out of the library, he would see Hyder Ali’s wife and daughter sitting on a divan on the veranda, cutting up vegetables for pickles or embroidering their coloured veils and accept a slice of guava held out by the Begum / stop to tell them of his parents’ health or some gossip about the servants demanded of him... (p. 48 – 49).
Raja in *Clear Light of Day* is depicted as an individual who longs for society and for companionship and thus, when he is given the option of choosing between society and his family, he chooses the former without thinking about the latter and leaves them mindlessly. While, on the other hand, Bim, his own sister, rebels against the set norms of society by revolting against them and thus, establishing her own world and her own regulations. When Raja leaves the house in order to work for Hyder Ali, she remains extremely subdued though hurt terribly deep down at heart. Her agony is evident in her pathetic conversation with her brother Baba:

35. ‘So now there are just you and I left Baba,’

she muttered. ‘Does the house seem empty to you? Everyone’s gone, except you and I. They won’t come back. We’ll be alone now. But we don’t have to worry about anyone now – Tara or Raja or Mira Masi. We needn’t worry now that they’re all gone. We’re just by ourselves and there’s nothing to worry about. You’re not afraid, are you?’ (p. 101)

Apart from pathos, what is more notable in this fact is the zeal to fight against the society and to live at one’s own terms which exactly Bim does later on by living at her own terms, rejecting society entirely.
Its Tara who proves to be the most balanced of the lot by choosing a middle way of being with the society but at the same time, respecting the familial ties and thus, she proves to be the most successful at the end since she is the only one who is able to keep the balance between the society and the inner world.

CONCLUSION

As stated earlier, Clear Light of Day is a four dimensional novel concentrating on how a family life moves backwards and forwards in a period of time. On this relation Vrinda Nabar comments:

36. The journey into the past could thus be seen as the journey into the subconscious. Ms. Desai gives it just that degree of distortion, of formlessness, while adhering to the sequential pattern, to create the impression of a “psychoanalytic” process at work (p. 19).

Apart from the theme of time, Clear Light of Day is also about the liberated new woman who doesn’t succumb to the situations but fights them out. What is different about the female characters of Clear Light of Day is that they are prepared to face the consequences of their choices. As Ms. Desai herself points out:
I'm interested in characters who are not average but have retreated or been driven into some extremity of despair and so turned against... the general current (p. 84).

In *Clear Light of Day*, the protagonists of Ms. Desai are brought up to be different, meek and quiet in the face of exploitation, are yet highly sensitive and intelligent and are desperate to find an outlet to their pangs. Their extreme sensitivity however channelises and systematises their mode of liberation in other manners and directions. In this relation, Ramesh Kumar Gupta comments:

*Clear Light of Day* is chosen to evince and examine the wide space that divides the two types of women hailing from the same family – the women who do not act but surrender and so keep the tradition alive and next the women who choose not to surrender and be meek but break the convention to face their situation and take up a new road where no one can dictate to them (p. 275).

In *Clear Light of Day*, Bim is the liberated modern woman who chooses to be independent, courageous and who dresses and smokes like a man only because of her training which was entirely opposite of the training of any other ordinary Indian girl. It cant be ignored that much
credit to the liberation of Bim goes to her situation where literally no one was there to stop her from taking decisions like not marrying or looking after a tuberculosis patient, a mentally retarded and an ailing aunt throughout her life without demanding a single pie from her parents and thus earning at her own level. Bim’s confidence in herself of withstanding any sort of negativity enables her to see the sudden death of her parents, Mira Masi, the tubercular Raja and the mentally retarded Baba and later, the exit of Raja never to return and her being left on her own. Bimla in Clear Light of Day is shown as an educated woman who is working and enjoys her own financial freedom. In spite of all the odds, at last, Bim gets success in building up her ambition, is triumphant in being independent, which is closely observed by her sister Tara and her husband Bakul:

39. Bim had found everything she wanted in life.

It seemed so incredible that she hadn’t had to go anywhere to find it, that she had stayed on in the old house, taught in the old college, and yet it had given her everything she wanted.

Isn’t that strange Bakul. She did not find it—she made it, she made what she wanted (p. 158).

Through Bim, Ms. Desai has again stressed on the point indirectly that how much it is vital for the woman of today to be financially independent and self-sufficient and self-assured. R. K. Shrivastava, in this relation, rightly comments:
40. The man - woman relationship become more important due to rapid industrialisation, growing awareness among women of their rights and individualities, and westernisation of attitudes and lives of the people (p. XXVI).

While, Tara is meek, feeble and weak willed, thus succumbing entirely to her husband’s wishes but even her choice is not that bad. Tara’s matrimony does succeed and along with her husband, not only she is able to continue with her marriage but also is able to unite with her lost sister and brother.

Apart from the main characters, Clear Light of Day covers several burning issues like the traumas and the crisis at the time of Partition, the pathetic lives of average Indians in the form of Mishra family, the typicality of Old Delhi, and the most traditional relationship of husband and wife which has been viewed from different prospects in this novel. But, most importantly, Clear Light of Day is an effective saga which dwells on existentialist theme of time with reference to relations to eternity. In this regard, Dr. S. P. Swain comments:

41. In this fourth dimensional novel, Desai endeavours to fathom the depths of time as destroyer and as preserver, mirroring the vicissitudes, distortions, and manifestations that the two realities -
past and present – bring about in the identity of the characters (p. 51).

In Clear Light of Day, it is also noteworthy that for the first time, Ms. Desai has dealt with the theme of alienation in a different way. Here the main cause of alienation is not related to psychic illness which was the case in her other novels such as Cry, the Peacock, Voices in the City and Where Shall We go this Summer? But, here alienation comes from the emotional callousness operating within the domestic ambience of silence.
As Dr. S. P. Swain comments:

42. Alienation in Clear Light of Day finds expression in the to and fro shuttling of the characters between the past and the present, tradition and modernity. In this novel, alienation leads to identification which is symbolised by the “clear light of day” and the novel nevertheless ends in a positive note (p. 62).

Thus, it could be said that the action of the novel is a beautiful depiction of the affinity between art and life, between the alienated anguish of a thwarted motherhood and the searing pangs of a widowed existence in the form of Mira Masi, between movement and stillness and the fragmentation and incompleteness, between the human identity of the characters and their fictional identity and their alienation with reference to
the dimension of time and the haunting past which has enwrapped their present wholly. The renewal of identity which is evident in Bim’s attempt of transcending her past identity when she mocks Tara:

43. *Do you know anyone who would*. . . *secretly, sincerely, in his inner most self... really really prefer to return to childhood (p. 14)?*

And ultimately, the transformation of Bim into a mother like figure absorbing all the negativity yet saying nothing while on the other hand, Mishra sister representing a clash of values who cannot get rid of their past nor can completely accept present are basically the manifestations of the accentuating of past and present into isolation and self – estrangement of the characters in *Clear Light of Day*.

Ultimately, it could be said that *Clear Light of Day* is a highly rhythmical novel concentrating its attention on two brothers and two sisters living in Old Delhi, thus revealing an enervating scenario of passions and personal traumas, love and sacrifice, death and betrayal, anger and accusation along with the mental agony of a young woman trapped in the pattern of movement and stillness which has been musically orchestrated in the novel. As Dr. S. P. Swain comments:

44. *The novel carries the pattern of a musical*
composition. It sets off with the song of the koel and concludes with the song of the old master, thus suggesting a fusion of the rhythms of life, both natural and human. Time bound existence is juxtaposed with timeless existence. Here again there is a creative tension between polarities, between death – themes and life – themes, with harmonious arohas (rise) and avrohas (fall) (p. 63).

REFERENCES

5. Ibid
6. Ibid
7. Ibid
8. Ibid
10. Ibid
11. Ibid
12. Ibid
13. Ibid
15. Ibid
17. Ibid
18. Ibid


22. Ibid


24. Ibid
25. Ibid
27. Ibid
28. Ibid
29. Ibid
30. Ibid
31. Ibid
32. Ibid
33. Ibid
34. Ibid

35. Ibid


37. Anita Desai, Research Scholar (English) (Chapra: Jai Prakash University, Bihar)


6. FASTING, FEASTING

INTRODUCTION

Nominated for the *Booker Prize* for the year 2000 and one of the most haunting novels of the present times, *Fasting, Feasting* by Anita Desai can easily be called the summary of all her novels so far written. The novel is beautifully designed with the themes of alienation and familial relationships in such a way that specially, in this particular novel, they are simply inseparable. By *Fasting, Feasting*, Desai makes a comeback to her favourite theme of familial structure. The novel concentrates its attention entirely on a family comprising of parents, two sisters — one married and one unmarried, and one brother. This family is nothing but the compilation of an unfeeling husband and his over sensitive wife in *Cry, the Peacock*, two sisters and one brother struggling for survival in *Voices in the City*, a middle aged, sensitive woman sick of the hustle – bustle of the metropolitan cultural life in *Where Shall We go this Summer?*, two entirely opposite sisters coming together with one mentally deranged and one utterly selfish brother in *Clear Light of Day* and an isolated old woman with her wild and psychopath grandchild in *Fire on the Mountain*. 
Fasting, Feasting is an emotion packed novel which deals with the theme of alienation, family and escape in a rather different manner. The novelist has told us that due to an unsuccessful familial relationship, an individual can feel alone even in the crowd of his own people like that of Arun but it is also vital that the reason of this alienation is also his own inefficiencies like that of Uma and Melanie. Its essentially a novel which haunts its readers right deep into the heart. As Dr. Pamela Oliver comments:

1  Fasting, Feasting, as the editors’ blurb points out,
“cuts right to the heart of the family life in two cultures” – an apparently close – knit family life in a provincial town on the gangetic plains and a plastic representation of it in the suburbs of Massachusetts (p. 247).

The novel is divided into two parts. While, the first part discusses a typical Indian familial structure, the second part is dedicated to the Western familial structure whose condition is more or less the same like ours.

There are various problematic relationships discussed in the novel. These problematic relationships are:
1) **Husband – wife relationship.**

2) **Parents – children relationship.**

3) **Brother – sister relationship.**

4) **Sister – sister relationship.**

5) **An individual’s relationship with the society.**

1) **Husband – wife relationship.**

It’s said that “marriages are made in heaven” but unfortunately, the outcomes of several marriages doubt this saying and provokes an individual to rethink about this statement. *Fasting, Feasting* is a novel which concentrates on the theme of marriage rather deeply with reference to the modern urban culture. The novel concentrates on four marriages at a time. The first marriage is the marriage of Arun, Uma and Aruna’s parents which is an example of a typical marriage where the female submits at every level to her husband. Although, there is a depiction of submission, their marriage is also a beautiful example of 90% Indian marriages where after a certain period of time, husband and wife don’t remain separate identities but become one:

2. *Mama and Papa, MamaPapa, PapaMama. It was hard to believe that had ever had separate existence that they had been separate entities and not Mama Papa in one breath* (p. 5).
Its hard to find that between the two, whose identity is crushed and whose is dominated. Or rather who is the victim and who is the victimiser? However, things are not as simple too as they appear since, this is not at all a simple story of a traditional wife succumbing always to her husband’s wishes. Sometimes, she reacts also and is not to be relegated at any cost by an over domineering husband:

3. *When visitors came and enquired after their health one of them would reply in the first and sometimes third person singular, but the answer was made on Behalf of both of them. If Papa gave his opinion... Mama said nothing because he had spoken for her too. When Mama spoke... Papa made assenting grunts because his thoughts were one with hers.*

Their opinion differed rarely (p.p. 13 – 14).

But there are also moments when the two of them differ, like the pregnancy of mother which she didn’t want but her husband wanted since he badly needed a son after two daughters. Hence, when Arun was born he:

4. *appeared to be the glue that held them together even more inextricably* (p. 30).

The birth of Arun rekindled the relationship of his parents since his coming to this world was an achievement for his parents:
5. He (Papa) had not only made her his wife, he had made her the mother of his son. What honour what status...She had matched Papa's achievement, you could say, and they were now more equal than ever. Was this love? Uma wondered disgustedly, was this romance (p. 31)?

In this regard, Andrew Robinson points out:

6. In Papa and Mama, the Indian parents, she (Anita Desai) creates two monsters of almost Gothic proportions, locked into inseparable marital disharmony, determined to inflict on their two daughters and only son every ounce of the prejudices and disappointments of their own lives, as a respectable barrister and his wife in an undistinguished town (p. 39).

Thus, here we come across a successful marriage which in spite of some storms and thunders has managed to survive so far. But the second marriage is not that lucky since that was the marriage of Uma. In the form of Uma's marriage, Ms. Desai has brought up the most burning issue of the modern society – the marriage of daughters to a right person. In a country like India, where marriage enjoys the most important position, marriages of girls become an essential part of their lives. Thus, to avoid
comments from society, the moment, parents find some suitable groom at the surface level, they get their daughter engaged to him and later get her married with him, unable to observe various possibilities which could be fatal also in the near future. Such a thing is witnessed in *Fasting, Feasting* where Uma after two unsuccessful attempts to get married, is married by her parents to a groom who appeared to be suitable for her at the surface level. However, things proved entirely opposite when Uma discovered that he is already married and thus, had to return home in permanent disgrace, never to go back, with entire dowry lost.

While, the third marriage is of Aruna, Uma’s sister whose marriage is quite similar to the marriages of Monisha, Maya and Sita. However, Aruna is able to hide her sorrows in the form of a:

7. determined self - assertion, a kind of steely determination - a dogged ambition (p. 84).

But the inner self of Aruna longs for a perfect world. Like Maya of *Cry, the Peacock*, she aches for recognition and perfection. The longing of a perfect world where everything is perfectly at its place is basically the desire of all sensitive females but unfortunately, this is something which can only be dreamt but never achieved. In *Fasting, Feasting*, Aruna’s longing for a perfect world is, however in curtains, comparing to other works like *Cry, the Peacock*, where the same desire of everything being right provoked Maya to kill Gautama, or *Voices in the City* where the absence of such world made Monisha commit suicide or *Where Shall We*
go this Summer? where the ache for the same perfection led Sita to fly to an unknown island, Manori.

Aruna in Fasting, Feasting has a vision of a perfect world which provokes her to correct herself even in trivial things thus, disturbing her household and herself too on which Uma, her sister reflects:

8. ...was this the realm of ease and comfort for which Aruna had always pined and that some might say she had attained? Certainly it brought her no pleasure; there was always a crease of discontent between her eyebrows and an agitation that made her eyelids flutter, disturbing Uma who noticed it (p. 109).

Aruna’s life appears to be nothing but an illusion of a happily married life, as Dr. Pamela Oliver comments:

9. though, Aruna appears to have made a successful life, she has not, as Uma discovers, escaped the tangle of family conflict with its constant demands and pressures (p. 253).

However, the worst husband–wife relationship is that of Anamika who is the worst victim of an ill-fated marriage resulting in her untimely death. Anamika, who is the cousin of Uma is basically the victim of a patriarchal system. Anamika is the beautiful imagination of Ms. Desai who is:
10. simply lovely as a flower is lovely, soft, petal-skinned bumblebee eyed, pink - lipped....with a good nature like a radiance about her...

cool, poised, mannerly and graceful...... ( p. 67 –68 ).

The description of Anamika in **Fasting, Feasting** is perhaps the most exclusive description in the novels written by Ms. Desai so far, since, never before we find such a beautiful description of her characters. However, it is quite evident that Ms. Desai is suggesting that even the concept of “beauty with brains” is a big failure as far as institution of marriage is concerned. In **Fasting, Feasting**, Anamika along with her beauty, is highly talented, someone who wins a scholarship at Oxford yet is not sent abroad instead, her qualifications become the plus points in the marriage market thus getting her married to a so called suitable guy with whom her relationship proves to be an absolute failure. The brilliant and beautiful Anamika is simply obliterated by the institution of marriage, relegated to the kitchen by her husband for her in laws, never permitted even to attend the family functions, beaten, sexually abused by her husband, and ultimately burnt to ashes.

Thus, here is the example of a modern marriage which promises a heaven when seen from a distance but which gives a worst hell when entered into.
2) Parents–children relationship.

In a traditional Indian family, son is the most precious and the most desirable person. Ms. Desai attacks the very same typical Indian mentality by depicting Arun as a late child who wasn’t needed really by his mother but was eagerly awaited by his father so as to carry on the traditions and generations of the family. Due to this extra attention, many times the Gifted Son fails to come up to the expectations of his parents and become abnormal. Arun, the boy who comes late into the family, bringing a lot of elation and pride with him, proves to be a disappointment in many ways, like his preference of vegetarianism:

11. *Papa was confounded. A meat diet had one of the revolutionary changes brought about in his life, and his brother’s by their education. Raised among traditional vegetarians, their eyes had been opened to the benefits of meat along with that of cricket and the English language, the three were linked inextricably in their minds... now his own son, his one son, displayed this completely baffling desire to return to the ways of his forefathers, meek and puny men who had got nowhere in life. Papa was deeply vexed. (p. 32–33)*

Arun is a typical lonesome child who is pampered, always suffering from an endless procession of ills like mumps, measles, chickenpox, bronchitis, malaria, ‘flu, asthma, nose – bleeds and more. In
spite of that his parents are full of dreams for him and hence, his father has always insisted that he should pass his time in books rather than anything else. Thus, he is able to fulfil his father’s dreams by winning a place at an East Coast College in US, yet, he himself is so disgusted with everything, that he himself is drained of all feelings:

12. She (Uma) watched and searched for an expression, of relief, of joy, of doubt, fear, anything at all. But there was none. All the years of scholarly toil had worn down any distinguishing features Arun’s face might once have had. They had left the essentials: a nose, eyes, mouth, ears... There was nothing else— not the hint of a smile, frown laugh or anything: These had all been ground down till they had disappeared (p.12).

But, undoubteedly, Arun’s migration to U.S. is a dream come true for his parents, since according to them, their son would be able to get proper education there, but for Arun himself it is an elopement from the sugary web of his family. In the US, he has every intention of living alone, aloof and anonymous. His longing to stay alone is a manifestation of his being strangulated by the familial bonds, by the concern, affection and attention showered on him which is utterly unnecessary and many times burdensome:
13. ...he had at last experienced the total freedom of anonymity, the total absence of relations, of demands, needs, requests, ties, responsibilities commitments. He was Arun. He had no past, no family and no country (p. 172).

The reaction of Arun is basically a beautiful depiction of the fact that how the traditional and the most affectionate relationship of parents and children could be burdensome for either of them.

In _Fasting, Feasting_, Arun longs for loneliness which he ultimately gets in US but his sense of relief is short – lived since in a few days it is his Papa again who takes the decision for him to become the paying guest of Pattons who themselves have offered him a room, which is a:

14. _kind offer, generously made and not to be rejected_ (p. 175).

Again the nostalgia of past haunts Arun and he is filled up with disturbing memories:

15. _Arun was overcome by the sensation of his family laying its hands upon him, pushing him down into a chair at his desk, showing a textbook under his nose, catching that nose_
and making him swallow cod liver oil, spooning food into him, telling him; Arun, this, Arun, that, Arun, nothing but... (p. 175).

And once again, he is suffocated by the same kindness and affection.

16. So much kindness, so much 'goodness', how was he to defend himself? (p. 178)

Thus, Arun realises that his migration to US is not all an escape but a mere shift from one similar place to another similar place or the plastic transformation of the reality:

17. No, he had not escaped. He had travelled and he had stumbled into what was like a plastic representation of what he had known at home; not the real thing which was plain, unbeautiful, misshapen, fraught and compromised - but the unreal thing - clean, bright, gleaming, without taste, savour or nourishment (p. 185).

And that's the reason, when he gets exaggerated affection from Pattons, he runs away from there. Mrs. Patton, a shopaholic by nature taking an extra effort to make Arun feel at home:
18. She smiles a bright plastic copy of mother –
smile that Arun remembers from another
world and another time, a smile that is tight
at the corners with pressure, the pressure to
perform a role, to make him eat, make him
grow, make him worth all the trouble and
effort and expense... On the other side of
the world, he is caught up again in the

makes situations worse for Arun. Thus, the blurb of the text says:

19. Two different ways of assuaging human
hunger, desires and appetites are revealed
in this subtle sharp and poignant story, which moves from the hub of a close – knit
Indian household, with its traditional
obligations and impositions, its overpowering
warmth and sensual response, to the cool
centre of an American family, with its
freedoms; freezers and paradoxically self-
denying self – indulgence. In both, there are
victims- survivors (p. 27).

In fact, the end, which depicts Arun vomiting and getting out of
the house is the manifestation of his denial to the affection showered by
Pattons on him. Thus, here comes a strange case where an individual longs to be a part of the crowd instead of being alienated.

On the other hand, the relationship of Uma and Aruna with their parents is an ordinary relationship. While, Aruna rebels in the form of marrying a guy of her choice and ultimately, convincing everyone, including her parents, that she had made a right decision, Uma is the worst sufferer of the family. Rejected two times, and married once only for a fortnight, Uma’s life is a dismal failure and her existence is confined to:

20. the verandah, bedroom and kitchen of her parents. (p. 3)

Contrary to Arun, Uma has never been given any chance of escape hence, even, when there is a chance of escape, in the form of a job offered at the local hospital, she is not permitted by her parents to take it up. Yet in spite of all this dullness of life, she exhibits an astuteness and understanding and thus, is able to sense the relationship of children with their parents in a more matured manner:

21. the tightly knit fabric of family that had seemed so stifling and confining now revealed holes & gaps that were frightening – perhaps the fabric would not hold, perhaps it would not protect after all... (p. 86).
3) **Brother – sister relationship.**

In *Fasting, Feasting*, one doesn’t see a strong brother – sister relationship as in *Voices in the City*. The relationship of Arun with his sisters is quite an ordinary one. It’s not a relationship which has any kind of rivalry in it as it is in *Cry, the Peacock* nor it’s a special bond like that of *Voices in the City*. It’s a very simple relationship which is not much developed due to over influence of parents. Yet, Arun is able to understand his sisters and their feelings and therefore, when he meets Melanie in US who is Mrs. Patton’s daughter and who is equally desperate as Uma, he sees:

22. *... a resemblance to the contorted face of an enraged sister, who, failing to express her outrage against neglect, against misunderstanding, against in attention to her unique and singular being and its hingers, merely spits and froths in ineffectual protest.* (p. 214)

But, this is a fact that *Fasting, Feasting* nearly overlooks the relationship of brother – sister with almost no evidences of any type of rapport between them.
4) **Sister – sister relationship.**

Through Uma and Aruna, Desai has concentrated minutely on the feminine psyche. While, Uma represents millions of innocent females who become victims due to their innocence and simplicity, Aruna comes in the class of sensitive females who longs to be recognised and loved. There is a direct contrast between the two sisters. While, Aruna is a girl with strong determination and an immense will power to turn the tables to her side, Uma is an utter failure in whatever she does. Aruna is a winner all the way. While, Uma is quite unable to master the art of housekeeping, and keeps dropping and breaking things Aruna is a sharp contrast of her elder sister:

23. ***No one had to teach her to make samosas or***

*To help her to dress for an occasion.*

*Instinctively she knew all that… (p. 85).*

Unlike the relationship of Bim and Tara in *Clear Light of Day* which is essentially a relationship which in spite of having love, lacks feelings, the relationship between Uma and Aruna in *Fasting, Feasting* is full of feelings and that too, mixed feelings. There is rivalry, jealousy, sympathy, love, care, pity and concern. At the same time, there is also a mutual learning from each other’s mistakes like Aruna, on seeing Uma’s failed marriage is able to bring off her marriage:
24. *As was to be expected, she took her time, showed a reluctance to decide, played choosy, but soon enough made the wisest, most expedient choice – the handsomest, the richest, the most exciting of the suitors who presented themselves* (p.100).

However, when Aruna fails to hide her tears on trivial matters, it is Uma who feels pity for her and also a sense of grief enwraps her on seeing the pathetic situation of her sister who though appears happy and satisfied but is quite airy and distant at inner level. Such chemistry and equation shared by the two of the sisters is perhaps an effective portrayal of sisters’ relationships.

5) **An individual’s relationship with the society.**

*Fasting, Feasting* is a beautiful manifestation of an individual’s relationship with the society. The various characters of the novel depict in their own way how society plays its own role in their lives. Arun’s escape to US and then realising his inability to extricate himself from the webs of the family is basically an indication that how society rules the life of an individual anywhere whether in India or in the US. Relationships are always vital and one just cannot run from them. In this novel, Mama Papa, Pattons, Aruna, Arun, Uma, Melanie, all are caught up with no escape in the flux of society. But paradoxically, its Uma who survives and manages to keep a balance between the inner life and the outer life. Hearing Mira –
masi’s stories of Lord Krishna, the poet — saint Mira and Raja Harishchandra.

25. Uma, with her ears and even her fingertips tingling, felt that there was someone who could pierce through the dreary outer world to an inner world, tantalising in its colour and romance. If only it could replace this, Uma thought hungrily (p. 40).

In a society which essentially demands a lot of dedication towards itself from an individual expecting him / her to follow its rules and regulations entirely, the characters of Mama Papa, Aruna, Arun, Pattons are a misfit. On the contrary, it’s the feeble and the most incompetent Uma who not only fits herself with the trends but also is able to survive in spite of all odds which is so very much needed in the modern wasteland.
CONCLUSION

Ultimately, it could be said that *Fasting, Feasting* is a gripping saga which talks about familial relationships at a very deeper level providing us all the minute details of the modern society around us. But it is noteworthy, that apart from being a novel based on family, it is also a strong depiction of the study of feminine psyche, as Julia Leslie comments:

26. *it is a small deviation from the norm which may be crucial, perhaps the way the apparently negative is transformed into something positive and powerful (p. 36)*.

*Fasting, Feasting* is all about survival. The novel is a haunting saga of different females who though appear strong at the surface level succumb to the situations, while, on the other hand, females who appear to be feeble at the beginning are the real survivors in the end. While, females like Aruna, Anamika and Melanie, who in spite of all the talent, luck and freedom fall a victim to neglect and misunderstanding, it’s Uma who is able to transcend her disabilities and constraints at last to appear as the only survivor of the lot. Ms. Desai points out that it’s not the talent or hypersensitivity or freedom that ensures a good life or provides enough courage to survive but it’s the zeal for life which provokes an individual to stand in spite of all odds and here it should also be noted that the one who is feeble at the beginning or rather useless is more capable of fighting
and standing in the crowd than the others since as Ms. Desai herself points out:

27. *the murky water catches the blazes of sun* and flashes fire (p. 156).
REFERENCES


4) Ibid; p.30.

5) Ibid; p.31.

6) Ibid; p.39.

7) Ibid; p.84.


10) Ibid; p.67 – 68.

11) Ibid; p. 32 – 33.

12) Ibid; p.12.

13) Ibid; p.172.

14) Ibid; p.175.

15) Ibid; p.175.

16) Ibid; p.178.

17) Ibid; p.185.


20) Ibid; p.3.

21) Ibid; p.86.
22) Ibid; p.214.

23) Ibid; p.85.

24) Ibid; p.100.


CONCLUSION

From more than two decades of the last century, Anita Desai is a prominent name in the literary scene, mesmerising her readers and surprising her contemporaries with her flawless and deeply haunting works. Recognition has come to her in many ways and at several levels in the form of Sahitya Akademi Award and a couple of nominations for Booker Prize.

Here, the question arises that do the prizes alone confirm the literary genius of a writer? The answer is a big NO since in the case of Ms. Desai, her greatness is more dense than her prizes. The world of Ms. Desai is an intense world in which the characters grow with the growing up of India's freedom, they get affected by the partition and they try to stand in the maddening crowd of metropolis. Thus, here comes a family of four children and the changing equations between siblings who with the seasons come together and grow apart. Their reaction to urban violence, their sensitivity in an essentially hostile world and the actual experiences in their understanding of human life and relationships form the
blurb of the text of Ms. Desai. Whether, it's the haunting Cry, the Peacock, or the pathetic Voices in the City or the intense Where Shall We go this Summer? the theme in all these novels remain the same - the search of an identity in a world which has become entirely feeling-less and dead, which is a modern "Wasteland".

For Desai, solitude is vital like oxygen in an individual's life since it helps an individual in inward questioning. Privacy is directly linked with contemplation, intuition, visionary sense, and finally critical faculty, thus it forms the core of the life.

Ms. Desai certainly belongs to that minute group of writers who is well aware of the fact that for the purposes of fiction no human relationship is more fertile and potential than that in the family and specially among the kin. Hence, she doesn't make human relationships only of peripheral interest, rather she makes them the centre of her fictional concern. It is a known fact that the simplest of human relationships are the most complicated ones in the world. Relationships cannot be taken for granted, they are essentially based on emotions and
when there is an absence of emotions they result into a disharmony and
dissonance like the relationship of Maya and Gautama in Cry, the
Peacock, or the relationship of Monisha and Jiban in Voices in the City.
All these failed relationships are the outcomes of imbalance in familial
ties. Thus, it could be said that Anita Desai has proved her literary genius
by concentrating on the troubled identity and sensibility of an individual
in a typical Indian society which is a typical Indian phenomenon. Unlike
her contemporaries, Desai prefers to focus her attention on the journey
from the outer to inner part of human existence. In this relation, Dr.
Srinivas Iyengar observes:

1. 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. (p. 16)

Deeply influenced by writers like Woolf, Joyce, Hardy and Eliot, Ms.
Desai has largely concentrated her attention on the one-dimensionality
of her characters though many times, her characters are found boring
enough for her readers but here what is significant in all her characters is
that they are constantly moving in their existential and socio-psychic
import. Her main objective is to depict the psychological state of her
characters at the time of crisis.
In order to view Ms. Desai in a better prospective, its essential to view her through her characters. In a contemporary society, an individual emerges clearly as a fragmentary one which is so prominent in the characters of Ms. Desai. The characters of Ms. Desai are deeply engrossed in the discovery of their inner selves. They are trying to break their hidden shells either through expiation or by re – assessing themselves. Through self analysis, they are trying to find out their place in society and their recognition as separate individuals. In the process of the job of self – assessment, they come close to the job of scientist who tries and tries to find out and rather explore the utility of a substance without getting any idea of how to do it. But the process of self analysis is a synonym of self – destruction since in discovering the self, either the self is destroyed or changed. Human psychology doesn’t accept its faults easily, thus, when an individual tries to evaluate himself, his flaws become increasingly clear and then, he desperately tries to suppress them and change them finding various excuses for change but while, doing so, he complete destroys his own identity and his true individuality. Basically, most of the times, this fact is ignored that wholeness doesn’t imply completeness but it does imply integration of all the elements which come together to constitute a whole and construct a pattern which is unique in itself and lastly, it provides some encouragement to sanity. Self analysis means self awareness not self exploration. In Desai’s novels, her characters try to attain wholeness by sticking to their privacy, not letting themselves to open with others and explore a new world of happiness.
In Indian society, where family values and ties have the most important place in a family, various writers have portrayed their characters submissive enough to sacrifice themselves for their respective families. Though they do have their moments of loneliness but they do manage to change themselves instead of erecting themselves much strongly as individuals. This fact is evident in the works like *Music for Mohini* by Bhabhni Bhattacharya, *Inside the Haweli* by Geeta Mehta and *A Suitable Boy* by Vikram Seth. But here, the question arises, do such a sacrifice is really needed in a relationship? There is no doubt that any relationship does require some sacrifices and adjustments for one another but changing the whole identity for the sake of running any relationship is certainly not required. In the present society which is essentially traditional and Indian, unfortunately, the most traditional relationship of marriage has become a synonym of more than 100% adjustments on the part of girl alone thus, destroying the whole thread of such a beautiful relationship and perhaps, that’s the reason, that the percentage of separations, divorces and unhappy marriages is increasing day by day.

In the novels of Anita Desai, one finds the traditional relationships in their worst form. There are hardly any happy marriages in her works except a couple of relationships. Apart from these sour relationships, Desai has also given a lot of importance to the reaction of a sensitive individual to a sour relationship and thus we find Maya killing Gautama in *Cry, the Peacock*, Monisha committing suicide in *Voices in the City*, Sita eloping to an alien island in *Where Shall We go this*
Summer?, Raka setting fire to the forest in Fire on the Mountain, Bim remaining a spinster in Clear Light of Day and Arun vomiting in Fasting, Feasting. All these characters are basically the victims of bad familial relationships which destroy them like anything at the end. Here in this relation, it is noteworthy that the female characters of Ms. Desai are not entirely cut off from the society, but they are within the familial and social ties but they are also the women who living inside the orbit, protest against monotony, injustice and humiliation. They are aggressive and self realising individuals and though they shares their names with goddesses (Sita, Uma, Raka) they are real, very much real with all their shortcomings and negativity and insanity. They are mostly emotional orphans coming from a fractured or highly emotionally maimed families. In this relation, Jasbir Jain comments:

2. .. they (the protagonists) either disown or are disowned by their families. Maya’s only memory of her mother in Cry, the Peacock is the photograph on her father’s desk. (p. 134); the Ray children in Voices in the City, all four of them, are alienated in different degrees from their mother, their only surviving parent, as well as from their father, who is now dead, Sita’s mother in Where Shall We go this Summer? had run away from home leaving her children to the care of a father whose concerns lie outside the
family, Sita had imagined she came into world motherless. A similar withdrawal, from her parents, is there on part of Sarah in Bye—Bye Blackbird, who by marrying an Indian, has at one stroke, placed herself outside the family and the cultural situation. The children in Clear Light of Day resent the long absences of their parents and are aware only of their exists and entrances... (p. 113–114)

The protagonists of Ms. Desai are socio—psychic rebels, recalcitrant themselves finding it difficult to compromise with the milieu and the society whose values and ideals are entirely degenerated. Here the self frantically revolts to go to another world but the other world is also equally disturbing and disheartening.

The main concern of Ms. Desai is how an individual can deal with the familial relationships with reference to the society without losing his own identity and individuality. Thus, in dealing with the psyche of the characters, their motivations, their identities, their compulsions she moves along the labyrinthine inner reality so as to capture the inner cord which would help her in saving the identity of her character in a hostile world.
Thus, it could be said that the changing familial relationships are never so haunting and never so appealing before the works of Ms. Desai. Relationships are the most vital things in the world since they only give an individual an identity and that essential support and companionship which is badly needed for a healthy growth but at the same time, it is relationships only which also destroys an individual. Such growing and destroying relationships are beautifully depicted by Ms. Desai in her novels.

Ultimately, it could be said that the genius of Ms. Desai is undoubtedly the most appealing in the literary strata of Indian English fiction. In spite of some short comings like the repetition of the portrayal of characters and the similar themes in almost all the novels, it cannot be ignored that the changing familial relationships are the points of focus in her works thus, provoking her readers to re – think about the changing emotionless society and thus returning to the very core of sensibility with a touch of sensitivity and sentimentality.
REFERENCES
