CHAPTER-V

EXISTENTIAL DILEMMA
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Existentialism is a modern philosophical movement. It deals with man’s disillusionment and despair. The doctrines to which the term has been applied are in fact very various, but a number of common themes may be identified. The first is primacy of the individual, and of individual choice over systems and concepts which attempt to explain him or her. Existentialism sees freedom of choice as the most important fact of human existence. According to Sartre, consciousness of our own freedom is the sign of ‘authentic experience’. Kafmann calls it a “timeless sensibility that can be discerned here and there in the past.”¹ In the writings of the exponents of existentialism it develops:

A powerful revolt against reason, rationality, positivism and the traditional ways in which early philosophers portrayed man.... Man’s autonomy, assertion of his subjective self, his flouting of reason and rationality, his denial of traditional values, institutions and philosophy, his exercise of ‘will’ and ‘freedom’ and his experience of the absurdity and the ‘nothing-ness’ of life...²

Anita Desai like other existentialists shows concerns for the predicament of men and women. As a matter of fact in Desai’s novels, the existence of any character is blocked due to the obsessive role of the society. Man works for his existence in the society but it nullifies and thwarts his efforts. Aspects of existentialism are the frameworks of Anita’s novels. Her emphasis is on “the alienation of man from an ‘absurd’ world, his consequent estrangement from “normal” society, and his recognition of the
world as negative and meaningless... a life complex enough to make him obsessed “the one alone”³ seems to be a favourite subject of Desai. *Cry, The Peacock* is a remarkable novel, which depicts existentialism in its deep-seated morbidity through Maya’s search for an individual identity. She always pines for companionship. Here is an explosive life of incommunication. Her loneliness, her aching heart and the progressive disorientation of self make her an existential character. It makes her aware “of the loneliness of time, and the impossible vastness of space.”⁴ Maya is a motherless girl. She enjoys a prosperous and happy childhood with her father; but she always feels a void and a need for the mother in her life. So she always dreams of love which fills her mind with imagination, phantasy and nostalgia. After marriage with Gautama, Maya “expects some emotional and physical satisfaction in married life.”⁵

Contrary to the expectations of Maya, her husband has a mechanical attitude towards life. Because of their different mental make up, Maya and Gautama do not share anything at emotional level. Even on a physical level, they hardly enjoy any spontaneity. In their temperaments and attitude of life, the two are completely opposite to each other. An average evening for Maya is hardly more than a “quiet, formal waiting.”⁶ Their married life is punctuated all along by “matrimonial silences”⁷ and Gautama’s “hardness … his coldness and incessant take of cups of tea and philosophy.”⁸ Engrossed in his busy schedule, Gautama continues to ignore Maya’s needs, remaining callously immune even to her physical desires. This is how Maya usually suffers the agony of her unfulfilled desire.

Bitterly disappointed with Gautama, Maya has no one or nothing to turn to. The intense yearning for communication is combined with a
resigned acceptance that no meaningful communication is possible across the yawning gulf in attitudes, no bridge to overcome his overweening male superiority: “Dared I go in? Beg for comfort? Confess to my loneliness and my terror of loneliness? Useless, hopeless.” Once she suggests to Gautama to take her to south, as she wants “to see the Kathakali dances.” Gautama’s response is as lackadaisical and placid as ever: “If that is your only reason for wanting to go all that way south, I suggest you wait till a Kath kali troupe comes to give a performance in Delhi.” To a world of phantasy and illusion she vainly hopes to associate with Gautama. The attempt of self-assertion fails ultimately but the awareness and attitude of constant questioning is by itself of great significance. Maya always asks questions about life and seeks to elicit some meaning from existence.

The physical, mental and emotional separation torments Maya who struggles in a pursuit to relate to Gautama. They live in a loveless cage of marriage in which Maya’s emotional urges usually get defeated by Gautama’s rudely philosophical gibberish. Maya groans under the weight of Gautama’s wisdom as he often quotes from the Gita to prove to her his intellectual superiority. When Maya demands from him his love for her, Gautama resorts to a bewilderingly frigid explanation of a matter that needs tender, emotional treatment:

Love? Love that is without any ambition, without any desire, without any life expects that which keeps it alive burning...: remain detached-untouched.

It looks painfully comic and absurd to be told how to be a ‘Yogi’ or ‘Sannyasi’ and to achieve ‘detachment’ when what one craves for are the conjugal love and an emotional fulfilment with a natural, mutual attachment.
This stolid and philosophical speech in fact underlines the predicament of Maya and Gautama. This creates in her anxiety: “In psychological findings, if the level of anxiety pierces the unconscious level of human psyche, it makes a person to keep apart what actually belongs to him together... the separation of idea and emotion.”

Maya’s utter loss of hold on her senses and reality makes her a prey to hallucinations and delusions. Concerning them James C. Coleman observes: “Delusions are irrational beliefs.... Hallucinations are perceptions of various kinds of strange objects and events without any appropriate ‘external’ sensory stimuli.”

Delusion in Maya’s case finds expression in her obsession with the Albino and his prediction.

In the daytime, amidst companions I could force myself into believing that it was only a nightmare, no more.

The disenchantment and disillusionment of Maya exist in Albino prophecy. Maya, without any external stimuli, hears a sort of rhythm and the beats of drums, which become louder and louder with her increasing insanity. It is auditory hallucinations followed by visual hallucinations. All these make her a psychosis patient. Due to it she develops a negative approach towards life and finds its entire essence as useless and nothing less: “All order is gone out of my life.” The phrase “grew thin, worn” shows her inner anxiety of the mind. Maya unconsciously fears that “even the youngest freshest generation was touched by it and had no hope of survival.”

She dreams and her dreams become her fear psychosis. In her dreams she reaches to an unknown world-a bizarre world in which:

... a row of soft, shaggy, frail footed bears shamble through a dance.... The bears are rendered into a lonely, hounded herd of gentle, thoughtful visitors from a
forgotten mountain land, and the gibbering, cavorting human beings are seen as monsters from some prehistoric age, gabbling and gesticulating, pointing at their genitals, turning their backs and raising their tails, with stark madness in their faces.\textsuperscript{18}

The sexual images in the novel are quite prominent as they reveal the ungratified desires of Maya, which aggravate her agony. This bizarre world of animals world symbolizes sexual obsessions of Maya.

Significantly, the symbol of the dance of peacock merge with the symbol of Shiva’s dance which is used at the end of the novel before the final catastrophe. The meaning becomes clear when Maya views the peacock’s dance as the dance of death, which symbolizes death and also liberation and freedom for her tortured psyche. Maya identifies herself completely with the peacocks and hears her own fate in their agonizing call for love and death. Maya’s obsession with death leads her to think, that “It was now to be either Gautama, or I.”\textsuperscript{19} She finally decides for Gautama, who will not miss life, for he is already ‘detached’ and indifferent to it. Gautama never cares for her womanly fulfilment. In the company of Gautama her womanhood remains unfulfilled and her own existence as wife also. Maya lives in this “mortal agony”, in the duality of life and death; illusion and reality and she fail to reconcile them. She fails because she has a partial vision of the objective world-a world devoid of the existence of other human beings and perceived through the senses. The duality of Maya’s existence continues till the end of the novel.

Anita Desai has herself said that her second novel \textit{Voices in The City} exemplifies “the terror of facing single handed, the ferocious assaults of
existence.” 20 Apparently the novel is a very realistic depiction of the plight of Nirode, Monisha and Amla in the metropolis of Calcutta. But at the symbolic level, the novel deals meticulously with the existential problem of coming to the various facts of life as the infertile and dreary atmosphere of ‘monster’ city of Calcutta impinges herself on their sensibilities. All these characters undergo existential crises. They are questers, looking for a proper vocation. Nirode strives to find life in self-abnegation, Monisha searches it in privacy, and both fail. Amla turns to art and realizes that losing one’s self is not an answer to life. Mother, on the other hand, has already fought an extended battle vis-à-vis her relation with her husband and children. These characters wage war against the adverse social forces. Calcutta which shelters them is one of the factors which deter their future progression and “this city, this city... conspires against all who wish to enjoy it, doesn’t it?”21 Meena Belliappa’s remark regarding this is:

In *Voices In The City* an attempt is made, perhaps for the first time in Indian fiction, to relate the subjective word of the individual to the spirit of a locale.22

Life in Calcutta is one of horror. There is not any existence to anyone. Anyone who has breathed the air of this city is sure to be doomed. The description of the city life is metaphorical. As Nirode explains that life moves slowly and people are interested merely in their own things. The city is aptly symbolized by Kali, the goddess of death, who is universally worshipped. The paramountacy of Kali makes this vision of life as one of horror and death, the goddess ultimately taking everyone into her jaws. Even in the beginning of the novel, Nirode feels night marish by the cruel rebuffs of the city: “Striding off the bridge into the coagulated blaze of light and
sound and odour that was the city of Calcutta.” The environment of Calcutta is not in accord with Nirode’s temperament. He seeks to exist here; but he realizes the reality of situation which subverts his identity in this city: “Society must have some kind of guilt complex about us after all- As for clothes, I haven’t needed any for a long time now.” Nirode thinks that the success that leads one to the top of the ladder is ultimately going to be a step that leads down it. He shows the futility of the struggle in publishing the magazine Voice that will ultimately bring him failure, poverty, misery. He wants to explore the deeper reality face to face:

Then I want to see if I have the spirit to start moving again, towards my next future. I want to move from failure to failure step, by step to rock bottom.25

Because of his deep sense of failure and frustration, he wants to see beyond happiness and suffering: “Happiness, suffering- I want to be done with them, disregard them, see beyond them to the very end.”26 But being a rootless character drifting directionlessly, shifting from one goal to another, Nirode is finally faced with a void, a sense of emptiness: “we do not have even that consolation and our worst agonies come to an end one day.”27 He experiments with failure like a true existential hero. Wearied by his own unsureness, “He swept back and forth like a long weed undulating under water, a weed that could live only in aqueous gloom, would never rise and spring into clear day light.”28 His existential search for meaning and value in life ends in emptiness and bankruptcy.

Another character is Monisha who comes to Calcutta with her husband for her womanly fulfillment. But her wishes remain unfulfilled. She tries her existence as woman, but fails due to the blocked tube of her ovary.
She thinks that there is no existence of being mother in the society. She finds herself as “the mere triciousness, the rapacity, and the uneasy lassitude of conscience.”29 This trauma of motherlessness pierces into her unconscious mind without any outward shriek. She loses her existence in oblivion: “I will be invisible yet.”30 She suffers an unbearable treatment in her husband’s house following the mores of a traditional Indian Society. Monisha lives such a life which she describes as “non-existence.”31 She belongs to a family that yet refuses to recognize the fact that she is an integral part of it, and faces some kind of an existential problem of being divided between belonging and not belonging to the family and to the world. Monisha’s mean existence leads her to think that death is the only alternative to her agonized living, to her “confused despair”:

The family here, and their surroundings tell me such a life cannot be lived... and mean existence, and that surely is not a difficult choice.32

Monisha feels a negative rush of emotions in her mind. She always craves for those human passions which should not ravage “the soul, body and being” and being so disillusioned and disenchanted for her existence she says that “I should remain alone, apart and enclosed within myself, beyond their touch....”33 She has confusion for her future existence. She finally prepares herself for death:

Here it was, on her eyes, her face, and here it came-there. All over – with her arms she wrestled with it, she fought it, it was not what she wanted- she screamed No! No! No! Screamed, screamed. Fell unconscious very quickly fell unconscious.34
Monisha thus dies a miserable way.

In *Bye-Bye Blackbird*, we notice Desai’s existentialist concern rooted in expatriate experience. Ostensibly concerned with the lives of Indian immigrants in England, the novel explores the existentialist problems of alienation, adjustment, rootedness and the final decision in the lives of the three major characters – Dev, Adit and Sarah. Though Kamla Markandaya’s *The Nowhere Man* and Desai’s *Bye-Bye, Blackbird* deal with a somewhat similar themes, the problem of Indian immigrants in England and the individual’s quest for identity.

Sarah goes through the agony of loss of identity silently but the suffering and strain leaves it writ large on her face. She is a victim of cultural schizophrenia having no command over these two charades. She has to play different roles - Sarah, Mrs. Sen. Sarah the Head’s secretary sending out the bills and taking in the cheques and when she has none to play, she feels she is nobody. Here is Sarah an existential character grappling to grasp her real identity: “Staring out of the window at the chimney pots and the clouds, she wondered if Sarah has any existence at all…”35 Adit also realizes it to be an anguish of loneliness and feels it “absurd to call her by any name: she had become nameless; she had shed her name as she had shed ancestry and identity and sat there staring as though she watched them disappear.”36 Sarah is overwhelmed by the change because she can not fully involve herself in her husband’s culture, nor can she adopt herself to her own society. Sarah’s dual estrangement comes, not from social transformation within her society but from a cross-cultural relation of her own choice.

Problems arise for Sarah as she finds herself inadequate to her own British society; and her Indian culture is insufficient. To mention Indian and
her Indian husband to her English friends is an identity that she does not herself feel to be her own. She is given to self-questioning. Who was she - Mrs. Sen, married to an Indian or Mrs. Sen, the efficient secretary? Sarah feels trapped between these two selves and wishes to get out of them.

Her self-identity is not fully recognized because she is only acting her roles. She wishes to discard the masks and be her true and sincere self. She does not mind which identity she adopts- British or Indian – She wants it to be genuine. She wonders, “if she would ever be allowed to step off the stage, leave the theatre and enter a real world- whether English or Indian, she did not care, she wanted only its sincerity, its truth.”37 but she can not even separate her two selves as they are intermingled, “if only she were allowed to keep her one role apart from the other, one play from the other, she would not feel so cut and slashed into living, bleeding pieces. Apart, apart. The enviable, cool, clear, quiet state of apartness.”38 Like an existentialist she tries to know her real identity. She questions herself “who was she?”39

The insubstantial nature of Sarah’s carefully built life is brought out in sea image: “But unreality had swamped the paper walls of her fort, turning them soggy, making the pages float away on dim waves.”40 Sarah feels the two selves in her, the English self and the Indian one, are only “frauds, each had a large shadowed elements of charade about it”41 and “her face was only mask, her body a costume, where was Sarah?”42 These identity crises coupled with an element of theatricality and unreality sweep over the life of Sarah.

Sarah’s alienation, her sense of inadequacy and her inner struggle are projected rather powerfully in dream symbol:
She had dreamt she was borne upon the back of a mighty water mammoth that suddenly rose out of its underwater lair to start burrowing and digging through banks of black mud that flow, back into her face no matter how she fought it off, protesting and very nearly choked her.\textsuperscript{43}

The “water mammoth” represents her past which surfaces again and again accusing her of her betrayal of her English ‘self’. It is also significant that she had this dream in her mother’s house, which is irrevocably English. Her mother’s house and the sight of childhood toys work upon her subconscious self and being to surface her guilt of betrayal as well as her emotional turmoil. She can reject her past but even her ‘present’ is not truthful or authentic. When Adit decides to leave for India, Sarah is engulfed in uncertainties whether to adopt or not adopt Indian identity. There is suspicion and doubt in her mind if Adit would help her to emerge out of her alienation, if he would be able “to lift her and to transport her to a land where she would regain warmth and personality.”\textsuperscript{44} At last, Sarah realizes the demand of her situation that she will have to forget her cultural identity in order to adopt a new culture and undergo a completely new experience. Although it is painful to say good-bye to her “English-self”, there is a firm hope that she will “come to life” in India; it would be a “new a different personality.”\textsuperscript{45}

An immigrant usually passes through the phase of attraction, rejection and frustration as in the case of Adit. Through Dev, Anita Desai captures the psychic journey of an Indian immigrant. The sight of beggars in the London streets shocks him: “One expects them in India. But here beggars!”\textsuperscript{46} He feels a strange sort of schizophrenia, faced with the dilemma as to whether
he should stay on in England or return to his homeland: “The bewildered alien, the charmed observer, the outraged outsider...” He feels “a tumult inside him, a growing bewilderment.” He is caught in the ironic “double net” of his existence, Adit who is filled with a passionate homesickness. Nostalgia inacquires a dreadful dimension of an illness, an ache. Like an existentialist, he comes to consider himself to be a stranger, a non-belonger in England. He moves about in London in a kind of morbid search belongingness. Anita Desai observes:

I don’t think anybody’s exile from society can solve any problem... that is why exile has never been my theme.  

Ironically, notwithstanding all his appraisal, his worship and trust of England in liberty and individualism, he realizes that England can provide him neither of these. Wherever he goes, he becomes a victim of racial discrimination and apartheid and is constantly regarded as not only a second grade citizen, but also an intruder and consequently to stand in a separate lavatory queue for Asiatic or to be called “wog” in his irresistible destiny and he has to get on with it as long as he wishes to stay in England. As Dev and Adit explain his helplessness:

That boy at the bus stop - he called us wogs. You heard him. You heard him.  

At the close of novel, Adit now intends to break his ties with England and link his present with the past of India. He “packed his briefcase rolled up the times and left the house, shaking his hand...” Sarah loses her English-self. She follows her husband to India. She is baffled for her future existence: “English, she whispered, and then her instinctive reaction was to clutch at something and hold on to what was slipping through her finger’s
already."  

Where Shall We Go This Summer? is Desai’s shortest existential novel. She voices “the ferious assaults of existence” through her recurrent favourite existential theme of husband-wife alienation. An anguished soul, Sita is fed up with the dreary metropolitan Bombay. Her father-fixation hinders her contact with her husband. She feels a frog out of water in her father-in-laws “age-rotted flat” where they all live like pariahs “a life of subhuman placidity, calmness and sluggishness....” Sita is uncertain of her own self, little knowing which half of her life is real and which unreal-past and present.

Sita like Stephen Dedalus in Portrait of the Artist as a young man, chooses three things “exile, silence and cunning.” She ultimately rejects the values of her husband and has resolved to go to Manori island as a kind of self-exile in her search for identity in silence and in her revival of the past. Sita has her vision to fulfill on the island: “She had come here in order not to give birth.... She has come on a pilgrimage to beg for the miracle of keeping her baby unborn.”

The author makes psychoanalysis of Sita’s mind and some situation, the eagle-crows fight, which testifies to Sita’s conflict with her husband and her struggle for supremacy at a deeper psychological level. The symbolic situation of the eagle-crows fight reveals very subtle personality clash between Sita and Raman. Sita is the eagle and Raman is symbolized as the crows that attack the helpless eagle “lay struggle in a mound of rust on the ledge that jutted out below their balcony.” Sita’s desperate effort to save the eagle from the attack of the crows whose “scimitar beaks” pierce the

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eagle is her fight against masculine values represented by her husband. Again the “scimitar beaks” are a symbol of phallus, and the attack of the crows with them is suggestive of male chauvinism unleashed against the feminine instinct, when her sons who supply her with a “long handled brush” and “a toy gun” are symbols of mother-son incestuous relationship and mother with her sons against the father. The eagle has been eaten by the crows, suggests the future course of Sita’s action following her defeat and loss of identity. She hurriedly packs up and leaves for Manori island is complete defiance of her husband’s hostile and hypocritical world. It is her last effort to try to save her identity by showing her faith in her father’s magic world.

To reveal Sita’s exile Anita Desai captures the great exile motif of the Indian epic The Ramayana, the mythical Rama is caricatured in the character of Raman. Both Rama and Raman in rarely show emotion and love for their wives which they face the reality of life. This is one of the reasons why both Sita suffer. So Sita’s childhood belongs and future still gnaws at for refuse and for self-identification. At a deeper psychological level Sita’s quest for her identity is an outcome of the husband-wife conflict.

Sita is always fascinated by the strange sight of ‘The Hanging Garden’, because it gives her emotional satisfaction. Sita’s mind is governed by “pleasure-principle” in the form of excitement, hunger and drives etc. for the attainment of pleasure. Sigmund Freud observes: “It seems that our entire psychical activity is bent upon procuring pleasure and avoiding, that it is automatically regulated by the Pleasure-Principle.” Here Sita’s life which looks like a “shadow, absolutely flat, uncoloured.” She has never shared such kind of tender and gentle love with her husband. In Sita’s view,
life without love is meaningless. She says, "Their lives seemed to have one-if not meaning then a secret, a strange, divine secret." But Raman does not understand her feeling and emotion and wonders how "your happiest memory is not of your children or your home but of strange, seen for a moment, some lover in the park." Sita’s existential angst is displayed in her thoughts: "Life had no periods, and no stretches. It simply swirled around, muddling and confusing, leading nowhere."

At the end of the novel, Sita wants to avoid such questions as what is true and what is false? Her identity crises are over. She realizes: "If one is alive, in this world, one cannot survive without compromise - drawing the line means certain death, and in the end, Sita opts for life with compromise - consoling herself with Lawrence’s verse, with the thought that she is compelled to make this tragic choice because she is a part of the earth…"

In *Fire On The Mountain*, the three-character are correspondingly analyzed for their respective search for selves. Mrs. Nanda Kaul, Raka and Ila Das are the characters who seek respectively the security and fulfilment of love in the society. Nanda Kaul, the wife of an ex-vice-chancellor of the Punjab University, buys after the death of her husband, a house named Carignano built on the ridge in the hill town of Kasauli. She always seeks her existence as a wife. She identifies herself with the lonely pine tree. She likes the ‘bareness’, the ‘emptiness’ of the garden of Carignano. Her husband has life-long affair with another woman. Though she does not follow the revolutionary path of Sita but feels that she could be ‘ship wrecked’. Nanda Kaul could only achieve her husband’s rejection, as he had affair with another woman. Though she meets everybody’s expectation, but gradually she found her life to be total enslavement to the circumstances.
Gradually a longing for withdrawal started growing in her. Then began Nanda Kaul’s search for identity, search for privacy, search for freedom and search for wholeness.

The words like “disgorged”, “crawling grey bugs” and “a pair of block blades” give a specific shade to the image and suggest Nanda’s withdrawal, which is based on hatred and awareness of meaninglessness of the so-called normal routine life. She has longed for privacy all through her life and at last got it in the hills of Kasauli: “She wanted no one and nothing else.” The garden of Carignano is a projection of Nanda Kaul’s yearning for loneliness and privacy. It is also a projection of Nanda Kaul’s self that is bare and empty. Through age and experience the garden has arrived at a state of elegance and perfection like Nanda Kaul. Like Nanda, Raka wants only one thing “to be left alone and pursue her own secret life amongst the rocks and pines of Kasauli.” Raka is another lover of loneliness and spiritual life. In her desire to search for peace and calmness of the mind, she comes to Carignano. The novelist compares her mental level with Nanda Kaul:

If Nanda Kaul was a recluse out of vengeance for a long life of duty and obligation, her great grand daughter was a recluse by nature, by instinct. She had not arrived at this condition by a long route of rejection and sacrifice – she was born to it, simply.

The reclusiveness of Nanda is forced one, while Raka is born recluse. Both Nanda and her grand daughter irresistibly raise certain issues of comparison and contrast in their outlook on their lives.
In sum, the three female characters in the novel choose their own value systems to guard themselves from reality. As Nanda Kaul has a small spell of self-discovery, but the truth about her self is too bitter to endure.

In Village By The Sea existentialism occurs rather thinly here, through the life of a young village boy Hari. Desai captures the existential predicament of the ruralities undergoing the pangs of a society in transition. The novel makes the coming back of Hari to Thul as Return Of The Native. The central theme of the hero’s quest for a mode of survival to help his parents, brothers and sisters escape from the financial problems leads to a convincing denouement. Hari strives hard for materializing his inner yearning to exist. Adequate details are supplied through external exploration to emphasize the harsh realities surrendering him “Debt, debt, debt, Hari gnashed his teeth.”

Hari has three sisters, and he is worried about their marriages. The future of the family nags him “he must have jobs if he was to find his sister a way out of this dark gloomy house.” “Gloomy house”, “the illness”, “darkness” and “hopelessness” are enough clues to understand his plight. All these compel him to seek a job in his teenage. He comprehends the approaching “shadow of night” for the bare existence of his family. He wants to exist independently. He comes to Bombay and tries to meet Mr. De Silva, but in vain. He gets a job of a waiter in Shri Krishna Eating House. Here, he begins his search for self.

Hari develops self-confidence in himself to face life with enthusiasm. He undergoes a metamorphosis of his character. He no longer appears “the frightened, confused boy who crawled into any hole where he could find shelter and protection.” He now exists independently. Hari shows
forbearance and determination as a young man for improving his predicament. Hari and Lila become an epitome of courage and labour. Thus, Hari’s search for self lies not in the escape from reality, but in facing it boldly.

_Clear Light of Day_ breaks new ground in the sense that it dwells on an existential theme of time in relation to eternity. Time in treated as a fourth dimension depicting the unavoidable emotional turmoil in the protagonist. Delineating the life of two brothers and two sisters who grew up in a house in Old Delhi, the novel is about time as a destroyer and a preserver and about what the bondage of time does to the smooth and unruffled existence of human beings. The childhood intimacy of the four children- Tara, Bim, Raja and Baba is gradually lost as they grow older and become aware of their variegated dreams and aspirations. Desai endeavours to fathom the depth 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. The whole novel revolves round ‘time’ drawing different impressions from the characters. Mrs. Desai herself says:

My novel is set in Old Delhi and records the tremendous change that a Hindu family goes through since 1947.71

The abrupt change in the circumstances of her life and her family not only poses a treat to her high aspiration but simultaneously breeds identity crises. The partition of India Pakistan creates a fissure in the familial ties. So Tara, Bim and Raja face severe identity crises. They are unable to relate their present to the past- their adulthood to childhood. Santosh Gupta observes:

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The period that lies in between the growing consciousness and search for individuality... fails to provide a continuity from the early period of childhood to the later stage of adulthood, causing deep psychological trauma and stress.\textsuperscript{72}

In this novel, Desai visualizes the reality of childhood with femininessensibility. Bim seems to have lost love, marriage and domesticity and is eagerly waiting for new experiences and new roots. Bim symbolizes forces that have strengthened the foundation of all family life. She is involved deeply in her symbolic search “of the archetypal sustaining mother.”\textsuperscript{73} Instead of doing marriage, Bimla decides to stay in Old Delhi in her parental house to look after her neurotic brother, Baba. After coming back to her old house, Tara is surprised not to see any change in Bimla: “Had she developed no taste of her own, no likings that made her wish to sweep the old house of all its rubbish and place it in things of her own choice? .... She wished she had the will to get to her-feet and escape from this room where to.”\textsuperscript{74} The developing will power in Bim ‘to get her feet and escape this room’ is followed by a question mark ‘where’? Thus the entire life of Bim swings into two polarities: her duties for social obligation and her yearning to stand on her own feet. But behaviour of her brother and sister creates a trauma in her for her future existence. Thus, the metamorphosis in her character is caused by the false social values of her brother and sister. Bimla analyses herself thus:

I mean - I mean she’s only five years younger than I am and she thinks I’m old. And she spies on me- she has
been spying, she is cruel. Tara is cold. And Raja selfish, too selfish to care.75

Bimla seeks her existence in social obligations but the letter she receives from her brother Raja disenchants her. She is shocked by the behaviour of her family: “By Tara, by Tara, By Baba, by all of them.... The conflict that rose inside her with every word they spoke and every gesture they made had been an enormous strain.”76 She questions herself, “how would she swim through that ocean and out again.”77 To overcome from the riddle, she finally decides to embrace whole-heartedly her social duties: “I have lost hope in myself.”78 She thinks of her existence like an old woman who “is no longer watched and need no longer pretence.”79 Lying on her arms, she removes all her doubts and comes to develop a positive mindset. Pure as gold, she submerges her lower self into higher consciousness and thus she perceives a clear light of day which illumines her inner mind:

There was nothing left in the way of a barrier shadow, only the clear light pouring down from the sun... it was as vast as the ocean, but clear, without colour or substance or form. It was the lightest and most pervasive of all elements and they floated in it.80

The novel In Custody begins with Deven’s childhood friend Murad visiting him in his town and asking him to go to Delhi interview of Nur Shahjehanbadi, for a special number of his forthcoming issue, “to contribute a piece by the editor of what he took to be a leading Urdu Journal.”81 For Deven who had never found a way to reconcile the meanness of his physical existence with the purity and immensity of his literary yearning, the request to interview Nur, who had been his hero since childhood, appeared to be the
very summons he had been waiting for all those years. This request gives him purpose to his meaningless existence. His trip to Delhi becomes a trip of self-discovery and recognition of ambition in Deven for realizing his future existence as a critic of Urdu poetry when he is sitting in the house of famous Urdu poet, Nur:

He turned the roll of papers between his fingers... he would have followed in pursuit of an art, published a book of poetry, and earned a name for himself, a little fame, even gold bangles for Sarla.  

Deven whole-heartedly tries to exist as an academician. For it, it is necessary to be free from the snares of Mirpore. So his journey for attaining material progress transfers our thoughts to the material development attained by industrialization. As the evil of industrialization symbolized in “concrete, zinc, smoke, pollutants, decay and destruction” have obliterated “a pleasant agricultural aspect.” So Deven’s dry and drab existence will be swamped by the life that he is going to get in Delhi – a life of driving uncertainty, of despair, of increasing desperation is prefigured by the nature that he sees around him. Deven’s imprisoned existence and illusory heaven are delineated in the landscape: “The impossible desert that lay between him and the capital with its lost treasures of friendships, entertainment, attraction and opportunities. It turned into that strip of no-man’s land that lies around a prison, treating in its desolation.” The meanness of his physical existence is paralleled by the meanness of the surroundings that he sees on his way to Delhi: “it is more bleak and more bare under the empty sky.” Again, the dreariness and vacuity of his existence are reflected in “a whirlpool at that point. The whirlpool was an opening into the water, leading into its
depths.”87 The whirlpool leading into its depths “evoke Deven’s imprisoned life from which there is no escaper for him. Still, he comes to Delhi for realizing his self.

Deven surrounded with the experiences of various shades and complexities of the college and the family is portrayed as a marginal character. He stands all through the length of the novel on the periphery of action and in vein forces his way on the road of fame. His despair-ridden state is described thus: “Deven had been more a poet than a professor, when he married Sarla… and for the wife of a poet she seemed too prosaic. Of course she had not been his choice.”88 Sarla as a young girl and bride had the usual aspirations of her girl-friend, to own the three F’s “fan, phone, frigidaire.” But by marrying into the academic profession and by living in a small town, all her dreams had been rudely swept away.

Disappointment, however, had not brought them “any closeness of spirit, any comradeship.”89 To live on a lecturer’s salary can be an oppressive experience and having no choice. Deven and Sarla feel desperate. Sarla also becomes a victim in her married life. High expectations about married life are dashed after the marriage. Sarla also seeks her existence. So in order to seek gratification, Deven accepts Murad’s proposal to interview Nur in Delhi for his magazine Awaaz. But it is ironical that Deven’s enthusiasm and love for Urdu poetry is misunderstood by Trivedi who is a staunch Hindiwalla and on political front who can be better advocate of Rashtrabhasha than the R. S. S. . Trivedi dislikes Deven’s interest in Urdu and this dislike comes openly when he goes to him for asking for one weeks leave to go to Delhi.
Now Deven is caught between two language, Hindi which is the source of his livelihood and Urdu which he loves. He is in dilemma of what to choose. He seeks to reach out into the wider world in the hope of self fulfilment. But he feels victim of circumstances. At last he decides to go to Nur “Deven’s visit to Nur is his quest, an attempt to identify the intangible world of spirit to the tangible, visible world.”\textsuperscript{90} But in Nur’s house, he finds himself as a caged animal. Here Desai has analyzed the psychic depth of Deven’s mind in the following lines:

And that was all he was – a trapped animal. In his youth he had the illusion of having free will, not knowing he was in a trap. Marriage, a family and job had placed him in this cage; now there was no way out of it. The unexpected friendship with Nur had given him the illusion.\textsuperscript{91}

The phrases like “daily –trepidation”, “an enclosed world”, and “the cacophony of traffic”\textsuperscript{92} outline the horrible nature of the city-sensibility. The city of Delhi is the polluting honeycomb of commerce, in which Deven fears to be lost. It is as gloomy as a prison. It is like a “Maze” from which there is no exit. Like Nirode in \textit{Voices in The City}, Deven is also obsessed by the city-sensibility. It is the city of Delhi which blocks him to exit in society. Lying on an open bench, his unconscious mind raises many questions relating to his long search for identity. He finds answer to several questions about his future existence unconsciously.

The white and black marble facing of the eastern door way soared upwards to the dome which rose like a vast bubble that the flat earth had sent out into the dusty
yellow grey sky, silent exhalation of stone. It was absolutely still, very serene. It was infect the silent answer to his questioning.\textsuperscript{93}

Thus Deven comes back to Mirpore. His journey back to Mirpore. His a journey from ignorance of reality to its awareness. Finally, Deven transcends his personal problems and gains an awareness of the existential problem of man. He accepts the human condition as it is and reaches an existential dimension of personality. Here is Deven who realizes the quest for his self:

He saw the woman in the family weeping and wailing around it. He heard the funeral music play. He saw the shroud, the grave – open. When Nur was laid in it. Would this connection break, this relation end? No, never... he would have to pay for the funeral, support the widows, raise his son.\textsuperscript{94}

Anita Desai's \textit{Baumgartner's Bombay} reveals the quest of protagonists for identity. Baumgartner is a wandering Jew in quest of roots. The bitterness of a neglected childhood, the horror of being hunted and hounded out of his own country, exposure to an outlandish ambience in an alien land, forever condemned to the life of an exile, he moves from one existential dilemma to another. The novel focuses on the absurdity of his existence both in Germany and India. In Germany he was a Jew, alienated from the mainstream of life. In India he is dubbed as a firangee and unwanted. There is no resolution to his crisis. Like the fall of Hitler, “Defeat was heaped on him, whether he deserved it or not.”\textsuperscript{95} Huge Baumgartner realises:
His existence is an absurd odyssey from nothingness to nothingness, from nowhere to nowhere, forever condemned to the life of an exile, he moves from one existential dilemma to another.... Baumgartner’s existential problems to his immigrant experiences.96

Hugo’s consciousness of continued rejection and ‘otherness’ began with his childhood in Germany. The memories from his childhood constitute the formative influences on his personality. The harshness of his authoritarian father makes an indelible impression on his mind: “All other children had talked of the bonbons their parents had promised to bring to school- already ordered, already brought, they said ecstatically- and he had stood silent” when he meets his mother at school, he questions her: “You don’t look every one else’s mother, why don’t you look like the other mothers.”97 As a child he had developed doubt and suspicion. The cruelty of racial discrimination dawns on him only after a series of subtle forms of rejection on his childish mind.

Hugo as a man comes to India but, “the eyes of the people who passed by glanced at him who was still strange and unfamiliar to them, and all said: Firangee, Foreigner.”98 In Bombay, he is disillusioned of his mistaken identity as European despite of his inclination to accept India as his home: “… of which he felt himself the natural citizen.”99

Hoppe, hoppe, Reiter,
Wenn er fallet, dann schreit et.
Falt er in die Hechen,
Fällt er in den klee.
Schreit oder gleich ; O web... 100
The verse comments on young Hugo’s inability to assume and act out a role of his own choice and frees this disablement to archetypal situation of frustration, impotence, and loss of self-identity. Other songs also express Hugo’s failure at establishing a cultural rapport with the milieu.

The psyche of the protagonist Hugo is also shaped by his past-experience of violence and terror in Nazi Germany. Hugo Baumgartner had come to India as a young man to start a new chapter in his life. In fact, he is forced to leave his homeland when the atrocities on the Jews in Nazi Germany had become intolerable and posed a threat to the security of his life. But it is ironic that the attempt leaves him quite bitter and disillusioned. If in Germany he belonged to the ‘subhuman race’ and in India he was termed as ‘hostile alien’. Hugo appears to lead an existence shrouded in hollow gestures: “Accepting - but not accepted.... In both lands, the unacceptable.”

Lotte, another European who is seeking her own existence. So she marries Kanti Sethia in order to have Indian citizenship. He deceives her by leaving her in Bombay “like a widow and lives in Calcutta himself.” Thus Hugo always lives on the periphery and so Lotte. Baumgartner thought that “nothing made sense. Germany there, India here, India there, Germany here, it is all impossible to capture” and Lotte’s efforts to find “a meaning to the meaninglessness” precipitate the sad predicament. Most of the characters in Baumgartner’s Bombay, more notably Hugo and Lotte, remain heroic fighters, questers in search of the real meaning of life, till the very end. This novel brings into focus the emotional question of identity as an Indian citizen.
In Anita Desai’s *Journey to Ithaca*, the spiritual quest of two characters Laila and Matteo has been described. Desai shows a spiritual odyssey of Laila, a white European whose voyage takes her through a range of Islamic, Christian and Hindu culture of her exposure to multiple ethnic sensibilities. In discovering the world she discovers herself. Desai identifies the restless yearning of those sensitive souls who live under the same sky as others but see different horizons, as the epigraph of the novel presents:

*Always keep Ithaca fixed in your mind.*

*To arrive there is your ultimate goal.*

The three characters, Laila, Sophie and Matteo, begin their journey to search for truth, ultimate reality, beauty, joy, ecstasy or whatever form of truth has. Sophie, a journalist, follows her husband Matteo to India. As a young wife, she desires to fulfill herself. But here she feels very much the outcast. After sometimes, due to her sense of belongingness she questions her husband: “Couldn’t we stay in our own country? To die there?” After female child’s birth, she comes back home in Italy where she tries to find her existence in Matteo’s absence. But hearing the illness of Matteo, she returns to India. Here Diya tells about the death of the mother and Matteo’s departure from the ashram in quest of his self and for spirituality.

In Matteo’s life, the title of his tutor’s book *The Journey to the East* by Herman Hersse is the turning point. As from now on, he tries to quench his ravaging thirst by possession of an object, a book. Matteo feels, “it is spiritual experience for which you must search in India, nothing else” for the higher reality “he had done with the travels.”

Matteo’s search for eternal truth makes him vulnerable. His quest becomes the quest for survival. His life becomes meaningless and worthless
without having a vision of spiritual truth. In search of spiritual truth, he embarks upon another journey where "he felt certain divine light." Thus divine light helps him to see the enormous complexity of human existence - a labyrinth within the labyrinth. In a bid to unravel the mystery of this labyrinth, Matteo moves from Ashram to Ashram and from one yogi to another but the peace of mind and inner happiness eludes him.

Matteo’s hunt is not yet over he needs "a guru." From a magazine stall, he is able to get a book entitled "The Mother." When Matteo reaches the Mother’s Ashram, his joy knows no bound on hearing the mother speak to the devotees. For him it is "natural phenomena of wonderful significance." For the first time since his departure from Italy, he experiences a sense of unity between the mundane and the divine. Matteo describes to Sophie what he experienced of unity "... the spiritual with the physical, the dark with the light, the human with the natural." Matteo feels that the Divine force is everywhere and knowledge means the realization of this truth and "the purpose of our existence in the Ashram is to experience fully, to be fully, my friend." The Mother believes in the motto "work is worship", she assigns duties to all the devotees in the ashram and explains to them:

This effort, this endeavour, this exercise, it is Sadhna? If the artist performs this exercise, it is artistic. If the farmer performs it, it is spiritual and it all leads to achievement.

Matteo has been assigned an assiduous work of letter writing by the mother. He regards the assignment to work as his test as a seeker after truth:
“At times, he wondered if he could prove himself. He worked without pause…”\textsuperscript{114}

Matteo’s statement to Sophie about Mother “as container and repository of all powers creates a spiritual awareness in Matteo”\textsuperscript{115} and confirms his reception of the miracles in the presence of the mother:

Her presence heightens and illuminates the experiences of living as no one else’s does, why? Because she contains – she is container of a power that gives the world this heightened and illuminated quality. When I leave her, I feel I am falling down, down into darkness. No, not darkness but grayness, flatness, emptiness. When she appears everything comes to life, it flowers, it brightens.\textsuperscript{116}

The third character who becomes rebellious in seeking a spiritual being in India is Laila. She is also in search of a way of achieving union with the intimate reality and the differences between the Divine and the profane the spiritual and the mundane. She starts her carrier as a troupe dancer but all along she keeps her gaze fixed in her quest and ultimately becomes a saintly figure – the mother – and epitome of love, wisdom and compassions:

I am a seeker after truth and have given up all orthodox religions…. I find them the repositories of ignorance and suppression.\textsuperscript{117}

It is this search that brings her to India though in a different way. Her first exposure to India comes through the bookshop of Madame Lacan selling the book \textit{L’Orient} and \textit{L’Inde}. One day she opens up the \textit{Aitereya}
Brahmanan of the Rig Veda and reads what would become her own life, the life of a seeker:

There is no happiness for him who does not travel.
Rohta!.... The feet of the wanderer are like the flowers...
al his sins are destroyed by fatigues in wandering.
Therefore, wander!
The fortune of him who is sitting, sits; it rises when he rises; it sleeps when he sleeps; it moves when he moves.
Therefore, wander! 118

Initially she is fascinated by an Indian dance troupe led by Krishna and she describes it to her aunt: “It was a dance of gods.” 119 She decides to join the troupe much to the curiosity and a bit of scepticism of its leader Krishna. She says it is not just the movement and music for entertainment. It is much more; it is spiritual. From her imagination Laila comes to the real India. Now she is “Traveling eastwards to meet the great sun, the great light. I must prepare my soul for the sweet union.... O mysterious India, I can feel you stirring in the dark.” 120 Coming at the Mahalakshmi Temple in Bombay, she is not impressed at all and says: “My search is not over. I must continue it. O where is my Lord whose calm face shines only with the pure light of truth?” 121 Seeing an ascetic sitting serenely under the holy banyan tree, the tree of eternity, she feels the great desire, that she had always had “ever since I was a child to be through a maze of her doubts and illusions.” 122 She reaches moments of revelation, a very personal mystic experience of union with the Lord, reminding us of Tagore’s Gitangali. In her Guru, she finds her Ithaca and in him she realizes ‘Him’:
Here I dwell now where I was always meant to dwell and where I resolve to live, never leaving His side, His true Devotee and lover.\textsuperscript{123}

Laila begins to discover that a personal realization of oneself can only come from one’s inner consciousness. Finally, she realizes her existence as a spiritual seeker:

I know now my journey’s ended. I see now that Mountain peak that had been my true home from which I was kept.\textsuperscript{124}

Thus all the three protagonists achieve their fructiferous result for their respective search for spiritual height.

Quest for identity and female self-assertiveness in Manju Kapur’s \textit{Difficult Daughter} and Anita Desai’s \textit{Fasting, Feasting} which are innocuous human documents. One is a cry for freedom and another a cry against discrimination. Here Desai shows existential dilemma of protagonists, how women have to lead a life of suffocation and undeserved sufferings – both physically and mentally in a male-dominated patriarchal framework, how a girl child craves for parental affection but in the end, gets nothing but frustration, isolation and unhomely treatment and above all how the neglected child slowly develops the horrible sense of trauma and other associated psychosomatic diseases. In her novels Desai’s notion of life is richly influenced by Virginia Woolf who observes:

Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged:
Life is a luminous halo, a semitransparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end.\textsuperscript{125}
Uma, the daughter of an advocate of a small town, depicted in the novel raises a question: What it means to be a girl without striking features? A girl with personal magnetism like Aruna or the one with a good educational background like Anamika easily sails through in marriage. But Uma who has not studied beyond eight class? Who is not expert in the art of cooking? Who is not conversant with ways of the world? Where does she go?

In the house of her husband, she finds out that the man already has “a wife and four children in Meerut where he runs an ailing pharmaceutical factory to save which he needs another dowry which had led him to marry.”\textsuperscript{126} When the truth is revealed, much to Uma’s dismay, her father brings her back. She is considered “ill-fated” by the family. She remains virgin all through her life. Uma remains an inevitable liability of the family, starved of parental love and affection, which she dearly needs. All the family members are concerned more about their loss of dowry than her loss. That’s why she pines for love somewhere else – sometimes in Mrs. Henry’s party and sometimes in Mrs. Joshi. She also thinks of “A career - leaving home. Living alone.”\textsuperscript{127} But she is too domestic a bird to fly away. Uma’s stagnant provincial life is a life of an endless quest for an illusive perfect world “in which all of them – her own family as well as Arvind’s-were flaws she was constantly uncovering and correcting.”\textsuperscript{128}

Uma undergoes two sad experiences related to matrimony, but finally she is neither a divorcée nor a widow nor a spinster. Wed yet unwed physically and mentally. At home yet homeless. She is inclined to do a job but is not allowed. She is stuck up in a strange human predicament. From this mire, she can not pull herself out even if she so tries. For her life
becomes a trap. There is little hope for any other kind of progress in her life. Uma herself has become a victim of this absurd existential movement of ‘dynamic stasis’ and ‘swings’, especially when the parents are not there. The swing represents her merely an illusionary, purely momentary indulgence in the present, and does not promise any future:

MamaPapa are back. Abruptly, Uma gets up from the swing and goes into her room. When they come up the stairs to the verandah, the swing still rocks, creaking back and forth as if a ghost had sat on it.¹²⁹

The emptiness of the swing that signifies Uma’s past, the denial of school for her by her chauvinistic parents, the meaninglessness of the present and the hopelessness with regard to her future are all conveyed through the metaphor of the swing, which offers little comfort other than including a temporal stupor in the present.

Here Uma’s sense of being unloved is communicated, when she opens her cupboard and considers her belonging. The state of unloved makes her punish her ownself in order to prevent parental punishment. Uma shows her unhappiness by shutting her room:

Minutes pass and she can picture their faces, their expressions, twitching with annoyance, with curiosity, then settling into stiff disapproval.¹³⁰

Another example of gender suffering, which is more glaring than Uma’s, is that of her cousin Anamika. A bright student who was formally admitted to a collage in Oxford is not allowed to prosecute her studies. Instead her ‘letter of acceptance’ is used as bait to lure the prospective grooms. This charming girl is married in a family that ill-treats her. Beaten
regularly for no fault of hers by her mother-in-law and her husband remains a dumb observer. And then the final tragedy comes when Uma’s family is informed that Anamika has died of burning and it is projected by her in-laws that she has committed suicide:

What the mother-in-law said was that she always had Anamika sleep besides her, in her own room, as if she were a daughter, her own child. Only that night Anamika had insisted on sleeping in her own room. She must have planned it, plotted it all.

What Anamika’s family said was that it was fate. God had willed it and it was Anamika’s destiny.

The tragic incident was described by her in-laws, “That it was fate, God had willed and it was Anamika’s destiny.”

Desai has deeply probed into the psyche of Anamika and artistically used death by burning to focus on the loneliness and existential problem of the bride.

Anita Desai exposes very successfully the inner life, inner conflicts and predicaments of existence in her characters. Even the American quest for a goal and meaning in life with all its technological power and knowledge of science is going to prove fertile in the end, according to the novelist:

Who are the inheritors of the pioneer’s dream of the endlessly postponed and endlessly golden west? They alone can challenge the space and desolation; pit their steel against the wilderness and the vacuum.
However, Anita Desai triumphs in revealing the dilemma of human life and its fundamental problems that emerges from the constant strivings of an individual for his existence in the society. Her protagonists fail to exist as egoists, but succeed as altruists. They exist all the same while leaving an indelible impression on the reader’s minds.
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