Alienation And Quest For Self

The fifth chapter of my thesis is “Alienation And Quest For Self”. The study for this chapter has been divided into two parts – first alienation and other quest for self. In almost all of her novels Anita Desai has written on the theme of “Alienation and quest for self”. Alienation refers a feeling of estrangement from someone. It may be from an individual, family, society or even one’s own self. Mrs. Desai has thrown light on diverse reasons of alienation in her various characters. Being alienated, they conduct themselves in different manners. After this, they begin their search for identity. When her characters, especially women characters find this world meaningless and feel alienated in their milieu, they start a journey- an inner journey to quest for self.

Alienation has been the thematic motif that organically connects Anita Desai’s fiction. This makes her an exceptionally unique novelist.  

In Mrs. Desai’s literature the struggle of alienated self is revealed through protagonists who undergo estrangement from the world due to varying factors. There is no doubt that in Anita Desai’s fictional world, her most of the characters are victims of alienation who experience a kind of disintegration that Mrs. Desai has conveyed through different images. A sense of isolation and alienation haunts their mind. Her characters seem not to be average people and they are unable to communicate with the people around.
They fall short in relating or joining themselves with the milieu. Therefore, they begin to live in their own world which is only an imagination. In this world, they spin their dreams but unfortunately such kind of dreams never materializes. This is how her protagonists become alienated from world, from society, from family and even from their own selves.

A unique feature of Desai’s characterization is her dexterous handling of objective correlatives. These objective correlatives project the alienation and identity of the characters. It is in fact their state of alienation that motivates them in their quest for identity.²

It is certain that alienation and identity are objective correlatives as it is only alienation that enforces the individual for search for identity. Not only Anita Desai but also many other Indo-Anglian novelists like Bharti Mukherjee, Kamala Markandaya etc. have probed into the psyche of characters but it is only Anita Desai who transforms alienated experiences in her writing. She explores the inner predicament of anguish, despair and hostility of her women characters. We can notice that due to their inner predicament of alienation, they are led to their self-discovery. Sometimes this unfriendliness is self-imposed while sometimes it is created due to their inability to adopt a new culture. Desai treats the problem of alienation psychologically and the estrangement of her characters is temperamental. In some of her novels, it is perceived that sometimes the alienation of her characters assumes schizophrenic dimensions, and in this situation her characters have no contact with the real world and they are lost completely in their false world of imagination. They try to guard their identity but
don’t succeed in doing so. Studying all of her novels, we come to know that most
of her female protagonists are the outlandish women who are in their quest for self or identity.

Today, many individuals feel alone, unrelated to others, unable to communicate with those around them, unable to feel at one with them. This problem of an individual who feels emotionally and spiritually alone forms the backbone of Desai’s themes. 3

Not only Mrs. Desai but also many other writers have composed on this theme but their treatment of alienation is diverse from that of others. Karaka gives psycho-spiritual dimensions to the alienation of her protagonists but Mrs. Desai treats alienation psychologically. We can observe a social-philosophical direction in some authors’ alienated self like that of Raja Rao and Kamla Markandaya while the quest for identity in Anita Desai’s characters is socio- psychic. In Desai’s most of novels, alienation ends up in despair but in Rajan’s novels, it doesn’t. In Desai’s writing alienation functions within the family while in Danial’s, there is disjointed extravaganza of structure, and the problem of alienation assumes a comic dimension. In Narayan’s novels, alienation is comic and ironic but Desai’s alienation is hysteric. In this way, alienation in Mrs. Desai’s novels is totally different from that of other writers.

Mostly Mrs. Desai depicts the alienation of upper middle class people of society. Some factors of their life create the feeling of alienation in them and her characters are seen suffering lack of parental love, pain of broken families and sometimes from Oedipus or Electra complex. Being bothered or frustrated in
their existence, they get a side from the mainstream of life. We find immortal ties manifested by alienation in Mrs. Desai’s characters. They become alienated from themselves and search for their identity through self-discovery and self-identification. Mrs. Desai has taken many emotional women as the protagonists of her novels who are never satisfied emotionally by their husbands. Anuradha Roy has written about these women’s relationship with their partners:

   Emotionally incomplete relationships have a fatal effect on the finally turned female psyche and Desai’s women find themselves tortured by a painful sense of alienation and an excruciating loneliness of the spirit. 4

   It is true that Mrs. Desai’s protagonists don’t look at life from surface but they seem to be involved in their lives intensely. Communication-gap between them and others and sometimes disintegration of social values are responsible for their alienation. It is doubtless that alienation is basically a Western concept but Mrs. Desai has imitated this idea in a different manner. In her novels, she has related alienation to the emotional moods and attitudes of her characters. Her characters experience the pangs of emotional isolation and lonesomeness. Mrs. Desai has depicted the struggle of alienated self magnificently.

   She has revealed artistically how her women characters feel alienated and commence their journey for quest for self. She considers alienation as a psycho-emotional reality, and in her characters the feeling of alienation is psycho-neurotic. Due to feeling of alienation, most of her characters feel lonely and are seen in quest for self. They attempt to know or get their identity and make all
possible efforts to know their own selves. They seem to be struggling in an identity-crisis.

Identity crisis in the lives of protagonists of Desai’s earlier novels is generally of an individual character through all along it has overtones and undertones of existentialist. With the maturity of the narrative art of Anita Desai, the nature of the identity crisis of the protagonists in her novels become more complex, its range of experience and density of vision extend to communities and nations either directly or indirectly. 5

Thus, to understand reasons, effects and different forms of alienation and quest for self of Mrs. Desai’s women characters, we need to study the alienation of various characters one by one. Maya, the protagonist of Anita Desai’s first novel Cry, the Peacock has been portrayed as an alienated and lonely woman. She is seen torn between inner and outer world. Marital disharmony, childlessness, prophecy of albino astrologer etc. are the factors that make her smitten with the pangs of isolation. No doubt that she can’t share her inner predicament with anyone. This is why she retreats into her own world of fantasies. The prophecy of albino astrologer about death of Maya or Gautama and death of her pet dog Toto alienate her from the world. She becomes estranged and having no interest in the world around.

Cry, the Peacock is a pioneering effort towards delineating the psychological problems of an alienated person. Maya’s moods, obsessions, dilemmas and abnormality are conveyed very effectively in it. 6
Maya begins to identify herself with monkeys, bears and caged birds. Not only with these creatures but also in her disturbed state, she identifies her with dust-storm. She lives a fractured life. Mrs. Desai has depicted in a stunning manner how Maya’s alienation leads her to the annihilation of the self and she begins to search her identity. In the process of her quest, she steps out of her fear and confusion and moves towards self-affirmation. Thus, being alienated in her life, Maya begins to live in her own world of fables and starts her journey to quest for self.

It is doubtless that the basic reason of Maya’s alienation is Gautama’s philosophical detachment. She experiences alienation as her husband keeps himself away from her and has unconcern over the basics of life. Her alienation can be seen in her own words when she says to herself,

All order is gone out of my life.....No peace, nothing to keep me within the pattern of familiar everyday living and doing that becomes those whom God means to live on earth. Thoughts come, incidents occur, then they are scattered, and disappear. Past, present, future. Truth and untruth. They shuttle back and forth, a shifting chiaroscuro of light and shade...
Those are no longer my eyes, nor this my mouth.... The pattern for an order of lines and designs, a symmetry___has deserted my own life___strangers surround me.” 7

Studying the novel and coming across its theme, it seems that it is a story of Maya’s isolation and estrangement in which she is ruffled to discover the meaning of her life. As her existence becomes meaningless for her, she makes
effort to comprehend the reality of life. She is also seen in the story justifying herself to herself. We find that Maya is a sensitive girl who has been obsessed by a prophecy of disaster. If she had discussed her husband about this prophecy, she could have avoided the disaster but unfortunately due to her alienation from her husband, she can never talk frankly to her husband, Gautama. This makes her frustrated and more alienated. Her alienation appears from the tension between her and her husband.

The novel tells the story of a young sensitive girl obsessed by a childhood prophecy of disaster, whose extreme sensitivity is rendered in terms of immeasurable alienation. The very beginning of the novel highlights the husband-wife alienation theme by unfolding the relationship of Maya and Gautama. 8

Maya suffers from a sense of loneliness, communication-gap between her and her husband and uncontrolled circumstances; she becomes unable to cope with the pressures. This is why she begins to live in a self-enclosed mental world. In other words, her isolation passes into a psychotic alienation, and she starts her flight into fantasy. Her alienation is purely emotional and psychic. Mrs. Desai has used some images to bring out the alienation between Maya and Gautama. She has described Maya’s psychic estrangement in terms of the light pouring in from her window. When Maya looks at the monkeys in the cage struggling for liberation, they remind her of her alienation. Cooing of the doves also does the same. Thus, through alienation of Maya from Gautama, Mrs. Desai has
remarkably voiced the terror of facing single-handed the ferocious assaults of existence.

In this way, Maya is an isolated and estranged woman who feels alienated from her husband, Gautama by reason of his detachment for worldly pleasures and communication-gap between them. Her alienation is basically a husband-wife alienation because of that she begins to live in her own world of fantasies and fables.

As we come to Mrs. Desai’s other woman protagonist, Monisha of *Voices in the City* who is an intelligent woman and feels suffocated in congenial atmosphere of her husband’s house. No doubt that so many members live together in that family but unfortunately Monisha feels lonely, isolated and alienated. Being unhappy in her husband’s house, she is alienated from him as he has no time for her and is always busy in his family. Since her hobbies and interests are different from those of her in-laws, she is quite educated and religion doesn’t comfort her, she feels alienated not only from her in-laws but also from her husband, Jiban.

*Voices in the City* is an interesting study of the outsiders *a la* Camus; Nirode, Monisha, Amla in different ways live through the anguish of alienation.  

This novel seems to be more realistic than Anita Desai’s first novel *Cry, the Peacock*. In this novel alienation is against monster city Calcutta where no normal or healthy life is seen but there is only odorous and stealthy of mortality. In this novel actually, alienation is intellectual. The alienation between husband
and wife (Monisha and Jiban) seems to be only nominative while the real alienation in all the cases is between the individual and the city. An instance of alienation between art and artist is also found in the novel. A different kind of alienation which is between a son and mother is shown through Nirode and his mother who is compared with Goddess Kali by her own son as although he loves her, he has become alienated from her.

Monisha seems to be torn between socio-psychic self and psychoemotional milieu. Her alienation is emotional. Monisha’s own words suggest the identity crisis when she says, “I am all exterior” and “I am done with most things.” Not only Monisha but also her siblings Amla and Nirode get involved in identity crisis. They act in their own way to search their identity. Mrs. Desai has shown their alienation with splendor.

Amla and Nirode too realize their identity and overcome their alienation through the aesthetic process of transmutation of their experiences in artistic creation.¹⁰

Monisha is an educated woman and when she finds her in-laws unsympathetic and self-centered, she feels alienated from them and desires to be away from them. She feels alone in the family of numerous members. When she gets disturbed and frustrated in such family, she longs for real loneliness. This novel of Anita Desai is existentialist novel in which its characters like Nirode, Monisha and Amla are busy in quest for self. Even the city of Calcutta itself seems to be engaged in the search for true meaning of life. In this novel, the writer has creatively depicted the alienation of Calcutta. Monisha seals her
alienation by deliberate but desperate attempts. When Amla undergoes a cathartic experience of her involvement with Dharma, her quest for individuality begins. After her quest or in the end, she acquires a new meaning of her life and starts to understand it.

*Voices in the City* is far more realistic than Anita Desai’s first novel. The human drama of alienation takes place against the background of *the monster city that lived no nor med, healthy, red-blooded life but one that was subterranean, underlet, stealthy and odorous of morality.*

It is doubtless that this novel is more realistic and artistic than other of her novels for she has taken the background of the monster city, Calcutta that has been taken as a symbol of alienation and frustration.

The hostility between Monisha’s parents, and her mother’s mixed parentage, are images of and perhaps even the precipitating factor in the conflicts within the three children, Monisha, Nirode and Amla, in their search for identity.

These words are absolutely true as their mother is also alienated not only from the society but also from her children. Nirode is also a traveller in his quest for identity whose alienation is partly due to Oedipus fixation. Amla’s apathy compels her mother their alienation from her. Monisha’s quest for identity is a quest for the infinite solitude. Monisha’s alienation is due to her husband’s inability to understand her and indifference of her in-laws to her weal and woe. She is an incomplete self who pines for self-completion.
In this way, *Voices in the City* is a novel with the problem of alienation of a different kind. There is alienation between husband and wife, between son and mother, between individual and the city etc. All the protagonists of the novel are alienated and involved in search for identity. They feel estranged and lonely even in the crowd and want completion. They feel incomplete and begin their quest for self. Overall, this novel is an exquisite novel that deals with alienation and quest for self.

Sarah, woman protagonist of *Bye-Bye, Blackbird* has also been shown as an estranged woman who feels alone in her own city. Her alienation seems to be due to misbehavior of her own countrymen who comment on her badly because of her marriage to an Indian. Her alienation is purely emotional and psychic.

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 lines of the three major characters- Dev, Adit and Sarah.  

An interesting fact is that Sarah lives in her own country, England but feels alienation from her people while Dev and Adit are Indian immigrants in England, and their alienation in other country seems to be natural. They experience a predicament to live or not to live in England as they are not accepted completely there, and it creates a feeling of alienation in them. Circular journey of these souls searching for a perfect life has been depicted imaginatively in this novel. Being alienated from society, Sarah starts her journey of quest for identity.
Her logic credentials inspire her to seek identity and self-actualization. The state of suffering repressed emotions fills her mind with a sense of anguish and alienation also.

Sarah gets herself alienated from her own English society because of her marriage to Adit, an Indian. This alienation creates psychological trauma in her. She is neither accepted by her own society nor can she expect acceptance by Indian society as she is an English woman. In Mrs. Desai’s own words,

She had become a nameless; she had shed her name as she had shed her ancestry and identity.  

We come to know by the study of the novel that Sarah feels herself-parading like an imposter, to make claims to a life, an identity that she did not herself feel to be her own.

Her marriage launches her on a quest for identity as because of her marriage she has lost her real identity but now she wants to get self-affirmation and true identity. She feels like living on a stage from which she wants to step off, to leave the theatre and to enter into the real world whether English or Indian. She doesn’t hesitate in leaving England as because she considers her journey as a conscious step to seek fulfillment and affirmation as she has felt a feeling of alienation in that country. Now she wants to be out of her identity crisis. Sarah’s quest-pattern is far complex than other heroines of Anita Desai. Sarah is a working-woman and Mrs. Desai has used her job as a device to deal with her dilemma of identity. Though Adit and Dev also feel identity crisis, Sarah’s identity crisis is more difficult than theirs. The writer deals with the problem of
alienation on the level of cultural disparity. She suggests either for adjustment and compromise or for rejection of alien culture and identification with own culture.

The cultural alienation and loss of identity that results from inter-social marriage is excellently dealt with in the character of Sarah in *Bye-Bye, Blackbird*.¹⁶

Not only once but also many times, her identity crisis has been described in the novel. A question always haunts her mind “who is she?” Her search for self-identity symbolizes common women exploration for self. She represents all the women who are generally in a continuous search for identity. Now Sarah prefers solitude. This moral solitude is actually the result of her suffering. When Sarah is rejected by the society and her parents, she becomes alienated and tries to submit to Adit who is actually the cause of her alienation and isolation. Adit’s feeling of difference from English leads him on to a quest for his true identity.

*Bye-Bye, Blackbird* points to the self-discovery of the educated Indian immigrants, who wobble between self-alienation and self-identification.¹⁷

To conclude, by marrying an Indian Adit, Sarah has lowered her position and suffers from alienation. In Indian community, she is going to remain an outsider. Thus, she faces dual loss of identity and makes attempts for self-fulfillment and search for identity. She is culturally alienated and her main problem is to know her identity.

Anita Desai’s next novel “*Where Shall We Go This Summer?*” is a tale of alienation of a woman who is a wife and mother. Her family and society have
conditioned alienation to her and her alienation is not only positional but also seems to be natural as she is unable to accept the authority of the society, and this causes suffering to her. Since she can’t put up with her husband, she retreats to her private shell and withdraws herself totally from her milieu.

It has been said about Sita in regard of alienation and quest for self,

No wonder, Sita is completely alienated from the world around her and starts living in a world of dream and fantasy and make believe under the strain to *a serious psychological confusion.* 18

Sita and Raman are hardly compatible in the sense that their mythological namesakes are. In the works of both, the male and the female stand isolated in a typically Kiplingsque situation where ‘never the twain shall meet’. 19

In the novel, we come to know an event of the crows preying on an eagle. This event, although not very important, suggests that Sita withdraws herself from her husband, Raman. It is evident that her alienation is physical. Her biological alienation makes her undergo a depression that is caused by her continuous struggle for assertion and to get her identity. It is doubtless that she is an estranged individual who feels alienated not only from her husband but also from her family and society. This enforces her to search her identity.

Through the image of Monsoon wind, Mrs. Desai has projected the chaos and alienation of Sita’s life. Her alienation has also been highlighted by the image of Jelly Fish. Sita, being alienated from her husband, his family and society becomes a split self. She has a desire to be whole or stay whole. This
desire of hers evokes the urge to escape from her alienation and assert her identity.

Sita’s return to the Island suggests both renewal and regeneration as well as alienation. To the Island where Sita’s father had created a distinct social identity for himself and his followers, Sita comes back in search of her personal identity. 20

This novel, however presents an identity crisis of a sensitive woman Sita in her early forties. When she feels unable to live in her troublesome present, she begins to identify herself with the past. She recalls the stranger’s irrationality, and this shows her own quest for self of primitive reality and her alienation from her husband, Raman. She has many members in her family and her own children. In spite of this, she feels lonely and alienated in her house and lives in her own world of imagination. Deep study of her identity crisis shows that in spite of her effacing, she thinks her self to be glorified. A reason of her alienation is her living in multiculturalism as we come to know that she dislikes the materialistic and fast life of Bombay.

She feels alienated from her children also as she says that they have betrayed her. Busy life of her husband, Raman also makes her estranged from him.

Sita’s real problem or predicament is that she never got used to anyone. The stultifying atmosphere of household routine makes her yearn for the fantastic for something quite different that should “proclaim her still alive, not quite drowned and dead”. 21
No doubt that the theme of the novel is the alienation in married life that has been depicted through Sita who has to face the loneliness of a wife, a mother and a woman. Sita's state reveals the alienation that has been conditioned by family and society. Her retreat to Manori and return to Bombay seem to be her existential quest for self or identity. Her journey to Manori Island seems to be a journey from illusion to reality. The reason of her retreat is her desire for self-discovery. No doubt that her journey to Island is significant for her movement to quest for self. On one hand, her retreat to Manori Island shows her estrangement from the family and society. On the other hand, it shows her search for identity.

In this way, Sita is a middle-aged sensitive woman who experiences the feeling of alienation of a woman, a wife and a mother due to varying reasons. Sita tries to assert her identity and retreats to Manori Island due to her quest for self. She considers it to be a platform from where she can start a voyage for self-discovery.

Nanda Kaul of *Fire on the Mountain* has also been represented as an alienated old woman who feels alienated in her own house where she lives with her husband and children. The main cause of her alienation seems to be her frustration from life due to her husband's extra-marital affair with Miss David, the mathematics mistress. Because of her alienation from family and society, she starts residing in mute and isolated milieu of Carignano in her old age. Though she has lived with her so many children and grandchildren or in a crowded family, she has felt alienation from all of them. So many people have visited her in her
house but she feels alone among them. Now living in Carignano in last years of her life, she searches for the meaning of her life.

In a remarkably terse and evocative language Anita Desai tells the story of a pronounedly individual woman who yet emerges a representative figure with her brave though sad attempt to find an identity of her own. 22

It is absolutely true that Nanda Kaul represents so many Indian housewives who are successful wives, mothers or homemakers or who work for their family all over their lives but always feel alienated, and in last years of their lives they wish to be alone, finding or searching for their identity which they feel to have lost in their lives.

Nanda Kaul desires to be a tree, no more and no less. This is actually her isolation that leads her into a state of silent alienation. She has been bound in the shackles of a socio-physically maladjusted environment in her married life where she has lost her identity completely in her husband’s house as she has been an actor there, smiling before the guests as an perfect host, ignoring her husband’s extra-marital affair while knowing it and performing all her duties well towards her husband, children and society. Having lost her identity in her family, now being alone she wants to search it back.

Her characters like Maya, Sita and Nanda Kaul are lonely, anxious and estranged and suffer from a sense of alienation that is not merely physical but psychic. This estrangement steams from a lack of companionship with which they could feel secure. 23
Like other novels of Anita Desai, this is also a search of the self for a heightened female awareness. At the stage of her old age, Nanda Kaul wants only privacy and doesn’t want to be disturbed by anyone for now she may address herself with complete attention and dedication. She has proper and enough time to define, analyse and search for her identity which has been lost somewhere in her earlier life. She feels alienated from her own children, and it is seen when she doesn’t like the arrival of her great grand daughter, Raka in Carignano.

It seems that Nanda Kaul’s unfulfilled desire of love results in the feeling of alienation and loneliness. Being alienated in her life, she becomes isolated and loves loneliness. Thus, there begins her search not only for identity but for freedom and wholeness also. She wants to withdraw her from responsibilities and involvement completely.

Anita Desai’s fifth novel *Fire on the Mountain* projects the conflict between the need to alienate in order to retain one’s identity and the wish to be involved in the throes of life.  

The search for identity and fulfillment is evident also in the portrayal of Nanda Kaul. Her detachment is a result of her disillusionment at the hands of her Vice-Chancellor husband.  

Her alienation seems to be double as firstly, her busy husband has no time for her private self and secondly, she has not intimate relations with her children also. Being frustrated and bored of her married life, she has wished to be alone in last years of her life. Studying the novel deeply, we make certain that though she has been depicted as a recluse by choice, it is also a compulsion of circumstances
that makes her live alone. Not only through Nanda Kaul, but also through two other characters- Nanda Kaul’s great granddaughter Raka and Nanda Kaul’s old friend Ila Das, Mrs. Desai has dealt with the theme of alienation. No doubt that the alienation of these three different characters is varying but by studying all of them, we can be familiar with the theme of alienation in its entirety.

While Nanda Kaul’s alienation seems to be self-imposed, her great granddaughter, Raka’s alienation is more emotional than physical. Arriving in Carignano and living with Nanda Kaul, she remains alienated from her but she is not wholly alienated as though she remains detached from her great grandmother’s world, she likes to live with natural beauty- with pine trees and their charred trunks.

The Sahitya Akadami Award winner *Fire on the Mountain (1977)* explores the alienation of Nanda Kaul and her great granddaughter, Raka. The loneliness and isolation of the two have been presented in detail. 26

The alienation of Nanda Kaul and Raka can be distinguished and considered easily but Ila Das shows no alienation from anybody. But as she has been depicted as an alone and alienated woman of society, through her traumatic death, Mrs. Desai highlights the problems of alienated female in a male-dominated apathetic society.

In Raka’s person, Nanda’s loneliness is identified and externalized. Both are cases of self-alienation, pointing at the futility of human existence. 27

Ila Das, despite her handicaps, has tried to assert her identity in her own way. 28
Thus, it is novel of three main characters who show varying alienation and try to achieve their identity by searching for it in different ways.

Alienation of Bim, woman protagonist of *Clear Light of Day* can’t be ignored. Bim suffers from despair and isolation as her siblings Raja and Tara have left her alone with their mentally-retarded brother Baba and alcoholic aunt. She becomes alone and alienated. Not only Bim but Tara also feels alienated in her life. Though she has married someone settled in some foreign country willingly, leaving her sister Bim alone in India struggling with her problems, now she is estranged even from her husband and family.

Alienation of the self in *Clear Light of Day* unlike Desai’s other novels is not related to psychic illness but to emotional callousness operating within the domestic ambience of silence and staticity. Alienation here 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 symbolized by the *Clear Light of Day*. 29

It is true that alienation leads to identification. Bim wants to know who she is. Though she is a working-woman, she feels her identity lost in looking after her brother and aunt and performing the duties and responsibilities of her family. On other hand, her sister Tara also wants to know why she does the things she doesn’t want to do, and how long she will obey her husband. In this way, both of the sisters, being alienated are involved in their search for identity, liberty and individuality.
The transitory feel of alienation and its concomitant pangs occur as cross-light flashes here and there in the story but is not deeply ingrained and embedded in its fabric. 30

These words about the novel *Village by the Sea* seem to be absolutely true. Lila, a small girl feels alienation and estrangement in her life but when her brother Hari comes back and her mother recovers from illness, her alienation melts away. Her brother Hari has also the feeling of alienation while he lives in the village called *Thul*. But when he reaches Bombay, his alienation also vanishes. Mrs. Desai uses their house as a symbol of alienation. Both of these brother and sister suffer from alienation and searching their identity, react differently. Through Lila and Hari, Mrs. Desai has shown how the circumstances make the children too alienated.

We cannot leave the alienation of Deven, male protagonist of *In Custody* unnoticed. Because of his small job in a college and his wife’s despair, Deven feels alienated from society and his wife. Being dissatisfied and estranged, he begins to search for self. His quest for self culminates in value-discovery when he positively identifies with the historicity of life and the existential problems of man. His wife Sarla also considers all her dreams unfulfilled and becomes alienated even from her husband. To prove and search his identity, Deven takes the task of taking Urdu poet Nur’s interview but as the matter becomes worse, and he loses his control over the circumstances, he remains ruffled and alienated.

The alienation of Hugo in *Baumgartner’s Bombay* is different from the alienation of Deven in *In Custody* and also the alienation of female
protagonists of Desai’s earlier novels. The alienation here is neither of neurotic and hypersensitive individuals nor of aspiring artists, nor self-sacrificing and self-effacing ladies but of an enemy alien, eager to strike roots. 31

To my mind, Baumgartner, the protagonist of Baumgartner’s Bombay has lost his identity totally as he is a Jew immigrant settled in India. The word settled is not so correct because he has never been accepted by the Indian society while he has accepted everything. This makes him feel alienated. He suffers from alienation and an identity crisis throughout his life. He never gets the proper answer of his question who he is. His friends Lotte and Julius too feel alienated.

Baumgartner’s story is one of inherent alienation augmented by global war, colonial war and religious war. 32

The male protagonist of Journey to Ithaca Matteo’s alienation seems to be twice as he feels alienated from himself as well as from the society. He neglects all his duties and starts his journey to India for the search for spirituality. This novel is a story of Matteo’s nagging sense of alienation and his quest for spirituality. His wife Sophie becomes alienated from her husband due to his misbehavior and makes quest for self.

Desai’s Journey to Ithaca is a compassionate portrait of people struggling to find a spiritual home. It delineates Matteo’s alienation and the concomitant quest for spirituality. 33

In Fasting, Feasting, also Mrs. Desai depicts a sense of alienation and identity crisis through characters- Uma, Melanie and Arun.
Fasting, Feasting is the story of an anonymous family addressed in the narrative as Mamatapa of its isolation and alienation and its typical life.\textsuperscript{34}

Uma, woman protagonist of this novel feels alienated and estranged for she has always felt unwantedness and agonizing loneliness especially after the birth of his brother Arun. Her marriage proves to be a failure, and she has to stay in her parent’s house all over her life where she feels rejected and alienated. There she is too busy in household works to think about her identity and individuality.

Melanie is also a form of Uma but she lives in America. Problem of alienation is the same in her life also. Mrs. Desai has compared the alienation and frustration in the lives of Uma and Melanie who have lost their identity in their own houses.

Uma’s brother Arun, male protagonist of this novel gets ample opportunity in America but the problem of adjustment and acceptance makes him feel alienated. He experiences so much loneliness in America that the place where he has gone to prove his identity creates an identity crisis in his life. He starts doing everything with a quest for self.

Mrs. Desai has depicted the alienation of not only women protagonists but also of male protagonists like Hari of Village By The Sea, Adit of Bye, Bye Blackbird, Nirode of Voices In The City, Arun of Fasting, Feasting, Hugo Baumgartner of Baumgartner’s Bombay and Deven of In Custody.

Thus, we have seen that the protagonists of Anita Desai, especially women protagonists feel utterly isolated and alienated. Mrs. Desai, in all of her
novels, has depicted these problems of loneliness, feeling of utter isolation from others and lack of real communication. In reality, these are the problems that human beings face at present all through their lives. The sincere study of Mrs. Desai’s novels reveals that she is acquainted with the loneliness and alienation of modern woman who plays the role of a housewife and a human being searching for her self. Actually, they fight a conflict in their minds as the things are not always so as they want them to be.

The conflict in each novel grows out of the protagonist’s gradual awareness and final rejection of the chains imposed on her by convention and social morality as she steps carefully towards achievement of a personal identity.  

Her novels reveal that though she shows the causes of her women characters’ alienation but it is limited, and she is more interested in exploring the state of their minds while they are suffering from alienation. Her women are aware of their condition in society and family and of the emptiness of their existence. This awareness makes them feel alone and alienated. This very thing is responsible not only for alienation but also for their search for identity.

To show her character’s quest for identity, Mrs. Desai has used the motif of journey and departure. While struggling with the problems of present day and fighting against old system, her women suffer from loneliness and alienation.

Anita Desai creates characters who feel a terrible isolation in the suffocating darkness of their life in which no deep communication is possible.
In seven novels of Mrs. Desai, the alienation of women is due to their maladjustment in marriage. When her characters feel unable to adjust in the married life, they feel so alienated from their husbands, and their identity seems to be diminishing. Mrs. Desai has shown very artistically how in the age of lost values, women being alienated desire for complete human personality. She has revealed husband-wife alienation due to hypersensitive nature of her women protagonists and their maladjustment with their partners. These women always long for a meaningful life. They want to reveal their identity, and this is why they search for self. Through these women characters, Mrs. Desai has shown in her novels the isolation and alienation which is a distinctive feature of present day metropolitan life. Her women long for love and understanding from their husbands as panacea of the ills of the world, and while they refuse them, they also refuse to compromise. This inability to adjust with their partners and their partners’ non-adjusting behavior make them alienated and isolated.

Alienation is not something unique, but is, indeed a characteristic of the society of our time. These days, many persons feel alone. They feel unrelated to others. This problem of an individual who feels emotionally and spiritually alone forms the backbone of Mrs. Desai’s themes in each of her novels. 37

To my mind also, it is true that alienation has become an indistinguishable part of our present society. Mrs. Desai has presented this non-separable alienation and the quest for self actually due to this alienation in a superb manner. She has not portrayed the socio-political life in India but only the inner struggle
and frustration of the women. All her works seem to be a haunting quest of the psychic self. Sociological or philosophical connotations are not required in Mrs. Desai’s theme of alienation. Her women have generally emotionally incomplete relationships with their family members and even with their husbands. Their female psyche turns and they start feeling tortured by a painful sense of alienation and loneliness of the spirit. They become so frustrated and dissatisfied in their circumstances that they begin to search the meaning of their existence. They are involved always in enquiring who they are. Considering their identity lost, they find their lives meaningless so their main concern becomes knowing the importance of their existence. Their inner journey to search their self is always continuous.

It is in the light of the preface to the feminine that Desai’s heroines have been examined as questers for greater goal, as quester for a psychological integration, as questers for the sublime. 38

It is doubtless that Mrs. Desai has written on Feminism and regarding it she has thrown light on the alienation and quest for self of present day women through her depiction of different women characters. On one hand, she has shown alienation of small girl through Raka and on other hand, the alienation of old women has been depicted through Nanda Kaul’s alienated self. Search for identity has been expressed by Mrs. Desai in almost all of her novels. Through Maya and Monisha, Mrs. Desai tells us how childless women become alienated and estranged and become involved in their quest for self. On other hand, Tara and Sita’s alienation is the alienation of a wife and mother respectively, and the
later goes to her native land, Manori Island to search her identity. Sarah’s loneliness, alienation and identity crisis is that of a woman who becomes estranged in her own country and loses her identity due to her marriage with an Indian. The novelist has also enlightened the loneliness and alienation of men through her male protagonists like Adit, Dev, Hugo Baumgartner, Deven, Nirode etc. Through some characters, she depicts the alienation and loss of identity of immigrants. Bim becomes alienated as she remains unmarried and finds her true identity with her family. Alienation of young girls due to avoidance of their family has been shown through Uma and Melanie.

In this way, the present day world is full of alienation and search for self. Most of the people feel alienated and alone there due to their own different reasons. They are in continuous search for identity, asking themselves who are they. No doubt that many writers have written on the theme of “alienation and quest for self” but Mrs. Desai’s writing on the alienation and quest for self especially of women makes her an outstanding novelist of this particular theme. Through the depiction of varying characters in almost all of her novels, she has told not only the factors which make the women alone and alienated and, being alienated how they react differently, but also their mental state and their own way of thinking which make them search their identity. Her thinking and writing on this very theme is striking and remarkable, and it makes her a stupendous Indo-English woman novelist.
Notes and References


*Anita Desai, Voices in the City* (New Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 1965) p. 150.


