CHAPTER IV

WOMEN CHARACTERS
One of the chief delights of fiction is the satisfaction of our desire to know about man and his relationship to his society. A novelist should, therefore carve man's image in his art with a social awareness and insight into life. The Indian English novelists seek to project an integrated view of man's identity, his place in society and the social values within which he works out his destiny. Anita Desai ever is an exception, as instead of presenting man in conflict with or in relation to the society, she rather keeps her focus on man in conflict with his mind. Her forte is the exploration of the human psyche. The social concern is present in her novels in the form of cultural polarisation, conflict between traditional values and Westernised ideas, which highlights the mental development of the characters.

Anita Desai is gifted with a style and a sensibility to suit her aesthetic goal of delineating her world-weary characters, fighting and struggling to be free from the nets laid by the society. Among the Indian writers in English, she is perhaps the most selfconscious artist forging a unique world out of things of day-to-day experience of an Indian female. Madhusudan Prasad rightly observes: "In her novels, Desai has concentrated strictly on characters independent, acerbic, agonised, frustrated, somewhat domineering and combating with angry defiance their individual problems and predicaments which
are basically existentialist".1

A regular feature in most Indian English novels is the treatment of characters as types rather than as individuals. In the novels of Anita Desai, however, there is a striking departure from this practice. Although her characters might display a set of psychological proclivities and represent certain universal predilections and conflicts, they are essentially independent individuals with distinct identities of their own. Anita Desai's novels are studies of the inner life of characters and since she creates a small milieu, her narrative focus becomes precise and clear. This provides her with an opportunity to observe all the minute details in the environment of the characters. The novelist is gifted with an extraordinary sense for details, a capacity for graphic delineation of things, usually left unnoticed and is able to present a very realistic picture.

Anita Desai's protagonists are women born out of loveless marriages, women who try to shun reality and escape into a dream world, nurtured by their fantasies. These women break away from reality and rationale and feel terribly alienated. They always evince a tendency to escape, sometimes even seeking to flee from the past (as in case of Nanda Kaul) or present (as in case of Sita) to seek shelter in an illusory, world of their own creation.

Most of the heroines of Anita Desai bear the scars of a particular kind of emotional deprivation. They are either motherless, like Maya and Sita, or products of broken homes, like Bim and Raka. They try to preserve their independence zealously, and think that by getting themselves alienated, they will achieve their goal—the discovery of their identities. It is this nostalgia for independence that turns them into rebels. They grow into non-conformists or wayward people who cannot find peace in a fixed situation and are usually drifters.

These characters nevertheless cannot be called escapists, for they discharge the duties allotted to them quite effectively, but resent the circumstances in which they have to operate. Nanda Kaul, Bim, Sita and Sarah—all are dutiful wives and daughters. They discharge their duties efficiently, but most of the time they feel crushed under the load of responsibilities and long for a release, and when they find themselves free from the net of duties, they try to get what they had been robbed of in the past. Characters like Bim, Sita, Sarah and Nanda Kaul, having bogged down playing their respective roles as wife, daughter or mother, try to find peace by forcing themselves into a state of alienation.

Anita Desai's major preoccupation as a novelist has been the delineation of characters. Each of her novels is primarily designed to project one or two major characters. In the portrayal of character, she is
primarily interested in the projection of the psyche of female protagonists living in a separate, closed and sequestered world of existential problems and passions, love and hatred. She portrays her characters as individuals destined to face single-handed the ferocious assaults of existence. Carefully avoiding feminist impulses, the novelist avoids whipping up any morbid interest in the mass of women marching forward under the banner of feminism. Only the individual, the solitary being, is of real interest to the novelist. One must be alone, silent, in order to think and contemplate. Critics say that Desai is influenced by Virginia Woolf, who in this century has portrayed the feminine psyche in many of her novels. They have made a comparative study of the two novelists with encouraging rewards.2

In the novels of Anita Desai we find striking similarities between her women characters and their psychological state. We find that some of her women characters are over-sensitive and are generally misunderstood by their husbands and the people around them. Their childhood development has some bearing upon them, and the present circumstances do not help them into getting themselves adjusted to their immediate families and the society. Because of this, some of the characters in her novel are mentally disturbed, and they act and react either in a rebellious way or try to find

an escape from the world around them, sometimes escaping even from their own selves. Many times we find them in a desperate search of their identity. And when their quest is thwarted, they create their own world around them according to their own wishes. However, when the reality of life comes into conflict with their illusory world, their sentiments are hurt and they feel insecure. The predicament of Maya in Cry, the Peacock, Monisha in Voices in the City, and Nanda Kaul in Fire on the Mountain illustrates this point. Sarla in In Custody also bears some of these psychological effects.

II

Maya, in Cry, the Peacock, is oversensitive and most of the time is misunderstood by her husband. To her, their marriage is likely to ruin each other's life and happiness. The very thought has more effect on Maya than it has on Gautama, her husband. Maya's mental and psychological state is pathetic because her womanhood is not complete, and she bears the scar of a particular kind of mental deprivation of being childless and motherless. "Childless women", She herself ruminates, "do develop fanatic attachments to their pets, they say it is no less a relationship than that of a woman and her child, no less worthy or reference, and agonised . rememberance" (p.10). Maya's highly impressionistic and hysterical attitude forces the reader to have a clear peep into her nurotic sensibility, which becomes even more acute due to the lack of communication and understanding between her
husband and herself. She feels that the ambitions of her mind and her husband's are totally different from each other. While she is very sensitive and totally broken by a simple reality of the death of her pet dog, her husband is not touched by this incident and immediately starts taking things in routine as before. Toto, her pet dog, meant more than a person to her. She tries to explain to Gautama: "Living mightn't mean much to some people, but when they die, they want it to happen splendidly, something that will be remembered, for ages, by everybody" (p.16). This difference is also seen when Maya sees caged monkeys on the platform and becomes inquisitive about them. When she finds out that they are laboratory monkeys, she feels very sad for them. Gautama explains to her very simply that they will be piled up and taken loaded in the ships to be tested. Maya's sensitive nature makes her cry: "Look, they are thirsty and hungry. There is not even a bowl of water for them". Gautama, however, does not pay attention to the monkeys' condition, and his behaviour convinces her that he has seen nothing, really" (p.155).

The women characters in the novels of Anita Desai are mostly not happy with their present situations and also with their relationships with the husband, and the other members of the family and even their children and the people around them. Their psychological development has a lot to do with their
childhood and growing up. They are what they are also on account of the people and circumstances which have influenced their lives. In *Cry, the Peacock*, we find Maya to be very unadjusting and unhappy when she goes to parties with Gautama. She feels that people there talk only about business, prestige, social status and money. To her, they were far from living a spontaneously happy life. She often argues with her husband on this matter and tries to persuade him to see things in her way.

The environment of Maya's childhood has a lot to do with her personality. She grew up just like her father wanted her to. She had an Ayah to look after her and regulate proper timings for all of her activities. She was also made to learn proper manners and habits. She had to calmly surrender to the lifestyle that her father prescribed. The dominance of her father's disciplinary guidance created a father fixation in her, which is evident over and over again.

The childhood sentiments continue to remain with Maya. She continues to value and love certain small decorative objects which she clung to in her childhood. These were small boxes and horses of wood and metal which were decorated in her father's house. Now they are decorated in her own house. But Gautama has no attachment for such lifeless things and sees no purpose for them.

When young, Maya heard the voices of peacocks
from the jungle. Someone had told her about the lives of
the peacocks and peahens which lived a very passionate
life, so passionate that the peahens died during the act
of love, their last cry sounding as "Lover, I die". This
call has a particular relevance to Maya's own life.
Somewhere in her subconscious, she always has a desire to
love her husband intensely with a love which goes beyond
the physical and has its roots in the heart with a proper
understanding for each other's thoughts and emotions. But
when Maya discovers that both she and her husband belong
to separate worlds, she is hurt emotionally. Although the
world "daily grew more desirable", she continued to be
doomed.

Under the onrush "writhe and die in the
cruellest of hells", of this ghastly
revelation, come the undercurrent of another
searing realization— that it was not only
for his presence, his love that I longed, but
mainly for the life that would, permit me to
touch him, feel his flesh and hair, hold and
tighten my hold on him. And not on Gautama
alone, but on all the pulsating world around
him,... all that suggested life and the great
entrancing world to me who was doomed not to
live (p.102).

Maya's mother-in-law is a social worker and is
very strict about rules and regulations. A woman with
brains, she can easily communicate on topics of money,
qualities and business. She is a hardworker and seems to
be really concerned about things and people around her.
But when she talks to Maya in a soft tone, Maya cannot
tell whether "she said this out of affection or had some
notice far removed from any personal feelings" (p.47). But when Gautama's sister, Nila, fails to keep up with her married life and wants to divorce her husband and seeks advice of Gautama and her mother, the mother assumes a different role, she appears to be a typical woman with double standards who has considerations and reasonings entirely different in so far as her own daughter is concerned. How can a social worker, concerned with the problem of the world around her, is so impersonal with her own daughter? Gautama is upset at the thought of divorce and does not want to have anything to do with it. As for Maya, she cannot understand why her husband is not willing to help his own sister. Both Maya and Gautama have different psychological views on a problem which may be bothering them both, Gautama bluntly says: "I haven't time to waste on a case like hers - the mess she makes by being too bossy and self-willed and bullying". (pp.161-62).

Maya's dissatisfaction in such matters is obvious because, she feels, Gautama does not understand her and her sentiments properly. A secret fire keeps on burning slowly inside her. She is naturally amazed at Nila's bold steps when she finds that she (Nila) has gone alone to the lawyer to seek help for her problems.

Maya has many scars of the past in her heart, including the running away of her brother Arjuna from home when he was still young. Arjuna was a rebel endowed with a free nature and did not care for his father's
orders. But Maya is submissive and dominated by her father's disciplinary guidance even in her youth, which resulted, earlier in Arjuna's leaving home. Maya often realised the difference and continuously asked herself, "Couldn't I do it"? When she tells about her brother to Gautama, he only says mockingly: "What amuses me is how this young man, barely older than you, revolted so violently against an order that you so naturally gathered to your bosom as the only way of life possible for the Brahmin daughter of a Brahmin..." (pp.143-44). As for Maya she finds the world around her abnormal: "This is not natural, I told myself, this cannot be natural. There is something weird about now, wherever I go, whatever I see, whatever I listen to has this unnaturalness to it. This is insanity. But who, what is insane? I myself? Or the world around me?" (p.145).

Maya recognizes that woman is the weaker one in the world and needs some male protector. She, being constantly in mental tension, her inner being cries out in a desperate state: "Father! Brother! Husband! Who is my saviour? I am in need of one" (p.98). Her constant search of meaning of life and longing for love is seen in are vitiated by her reactions and inability to adjust with her practical and down-to-earth husband and other members of the family. Her anguish finds its correlation in the agony of the peahens "which lived a very passionate life, so passionate that the peahens die during the act of love" (p.97). Maya now believes that
the destiny of these peahens was her destiny also.

Maya is emotionally disturbed when Gautama's palmist friend approaches her and wants to tell her about her future. Maya does not want to know anything because she is horrified at the thought of what she believes is going to happen. The feeling of insecurity has gripped her so much that she thinks that she is going to die: "... What if tomorrow I were a mere stone, mute, immobile, extinct? For now I knew my destiny. It was annihilation" (p.132). Although Maya acts as if she does not believe in astrology or horoscope, in her heart of hearts she has faith in the prophecy. It is a surprise to her that her husband is not moved by the prophecy and is leading a normal life. When Maya starts discussing the topic of death to Gautama, he starts getting annoyed and sarcastic. Maya has a strong feeling that one of them has to die. The uncertainty regarding the death of either herself or her husband drives Maya insane. The duststorm on the evening of the tragedy is symbolic of Maya's disorder and disturbance and also conveys the distance in the husband-wife relationship. She herself reminds us that "this evening underlined so significantly the wast difference between us, between our worlds and our destinies" (p.196).

Maya knows full well that Gautama is an intellectual and optimist and that there is no point in discussing such issue with him. She is, nevertheless, always
expecting the danger of death that is inching ahead. She is not sure but always suspects that probably she will die like the peahen. But later she thinks that it could also be Gautama. This thought makes her aggressive. The peacocks make her aware of her own predicament and she does not want to die because she discovers her new identity. Finally, she takes the crucial decision to murder her husband because she is committed to life while her husband takes it lightly. Gautama's murder is a result of sudden impulse. Maya kills not just her husband, who does not understand her, but kills all the people and forces around her that also do not belong to her world. K.R.S. Iyengar, while discussing the novel, has noticed the pervading fatality in it: "Over the whole narrative in *Cry, the Peacock*, which is really Maya's effort to tell her story to herself, to discover some meaning in her life, and even to justify to herself, there hovers an uncannily oppressive sense of fatality".3 This fatality seals Maya's fate irredeemably.

To Maya, in the abnormal world around her, only she is normal. But she does not know that she is bound to be different from others who live not merely on emotions but on facts of life. The childhood memories, especially that of her father dominating all the aspects of the family life, are so much in the subconscious of Maya that they haunt her even in her present life. "She wants to forget the past but she cannot do so."

Even when Maya is with her husband, she acts as if she is not there with him. The emotional difference between them has torn them apart so much that not only are they away from each other emotionally, but the tragedy is that their physical togetherness also is affected by this dilemma. They are very unhappy chiefly due to Maya's father-fixation. It is a strange life for them to lead together. At times Maya feels very sorry for Gautama because, in her evaluation, he is not lively and loving like her. The tragedy of Gautama and Maya lies in the inadequate emotional transference from father to husband, which blocks her encounter with reality. Maya is a creature of the inner world and wants to converse and communicate in the language of silence which Gautama fails to understand.

In Anita Desai's novels we find that the interpersonal relationship of the main women characters are somewhat disturbed and strange. We find that Maya feels very uneasy when she meets a palmist Sikh friend of Gautama because she does not want him to read her future. She Says: "My palms began to sweat. Secretly, for I hid them in my lap, curling my fingers across them so that no one should see, no one should know. Softly, softly, I murmured. Here's danger. And yet my blood boiled in the shells of my ears, hammered there. If I did not say something to release the pressure, it would burst as through an overtaxed dam" (p.76). Maya is emotionally disturbed because she remembers the prophecy of the albino. She is not sure whether she should believe in
fate or not but is emotionally disturbed at the suggestions of the Sikh palmist.

Maya also feels very uncomfortable when her mother-in-law and sister-in-law come to visit her. She tries her best to get along with them and also has a feeling of security with them. She has a strange feeling about the empty house after their departure as she will be left alone with her horrors and nightmares. The presence of Gautama's mother makes her feel the lack of motherly love in her life. She longs for care, concern, and loving kindness of mother. Even though Maya does not approve of the ways and life-style of Gautama's sister, she does not want her to leave.

Maya has a friend named Leila who is just opposite to her. She cannot understand why Leila never wears any jewellery and always has bare arms. And also how can Leila love her husband, who is terminally ill with tuberculosis? Pom on the contrary, is always very conscious about her appearance, always taking a long time for her make-up and dressing. Fed up with the life style of her husband, Pom tells Maya that she is going to make her husband move out. She is courageous and lives life the way she wants to. Maya also seems to have the same desire, but does not have the courage even to think about it. Thus though Cry, the Peacock is Desai's first novel, yet it can be regarded as "a trend-setting novel" so far as the delineation of the psychological aspect of
characters is concerned.  

III

Monisha is the main woman character in *Voices in the City*. Like Maya, Monisha is also fed up with her dull life. The routine housework, which includes cooking for a large joint family, is not pleasing to her at all. If there was a way for her to get out of all these, she would have chosen it. We find a striking similarity between her psychology and that of Maya. Like Maya, Monisha is also childless and being childless, both Maya and Monisha have an over-emotional nature. Both suffer from a feeling of insecurity and worthlessness. Although Nanda Kaul in *Fire on the Mountain*, has different reasons for her feelings, all the three women are trying to find an escape from their present dilemma. The other women of the household keep themselves busy with their children and other household duties, but she does not feel comfortable in their company. The desire of becoming a mother is very strong in her and the lack of a child in her life makes her irritated when other children are around her. As motherhood is a symbol of honour and fulfilment, Monisha's failure only disturbs her: "I have not given birth, I have not attended death" (p. 240), says she. The total deprivation of an experience, which enriches life, creates a complex that further aggravates her condition. Thus she always remains 'apart and enclosed' within herself, beyond any body's reach. Even

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4 Ramesh K. Shrivastava (ed.), *Perspectives on Anita Desai*, Introduction, p. XII.
in the company of others she is not happy and longs for privacy: "I am glad to be occupied in cutting vegetables serving food, brushing small children's hair. Only I wish I were given some tasks I could do alone in privacy..." (p.115).

Tired of the crowd of Calcutta, Monisha finds many kinds of people, rich and poor, healthy and handicapped and is disturbed by the way of the would. Insecurity and uncertainties inside her do not help her make up her mind as how to feel about the whole situation whether with compassion or with loathing. She herself is not unaware of her dilemma: "Two faces—one rapacious, one weary—gaze at me from every direction. How to reply - with loathing or compassion? (pp.117-18). She misses Kalimpong, where her husband was previously posted, where they had privacy and more time to spend with each other. She does not have a religious faith, which makes life still more difficult for her. Realising her limitations, she observes :"If I had religious faith, I could easily enough renounce all this. But I have no faith, no alternative to my confused despair, there is nothing I can give myself to, and so I must stay" (p.120). Like Maya, Monisha also feels lack of love, from her husband. She feels that all relationships are superficial and and life is miserable. Because of this, a fear of the unknown grips her, and she prays: "Never, never wake to draw us into the dreadful ring again. Allow us just this to stand back, apart, in the shadows, and watch the fire and the flames, the sacrifices that are
flung in to it, the celebration, the mourning, and permit us - not to take part" (p.136). When a musician and a singer come to Monisha's house for performance, we find her untouched by songs and music. She does not quite understand the kind of love that is expressed in the songs. We find Monisha questioning herself whether she is normal or not. The songs seem to her barren like herself. The psychology of a childless woman and inability to achieve the total womanhood by being a mother, has been sensitively suggested by the novelist:

I have not given birth,... I have not attended death. All the intervening drama has gone by, unwound itself like a silent, blurred film that has neither entertained nor horrified me. It has unwound itself and now there is nothing.... But if a great fog were to roll across the scene, or a terrible cyclone to snatch it all away and scatter it upon the sea like so much flotsam, it would be all the same to me. I should remain alone, apart and enclosed within myself, beyond their touch (p.240).

Amla, Monisha's sister, comes to Calcutta to make her career there. Unlike Monisha, Amla is very lively and cheerful about her future plans but deep inside she is not at rest. The basic reason for her discomfort is her relationship with Dharma which is not proper. She knows it, but is scared to admit it. Amla does not like much guiding of elder people and wants to have her own way in life. Even Monisha's advice is something that she disapproves. As a matter of fact, we find that Monisha suggests Amla to take up painting and
avoid worrying, but Amla protests against what is happening to Monisha's life. Monisha had to marry Jiban, a man of her father's choice. But in Amla's evaluation Jiban is not fit for Monisha at all. The mother of Nirode Monisha and Amla seems to be a woman of a different character. When all the children are living away, she regrets her previous plans to let them go to different places to live. Now loneliness is too oppressive for her to bear and in the process of trying to adjust in the new situation, she becomes friendly with another man, just to spend a few happy hours in his company. However, she acts very strangely at the death of her daughter, Monisha. Nirode could see that his mother does not need him or her other children. She does not need anyone to share her sorrow. She wants to keep the essence of this tragedy to herself. Nirode even compares his mother to Goddess Kali, who takes her children away whenever she wants to. But to Amla her mother is a simple woman.

The story of Monisha is a typical story of a woman whose life becomes tragic because of her being childless. The family life especially the presence of children around her makes her feel irritated. Her situation also gives her a feeling of insecurity. She wants to find an escape but, to her, her situation is like a caged tiger she saw at the zoo. "The tiger there is dead-like for he is caged." Monisha also feels dead-like because her condition is also like the tiger who is locked up. "She has no freedom and no life of her own" (p.120). She also feels that her life is like a musical instrument
that someone else plays to entertain others. To her, such a life is worthless. She asks: "Is this what life is then, my life? Only a conundrum that I shall brood over for ever with passion and pain, never to arrive at a solution? Only a conundrum is that, then, life?" (p.124). Monisha's husband is, like Maya's husband, a practical man who does not go to any depths of Monisha's mental state to find her problems. Monisha's secret of frequent miscarriages and stillbirths enhances her insecurity and feeling of worthlessness. Like Maya, Monisha has a different concept of love, which she never realises in her life: "But I do not mean these physical passions and congenital connections at all - I mean by love only an awake condition of the conscience. I fear this and avoid it, and so we step backwards from love..."(p.136). She sees her life as closed in a locked container; finds herself only as an observer, feels very imperfect and handicapped. Since she does not bring 'life' into this world, reality also does not mean much to her. She just lives as an unconcerned person, and life goes on like a drama on a stage. Like Maya, her psycholocial disturbances achieve their heights and she, in desperation, burns herself to death. This results in a rebellious attitude towards the world. But in desperation she takes her own life. Jasbir Jain writes, "Monisha's suicide is an attempt to give meaning to her death, for her life has not been able to acquire one. Her suicide is preceded by self-knowledge and it asserts her freedom; it
is an exercise of her choice. 5 Monisha lives alone and dies alone: "no ashes of that fire drifted over the city, no wind carried the smoke away to inform others of the cloistered tragedy" (pp.242-43). She prefers a meaningful death to a meaningless life and practises what she believed.

IV

Bye-Bye Blackbird depicts the struggle of Sarah. A Britisher married to an Indian man, she tries her best to learn the ways of Indian wives and Indian traditions. The reader is sympathetic towards Sarah because she tries her best to leave behind that which she properly belonged to and tries to adopt what she was a stranger to. London, where she was born and brought up, is no more her own, but a strange land since she is married to an Indian. India, which she very much wants to be hers, is foreign to her because she has never been there. Sarah fails to please either her husband or her own inner self. She does not get much help from her husband. After all she does, she gets an accusation: "You all never accept anything but your own drab, dingy standards and your dull, boring ways. Anything else looks clownish to you, laughable..."(p.220).

At times Sarah acts as if she wants to hide herself from the world around her. At this point she has a deep desire to learn all the Indian ways of life and

tradition, but her wish does not become a reality and she finds herself in a place where she cannot identify herself with either London or India. She has so little command over these various roles she has to play, and her loss of identity is so complete that she is not certain if the real Sarah exists at all. She is fed up with treating her life as a stage where she has to play different parts and her wish to live a real life, off the stage, becomes unnatural. All she wants is to live a real life. "Whether English or Indian, she did not care she wanted only its sincerity, its truth" (p.35). She treasures even the smallest of Indian things which remind her of India to prove that she has some relationship with India. She has a secret desire to live in India, as is evident from the following:

Indian stamps-that tiny triangle of mauve on a purple background that was stamped even on her white forearm; that Indian tea-planter in a cowl, picking her way through green tea bushes, who was her secret companion; those many inscrutable faces of statesmen, philosophers and unknown Indian sages who were her oracles-these figures of the Indian stamps were hers, hers to ponder over, mull over, to acquaint and align herself with, in an effort to know India, become Indian-these were her secrets, to have anyone pry upon them, break in upon the shadowed intimacy of her relationship with them was violent, shaking, terrible (p.34).

while planning to go to India, Sarah is puzzled, for she does not know what is best for her to do, i.e. to leave her job and promotion offered by
her Boss or to leave everything and go to India with concern for their unborn child:

Now she sat holding her head in her hands, waiting for the pill to exercise its steadying influence on her and trying to keep from splitting into three splinters - one pursuing Adit on his voyage to the East, one holding back to cradle and comfort the uneasy, unborn child, and the third tackling the exigencies of a career that had surprisingly revealed a future (p.207).

Sarah thinks of all the things that her child will not know or enjoy in the future. It is a painful thought that her child will not have many pleasures of childhood that she had enjoyed, if she goes to India.

Sarah is a typical British character and is appreciably influenced by Emma Moffit, the landlady of Adit. Emma has had a longing to go to India, and Sarah is very much influenced by the way Emma describes her desire to go to India. Since Emma is now old and has no way to go to India, she tries to create an Indian touch around her where she lives. She wants to gather a group of Indians whom she loves to start a club. When she comes to know that Sarah is going to India with her husband, her excitement rises to the heights where she even suggests that she accompanies them to India. Sarah has also seen an unbalanced family situation in her own home. This must have been another reason of uncertainty in her mind as to how she was going to face her family life and adjust to an entirely different world. She has seen how dominating
her mother was, who always tried to be superior to her husband. The mother often said that the ways of Asian immigrants were filthy, and does not even care for her Indian son-in-law. Sarah's father on the contrary, is a quiet man, who has learnt to ignore his wife's humiliating words. The novelist has shed significant light on the attitudes of these characters. Sarah is torn between her two selves, the one as the Indian wife, and the other as the Secretary in the school. At times she feels that she is not being herself and is rather acting on the stage playing different roles at different times, and when she is not playing any roles she is 'a nobody'. Her search for an identity makes her desperate: "... if she would ever be allowed to step off the stage, leave the theatre and enter the real world—whether English or Indian, she did not care, she wanted only its sincerity, its truth" (p.34). Even at her best, admits Sarah, she is never sure whether what she says about Indian ways is right and is always afraid of initiating a conversation. She is so frustrated at times that she would prefer to go to the Supermarket and lose herself in the crowd. She does not want to be noticed as someone married to an Indian and trying to adopt Indian ways, culture and traditions.

Despite her search for an identity, this is Sarah's destiny to flow between the two worlds, Indian and European, and be torn asunder. She tries to escape reality and feels very insecure. Before leaving for India, when Sarah visits a Sikh in London, the old Indian
lady tells her about the problems of foreign girls marrying Indian boys: "When I hear of our boys coming here and marrying English girls, I always feel pain here inside me. I feel pain for the girl and also for the boy because I know how hard their life will be and that the English girl can never belong to us" (218). This makes Sarah's uncertainty even stronger. Finally, when time comes for Sarah to leave for India

It was her English self that was receding and fading and dying, she knew, it was her English self to which she must say good-bye. That was what hurt— not saying good-bye to English, because England would remain as it was, only at a greater distance would remain as it was, only at a great distance from her, but always within the scope of a return visit. England she whispered, but the word aroused no special longing or possessiveness in her. English, she whispered, and then her instinctive reaction was to clutch at something and hold on to what was slipping through her fingers already (p.221).

Thus, Sarah, like other women characters of Ainta Desai, desperately struggles with her present state of being, her inner longing to be loved, to be wanted and to belong to someone. This struggle for identity is chiefly responsible for their uncertainty and psychic imbalance.

V

Where Shall We Go This Summer? is a story of a woman who is frustrated in all aspects of life. Her mental state is strange when she comes to the island of Manori in a pregnant state, where she comes "not to give birth"
to the child. She already has four children and has the most strange feeling about the baby yet to be born. To Sita, this world is full of selfishness and immorality, and does not want to bring another child into this kind of world. Desai has depicted Sita as a person who is not understood by anyone, not even by her husband. Her views do not match with those of her husband at all. Her husband Raman takes life lightly and takes things and incidents easily. On account of frustration of inability to convey her thoughts and emotions to her husband, Sita gets furious. When she talks about her view of "not giving birth to the child", her husband thinks that she is talking about an abortion. This makes her furious and she tells him with rage how he even thinks of 'that word'. Her experiences of life are bleak, drab, grey and, in many ways, depressing and disappointing. The everyday-world, which is full of compromises, becomes insufferable to her and she decides to protest in her own unusual way. Desai reads Sita's decision as: "rebellion right through to the last moment".6 Thus Sita's refusal to continue life as it is, is a manifestation of her rebellion.

To some extent, we find similarity in the characters and psychology of Sita and Maya of Cry, the Peacock. Both of them have strange views of the world and things around them and both are very upset because no one understands them, not even their husbands, Sita is also a

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6 Jasbir Jain, Stairs to the Attic: The Novels of Anita Desai, p.11.
misfit in her husband’s house and never adjusts with other family members. She has a different opinion about the women relatives as well, and never understands them. They are typical Indian women while Sita is made of a different stuff. These women bent over their trays, are busy with chores like chopping vegetables, slicing, chopping, slicing the incredible quantities of vegetables they devoured. Like elephants, ... eating grass, shifting from foot to foot, swaying their trunks, small-eyed, eating” (p.48-9). While Sita grew up, she lacked many things in her life. She did not have a mother or a real sister, which made it difficult for her through adolescence. This factor made her a kind of introvert who plunged deep in her own chamber and struggled alone. She could not develop skills or talents to keep her busy or to channel her thoughts and feelings properly. Consequently, she is withdrawn into a world created by herself and has strange ideas about many things including her unborn child. She comes to Manori believing that her father’s spiritual performances are true and he actually possesses magical powers and that he would help her keep the baby unborn.

When Sita gets married to Raman, and comes to his house to live in a joint family, she cannot adjust to the family and their ways. She takes to smoking, stares about in silence, and speaks in a provocative way. Eventually, the situation compels her husband to move with her to a small flat but even there-
People continued to come and be unacceptable to her. She took their insularity and complacency as well as the aggression and violence of others as affronts upon her own living nerves. She spent almost all her time on the balcony, smoking, looking out at the sea... (p. 49).

But there comes a point in her life when she can no longer tolerate the monotonous life in the city. She wants to get away from the uninteresting and boring world even though she knows that running to the island of Manori is not a solid answer, but it would be far better than staying and suffering.

In spite of strange ideas, dreams and emotions, we find that Sita longs for care and concern of her loved ones. She is so glad when her husband Raman comes to the island. But very soon her happiness is turned into emotional hurt when she finds out that Raman has not come because of his concern for her; he has come because Menaka, their daughter, called him. Sita feels that everyone around her has forsaken her. This thought tears her open and she has a feeling of disappointment and shame. The actions of the members of her family force her to think: "They had all got together...her family, to fight her, to reject her, to run away and hide from her". All human relations seem meaningless to her. She sees how worthless her married life has been! She realises that she is bored with everything and everyone. Sita's mental make up is also due to the background of her childhood. She is very young when she first comes to the island of Manori with her father. "She was not really a child at
that time in another environment she might have already been regarded as a young woman, but she had lived a strange life, an unusual life, that had the effect of making her withdraw into the protective chrysalis of childhood for longer than is usual for most" (p.63).

Sita is haunted by the fact that she was 'motherless', and her father being too busy, she was carried away to someone's house to sleep "always a different someone" (p.85). The unusual way she was brought up is also responsible for her strange psychic behaviour.

Later on, in life Sita grows up to be a person who is never satisfied with her situation. She is always complaining about everything around her, which becomes a part of her nature. Arguments never help her to see things in the proper perspective. She becomes so rebellious that she does not want either to put up with either the city life or her baby to be born in such a place. She Says: "Put up with it? I'd would be cowardly to put up with it. And it isn't only I-there's the baby. That is what I refuse to do, you know - have it born to such--such a life" (p.143). Sita is constrained to live a confused life. As the novelist tells us, "The line between the creative and destructive grew so thin, so hazy and undefinable that, gazing at it, she seemed to see it vanish altogether" (p.56). In desperation, she comes to the island of Manori. But when the realities hit
her hard, she feels very sorry for her decision. Eventually, she returns to the mainland as a defeated person.

VI

Nanda Kaul, in Fire on the Mountain, is a housewife, who has spent the precious years of her life in taking care of the household affairs. She looks after the children and keeps herself busy, as the wife of a Vice-Chancellor, with entertaining people who come to visit her husband. She longs for privacy, a life of her own, but never has it. Although she never complains vocally or through her actions during all these years, she feels insecure and dissatisfied.

Nanda always feels that the family members are only using her for their purpose. She does not even have time to take a little rest in the afternoon. She resigned to her lot, says: "... all right, come, come all of you, get me, I am yours, yours again" (p.24). Out of tune with her husband, she feels very lonesome. Seema Jena rightly feels that Nanda "seeks a stillness that will exclude all movement, animate or inanimate. In fact, the novel grows out of a contrast between stillness and movement. Her withdrawal stands for an emotional stability, a kind of psychic frigidity that refuses any intrusion and movement". 7 Nanda feels frustrated and as a defeated woman because her husband had an extramarital

affair with another woman. Nanda has a strange relationship not only with her husband but also with other people that cross her life. Ila, her best friend, is opposite to her. Unlike her, Ila is a strong person who faces life boldly and knows how to fight her own battles. Nanda asks herself: "...wasn't Ila Das still lively-in spite of everything, still lively?" (p.121).

Nanda comes to Carignano to live a secluded and peaceful life. The setting of the novel "symbolises the desolate state of Nanda Kaul's mind; it stands for solitude valued so much by her ...:8 The news of Raka's proposed visit, however, upsets Nanda very much. Nanda has only "... her disappointment and her total loathing because of this plan which was made without her consent. Her mind was totally 'distracted' now" (p.16). After the arrival of Raka, however, Nanda tries her best to adjust with her. But she is disappointed when she finds that Raka gets along better with Ramlal, the cook, than with her. She tries to catch Raka's interest by telling her past stories and stories of her father and his trips. She later realises that she is uncomfortable because all these stories were made up and not true.

In Nanda we find yet another Indian woman character who is longing to be loved, to be listened to, and to be an object of interest. But all her desires and plans crumble and she is forced to feel lonesome. What

she does all through her life to prove herself to be a successful housewife and a mother is just a show. Her real self comes out when she leaves everything behind and goes to a place where she can be herself. We see a longing in both Ila and Nanda for what they do not have. Nanda wants to be like Ila and Ila, like Nanda. On the surface Nanda is trying to escape from the realities, but deep inside her she is attached to everything and everyone. She tries to please Raka when she arrives to live with her and also entertains Ila when she comes to visit her.

VII

Anita Desai has presented different aspects of her women characters in her other novels. Unlike Maya, Monisha, Sarla and Nanda, Bim, in Clear Light of Day, is a bold and strong character. She is educated and could have been working in a good place with all the brains she has. But because of her brother's mental illness she is confined to home in old Delhi. She often thinks and feels sorry for her own life, which she often compares with old Delhi itself, which does not change but only decays. John Leonards writes that although externally we are in the suburbs of Old Delhi, yet actually we are "outside time and inside memory". This memory is of lonely Bim, who can now only contemplate on the past. She desperately fights with her loneliness and tries to find an escape from her present situation. Her desperation is expressed

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by her to her sister Tara: "... isn't it strange how life won't flow, like a river, but moves and jumps as it were held back by locks that are open now and then—nothing happens and each day is exactly like the other plodding, uneventful" (p.42).

Apparently, Bim seems to have adjusted herself to the circumstances of her life, but inside her an emotional storm is gathering. She has decided to be independent and not to get married, but she wants to gain higher education and have an identity and not become like the Mishra sisters whom she knew in her youth. Mishra sisters could not attain higher goals because they were in constant search for husbands. Bim has an admirable courage to face whatever difficulties come in her way. Her whole life is one of sacrifice and tolerance. The responsibilities do not bother her; she strongly faces them and tries to fight her way out. In her, we find a strong personality who is constantly struggling for survival. As Seema Jena puts it,

Unlike other female protagonists of Anita Desai, Bim is free from the traumas of a scattered childhood or an incompatible marriage. She is symbolic of forces that have sustained all the foundation of all family life. She becomes symbolic of the archetypal sustaining mother, a metaphor that Anita Desai subtly employs to reaffirm and reassert the life-themes in the novel.10

Bim's actions and her dealings with others present her as one who is not just a traditional Indian woman. Unlike Nanda Kaul, she wants to be liberated and strongly fights for her identity. She is an important and sustaining member of the family, with firm decisions and courage of her own.

The strong character of Bim had a lot to do with the way she felt when she was a young girl. At that age, she was very much fond of Florence Nightingale and Joan of Arch, who were her ideals. Her early resolve bristles with confidence: "I shall earn my own living and look after Mira Masi and Baba and be independent. There'll be so many things to do—when we are grown up, up, when all this is over" (pp.140-41). Bim is bored with the dull life of the Old Delhi. She is a girl with visions and dreams, but it is her misfortune that she cannot work out her plans. Gabriele Annan testifies to this fact when says that this novel deals with "the theme of frustrated expectation", and "an elegiac mood followed by it".11

Bim and Tara are of opposite natures. In the earlier years, Tara was alienated and an introvert while Bim was rebellious and wanted to reach out the wide open world. As a student Bim was smart and energetic, participated in every game and was the monitor of the

class. But the situation has now changed, for Bim is the one who is isolated and has "turned grey" with time. She is tragically left behind by the rays of life. Her life is summed up by herself as a life without flow, movement, change or any meaning. She is, in fact, tired of this dull, boring and lonely life. Desai herself has described the "... stagnant, dreamlike lives of a decaying family", 12 especially that of Bim, in this novel. We find that Tara never grows out of her childhood completely. She is an escapist, who runs into matrimony, sensing the trouble at home.

Aunt Mira, another important woman character of the novel, plays an important role in bringing up the children. Married at the age of twelve and widowed at fifteen, she was much exploited by her in-laws for whom she served as a maid. Mira Masi presents the picture of an Indian widow and her tragic life in the house of her in-laws. She leaves that house and comes to the Das family to find a shelter and to be saved from her brother in-law's unclean intentions. But as a sheltering mother, she provides everything to the family and expects nothing in return. She is unlike Nanda Kaul, who is very much dissatisfied with her situation when she has to look after the household work and children. Clear Light of Day is also the story of the Mishra Sisters. They do not go for higher education but have been searching for husbands since their youth. Their influence on Bim is such that

she realises that it would be foolish to find marriage as a solution of their life's problems and decides never to get married, so that she can remain independent. As time passes, Mishra Sisters grow to be grey haired and run a nursery school in the daytime and give music and dance lessons in the evening. Both of these unfortunate sisters are married and abandoned by their husbands at the same time. Now they have to work hard to earn their living and that of their brothers.

The mother of Bim, Tara, Raja and Baba is a person of different character. She neglects her children and never thinks about the future of her daughters. She is busy with her club life so much so that even in her unconciousness, she mutters the names of cards rather than those of her children. She dies, but the children never miss her, as they hardly spent time with her. It is a real tragedy for a mother if she is never missed by her children.

Notwithstanding her courage, Bim needs a man and his strength in the house to give her security. Her expectations are, however, shattered when she learns that her brother Raja is not planning to stay in India but wants to go to Pakistan. When Raja leaves, Bim is left alone with her brother Baba. The loneliness haunts her. She thinks of the good old days of their childhood and tells Baba: "Now there are just you and I left...." She talks about their empty house and tells him "We'll be alone now" (p.101). We find her tragedy similar to that of
Nanda Kaul who has given everything to the family and in return does not find what was expected.

VIII

In *The Village by the Sea* Anita Desai has presented the psychology of Lila, a young girl who is fulfilling the responsibilities of a father, because her father is a drunkard, and those of a mother, because her mother is very sick and confined to bed. Being the elder sister, Lila has to look after two younger sisters and her younger brother. What aggravates her tragedy is the fact that she belongs to a very poor family. She has to grow up mentally and emotionally before natural time as she is the major supporter of her family. In a very touching manner, Desai has painted the picture of how Lila has to suppress her other interests like spending time with friends, playing with them or dressing up for a free evening with young people of her age. The never-ending responsibilities at home do not allow her to enjoy the life of a young girl, but force her to grow up and fulfil the demands of the circumstances. When her friend excitedly asks her to see the play with her, she, knowing fully well that her presence is needed in her house, only says, "Perhaps...knowing that she would not" (p.30).

When Lila's mother is very sick, Mr. D'Silva is kind enough to take her mother to the hospital. We find Lila in a very desperate state of mind not knowing what to do. Although she goes to the hospital, when the doctors advise her mother to be admitted in the hospital for a few days,
she does not know whether to remain with her mother or to return to the task at home. When Mr. D'Silva asks her to come along with him back to the house, she has to agree because "She was not brave enough to argue with him, so she followed him to the car but wept all the way home" (p.99). It seems that for this little girl, leaving her mother, without her, for help, is tearing her inside and she returns from there as if leaving a part of her own behind with her mother. Her state of mind is also pathetic as she returns back from the hospital and stares silently out of the window and looks at the bare, baked field with a feeling of uncertainty. She sees her future in those fields and wonders whether it will ever change.

In this novel, the drunkard father and the sick mother force Lila to take the responsibilities of the two younger sisters and a brother along with the household responsibilities. In the interpersonal relationships we find that Lila, her two sisters and brother, Hari, are all afraid of the father. She wishes to see in her brother the face of a father, taking up the responsibilities of their father, later when he grows up. The departure of Hari to find a job makes her lonesome as she loses a companion that she could rely upon. Although the father is a drunkard, his presence makes Lila feel secure. When they discuss the situation of their home and Hari says if the father kills himself by drinking let him do so, it makes Lila frightened, and she says: "And mother? And mother? And us? What about who will look
after us? "(p.15). Lila seems to be optimistic and looks forward to the day when Hari will grow up and earn money and slowly their situation will change. When she comes to know that Hari has left to find a job in Bombay, she is filled with loneliness. In spite of all these facts, Lila appears to be a girl with a strong character. She knows that she has to stick with the present circumstances and has to bear the responsibilities, but she is filled with confidence that she will manage. However, from time to time it appears that she is in need of a shelter and looks for strength in a man: "She sighed, thinking how much easier it would have made things if Hari had been here" (p.82).

Lila is a desperate girl who has a rough life from her childhood with many responsibilities to bear. Circumstances force her to grow up mentally before her natural time. She tries to find solace in the thought that when her brother Hari grows up, they will have a better life. She is patient and knows that the change would not come all of a sudden but will come gradually. But when Hari leaves for Alibagh to find a job, she is alone at home, to manage the household work and to look after her two young sisters. But patient as she has been, she accepts the challenge. In her ill mother she probably sees her ill fate and helplessness. When she has to leave her mother at the hospital, she probably leaves a part of her behind helplessly. She looks far beyond time, waiting for her brother to return with an optimistic view; "Perhaps he
will come when the monsoon is over. Perhaps he will come at Diwali" (p.125).

IX

Sarla, in In Custody, is a young wife who is much neglected by her husband, Deven. Because he has to make many business trips to Delhi he gets tired of the work, and feels dissatisfaction. However, when he returns from his tours, Sarla reacts in anger and sarcastic gestures. Deven does not understand her mental state and takes his wife to be less educated less understanding, a homely woman who can only understand the problems of the kitchen and their small son. He does not even consider sharing his business problems with his wife. Sarla has had many dreams of married life.

While her mother collected stainless steel cooking pots and her sisters embroidered pillowcases and antimacassars for her, she (Sarla) dreamt the magazine dream of marriage: herself stepping out of a car with a plastic shopping bag full of groceries and filling them into the gleaming refrigerator, then rushing to the telephone placed on a lace doily upon a three-legged table and excitedly ringing up her friends to invite them to see a picture show with her and her husband who was beaming at her from behind a flowered curtain (p.68).

However, her dreams are shattered because her husband is more of a poet than a professor, to whom she seems to be too prosaic. Sarla's dreams about married life have not come true. Her husband under-estimates her and does not try to understand her.
The other women characters are Imtiaz Begum, the younger wife of poet Nur, and his first wife. Imtiaz Begum, once a student of Nur, gets married to him and becomes the mistress of the house. Time takes a turn and Nur is so much neglected by Imtiaz Begum that he takes to drinking and his life becomes miserable. Obviously Imtiaz Begum is attractive in comparison to Nur’s first wife and she takes advantage of the situation in every way and becomes overpossessive. She is a dominating woman who tries to show to her husband that now his reciting days are over and that it is she who the audience wants to hear. To her, Nur is hardly better than ‘that poor beast’ (p.59). Her fits of rage make her behave like a ‘fire-eater in the middle of a performance’. Nur has no choice but to listen to her accusations helplessly. The bitterness of Imtiaz Begum presents her as one who regards others as nothing and is always puffed up with her superiority complex. No matter how Nur tries to console and compromise, her fury in never subsided.

Nur’s first wife, on the contrary, appears to be a very strong person. Although she is a typical backward Indian housewife, always engaged in nothing but housework, she appears to be selfconfident. She does not have the abilities and skills like Imtiaz Begum, but she has genuine admiration for her husband’s talents. When she learns that Deven is trying to write an article on her husband, she is overjoyed and wants to encourage him to complete it, in spite of Imtiaz Bagum opposing it. She
believes that her husband is a great man. Although she does not approve of the presence of Imtiaz Begum in the house at all, yet she tolerates her. When Deven wants to know if Imtiaz Begum can be sent away while he interviews and records Nur's poetry, the old woman answers bitterly: "She has planted herself in our house—like a witch" (p.124). However she is very confident about her relationship with her husband. She says: "She will fume, seeing him come to visit me, but she can't stop that, I am the older one, the first" (p.125). Thus we see that Nur's first wife has love and care for her husband and wants her rights to be acknowledged.

In the novels of Anita Desai, the women characters represent a typical picture of Indian housewives, mothers, or just simple members of the family. In their cultural and traditional setting, many times even if they want to, they cannot establish their own selves as they wish or without a self identity according to their wishes. They struggle and in the process their psychological reactions are sometimes strange. Many of the characters try to escape their present predicament, and their desires and their desperations many times lead them to act and react the way that when they face the reality they cannot stand up and face it. And thus their oversensitive self is brought out and their act becomes abnormal.
Desai's characters are mostly lonely women, who are fragile introverts trapped in their own skins and there is a striving on their part to arrive at a more genuine way of life than the one which is available to them. Moreover, 'to be loved and understood' is their necessity but they have to surrender and loose at the end. Their attitude is controlled by fantasy, and they are fundamentally dependent on men.