Chapter 2
Dim Corridors

No man is an island. From birth to death every human being is a participant in society and neither the individual nor any human experience can be understood independently of that involvement. Society is a complicated web of social relationships by which each man is interconnected with his fellowmen. Social relationships occur at different frequency and are of different types such as direct and indirect, formal and informal, horizontal and vertical. Socialization is the basic process by which an individual becomes a functioning member of the society. Both the person and the society are dependent on this unique process of psycho amalgamation whereby the sentiments and the ideas of the culture are transferred to the organism. It refers to the whole moulding process by which an infant who is born with an enormously wide range of behavioural potentialities is introduced to the norms and values of a society. The core of socialisation is the development of the self. A continuous process from the cradle to the grave, it enhances the development of a healthy personality. It humanizes the biological organism and transforms it into a self having a sense of identity endowing it with ideals, values and ambition. According to Graham A. Allan, "the personal relationships do not simply provide compensation and distraction from the more serious issues of life but they are the very bones of social structure." While sympathy and tranquility emanate from harmonious interpersonal relations, disillusionment and despondency issue from a clash of ideas and personalities.

The process of socialisation begins in the family and is conditioned by culture. Since every society has its own culture, the process of socialisation also differs from society to society. Family is the basic social institution built around the biological and psychological needs of the people. "As a psychological group family is significant as in its structure are involved three fundamental bonds: the marital, parental and sibling." Even this small group offers challenging possibilities of complex ties. Though the primary familial ties are universally esteemed, in the
traits, a quest for identity and the external stresses like economic and political upheavals \(^3\) and the fluctuating value system. Anita Desai explores the psychic depths of her protagonists to analyse the alienation arising from the dissonance and despair in their social and personal relationships.

Desai seems to agree with D.H. Lawrence that "the great relationship for humanity will always be the relation between man and woman..."\(^4\) She focuses on the predicament of modern woman in the patriarchal Indian society and her disillusionment at the altar of marriage. Studies in marital harmony indicate that homogeneity of interests and attitudes is conducive to a happy marriage. But often the rational and matter of fact world of man clashes with the sentimental, emotional world of woman. In the Indian social milieu where arranged marriage is the common rule it is not compatibility, but obligations that gain prominence.

The novels of Desai often echo the lacerating cries of her alienated protagonists and mirror their traumatic private worlds. *Cry, the Peacock* (1963; New Delhi, Orient, 1988) "explores the turbulent emotional world of the neurotic protagonist Maya who smarts under an acute alienation stemming from marital discord and verges on a curious insanity."\(^5\) Plumbing into the chaos of Maya's consciousness the novelist transcribes the various factors leading to her psychic state. Desai employs the technique of contrast to effectively portray the marital life of Maya punctuated all along by "matrimonial silences" (12). The jarring notes of discontent and frustration in marriage often emanate from temperamental incompatibilities. Emotional, sensitive and impulsive wife is contrasted with the rational, matter of fact, practical husband. A realist to the core, the unsentimental Gautama stands for the prose in life while the hypersensitive Maya is gifted with a poetic imagination. Her obsessive love of the beautiful and the sensuous are not shared by her husband. Gautama remains untouched by the beauty of the starry night and the fragrance of flowers whereas her delight in the textures, scents, sounds and even silence is palpable. While Maya finds the half-sweet, half-sad aroma of flowers matching her
mood to perfection, they are of no use to him. She is dismayed that Gautama cannot even distinguish the smell of lemons. Her efforts to drag him to the world of colours and scents fail.

The differing attitudes to love and life inhibit their mutual understanding. Love to Maya is an intense experience that leads to true happiness. Gautama firmly believes that attachment, when mistaken for love which is many faceted, becomes the root cause of depression and disillusionment. To her life is a pulsating, throbbing possibility; to him it is clear, concrete truth. While Maya experiences the world through senses, he does it through reason. The instability in their marriage stems from her life-affirming as opposed to his life-denying and her subjectivity versus his objectivity. The clash between craving for excessive involvement in her and the complete lack of it in Gautama sparks off trouble.

The element of companionship, an essential ingredient for a happy conjugal life is wanting in their lives. Maya believes in involvement. “Contact, relationship, communion” (18) are her needs. But Gautama strongly believes in the wisdom of detachment: “The proof of love is the investment of time.” Gautama’s busy profession spares him no time for his half-woman, half-child wife. Their evening tour of togetherness, more of a ritual than really life-supporting, is hardly sufficient to drive away her loneliness. It does not instill in her any feeling of relatedness, of the peace that comes from companionship. With no vocation to occupy, she broods over the coldness of her husband: “Telling me to go to sleep while he worked at his papers, he did not give another thought to me, to either the soft willing body or the lonely mind” (19).

The feeling of loneliness and yearning for supportive primary relationship “are the two sides of a coin.” Aloneness creates vulnerability. With nobody to confide her unexpressed fears and uncommuned longings, Maya is engrossed in self-talk and Desai employs the interior monologues to illuminate her psychic state. What pains her is the utter loneliness in the house. The image of the caged monkey highlights her misery and lack of freedom. Her pervasive need for love, understanding and
communion of souls are conspicuous by their absence. Awareness of the unbridgeable gulf between them leads to gradual disenchantment and frustration.

In the modern nuclear families each person counts on the other for emotional rapport. But Gautama fails to fathom the restlessness boiling within her. Since Desai prefers to delve deeper and deeper into a character or a scene rather than going round about it, she uses the medium of Toto’s death to project the inner fears and anxieties of Maya. The death of her pet surfaces a chain of morbid thoughts. It triggers her terror of the disagreeable prophecy deeply buried in her subconscious which predicted death to one of them four years after marriage. Her attempt at confiding in Gautama her fear of the albino-astrologer’s prognosis is discarded by him as her new fad. He fails to see beneath the outward manifestations of her frivolous and childlike behaviour over Toto’s death. The seemingly meaningless mass of reality hides a turbulent psyche burdened by fear of death and aloneness.

Maya-Gautama relationship lacks the vital element of understanding and sharing. Holding fast to their separate worlds of emotion and reason they fail to come closer transcending their limited visions of life. Even after four years of marriage they have developed no common interest and the distance between them only widens. Marriage has provided them only physical proximity. Maya’s disillusionment becomes total when she realises that he is not able to empathise with her reactions to events around her. The death of Toto, which means something traumatic to her, is only a trivial incident to Gautama. Nowhere in the novel does Desai suggest any closeness between them. Communication gap hinders the establishment of and maintenance of harmonious relationships. One a creature of instinct and the other of intellect, their relation is always tenuous. The things they leave unsaid in fact fill great volumes. What is real to Maya is shadow to him and what are facts to him are of no interest for her. Hence she finds it difficult to communicate her morbid fears and the haunting sense of loneliness. She withholds from him the vital piece of the puzzle, the prophecy, and he fails to piece together the total picture of her psychic disturbance. The inability to confide in him leads to an obsession with fears which culminates in insanity.
All around her Maya sees only acceptance and resignation. Gautama urges her to action for he feels it necessary for each being to have a vocation. He believes that only those who are active can remain peaceful. But while Gautama seeks refuge in his vocation, Maya seeks fulfillment in her relation with him. She realizes the futility of her marriage when she feels neglected and imagines that her loneliness is of his making. While he asserts his belief in the power of self-control, he fails to grasp the fact that his wife is gradually losing her grip over herself. Gautama's logic does not help Maya to extricate her fears and establish her desire for self-preservation. In her moments of lucidity Maya is able to view him as a protector and guide. But his world, however calm and safe it is, is so drab for her and does not offer any security.

Gautama evaluates her negatively as far as their intellectual wavelengths are concerned. She is never considered an equal, a companion and a comrade. Her inability to comprehend a man's mind too contributes to the conflict. To him she is a child, a light-hearted woman. The realization that Gautama refuses to share many aspects of his life makes her sadly ruminate: "In his world there were vast areas in which he would never permit me, and he could not understand that I could wish to enter them, foreign as they were to me" (104). He refuses to emerge out of his cocooned shell of intellectuality to see her growing agitation. The demand to join his world of logic, reason and detachment is far beyond the capacity of the immature psyche.

Gautama's outlook is also influenced by his self-sacrificing years of study and hardwork which goes beyond the comprehension of Maya, the only daughter of a doting father. Her attempt to see a substitute of the father in Gautama fails. Like a child she wants to be assured that all is well. She expects the same care and consideration, a father surrogate, whereas he expects her to discriminate between the real and the unreal, the important and the unimportant, attachment and detachment. Fed on fairy tales Maya fails to grow out of her childhood. Gautama's cool rational mind makes him clearly understand that Maya can never dissociate her husband from the father. The two men in her life are different. While one showered
all attention and love, the other demands her to emerge out of the bondage of the past. Maya labours under father-fixation, the impact of which is patent throughout the narrative.

Sex can act as a revitalising force in an otherwise sterile life. Maya’s intense desire is dismissed as father-fixation for as Maya rationalizes he is too fastidious to admit such matters as love, copulation and physical intimacy. “A continuous frustration of the body’s sexual needs can be disastrous to somebody like Maya, given her fierce instinctuality.” Desai conveys Maya’s despair and agony at her unattained closeness, in mind and body, with her husband through many symbolic references to the frenzied dance of the peacock for its mate, the cooing and mating of the pigeons and the heaving of the silk cotton trees. In her desire for emotional gratification she identifies herself with the peacocks: “I felt their thirst as they gazed at the rain clouds, their passion as they hunted for their mates. With them I trembled and panted and paced the burning rocks” (96). The title itself suggests the agony of her unfulfilled desire. Despite his practical wisdom and experience Gautama remains callously immune to the demands of her soul and body. Maya’s honest appraisal of herself brings in more pain. She considers her face lacking the charm to capture the entire attention of Gautama. She eventually gives up the efforts to enchant him, to force him to share her troubled mind. As J. P. Tripathy rightly comments, “her psychiatric hatred is caused by inadequate mating and insufficient spiritual companionship.”

Maya craves for some guidance. At her moment of crisis she longs for her gentle father to reassure her fastly disintegrating self. He had always advised her to accept one’s limitations and to act within them rather than trying to destroy or act beyond them. But unfortunately she is not tutored how to accept. Her suggestion for a trip to the hills to meet him is thwarted by Gautama just as he dismisses her desire for a trip to the South to see Kathakali. Her attempts to seek support from her friends also become vain for their acceptance of life and resignation to fate alienates her. Leila who is nursing a dying husband is resigned to her fate and also to her choice of
a sick husband. Pom after flaunting with her in-laws has submitted meekly on the prospect of motherhood. Thus wherever she turns to, all the doors are closed: "There was not one of my friends who could act as an anchor anymore, and to whomsoever turned for assurance betrayed me" (64). Haunted by the dull opaque eyes of the albino, she feels trapped in his prophecy. Thus her fear of imminent death coupled with Gautama’s inability to provide her a protective citadel cripples her thinking and her very being. Without any anchor Maya lapses into the hallucinatory world to fight the terror of the prophecy.

Death motif is skilfully woven into the structure of the novel. Mounting fear of death slackens her precarious hold over sanity. Highly functional images are used to illuminate Maya’s mind with its different moods and deteriorating psychic conditions. As tension in her aberrant mind accelerates the disturbing images of slimy crawling creatures crowd her mind reminding her of imminent death: "Albinoes, Bleached into albinoes by the desert sun, these lizards. But the rat, too, is an albino, from having lived always in the dark, from never having seen the sun at all" (127).

It is not only the memory of the prophecy but associated incidents too augment her trouble. Her brother Arjuna’s letter confirms that the astrologer, the horoscope and the tantrums are not figments of an insane nightmare, no curious hallucination, "but facts, corroborated, solid facts, remembered, known" (144). The superstitious, fear-stricken mind now associates even the ordinary events and remarks with the prediction of the albino astrologer. The culminating tension leads to severe headaches which are symptomatic of the desire to elude the issue. But reality can no longer be eluded and fears and thoughts crowd her mind.

Maya fails to visualize any strategy to achieve tranquility. During the nightmare of her suffering she loses hold over reality and descends into the abyss of darkness and aloneness where the only echoes are those of the albino and the peacock. Her heart rending cry renders the poignancy of her agony: "Am I gone insane! Father! Brother! Husband! Who is my saviour? I am in need of one" (98). Like Hamlet, Maya maintains a method in her madness for she is careful in keeping her plans secret.
for fear of any peril to her own life. Using a tripartite structure and alternating first person and third person narratives Desai traces Maya's gradual descent into a state of neurosis. The opening of the novel depicts what leads to her neurosis, part II takes us to the cause of it and the last part shows her regression to an infantile state. In her schizophrenic state she fails to distinguish between right and wrong. Past invades her present and obliterates the thin line between memory and reality. The obsessive preoccupation with death renders her hold on reality and control tenuous. The centre fails to hold and her self falls apart. Moving from one pit of despair and depression to another she acknowledges the hell into which she has fallen: “All order is gone out of my life, all formality. There is no plan, no peace, nothing to keep me within the pattern of familiar everyday life” (79). Although she wants to live, the awareness of death disintegrates her sanity. Maya passes through avenues of thought, recollections, doubts, horror and is finally caught in the whirlwind of insanity.

Intensely in love with life she wonders whether it is she or the detached Gautama who is fated to live. It is Gautama who tells she is neurotic and considers her love madness. Her conscious mind reminds her that “they are not made for tragedy . . . while her subconscious mind moves towards thoughts of murder.” The poetic description of the outside serves as an objective correlative of the variant moods. The fury of the dust storm reflects the fierce inner storm. As she moves towards insanity the dark house seems to her a tomb. On account of her rudimentary self she neurotically perceives Gautama's death as the only solution. Finally she accepts the polarity between them and the final disinterested question about Toto causes the death sentence for Gautama. Feeling that he has never lived and never would live she tries to recapture her lost freedom by ridding her of her husband. “Maya’s death wish is ultimately transferred totally to Gautama.” Fear of death, feeling of insecurity, unfulfilled zest for life and lack of human company drives Maya from the stage of innocence to the role of a murderess.

Both the past and the present are equally dissatisfying and unacceptable for Maya. She fails to achieve peace of mind and integration of sensibility. Gradually
she reaches a stage of emotional disorder leading to the final tragedy. Her life follows the course outlined in the Gita quoted by Gautama: “From attachment arises longing and from longing anger is born. From anger arises delusion: from delusion, loss of memory is caused. From loss of memory the indiscriminative faculty is ruined and from the ruin of indiscrimination he perishes” (112).

Monisha’s predicament in *Voices in the City* (1965; New Delhi: Orient, 1988) also follows a similar pattern of disaster and disappointment though the novelist does not delve deep into her psyche as she does in the case of Maya. As Sema Jena observes, “the Maya-Gautama tragedy is re-enacted in the Monisha-Jiban marriage.” Their marriage is also not solidly founded on love and understanding. Monisha’s tragedy is in a way engineered by the traditional Indian system of arranged marriages where the propensities of the partners are disregarded. Their marriage is fixed ignoring the report that the stolid, middle-class, unimaginative family of Jiban is completely unsuitable to Monisha’s tastes and inclinations.

“Monisha and Jiban signify the most usual and painful instance of conjugal conflict.” A relationship marked by silence and discontent breeds only alienation and disillusionment. Three years of marriage has transformed her inside out giving her an eerie unreality. Desai uses Monisha’s diary to provide the tone of immediacy. “Evocative of the stifling atmosphere around her;” her diary has not recorded any intimate conversation between the spouses. No wonder Amla asks “why did they ever marry?” (198). Monisha's tortuous journey towards terrible death is painted in black and dismal colours. Lack of communication with him creates in her an oppressive sense of loneliness. But unlike Maya, she does not want to pour out her heart to Jiban. Marriage alters the quiet, sensitive girl to a neurotic, diary writing woman.

Burgess and Cottrell consider a well-adjusted marriage as one in which “the attitudes and activities of each partner produce an environment which is favourable to the functioning of the personality in the sphere of primary relationships.” But Monisha finds nothing in common with Jiban and their sensibilities are distinguished by greater divergence than that of Maya and Gautama. As a husband Jiban proves
inferior to Gautama. She gets estranged from this boring nonentity, a minute minded and limited official. Sensitive like Maya, the temperamental incompatibility aggravates the psychological malady of Monisha also.

The diametrically opposite cultural backgrounds also hinders mutual affinity. An Indian wife is expected to negate herself for the welfare of others. To the conventionally brought up Jiban, a woman’s life is confined to certain roles—procreation and domestic work. The Bleeding Heart Doves at the zoo reminds Monisha of the countless generations of women sacrificing their lives resignedly. But the “Bleeding Heart Dove like existence is not something for which Monisha has bargained in her marriage with Jiban.” He fails to recognise his wife as an individual with her own identity and with her right to his money. She is always an outsider to be collared by his mother. When she is accused of stealing Jiban’s money which she took prior permission to pay Nirode’s hospital bills she feels belittled: “To be regarded so low by men and women themselves so low, it is to be laid on a level lower than the common earth.” (136). More than the groundless accusation it is his attitude to the whole affair that hurts her. By allying with their collective, groundless accusation, he denies her the right of a wife and destroys whatever harmony there might have existed. Susnaina Singh rightly comments: “Monisha never protests though acutely feels the agony of unloved, uncared, wifehood.” Marriage is often regarded as a rite guaranteeing physical and material security and identity. But for Monisha it only annihilates her true self.

Monisha's predicament highlights that of many an Indian woman who is emotionally and financially bound to her husband. With no income of their own, even the educated wives like Monisha are often forced to suppress their wants and desires. Refusal to accept their needs is in fact refusal of their individualities, their identities. Feeling too small, shrunken and invisible, Monisha withdraws from material concerns and retreats, like Maya, behind her own shell. Seeing her misery Nirode suggests her to go in another direction. But her impenetrable citadel has made her indifferent to leaving and staying. Apprehension of social consequences forces her
to remain attached. The traditional Indian society will never approve a divorce. She knows that whatever be the grounds, a divorce is a disgrace to the woman and her family. Thus she finds herself trapped in an “emotionally bankrupt and joyless matrimonial bond with all outlets of escape plugged for her.”

Like Nirode, her brother, Monisha’s search for an identity and meaning in life results only in estrangement. Her aspiration for freedom is curtailed by her appurtenances. The subdued pattern of monotonous life withers her soul and she remains as a mere observer in the shadows. Monisha guards her self from all violation to it by withdrawal. As a compromise between active participation and physical absence she tries to maintain her identity by following the ideal of nonattachment proclaimed by the Gita. “But the detachment she achieves . . . is not born out of experience, but out of fear and attachment.” Her traceless, meaningless, uninvolved life amounts to nonexistence which is not envisaged by the Gita.

Unlike Maya who craves for involvement, Monisha considers all attachments dangerous. The chance encounter with Nirode’s Irish friend helps her in discovering the root cause of her trouble, the vital element that is missing from Nirode and herself, “the element of love” (135). Love is replaced by a darker fiercer element, fear. Both of them shy away from love for, like Gautama, they fear it as attachment. Absence of love has transformed them to craven tragedies.

Monisha longs for unconditional love sans rules and obligations, but remains uninvolved without a touch of love, hatred or wrath. As the awareness of having wasted her life dawns on her, without having given birth and attended death, she panicks for experience. The realization that there is no escape from her predicament alters her to “a sleepwalker, a ghost, some unknown and dreaded entity” (147). Her glorified self-image is shattered by the recognition that she alone remains perfectly untouched by the passion and sorrow of the street dancer’s music. The true significance of human life can be felt and enjoyed only in terms of contact and relatedness. The futility of the cherished aloneness dawns on her. Terrified by her emotional vacuum she chooses between death and mean existence.
Infact the novel offers not a single satiating man-woman relationship. It delineates “a non-balanced, unsatisfying and colourless relationship” between the parents of Monisha. In temperament and personality the two are poles apart. Too often marriage becomes an exchange: exchange is the evidence of business, not of love. Amla objectively analyses their marriage as a financial contract. Just as Monisha and Jiban, or Maya and Gautama, the well-accomplished, beautiful, poised mother is contrasted with a careless, mannerless husband. While she relished in music it was no better than a piece of plumbing to him. He is presented as an over-fed house cat lying indolently toying with a cheroot or a glass of whisky or both. Both of them travelled in their parallel paths with no shared joy. Her interest in gardening was to him only an artifice to evade him. The ill-matched wedlock has turned the husband to a debased, dishonourable drunkard and the wife to a cold practical woman sans human warmth and tenderness. Amla observes in her mother’s iciness an adaptive strategy to an incongruous alliance. The mother rejects the superficially maintained semblance of a happy marital life on her becoming a widow.

Both Cry, the Peacock and Voices in the City abound with marital disharmonies. Maya is shocked at the apathy, hypocrisy and hatred that is revealed through other marriages around her. Maya’s friends Porn and Leila do not manifest anything to be jealous of. The Lals are “penportraits of hypocrisy personified.” The Sikh wife publicly denounces her husband as a charltan and an opportunist. Gautama’s sister Gita also reveals deep-seated antipathy of maladjusted relationships. Jit Nair and Sarla of Voices share only intense distrust and disgust for each other. Aunt Lila has no feelings of love over her fat, self-satisfied, long-dead husband. Her daughter gets divorced from a short-lived marriage. The Basus also stand as alienated partners. The lives of Dharma and Gita also expose the emotional and intellectual polarity between the two, but Gita symbolises what Monisha or Maya can never be—the traditional, long-suffering, self-denying Indian wife. Her forced severance from her only daughter destroys all joys of her life, yet she yields to her spouse estranging her from her ideal-self. Physically together they remain emotionally poles apart. Dharma
confesses: “Our relationship is not at all so straightforward and pat, married relationships never are” (229).

The theme of incertitude, ennui and meaningless existence is continued in Where shall We Go This Summer? (1965; New Delhi: Orient, 1988). Through the recurrent theme of marital discord, it portrays the estrangement experienced by a woman in her varied roles, an alienation conditioned by environment and family. Plunging into the extraordinary inner life of Sita, the novelist attempts to expose the agony and frustration of a middle-aged pregnant wife who fails to establish rapport with her home and the world. The marital friction between Sita and Raman is “based on the conflict of values, of principles, of faith even, or between normal double social standards and the iconoclastic temperament of uncompromising honesty.”

Temperamentally irreconcilable, they have diametrically opposed viewpoints. Like Gautama, Raman is a practical, successful businessman who favours rationality to sentimentality. Neither an introvert, nor an extrovert, he is “a middling kind of man, dedicated unconsciously to the middle way” (47). Sita, like Maya and Monisha, is “high strung with a heightened sensitivity and imagination that make her emotionally vulnerable.” Her experiences in the insensitive urban atmosphere as an individual and her jarring relations with her family force Sita to initiate the bold, yet strange decision to flee her quotidian Bombay life to Manori, her childhood home, in order to preserve her self, sanity and imminent child.

The prevalent violence all around in the fever and fret of the urban society makes her a stranger and a failure. The casual manner in which her family accepts cruelty and destruction unnerves her. The clash between the sensitive individual and the insensitive world is dramatised through a series of small incidents: the ruthless attack on a young eagle by raucous crows, the clamour and fight of ayahs fighting on the road side, the boys fighting duels imitating action movies, Menaka's brutality and indifference to life when she crumbles a sheaf of new buds. The prey-predator image is used to highlight the violent atmosphere. Each act of unintentional violence works out in her mind “like a stream of lava, bubbling for ever to burst out.”
It is not only the complacence and violence around her immediate environment but the newspaper reports of violence at large in distant countries also trouble her mind. She longs to escape from the madness around to a place where it might be possible to be sane again. In a world where brute forces frequent, she feels insecure, loses all faith in maternity and motherhood and begins to fear childbirth as another act of violence and murder. Her obsessive decision to keep the baby unborn stems from her hypersensitivity to violence.

Sita’s marriage is already on the verge of a collapse when she leaves for Manori. In the tripartite novel Desai allows Sita to analyse her disrupted marital relationship on her voyage to Manori through flashback. Eccentric behaviour often signals a graver problem submerged. Sita’s vehement and hysterical reactions even to the trivial incidents appear melodramatic to Raman. While her obsessive disgust with violence drives her to the brink of insanity, like Gautama, he fails to diagnose the cause. He fears that she is unhinged inspite of her greying hairs, without realising that “control was an accomplishment that has skipped out of her hold, without his noticing over the years” (32). People and society around seem to her mad, but he fails to notice any madness in the familiar patterns.

Sita and Raman, unlike their mythical counterparts, behave as though they hail from two divergent worlds. Inspite of living under the same roof for twenty years and parenting four children they remain “an ill-assorted couple lacking altogether in harmony in their lives.” Her irrational obsession to keep the baby safe inside seems unfeminine and unmotherly to her husband. The paranoic show of fear and revolt of a woman who bore four children with pride and passion embarasses Raman. Her deliric declaration “I don’t want to have the baby” (34) is misunderstood as abortion and her violent reaction over the accusation unsettles him for she fails to voice her misery effectively. Having different wavelengths they stare at each other uncomprehendingly. Her unbearable distress goes unapprehended. Though to Raman she appears like a bored wife in a movie, Sita knows that it can happen in real life too. The chance encounter with the stranger on the journey from Ellora is used
to highlight their sharply differing perceptions. While Sita appreciates his bravery Raman considers him only as a fool who does not even know which side of the road to wait on to reach his destination. Her admiration appears to him practically an act of infidelity.

Mutual affinity and recognition are essential components of a blissful wedlock. But most of Desai alliances are made out of convenience. Maya analyses her marriage as the one “grounded upon the friendship of the two men (her father and Gautama, a protege of him) and the mutual respect in which they held each other, rather than upon anything else” (40). It was circumstances, not love, that led to Sita-Raman alliance. Orphaned by the death of her father she would have continued in the island with no definite plan had not Raman, the son of her father’s friend, arrived there to cremate her father, fetch her away to the city, educate her and finally “out of pity, out of lust, out of sudden will for adventure, and because it was inevitable married her” (99). In due course Sita loses her zest for life and Raman finds it difficult to accept the transformation from a beautiful, fiery maiden in distress to a haggard and nervous woman. Alone at Manori she realises the farcical nature of marriage and human relations in general. The superficial garb of marriage has not brought them close. Though Raman has been able to provide her social security, emotional security still remains elusive. The strangeness of the Muslim pair at the Hanging Gardens mirrors the hollowness of their marriage. In the light of the tender, intense, divine love of the fatally anaemic young woman lying on the lap of an old man, her own marriage appears like a shadow, absolutely flat and colourless. Life becomes harder for Sita because, like Monisha, she craves for this kind of unconditional love that transcends the self. “It is this kind of relationship that she wants from Raman, but which is unable to achieve because neither of them understand the need of communion of souls.”

Sita’s decision to return to the safety and magic of the island which she left twenty years before is not a sudden one. All through their lives they had been avoiding a confrontation. Even in the initial stages of marriage Sita never considered sharing
and understanding seminal for a successful marriage. In the early phase, as she recollects later, she thought she could live with him physically but travel alone mentally and emotionally. Long years of dissatisfaction and disillusionment have now surfaced the long-buried intention. The plan to escape has been simmering inside her for long without her conscious knowledge. The fifth pregnancy opens the floodgates of her pent-up sentiments, resentments, fears and rages. But being an introvert like Monisha, she fails to communicate her inner urges to him; nor does it seem important to him to reach out to the anguished soul. Unexpressed fears and pains mount up her mental pressure leading her to the brim of neurosis. Her withdrawal is indicative of her refusal to resume life as it is, her need for unquestioning love and an attempt to remain sane. As Usha Pathania observes, “mutual understanding through meaningful communication makes for a balanced relationship, but such a communication is beyond Sita and Raman to achieve.”

The conflict between the need to withdraw to preserve one’s wholeness and sanity and the need to be involved in the painful process of life continues in The Fire on the Mountain (London: Penguin, 1977). Dedicated to three different souls with Carignano as a unifying background, Desai assays to analyse various forms of loneliness, all of them equally compelling. Old age is verily second childhood where one realises the need to be in the company of loved ones, where one craves and demands to be cared and protected. In the modern urban families old people often become unnecessary appendages obstructing the rapid, busy life of its members. Suffering from neglect, generation gap and lack of companionship they wait for death which only can ultimately release them. But Nanda Kaul is an exceptional grandmother who prefers to be left alone to the pines and cicadas at Carignano, far from the madding crowd of bags, letters, messages, requests, promises and queries.

Desai is an adept in creating a landscape not just a backdrop but an environment matching the mood of her characters. Part I of the novel carefully creates Nanda’s new locale where she revels in its bar barrenness and emptiness. Infact everything that Nanda craved for is there in Kasauli: “this was the place, and the time of life, that
she had wanted and prepared for all her life" (3). She creates a citadel around her preventing any intrusion. Withdrawn and completely detached, her insistence to remain anonymous is beautifully conveyed through her yearning to merge with the pine trees, to be mistaken for one: “To be a pine tree, no more and no less, was all she was prepared to undertake” (4).

Nanda’s story is told through a series of repetitive images and suggestive epithets. The very house seems to share her spirit with its own history of “barrenness, ageing, loneliness, decay and death.”28 Built as a life-sustaining health resort, it has witnessed unnatural deaths and disharmonious relations and for Nanda it becomes an abode to escape from the harsh realities of life. Her happy isolation is threatened by the unwanted and unexpected letter of her daughter conveying a series of events that disturb her emotionally. The impending arrival of the great granddaughter seems to her an intrusion of the outside world into her fiercely guarded private world. Contrary to the image of a loving grandmother, Nanda Kaul is filled with apprehension and irritation for all she wants is to be left alone, to have Carignano to herself.

Nanda’s isolation is not one that is willingly accepted as she forces herself to believe, but circumstances have given her no other choice. Her life in the world has failed to render a sense of contentment. Sema Jena observes: “Her withdrawal stands for an emotional staticity, a kind of psychic frigidity that refuses any intrusion and movement.”29 But her impenetrable barrier at Carignano does not shield her from the unpleasant past for it flows into the present and the two cannot be completely severed. Asha’s letter takes her down the corridors of her apparently enchanting past.

The vivacious life as the wife of the Vice-Chancellor in the small university town in the Punjab had never pleased her. Its crowding always stifled her. She had been suffering from “nimility, the disorder, the fluctuating and unpredictable excess” (3). Nanda Kaul is the opposite of Maya who craves for warmth and involvement. Though an efficient manager, she was deprived of any sense of satisfaction for her self was not involved. Like Monisha she had mastered the art of detaching herself from the
hubub around her that she is only glad to retire from her relentless responsibilities. Desai compares her past with “a great, heavy, difficult book that Nanda had read through and was not required to read again” (30). But Raka’s impending arrival demands an opening of that old troublesome ledger once again.

An Indian wife is always conscious of her duties. Though her hectic schedule lacked warmth and involvement, Nanda Kaul carried on uncomplainingly because of her sense of obligation. Having played her innings dutifully she refuses to let that noose slip round her neck once again. Loneliness has now become her creed. The image of the charred tree trunk in the forest which cannot harbour irritation or a broken pillar of marble in the desert which cannot harbour any annoyance convey her state of mind.

According to J.C. Coleman, “the forces of isolation progressively destroy the older person’s linkage with the world, reducing the meaningfulness of his existence and increasingly forcing him back into himself.”30 Terribly afraid to be hurt again by the apathy or callousness of the external world Nanda Kaul rejects all interference, even the telephone. Ila Das’s voice from the past is not reciprocated with a matching enthusiasm. Her request for a meeting is postponed on the excuse of Raka’s arrival. To her surprise Ila hears no note of joy, but only annoyance and apprehension when she speaks of her great-granddaughter’s visit.

Frustrating experiences often induce strong aversion to all human contacts. Ila’s unexpected telephone call floods back memories which had been consciously suppressed. Although “apparently Fire on the Mountain is concerned with Nanda Kaul’s determined detachment and non-involvement, unhappy conjugal ties are again the thematic nucleus of the novel...”31 The fierce obsession with a radiantly single life has issued from her complete disillusionment with all bonds, matrimonial or filial. Though more experienced than the other protagonists, Nanda Kaul is no less disappointed. To the Vice-Chancellor, his wife was only a glamorous appurtenance to elevate his social status. Her insulation at Carignano fails to mitigate the agony she experienced when he went to drop one of the guests home. Ila’s visit reminds her
of those unhappy days when the Vice-Chancellor went on his liaison with Miss. David, the Mathematics teacher. The betrayal of the matrimonial vows has created in her an ennui and a sickness of soul that seep into her oldage. Her married life did not involve her self and hence suffered from a terrible lack of belongingness. Even the very house over which she presided never really belonged to her. Mentally she stalked through the rooms of that house, “his house, never hers...” (18).

Infidelity of the spouse is something that is unbearable. But Manu Smriti declares that a husband though be destitute of virtue and seeks pleasure elsewhere must be worshipped as god. Like Rukmani of Kamala Markandaya’s Nectar in a Sieve, Nanda Kaul endures her suffering stoically. However her mental and physical alienation is suggested through certain incidents of the bygone days which push up despite Nanda Kaul’s stubbornness to thwart them. Infact widowhood becomes a blessing to her for it liberates her from “the condemned cell of spiritual annihilation.”

It is only in Part III that Desai discloses the painful present and the equally painful past of Nanda Kaul with a brutal frankness and marvellous verbal economy.

Using Asha’s letter and Raka’s unhappy childhood memories Desai cleverly touches upon disharmonious conjugal relations of Nanda Kaul’s granddaughter Tara who fails to take up the glamorous roles expected of her as the wife a diplomat. She is blamed for not understanding him and she is the wrong type of woman for him. Tara does not inherit Nanda Kaul’s endurance. Just like the Nanda Hills, Nanda Kaul too withstands all unpleasant experiences without raving about it inspite of the deep crevices consequent on them. Infact Tara suffers a chronic nervous breakdown as a result of her marital discord.

Tara-Bakul pair in Clear Light of Day (London: Penguin, 1980) is a fainter version of Maya and Gautama. Despite its glamour, Tara’s married life shows undercurrents of trouble though with a lesser degree of frenzy and disturbance. She too cannot escape from the pressure of married life. Two assertive personalities will never lead a harmonious life. Hence Tara is forced to sacrifice her individuality for
the sake of her marriage. Throughout her married life she conforms to Bakul’s expectations. He has transformed her into an active, organised woman who guided by her engagement book retires to her room at night "with the triumphant tiredness of the virtuous and the dutiful" (21). Back in her old house in Delhi she feels it had been an enormous strain always pushing against her self that now she feels emaciated. A spiritual emptiness haunts her though she manages to preserve the facade of a successful married life.

Tara’s marriage was also one of convenience. Bakul’s desire to have a young, easily malleable and mouldable bride coupled with Tara’s intense desire to escape from the dark, disease-ridden house rings the bells of their wedding. As Sita finds an escape in Raman, Tara finds escape in the hands of Bakul though it is only “a spatial escape as she always remains obsessed with the past.” Bakul is not deprived of emotion as Jiban or Gautama and props her up from mental wreckage. Tara who cannot think of a life without her puppeteer is in sharp contrast to Bim who refuses to surrender her individuality. Though she shares much in common with the other Desai heroines, avoids their destiny by her role as a mother and the helpmate of a diplomat.

Aunt Mira’s life is a picture of a sinister victim of social practice. Without the security of a husband a woman is denied her rights in her husband’s house where she is compelled to cater to every demand, including sexual demands of the menfolk of the family. Married at twelve and widowed at fifteen she has been shunned as bad luck and reduced to an unpaid servant. Prematurely aged with use she is discarded as a useless appendage to another house. It is not maladjusted married life that causes emotional insecurity and gradual alienation from life, but the traumatic experiences of a young widow in a joint family. Her disintegration into a paranoiac alcoholic stems from this feeling of rootlessness. Mira Masi is a “glaring paradigm of the violent victimisation of widows.”

One gets glimpses of economic and temperamental aspects damaging the matrimony of the Hindi lecturer Deven and his domestic wife Sarla in In Custody
(London: Heinemann, 1984). The disparity between them is suggested through Deven’s recollection that she was not his choice, but that of his mother’s relatives. His plain, penny-pinching, pessimistic wife presents the picture of an abandoned wife in whose company he feels a stranger, an interloper. For the poet in him, she is too prosaic. There is hardly any communication between them. The thwarting of her maidenly dreams of a life with the three f’s--fan, fridge and phone--has made her embittered. While Deven has poetry and his profession as a consolation, as most other Desai wives, Sarla has nothing to engage herself except unrewarding domestic work and financial insecurity. Both are victims. Although each understands the secret truth about the other, it does not bring about any comradeship because they also sense that “two victims ought to avoid each other, not yoke together their joint disappointments” (68).

Women in Desai’s novels often wear dress that often reflects their individuality: Maya in bright colours, Sita in colourless saris, Nanda in gray and Sarla in shabby, worn clothes. Though not an avowed social critic, her novels provide a significant quantum of insight into the status of women in the patriarchal Indian society. A humiliating sense of neglect, weariness and waiting becomes their lot. Sarla represents the destiny of most of them. She hesitates to protest in the presence of Deven for “countless generations of Hindu womanhood behind her stood in her way, preventing her from displaying open rebellion” (145). Since the story is narrated through the consciousness of Deven we find neither the piercing cries of a sensitive woman nor any intense introspection of the mind. Emphasis has shifted from the internal to the external.

The same elements of lack of warmth and freedom permeate into the life of Uma in Desai’s latest work Fastings Feasting (London: Vintage, 2000). Unlike the earlier novels it projects a perfect marriage in the old pair of Uma’s parents. But their ‘Siamese twin like existence’ is attained, as in the case of Tara, at the cost of the wife’s individuality. During her surreptitious excursion to the neighbours the wife becomes quite a different woman, flirtatious and girlish. But back at home her manner alters
automatically to "the familiar one of guarded restraint, censure and tired decorum"(7). In a patriarchal society women often loses the freedom over her body and desires. Mama's attempt to seek refuge in abortion to avoid the shame of pregnancy, when she has two grown up daughters, is thwarted by Papa's desire to have a boy.

According to Simone de Beauvoir "marriage is the destiny traditionally offered to women by society." When uncomely, unaccomplished Uma's maidenhood becomes not only an embarrassment but also an obstruction to the future of her much sought after younger sister Aruna, frantic attempts are made to dispose her. She becomes the butt of humiliation and disgrace when one party prefers Aruna to her and the second party proves to be third-rate scoundrels who are willing to enact any drama for the sake of a dowry. Although Uma is not disappointed over the broken engagement she senses a certain mockery creeping into the attitude of Aruna. The tightly knit fabric of family that had seemed so stifling and confining now reveals holes and gaps that are frightening. With her marriage to Harish, after the usual bargaining, Uma relinquishes all her foolishly unrealistic hopes. After the nuptial night spent in the crowded compartment of the train to Lucknow she is unceremoniously handed over to his relatives by a husband who does not even care to speak to the bride. When Harish goes to Meerut the same day, her unusual honeymoon ends abruptly. At the husband's house "all the speech directed to her was in the form of instructions: there was no other" (93). After several weeks of learning how to cut vegetables in pieces of exactly the same size and how to grind spices into a wet paste when her father comes fuming with the news of one more betrayal that Harish has already a family in Meerut, the future of Uma becomes sealed. In the retrun journey, the disintegration of Papa's personality pains her as much as that of her marriage. Even after years Uma remains uncertain whether she is actually married or divorced. Having cost her parents two dowries without a marriage to show in return, Uma becomes a "disgrace to the family - nothing but disgrace, ever!" (53). When both attempts end in fiasco she is destined to remain single much to the chagrin of her own
parents to whom an unwed daughter becomes a burden. Using third-person narrative Desai devotes the first section of the novel to Uma who is alive but does not ‘live’ as a daughter, wife or as an individual. She is crushed to nothing when she is denied any freedom, even the freedom of involvement with people of similar spirit. Her parents callously refuse to accept her as a normal person with a body and soul, not a machine catering to their whims and fancies. Her attempts to liberate herself through a career are aborted. When her wings are clipped she cannot protest beyond an occasional grumbling for she has no ‘locus stand I.’

While lack of brains and beauty together with the villainy of the people she is married to permanently darken the life of Uma, the story of her comely, submissive yet intelligent Anamika is a moving one terribly illustrative of what happens to women in different parts of India. Though equipped with a scholarship to Oxford as an added qualification in winning a suitable groom, the fate of Anamika proves to be worse than that of Uma. The future of her marriage has been predicted right from the day of marriage. She gets married to someone so occupied with maintaining his superiority that he is totally impervious to her grace and distinction. Like Jiban of Voices in the City mother-son relationship is central to his life, leaving no room for others. Anamika is only an interloper like Monisha, someone brought because custom has demanded it and it would enhance his status. But the cruelty imposed on her worsens her case. Like Monisha, she too becomes a heap of ash. But whether it is suicide or planned murder remains unknown.

Her forte being the psychological exploration of sensibility, Desai attempts to probe “why her characters become alienated and withdrawn into their cocoons.”

Disparity in temperament between the partners is not the sole source of alienation in women. A marriage becomes a success in the traditional concept only with the production of children. The instability in the married life of Maya-Gautama results also from the fact of childlessness. Childless women with no other mission often behave like children and become neurotic. Her maternal instincts remaining unfulfilled, Maya lavishes her attention on the only living company, her pet dog.
Psychologists observe that childless women develop frantic attachments to their pets. According to Maya “it is no less a relationship than that of a woman and her child, no less worthy of reverence, and agonized remembrance” (Cry 10). It is this nagging sense of depravity that distances her from her friend Pom. The news of Pom’s pregnancy make her feel weak and powerless. Even Pom’s smile seems to her the matronly, faraway smile of condescension that pregnant women sometimes have for barren women. The birth of a child would have given her a sense of achievement and diverted her mind from her abnormal, Keatsian passion.

The Hindu social code upholds motherhood as the most sacred feminine function and regards any other ambition as diseased. Monisha’s predicament also becomes all the more miserable because of her sterility. While Jiban’s relatives discuss her blocked fallopian tubes and malfunctioning ovaries, she feels a corrosive emptiness within. Through the image of the kangaroo at the zoo Desai adroitly projects Monisha’s uncommuned misery over her barrenness: “A kangaroo lies on its back to the sun the soft honey fur on its belly, but its pouch alas is empty” (Voices 112).

While sterility breeds alienation, fertility does not guarantee eternal bliss. Maternity has inculcated only anxiety, concern and pessimism in Sita. The absence of rapport between mother and children is evident throughout the novel. Being children of the city, they fail to comprehend Sita’s melodramatic reactions towards violence. Instead of depending on an erratic mother they have learnt to become self-reliant. The voyage to the island further accentuates the rift. The unhygienic, primitive environment of the island produces only repulsion. Hemmed in by the monsoon they silently accuse the mother for the past glory of Manori is beyond their imagination. As Krishnaswamy opines, “the myth of motherhood is jettisoned completely for there is no shared understanding between Sita and her children.”

Mothers usually dispel unwholesome worries and fears. Sita remembers her inability to mitigate Menaka’s tremors about death. Infact this competent, self-contained daughter is a foil to the mother. While Sita is bored with life in the
busy metropolis, Menaka is bored with the inactive life in the island. Inheriting her father's rationality she opts for science much to the chagrin of Sita who considers science only as a mask or shroud leading to a dead end. The emotional excesses of the mother has made the daughter apathetic and even cantakerous. Sita cannot understand the behaviour of her own growing children. Her sons behave as naturally as siblings in any other family, yet to the sensitive mother their games and combats seem to be violent. She does not have maternal tolerance and patience for she lacked a role model in childhood. There is a reversal of parental roles in their lives which is indicated through their excitement over Raman's visit to the island. Disgrace and disappointment penetrates her heart when it dawns on her that “he had not come to see her, to fetch her, as she had supposed he had come because Menaka has called him. He had betrayed her too. They all had betrayed her” (Where 132-33). Rejected and defeated she feels exhausted, the drama drained and passion crumpled. Sita has only ungratifying filial bonds. There exists a complete lack of communication.

The theme of alienation in terms of mother-child relationship is echoed in Voices in the City too. According to Usha Pathania “the stifling mother-child relationship in the novel is an off-shoot of dissonance in the husband-wife relationship.” All her children are alienated from their mother, whose consciousness is not analysed in detail, though the degrees of estrangement vary. Nirode's undiluted distaste for all bonds emanate from his peculiar relationship with the mother. During childhood he adored his mother to compensate for the hostile atmosphere at home, but as a grown up he considers her as the she cannibal and cobra who swallowed his father. Nirode harbour a Hamlet like jealousy towards his mother which arises out of her alleged relationship with Major Chaddha. He disowns her and denies to accept any help offered to him. The relationship between them is devoid of love and trust. None of her children consider her as the buoying force in their hours of need. Monisha does not divulge her misery to her despite regular correspondence between them. Infact “none of them can associate her with mothering, succour or nurturance.” Seclusion at Kalimpong, as she writes ruefully
to Amla, seems to have blocked her channel of communication with the real and rough lives of her children in the city. To Amla, her mother remains a mystery. Amla’s need for consolation at Monisha’s immolation is brusquely brushed aside for as Nirode realises “she was a woman fulfilled by the great tragedy of her daughter’s suicide” (252). Though sophisticated and graceful the mother fails to provide them emotional security. She is identified with Kali, the goddess and the demon, the amalgamation of death and life.

Nanda Kaul’s alienation with her husband has permeated into her relation with her children as well. Motherhood has never been a marvel for her. It has been as emotionally ungratifying as her wifehood. Maternity to an extent enables women to forget and forgive other unpleasant incidents. But having never relished her role, only the negatives associated with it spring up in her isolation at Carignano. Her relationship with her children was also nothing beyond the level of obligation. It was really a tough job catering to the constant demands of her many children. Children also become one of the items listed among the unpredictable excesses in her life that she fails to distinguish one from the other in the common blur.

In the absence of maternal instincts motherhood becomes a bane. Desai cleverly manipulates Nanda Kaul’s reaction to the sight of the hoopoe nurturing its nestlings to reveal her attitude. “It was a sight that did not fill her with delight. Their screams were shrill and could madden” (Fire 4). Even in her solitude years after, the poignant shrieks of the children resonate in her ears. Alienated and attempting to erase a life of humiliation, rejection and desolation, there is no vitality left in her to delve into the world of rhymes and games buried under layers of dust.

Past is not something that can be easily obliterated. Asha’s letter takes her back to the busy life which had denied her any privacy. Choked with children and visitors, claims have always been made on her in that house where “doors were never shut, and feet flew, or tramped without ceasing” (23). Stillness had always evaded her. Hence her reluctance to surrender the coveted solitude.

In Jiban’s house Monisha’s matrimonial disharmony also gets aggravated in an
atmosphere of distrust, ignorance and lack of privacy. The novel sheds ample light on the psychological problems confronted by sensitive individuals in a joint family. The submissive roles of women and the restrictions forced on their movements outside the family hinders personality development. Monisha finds herself entombed in the trap of joint-family. In the patriarchal setup women are expected to adjust and their refusal to surrender their individualities will culminate in estrangement. She mutely questions the value of subservient and monotonous life.

"Intellectuality in women is deemed as a direct betrayal of the fundamental feminine nature." Monisha's unproductive thinking and intellectual superiority are left unappreciated. Her wardrobe stacked with Kafka, Hopkins and Dostyoevsky and Russian, French and Sanskrit dictionaries only perplexes the ladies of the house who look for jewellery and saris. The non-aesthetic, unintellectual attitude of her in-laws destroys her spirit. She feels frustrated due to the constraints on her urge to lead a meaningful, intellectual life. Her awareness of the difference between them is well expressed in the remark "I am different from them all. They put me away in a steel container, a thick glass cubicle... they cannot touch me, they can only lip-read and misinterpret" (Voices 239).

Monisha feels smothered in the overcrowded house which negates her need for privacy. If Maya is obsessed with fear, Monisha is oppressed by a sense of suffocation. Her glorified self-image of intellectual superiority hinders adjustment with the milieu. Physically with them she keeps herself emotionally far away. Nobody in the overcrowded house have reached out to her, not even the mother-in-law whose legs she massages. Life follows a subdued pattern of monotonous activity without acquiring any meaning. The pettiness of domestive work amidst discussions on her malfunctioning ovaries and her bohemian siblings provides little affirmation of individuality. Even Amla is aghast at "the damp pressure of critical attention impossible to avoid in any corner of the house" (159). In such a smothering atmosphere Monisha learns the need to withdraw as a strategy to preserve her identity. She erects around her an opaque wall of darkness, obstructing communi-
cation with the family of account books, examinations, marriages and births.

Religion, customs and beliefs, whether trivial or absurd, are refuges from isolation. Unless one belongs to somewhere or to something, he will feel like a particle of dust and be overcome by his individual insignificance. Inability to relate to others or to any system that provides meaning and direction to life will fill a person with doubts which will paralyse his ability to act and to live. There is neither religious faith nor friends to prop Monisha up. The bond with her brother and sister is too guarded to make any lasting imprint on both sides. While Maya is lonely in the nuclear family, Monisha experiences loneliness amidst the crowd. Mentally isolated, her longing for physical solitude is not available since the sisters-in-law no longer see her room as the bridal chamber. Affiliation and association with others help the individuals to reduce anxiety and help him to solve his problems. But unlike Maya who craves for contact, Monisha is totally averse to company. The absence of love and meaning in life and the resultant loneliness within and around drive her to suicide.

Disgusted with the tedium and ugliness of meaningless existence Sita too suffers from a growing sense of tedium. Her condition is typical of loneliness and lethargy experienced by many a modern woman who remains inactive at home in the absence of busy husbands and grown-up children. Desai aptly pictures Sita’s struggle against boredom: “she herself, looking at it, saw it stretched out so vast, so flat, so deep, that in fright she scrambled about it, searching for a few of these moments that proclaimed her still alive, not quite drowned and dead” (Where 50). With an irresistible yearning for investing one’s life meaningfully, Sita is unable to accept that life would continue thus inside the small, enclosed area. Hence she goes on waiting for an alternative, something that she fails to define. Routine existence without any goal pressures her to quest for meaning in life, to seek an existence other than that of a mere procreating machine.

To Maya also life seems to be an endless tedium with nothing serious taking place at any time. She has never been the focus or instrumental in anything. By Indian
standards she is an ideal wife with a secure house, earning husband and well-defined future. But these superficial comforts are unacceptable to her unconscious mind which yearns for unbridled freedom. The constricted life within the house where she is not allowed to join the male party organised by Gautama accelerates her transgression.

Loneliness is a kind of social isolation. This kind of alienation is the “condition of absence of intimacy with others.” Violence, weariness and estrangement are projected as social forces moulding individual identities. Sita’s inability to relate obstructs harmonious relationship with the family and the society. Adaptability and adjustment are essential for the effective integration of the individual into his social group. But Sita “never got used to anyone” (Where 48). There is no communication with the society. Social life frightens her. Raman’s business associates are to her only animals and she objects to their crass values.

Life in the joint-family during the initial stage of their married life has been suffocating to Sita also. But unlike Monisha, Sita refuses to participate by adopting unfeminine ways. Emotional alienation coupled with lack of common interest leads her to smoking, an act unheard of in their household. The subhuman existence of the womenfolk tied eternally to their kitchen prevents her from establishing any affiliation with them. Hailing form the island where one had been scarcely aware of what one ate, she finds the whole house with its business of cooking disgusting. Sita shares Monisha’s superiority complex which reduces Raman’s family to elephants, always eating grass. She vibrates in revolt against their subhuman placidity and calmness. She takes their insularity and complacence as well as the aggression and violence around as affronts upon her nerves. In fact after marriage “she feels like a square peg in a round hole.” But life in the flat all by themselves, leaving behind their vegetarian complacency, does not brighten her condition. Visitors continue to be unacceptable. Sita lacks Raman’s capacity to accommodate and the emotional maturity necessary for leading a life of peace. In such a situation introvertive traits develop and the ego builds an impenetrable wall around cutting herself from the social world.
If marriage has disillusioned Maya, Sita, Monisha, Sarla and Nanda spinsterhood too harbours frustration and discontent. Nanda Kaul’s friend Ila Das becomes a prey of an unequal situation in which women suffer from misfortune and social inequities generated by a male-dominated world. Part III of the novel presents her as a slightly comical figure proceeding towards Carignano with her ancient shoes, great umbrella and her little grey top knot wobbling on the top of her head, violently hooted by the schoolboys. But such jeering is not foreign to her for all her life she had been taunted and derided. Physical peculiarity is projected as a reason for alienation. Her voice repels people: “such a voice no human being ought to have had: it was antisocial to possess, to emit such sounds as poor Ila Das made by way of communication” (Fire 111). Desai uses a string of bird similies to highlight the strange appearance of this sad, talkative, poor yet self-respecting spirit.

Ila becomes a victim of wastrel brothers and an uncouth villager. Both the present and the past are marked by tragedy. But beneath her frailty she displays a remarkable fortitude and mental stamina which are born out of sheer necessity. The family fortune being wasted on the three drunken brothers, Ila and her sister survived through sheer hardwork, a condition unenvisaged by their glamorous childhood. Through Ila, Desai highlights the disparate attitude to male and female children in the traditional Indian society. Without the crutches of proper qualification or training, or the security of a roof over her head she had to go from pillar to post to earn a living. Yet her deeply ingrained sense of right and wrong makes it impossible to bow down before injustice which results in losing her job as lecturer in Homescience.

The present job as a social worker in the Himalayas hardly makes life better. Everyday she has to grapple with hunger, poverty and problems arising from her honesty, uprightness, self-respect and service mindedness. As a welfare officer she has to fight against antihuman elements like ignorance and superstition. It is her heroic attempt to eradicate child-marriage that culminates in her rape and death at the hands of Prit Singh, whose daughter’s marriage she has been trying to obstruct. But for all her bravado, Ila is dishonoured by man’s brutal strength and moral meanness.
Nanda Kaul becomes a passive accomplice in the murder because of her unwillingness to provide Ila shelter just as Jiban becomes an accomplice to Monisha's death by denying her a chance to establish her self.

While Nanda Kaul wants to free from her past it is memory of the past that sustains Ila. The glamorous life of Nanda Kaul loses all its glory before the pauperism of Ila. Her real involvement with the welfare of the people assumes tremendous significance when contrasted with the unsatiating, meaningless existence of Nanda Kaul. In every respect, in attitude and appearance, Ila is portrayed as a foil to Nanda Kaul.

That the life of a woman, whether married or single, is a series of commitments and obligations is further proved by Bim in *Clear Light of Day*. Here the problem of disintegration of human ties is given a new dimension by focussing on the part played by time. Desai's deliberate contrast between the two sisters provide insights into the various types of feminine responses. Far removed from the other high-strung neurotic heroines, Bim is a class by herself. Yet underneath her carefree, detached facade, the dull routine and domestic placidity, "the imponderable remains."43 Tara's visit to the old house, which itself is the image of destruction, decay and neglect, rakes up unpleasant memories of the distant past.

The novel, divided effectively into four parts, each part part dealing with distinct periods in the lives of the principal characters, spans the history of the Das children. Harsh experiences of life consequent on the death of her father hardens Bim to a seemingly tough woman with an established individuality. A middle-aged History lecturer, she represents a section of contemporary Indian urban woman, single, independent and self-assured. At a superficial level she may be seen as a westernised woman who even smokes. Combining this image with the image of Sisyphus Madhusudan Prasad comments on its symbolic significance: "A momentous image, it is connected with the theme of the novel connected with the theme of the novel illuminating the real character of Bim."44 Whereas Tara is traditional and subdued in thinking and behaviour, Bim is ruggedly unconventional with short hair, careless
disregard for propriety and her unfeminine disregard for appearance. In her refusal to conform to the dictates of the society she is on par with Sita and Monisha, but unlike them Bim is not socially alienated.

Marriage is viewed as a limitation of possibilities. The early marriage of the Misra girls prompts Bim’s passionate declaration: “I wont’ marry... I shall work - I shall do things... I shall earn my own living... and look after Mira-masi and Baba and... be independent” (140). Though Bim’s single life is restricted in space and activity, confined to her home and college, her fears of marriage prove true in the case of the Misra sisters. Abandoned by their husbands, they return to be ruthlessly exploited by their brothers. Their predicament also is conditioned by the system of education meted out to girls in the traditional Indian milieu. Bim, like Ila Das, is angry that her education has left her totally unequipped for shouldering business responsibilities after the demise of the father and the desertion of Raja. Feeling inhibited by her education and socialisation, she is determined to instill in her students self-reliance: “I’am always trying to teach them, train them to be different from what we were at their age to be a new kind of woman...” (183).

Bim’s voluntary choice of remaining single stems from her observations of other women including her mother. Though Dr. Biswas, her admirer, misreads her determination as martyrdom she does not actually want to be hedged in by the traditional role of a wife. It is the same nonchalance, resolve and alertness that claim the admiration of men like Bakul. Bim seems to have achieved what she wanted, but Tara realises that she too is harbouring discontent with herself, hiding it under the garb of brusqueness.

Alienation in Bim “is not related to psychic illness but to emotional callousness operating within the domestic ambience of silence and stacicy.”* For more than 20 years she has been undergoing the tremendous strain of managing single handedly a retarded brother, an ailing aunt and a crumbling house. Partition of India attains great symbolic significance in the novel for it becomes a powerful symbol of estrangement. It not only divides the country but creates cracks in their individual
personalities and fission in their familial ties. An emotional tangle builds up within her when she realises the shift in Raja from his role as brother to that of the landlord after his marriage to the daughter of Hyder Ali. Tara is surprised to see her anger and bitterness towards Raja with whom Bim had been very close as children. Their adulthood is thus unrelated to their prepartition childhood affinity. Entangled in the old house that looks like a tomb in the moonlight Bim broods over the futility of human ties.

Time too plays a seminal role in the novel. Over the years the competent fire-brand Bim has been altered into a grey, dishevelled, self-muttering and fault-finding person. A flip-side of self-sufficiency is loneliness breeding inner desperation which erupts during the last days of Tara’s sojourn. “Self alienating forces work on Bim’s psyche and in her weak moments she resorts to resignation, wishes to run away from life.”46 Despite feeling bitter and betrayed she neither shirks her responsibility nor ends up her life violently like Maya or Monisha.

Desai introduces the phenomenon of memory which surpasses time itself by the epigraph from Emily Dickinson. Memory is never a source of jubilee for Bim but it strikes like the knell of sorrow. She has adopted the strategy of repression for survival. Repression is the selective forgetting of unpleasant experiences for protecting the ego. Tara’s reference to Raja’s letter shatters her carefully made up semblance of nonchalance. The world of luxury and extravagance experienced and shared by Tara and Raja contrasts with her too rough and austere standards. Comparing the loving letter that Tara has received from Raja with the business letter that she received reducing her to a mere tenant Bim cannot but resurge: “Oh yes - he writes beautiful letters to Tara - all wedding, all gold - but what about the letter he wrote me?”(147). The letter which she keeps as a symbol of Raja’s callousness blocks a family reunion.

The effort of steering the abandoned ship of her family drains Bim of all her energy. The bitterness that corrodes her emanate from a feeling of being exploited. The despair and pain that Bim experiences is highlighted through the mosquito
They had come like mosquitoes, only to torment her and mosquito-like, sip her blood... Now when they were full, they rose in swarms, humming away, turning their backs on her” (153). Separation from her family fills her with a sense of fragmentation and incompleteness. Torn between love and anger, acceptance and refusal to accept them, understanding and misunderstanding them, Bim attempts to emerge out of her state of turmoil.

In her ability to reach out and connect Amla is different from her emotionally stunted relatives. A modern career woman migrating to Calcutta determined to enjoy life, she finds the silence and withdrawal of her siblings appalling. Despite all the stimulation of new experiences, new occupation and new acquaintances, her primeval joy remains momentary for soon she realizes the hollowness and futility of her existence. Her inner void and disgust for the mindless, monotonous city finds its aesthetic identification in the paintings of Dharma. In his company she becomes a new, vibrant Amla translucent with joy and overflowing with a sense of love and reward. But the emotional attachment which borders on love too gradually wanes when she becomes aware of the inhuman treatment of his daughter. Thoroughly exhausted, her yearning for sibling support is not gratified for Nirode becomes inaccessible and Monisha “has wandered away into some unholy garden of her own” (Voices 148). Monisha and Amla have striking differences between them. Amla's bohemian lifestyle is in total contrast to her sister's submissive life. Her attempts to get closure to Nirode and Monisha fail because they have their own safe armours of alienation. She feels insulted when Monisha comes for her invitation to tea in the company of Jiban and a cousin because it denies her need for private confidence with her sister. She cannot endure Nirode allying himself with Monisha rather than herself who had been his pet sister.

A murky sense of unreality creeps into her. The security and honour she enjoyed in her office now deserts her making her feel alone in the crowd. Feeling like a rabbit in a trap she regrets her choice of leaving Kalimpong. Jit Nair analyses the problem of the three siblings: “I think you all drive yourselves deliberately into that dead end
where you imagine you will find some divine solution. But there is none, not in a lifetime..." (176). Unlike Monisha and Nirode, she recognizes the significance of emotional ties to impart a meaningful life. Yet her quest for meaning takes her almost to the brim of the pit into which Monisha and Nirode have fallen. Monisha's death serves as a lighthouse for it offers her a glimpse of what lay on the other side of this uncompromising margin.

Cities also play an unusually significant role in the lives of the protagonists. The overcrowded, busy life in the cities often reduces individuals to islands within themselves. Insecurity, distrust and materialism become stallmarks of citylife. Maya feels alienated in the oppressive summer heat of New Delhi with no kindred soul to lean on. Her feeling of isolation stems from the total disillusion with life in the metropolis that has scant regard for abiding family relationships. Failing to cope up with the corrosive loneliness she longs to return to her old home with its garden, roses and pigeons. Not only the home, but the city also encroaches on the self of Monisha and deprives her the privacy she craves for. To her the city with its mindless, meaningless monotony of empty sounds is a threat to personal peace. The barred windows offer her no glimpse of the outside world and hence compounds the sense of isolation. Hailing from the rejuvenating hills of Kalimpong the dirt, dust and din of Calcutta are nauseating to her. She feels entombed and entrapped in the city and longs for the solitude of the jungles. Images of imprisonment and claustrophobia recur. As N. R. Gopal opines, "she seems to have been transplanted in the wrong soil." Amla also feels the grip of the monster city that lived no normal, healthy life but one that was "subterranean, underlit, stealthy and odorous of mortality"(150).

No other city perhaps assumes as much influence or identity as Bombay in Desai. To Sita the city appears to be a lunatic asylum where the children enact violent scenes from movies and servants quarrel on roadsides. Destruction becomes an inherent element of it. Sita desires escape from the bestial civilization of the urban milieu to the magic of Manori. Delhi cannot be separated from the life of Bim, born
and brought up in the city. Though it has not changed perceptibly over the years, it loses its charm and glamour just as the abandoned house of Hyder Ali. The old, unchanged house over which Bim presides in Old Delhi evokes feelings of stagnation, negation and resultant boredom.

The women of Desai, with their thwarted aspirations and desperate struggles to preserve their individualities, undergo varied experiences that contribute to the disintegration of their selves. Childhood experiences, according to Desai, are “the most vivid and lasting ones.”

Childhood is the formative period where one discovers the beauty of human relationships. The primary group is the nursery of personality development. A healthy parent-child relationship provides a congenial atmosphere for the child to become independent and self-reliant in later life. “Excessive pampering hampers the process to maturity, jeopardizing every chance of happiness in other adult relationships.”

Gautama blames Maya’s strange childhood for her alienation from the present. Reflecting on her childhood she herself acknowledges that she lived like a toy princess in a toy world. The realization unfortunately offers no help. She refuses to grow out of the chrysalis of childhood which hinders her smooth entry into married life. By keeping her confined to his orderly world Rai Sahib has made her oblivious of the salient features of a successful life. Her physical growth does not bring about a proportionate emotional maturity. Gautama places her desire for companionship as father-fixation, the failure of the individual to become emancipated from his emotional ties to his parents and their control over him. Her stultifying relationship with Gautama generates partially from the crippling effect of the father’s love.

While the overprotective attitude of the father has a negative effect on her personality, the absence of maternal affection in her fairy-world childhood also acts corrosively on Maya. “It is out of the earliest loving bonds with the mother that the infant develops the beginning of a being for itself.”

The lack of emotional closeness between a protective mother and an adolescent daughter hinders her role as a responsible wife. Though Maya never consciously spells out the need of a
nurturing mother, it is obvious in her search for a mother surrogate in her mother-in-law. She yearns for the protective warmth of her bosom. But to the social worker mother-in-law Maya is important only because of the monetary help of her father and “therefore necessary, though not necessarily loved” (Cry 48). She acknowledges Maya’s longing for safety, security and human company, but refuses to stay longer.

Estrangement between brother and sister also is described by Desai. The presence of a brother is kept secretive because of lack of binding sibling bonds and the humiliation associated with his running away. Her basic anxiety to please her father thrusts Arjuna the rebel brother to her subconscious for offending him will tantamount to loss of belongingness. There is no textual evidence of intimate interaction between the brother and sister and his final absence too creates no void until the arrival of his first letter. One cannot but accord with Jasbir Jain that Maya’s unhappiness in her adult life “is in part related to the process of her growing up.”

The devastating effect of emotional deprivation on the personality and interactional pattern of a developing child is substantiated by Sita. The term “emotional deprivation refers to a lack, in the child’s experience, of a positive reciprocal relationship with another person.” As the daughter of a charismatic politician living mostly in crowded assemblies, mobs, slums and villages where life was almost harsh and barbaric, she was denied the warmth and security of a hearth. On the island where they finally settled, the children grew up though in the presence of the father, there developed no emotional affinity. He was the legend to the villagers, but Sita alone missed the magic that others venerated in him. She could not corroborate his dubious ways. The feeling that his day light, practical charisma had its underlit night time aspect increased the distance between the two. The impossibility of communication with her father has built an “unsurmountable emotional block in Sita. Hence she feared and avoided physical proximity with him. Always viewed from a distance she has no intimate knowledge about him. Her doubts about the mysterious disappearance of the mother remains shrouded. Sita
thus harbours dubious feelings in her unconscious mind about the male. This myopic view prevents her from distinguishing truth and reality in future and inhibits her from exposing her inner problems to Raman. According to Madhusudan Prasad “Sita’s alienation from her husband was inherent in her relationship with her father.”54 Her queer life with her father robs her of all the feelings of mutual faith and love.

Parental partiality implants a feeling of insecurity and lack of self-esteem. Her father’s partiality towards the musically talented eldest daughter Rekha ignites feelings of jealousy and a sense of inadequacy in Sita. This coupled with the shocking disclosure that Rekha is only her step-sister removes the chance of establishing support and rapport between the sisters. The information that they do not have the same mother scalds Sita. The chance of female bonding is further blocked by the father’s favouritism. Childhood fears of insecurity remains dormant in her consciousness. In the observation of Mrinalini Solanki partiality “serves as the foundation stone of her anxiety-ridden personality.”55

Peer group is an important agency of socialisation of individuals all through their lives, particularly to children during their adolescence. Friendship between girls is of great significance for “identification with a similar being can strengthen the young girl’s consciousness that she is an independent ego.”56 Both the insulated world of Maya and the crowded childhood of Sita suffer from a lack of companion spirits. Hence as an adult the direct and immediate transaction with the society and the family becomes impossible for Sita.

The neurotic problems of both Maya and Sita spring from a motherless childhood besides other complementary factors. Without an affectionate, understanding mother, Sita too is a victim of emotional deprivation. Her childhood interaction has not provided the emotional security necessary for the development of a wholesome personality. At the conscious level Sita never bothered about the absence of the mother for she had believed “she came to the world motherless” (Voices 84). The sight of her mother’s jewellery unveils the deep sense of vacuum which remained unknown to her. A mother dead is easier to accept than the rumour about
a deserter mother. The sacred image being sullied, she finds herself transformed to
an eternal wanderer, always in search of her identity. In the incongruous mix of
loneliness and crowding she struggles along her adolescence as a cripple without
crutches. Like Maya she too grows into womanhood unprepared for the impending
roles as wife and mother. This emotional disability vitiates her own relationship with
her offsprings. Deprived of motherly affection she fails to gloat over her maternity.
What other women consider happiness is rejected as sentimentality. Having never
enjoyed the strong bonds of a mother and daughter she fails miserably to inculcate
mutual trust and understanding with her own daughter. Hence when the daughter asks
the father to come to Manori, Sita feels humiliated and rejected.

Lack of a proper home tarnishes her concept of a family. The varying sojourns
have injected only a sense of rootlessness and Sita “saw no reason why she should
belong to one family alone” (85). The disintegration of the family immediately after
the demise of the father testifies the fact that they had no centre to hold them tight.
Jivan leaves a couple of days before the death and Rekha immediately after. The
meaninglessness of her existence impels her to view life only as a drama enacted
without any involvement. Hence when Raman comes to close the theatrical era of
her life at Manori she feels relieved. The environment on the island has been not
conducive to the wholesome development of a balanced personality. It is only when
the humdrum existence in Bombay fails to offer security that she once again thinks
of the island. The past symbolised by the island has always remained a hindrance to
a happy present.

The return to the island only increases Sita’s isolation for she remains an
outsider as she has been in the mainland. She is unable to distinguish real life and
false life, whether twenty years of pretence and performance or her voyage back to
Manori as real. Hence at the second coming of Raman she feels like the player at
the end of a performance “in equal parts saddened and relieved” (152). Solanki
relates the anxiety, nausea and meaninglessness that engulf Sita directly to her
“isolated childhood during which she did not enjoy the security, confidence and
emotional fulfilment that a place called home generally has.”57
Ungratiying childhood incapacitates Monisha too in establishing meaningful relationships in adult life. The enigmatic and disturbing relationship between the parents sows seeds of destruction and degeneration in the personalities of the children. Monisha cannot overcome the influence of her parents' negative qualities and fails to relate to others. The peculiar family environment dries up all tender feelings of love and trust and are replaced by negative feelings of fear and suspicion. The inability to communicate makes them incapable of emotional warmth, understanding, consideration and confidence. There is no effective interaction among the siblings. The principles of give and take, adjustment and compromise are unknown to them. While the mother could bear her life of subdued emotions and thwarted expectations in her involvement with many activities, meaningless life and lack of harmonious relationships dissolve Monisha.

Raka is the only child character in the fictional world of Desai among other retrospecting grown-ups. She bears eloquent witness to the detrimental effects of a stifling home environment upon the tender psyche of a young child. In her isolation Nanda Kaul is pitted against her great-grandchild who is the finished, perfected model of petrified silence. Desai uses Raka's rejection of Nanda as a shock treatment to expose her deeply buried need of love and care. Emotional deprivation has made her an unusually detached child. Uncongenial domestic environment develops in her an aversion to belongingness and is strangely gravitated to the ragged, destroyed and barren spaces in Kasauli. Her rejection of Nanda Kaul and the world around is natural and instinctive whereas Nanda's is planned, strained and wilful.

Unhappy and terrifying childhood has hardened Raka into a stony little core of solitary self-sufficiency and her spirit, inspite of the typhoid, is defiant enough to chant “I don't care” (Fire 73). Scarred from infancy, the destructive, uncouth and the ruthless excites her. Feeling no attachment to the cosy, civilized world she feels an outsider inside the house and an insider outside. To her men are more dangerous than jackals: darkness friendlier than light. Desai subtly suggests Raka's tortured past through an aside. The festive orgy at the club unlocks the door to the unhappy
memories of her nightmarish experiences. Somewhere behind them was her father, stumbling home from a party, beating her mother with hammers and "filthy abuse that made Raka cower under her bed clothes and wet the mattress in fright" (71).

Discussing the causes of premature detachment in childhood Karen Horney mentions "the cramping influence" of the threatening home environment. To cope with the conflicting situation the child withdraws and creates an emotional barrier between himself and others. He creates his own world where he is totally free. Despite her father’s attempts to ‘socialize’ her, Raka too withdraws to her shell to save her self and to evade her past. When her emotional needs are unfulfilled she alleviates her suffering by relating to violence. Having tasted only unhappiness she unconsciously accepts it as the only reality. Hence her premature ageing which is brilliantly conveyed through the image of the infant langur that "looks strangely aged, as if by worries and anxiety beyond it’s age" (58). Having never experienced love both Nanda Kaul and Raka seek to avoid what they terribly need: the security, involvement and reaching out through love.

Bim, Tara and Raja are also victims of an unwholesome, “empty, hopeless atmosphere of childhood” (Clear 21-22). Their home, the symbol of decay and destruction, captures the duality of family life. It stifles, yet connects individuals. The picture is as scathing as the others. The indifference and self-centredness of the parents leave the children emotionally starved. According to Sudhir Kakar “an individual’s identity and merits are enhanced if he has the good fortune to belong to a large, harmonious and close-knit family.” In the Das house the parents remain offstage as shadowy pictures. The father is described as a man who dealt with both family and business by following a policy of neglect and the mother is presented as either sitting at the card table or lying on bed with a suffering face. The unexpected birth of Baba in her middle age made her restless for her ‘bridge’ suffered. Though the children interacted among themselves they were denied entry into the mysterious world of their parents. They drifted like a ship without a radar. Because of lack of effective communication with the parents, their deaths also failed to make
any difference in their pattern of life apart from its pecuniary nature. With no nostalgic memory of such a past Bim vehemently declares “I never wish it back. I would never be young again for anything” (43).

Desai uses both Tara and Bim to plumb the depths of their past. The death of the parents leads to the disintegration of the family when each one embarks on his own journey leaving Bim and Baba alone. For many years Tara has tormented herself with a feeling of betrayal, of abandoning Bim just as she failed to save Bim from the attack of the bees at the Lodhi garden while they were young. Anxiety about the mother’s health burdened the tender psyche of Tara. Old memories of the cow drowned in the well and the sight of her father injecting her mother, which to the young mind seemed a murder, keep surging within. “Years of westernised and antiseptic living in different capital cities have not exorcised those ghosts” of a vividly remembered past from Tara’s mind. Beneath the robe of her harmonious marriage she remains as tremulous and troubled as Maya.

Deprivation of maternal warmth, despite a living mother, had created an emptiness in the children which was later partially filled by the mother surrogate. Infact Mira Masi, “handed to them like a discarded household appliance they might find of use,” (105) became the anchor to the emotionally starved trio. To Tara whose childhood fears were never assuaged by a comforting mother, Mira Masi provided warmth, love and care unknown to her before. She became the tree which provided shelter to the Das children. She brought life and charm to the otherwise dull and soulless home. Contrary to their own mother Mira Masi was nurturing, supportive and docile.

Tara feels only discomfort at the memory of her childhood for both at school and at home she was only a failure compared to her all-competent sister. While school brought out Bim’s natural energy and vivacity that was kept damped down at home, school to Tara was a terror, a gathering of loud, malicious forces that threatened and mocked her fragility. The child Tara always felt at a disadvantage in both size and age for Bim and Raja were a match for each other in many ways. Out
of tune with Raja and Bim, the company of the Mishra sisters compensated for her forlorn experience.

Premature ageing and the burden of responsibility thrust upon Bim impede her relationship with herself. In her struggle to sail the deserted ship, she fails to acknowledge her own physical and emotional needs. The development of attitudinal difference that seeped into the adolescent Raja and Bim was something unexpected and hence at Raja’s callous desertion she was too falbbergasted to express her pain and uncertainty. But despite the emotional setbacks she refuses to surrender. Her determination to remain whole amidst chaos is achieved at the cost of self-alienation. The hiatus between the childhood heroic ambitions and the futility of her life torments her. Awareness of her own inadequacies heightens a sense of loneliness and rejection which she tries to counter through egotical elation of self-sacrifice. The dullness that pervaded all through their childhood because of the chronic illness of the mother continues for Bim through her sole companion, the retarded Baba. If family which is the primary force of cognitive development of individuals is characterised as a group where individuals have “intimate face to face association” there is no family in Clear Light of Day.

A girl is never allowed to be a child. She is indoctrinated with her vocation right from her childhood depriving her the happy freedom and carefree aspect of childhood. The birth of a son is supposed to elevate the status of the family. The humiliation and hurt that Uma and Aruna of Fasting, Feasting feel at the jubilation of their father over the birth of a male child permanently scar their personalities. All his bottled up emotions rush out once they return home from the hospital. The servants and elderly relatives witness the most astounding sight of their lives: Papa, in his elation leaping over the charis in the hall like a boy playing leap-frog, his arms flung in the air and his hair flying, shouting “a bo-oy! Arun, Arun at last!” (17). The two girls react to the incident differently. Uma never overcomes the awe of that extraordinary event, far more memorable than the birth itself. As for Aruna it marks the beginning of a lifetime of bridling, of determined self-assertion. Before
becoming a woman Uma is forced to take up the role as a mother with the birth of a son to her middle-aged mother. The future of the daughter is sacrificed for the much-awaited medal of a son. Despite the fact of being an abject scholar, school has always been a magic land to Uma. Hence when her education is suddenly curtailed to look after the baby brother, she desperately attempts to plead with Mother Agnes to keep her at school. The fits that Uma develops, when this last escape route is unexpectedly denied, is perhaps a precipitation of her dismay and protest at the unhealthy discrimination. If Bim fails to inculcate feminine qualities and maintains her own individuality because of parental indifference, Uma is refused the pleasure of ordinary living because of parental apathy and gender discrimination.

When external reality becomes oppressive the world of fantasy beckons with all its charm. Fantasy "is a cheap, accessible pleasure and an emotional safety valve, unlike many outlets such as a blaze of temper or act of vandalism." In their hours of distress fantasy provides escape, consolation and moral and psychological support for Desai's protagonists. In the fictional world of Desai fantasy is never the total structure, but a part of the total structure constantly juxtaposed with the other. It objectifies itself in various ways as "dream and nightmare, as wishful thinking and personal aspiration, and as a private world characterised by an obsession of a psychological fear."

Maya adopts the strategy of escape into the past as the present becomes frustrating, dissatisfying and unendurable. It shows her inability to grow out of the childhood world to merge with the larger world outside. In her attempt to recreate the childhood world of fantasy that caters to her demands of love and recognition she forgets the boundaries between reality and make believe. Gradually losing touch with all reality she withdraws to her own cocooned self. R. D. Laing argues that "the self whose relation to reality is already tenuous becomes less and less a reality-self, and more and more engaged in phantastic relationship with its own phantoms." Her fantasies are confused with vague memories and fears. Ungratified physical urges force her to involve in erotic fantasies: "If I could pleasure in contemplation of the
male Papaya, how much more food for delight in this male companion” (Cry 92). Confronted with Toto's death, Maya momentarily seeks solace in the gentle lullaby of her childhood. But retreat to the past brings in the memory of the unpleasant prophecy. Dreams and nightmares dominated by the albino image haunt her. Thus Maya’s retreat into the world of fantasy does not liberate her from the nagging sense of insecurity and schizophrenia, but culminates in insanity and murder.

Marital discord and failure of establishing meaningful relationships lead Monisha too to her own world where she imagines superiority over her surroundings. She tries to establish an identity by associating with the works of renowned writers. Dissatisfied with the present she also leaps to her past, immediate and early. In order to preserve her self she desperately attempts to create a private world of solitude amidst the crowd. Her fantastical world becomes unproductive for it leads only to further alienation and self-immolation. Her longing for privacy does not let her comprehend the outer world of reality. Amla too heavily depends on fantasy for the fulfilment of her psychic needs. Unconsciously she is gravitated to the world of imagination. Her relationship with Dharma provides a fantastic release, but saves herself when reality dawns on her. Falling in love with Dharma Amla experiences the hallucinating effect of his paintings. But with the knowledge of the truth regarding his daughter, the magic spell breaks. She decides to hold herself back, to withdraw from the world of enchantment. Her ability to free herself, though requires great strength, saves her life.

Like Maya, Sita also returns to her childhood world to escape from the burden of reality. She adopts withdrawal as a strategy to defend herself against demands on her unyielding self. “Her thought of protecting the child from the callous world is in fact a strategy to guard her self-image.” But the voyage to Manori becomes an odyssey of self-discovery. She realises, though late, that escape is no solution: Manori has no magic. Away from Raman, she learns that life must be continued. She realises that she lacks her husband's capacity for accommodation. Sita retreats to the island as if to a womb when she is disillusioned with the harsh world. As a child she
had doubts about the magic of the island, but as an adult she has given it the halo of a private refuge. The moment she lands on the island Sita begins to sense the gap between illusion and reality. The journey to Manori becomes a trip back to her childhood from which she had never outgrown. It turns out to be disappointment to the adult Sita when she realises the elusive, quasi-mystical nature of the father's world. Further, it reveals that she herself is unimportant: she is tolerated because of the father. Sita's awareness of the illusory charm of the island intensifies with Raman's arrival. Raman's second coming marks the end of Sita's spiritual voyage. Her return to the mainland signifies neither defeat nor failure but her graduation into a mature sensibility. It girdles her with courage to face the humdrum existence.

The novel is built around the metaphor of journey. Sita embarks two journeys, one an escape from the present and the other towards the future. Unlike Maya and Monisha, she uses flight as an occasion to evaluate her predicament. She realises the difference between necessity and wish, between what a man wants and what he is compelled to do. Wherever she is, she finds her very existence threatened by tedium. She understands that the problem lies within and there is no escape from the void within. Sita belongs to those characters of Desai who turn against or make a stand against the general current. It is easy to flow with the current: it makes no demands. But "those who cannot follow it, whose heart cries out 'great No,' who fight the current and struggle against it, they know what the demands are and what it costs to meet them." She has cried out her 'great No' but now the time has come to go back to normal life. She accepts the fact that the time on the island has been very much like a stage-performance. At the end of the pilgrimage Sita is equipped to face the quotidian nature of existence with sanity and courage. She reconciles to her lot, strikes a balance between the inner self and the outer world, the individual and the society. Unlike Maya and Monisha who fail to connect the prose and passion of life, confrontation with the past enables Sita to return to the prosaic life with a rejuvenated spirit.

Nanda Kaul too weaves a charming web of fantasies to survive in a world of bitter
truths and cruel realities. Raka’s obstinate indifference accentuates her unconscious
desire for love. The unexpected intimacy between Ramlal and Raka forces Nanda
Kaul to fabricate a fantastical world to intrude into the world of Raka. Dreams and
fantasies, according to Nanda Kaul, are important for human psyche as tranquillisers
to induce sleep at night. She therefore makes a laudable attempt at weaving a
colourful past around an adventurous father and an extraordinarily gratifying
childhood. The two childhoods in the novel are in contrast to each other. While one
describes the reality of Raka, the other projects a wished for world. In her second
childhood Nanda Kaul looks exactly like a thwarted baby, demanding attention that
she never received. The sight of the bronze Budha, a memoir brought from Tibet,
spurs Nanda Kaul to concoct a story about it. It helps her to overcome the feelings
of deprivation which had been her lot. But Nanda Kaul herself unconsciously
acknowledges the unusual nature of the past by the modulations in her voice. Raka,
who at the beginning devours her words in silence, gradually becomes suspicious and
wants to be released from the “disagreeable intimacy.” (Fire 95). She refuses to be
confined to the old lady’s fantasy world when the reality outside is so appealing. It
is Raka’s uneasiness that forces even Ila Das to narrate stories of their youth when
Nanda Kaul flourished as the Vice-Chancellor’s wife, always in pearls and emeralds.
But the intrusion of Ila crumples the world of lies that Nanda Kaul has been
fabricating all along. The death of Ila Das forces her to accept the long avoided reality
that “she did not live here alone by choice. She lived here alone because that was what
she was forced to do, reduced to doing”(145). With the failure of her survival
strategy, she too ceases to exist. Desai adroitly employs the image of the black
telephone hanging to indicate her inability to confront reality.

Raka’s private world of fantasy is neither related to the tales of Ramlal nor to
those of her great-grandmother. It is based on her observation of and experiences in
the world around her. In her imagination she finds herself soaring higher than eagles,
higher than Kasauli and all other hills. While a retreat to the fantasy world leads
Nanda Kaul only to a dead end, it provides Raka a move towards liberation from her
childhood fears.
The children in *Clear Light of Day* also engage in individual fantasies according to their specific needs. Deprived of the chance to socialize, their knowledge of the world has been confined to books with fairy tales. There is an unconscious realisation of their dreams whereas the Das children are concerned. They follow their dreams involuntarily altering themselves. By marrying Benazir, crossing the barriers of religion, Raja devotes himself to the fulfilment of the dream of becoming a hero. Bim identifies herself with Joan of Arc and Florence Nightingale, the symbols of devotion to duty, courage and self-sacrifice. Her fantasied image aids her survival. Bim and Aunt Mira almost play identical roles. When Bim succeeds in emerging from it, Mira Maṣi is consumed by it. Tara, who never indulged in any heroic aspirations but wanted to discover herself as a princess, finds her escape through marriage. Journey back home helps her to examine and assess her own selfhood. She realises that she has always exchanged surrender with boldness for it appeared to be easier. But pushing against the grain has proved to be equally exhausting. Reliving the past helps Tara to expiate the guilt of deserting Bim to single handedly manage the affairs of the family. She has viewed Bim only through the lens of her own self, as she wanted to see her. But now she achieves an objectivity of vision. Articulation of her sense of guilt enables Tara to bridge the gap between the two sisters.

In her unconscious march towards the role of a heroine, Bim has built up barriers around herself. Tara's return home, her tactless blundering into the past and her naive responses to the present forces Bim to confront the real emptiness of her life. Instead of withdrawing from life Bim had adopted the strategy of repression. While Tara goes away to attend a family function Bim gets ample time to recapture the past and evaluate the present. In her night long vigil, where the duststorm outside becomes an effective symbol of the violent turbulence within, Bim makes a brave effort to come out of herself to discover her greater being, in relation with others. She realises that she can remain whole only by reconciliation with her siblings who are part of her self. While others resort to suicide and escape Bim resorts to
reading as a defence mechanism to “draw the tattered shreds of her mind together and plait into a composed and concentrated whole after a day of fraying and unravelling” (167). In the last words of Aurangazeeb she finds the isolation inherent in human life and the need for selflessness and forgiveness. Once the wall of hatred is deliberately broken down, she is able to share Tara’s suffering over the past. Bim, who always considered herself superior to Tara, now realises the bond of relatedness. Through Tara she is able to convey her desire to make peace with Raja. The tearing of the letter is symbolic of the tearing up of her own idealized image. She attempts to come out of the mesh of prejudices, anger and resentment making her whole once again. Retrospecting her past equips her to confront reality, to forget and forgive. She gives a message of love which heals and with which dawns a clear light of day. All emotions spent “there remains only a new awareness of continuity of life, a life that marches along with time, destroyed and preserved by it, a life that is sustained by the old bonds of family life, luminous and engulfing like the light of a clear, bright day.”67 The last scene where Bim and Baba attend the music programme at the Misras becomes the image of Bim's reintegration with family, society and culture and her perception of a unity between divergent elements within herself and in the world.

In the apathetic friendless world Uma finds solace in her childhood memories associated with her school, the golden period in her life. When her present drifting life becomes too dreary she escapes to that world which has been carefully preserved in the Christmas cards and snapshots. The very sight and touch of them fills her with ecstacy: “they are so loving and bright with goodwill and friendship, she binds them all up again with string and stows them away like treasure - to her they are treasure” (Fasting 98).

Desai is concerned with the challenges of contemporary reality. In all her novels “there is a striving on the part of the protagonists towards arriving at a more authentic way of life than the one which is available to them.”68 The distinguishing qualities of introspection, introversion and a refusal to surrender their individual selves inevitably result in isolation and alienation though the extent of them varies
qualitatively and quantitatively in temporal, spatial and individual terms. The novels emphasise the motives and circumstances, the why and wherefore of the external action rather than the action itself. Using stream of consciousness technique Desai probes into the dimly lit and labyrinthine corridors of their psyche. An abundant use of functional images captures and concretizes the inner turmoil of her characters. The theme of disharmony and discord are confined to the family, the immediate environment and at times to the ill-adjusted self. All the protagonists ranging from the little Raka to the great grandmother Nanda Kaul suffer either from cramping influences at home or marital disharmony or both. Disgruntled with their humdrum and harsh existence they often withdraw into their own fantastical worlds. While inability to endure the stress drive Maya and Monisha to murder and suicide later heroines like Sita and Bim establish their identity through self-discovery and compromise. They seem to agree with the Desai statement: “I don’t think anybody’s exile from society can solve any problem. I think basically the problem is how to exist in society and yet maintain one’s individuality.” With Bim a strong individualized female emerges who achieves her identity and transcend inner divisions not in isolation but in togetherness, not in withdrawal but in positive commitment. This realization “marks her transition from hatred to love, from alienation to accommodation, from egotism to altruism.”
Notes

3 Pathania 5-6.
11 Prasad 3.
16 Pathania 26.
17 Susnaina Singh, The Novels of Margaret Atwood and Anita Desai: A
Comparative Study in Feminist Perspectives (New Delhi: Creative, 1994) 29.


19 Jain 25.

20 Pathania 30.

21 Gupta 92.

22 Gupta 109.

23 Krishnaswamy 264.

24 Prasad 95.

25 Prasad 65.

26 Jain 29.

27 Pathania 37.


29 Jena 51.


31 Pathania 47.

32 Gupta 123.

33 Solanki 103.

34 Gupta 175.


36 Jena 36.

37 Krishnaswamy 269.

38 Pathania 115.

39 Krishnaswamy 259.

40 Krishnaswamy 251.
41 Solanki 34.
42 Prasad 3.
43 Krishnaswamy 276.
44 Prasad 75.
46 Solanki 101.
48 Jain 25.
49 Pathania 107.
51 Jain 16.
53 Pathania 129.
54 Prasad 102.
55 Solanki 44.
57 Solanki 48.
59 Sudhir Kakar, The Inner World: A Psychoanalytic Study of Childhood and Sociology in India (Delhi: OUP, 1981) 121.
60 Krishnaswamy 271.
63 Jain 37.
64 Laing 85.
65 Solanki 158.
67 Krishnaswamy 271.
68 Jain 16.
69 Jain 10.
70 Jena 33.