The three writers Sahgal, Markandaya and Anita Desai portray with great sensitivity their consciousness about the impact of change on a traditional society, the repercussions of such change on a society on relationships, social institutions, even behavioural attitudes and outlook. The story of women, their response to changes coming into their lives as a result of transformation of tradition, culture and history form the core of the important novels taken up for study.

However, the three writers differ in their approach and method of dealing with the relative issues. Markandaya and Sahgal were writing at a time when the process of change, and its effects were gradual and tentative and the impact of tradition was still very strong in life. Therefore, the polarities between tradition and change were felt very strongly in the novels of the earlier writers, most particularly in Kamala Markandaya, the seniormost of the three. In Sahgal, the conflict is handled in a subtler way particularly as related to public/political issues as also its impact on the individual consciousness.

Anita Desai writing at a time when changes were coming fast and thick and Indian society was to a great extent transformed by modernity, at least in the urban areas, among the elite and the middle class who formed the subject of her fiction. Anita Desai’s character and situations display a greater complexity and ambivalence mainly due to her consciousness of the ambiguous nature of the changes brought
onto life in the modern times. The conflict between tradition and modernity and the resultant transformations were no longer clear-cut and polarized as before. One overlapped onto the other and there were subtle nuances of change and stability.

These perceptions and Desai’s modernistic technique of psychoanalysis and plumbing the depths of the individual consciousness to detect surface reality mark her out from the other two writers. Though of course, Sahgal’s vivid rendering of history, politics and culture and the colonial encounter in India coupled with her foray in the realm of psychological study of character and situation in her novel *Rich Like Us* make her a precursor of Anita Desai.

Anita Desai emphasizes strongly on the individual experience. In her, the social and individual clashes very strongly, particularly in cases when the individual interest, desire or aspirations go against the given or conventional notions of society. Desai’s concentration on this area to probe the depth of human experience and also to relate it to the wider social context is greater than the other two writers in this study.

Her fiction is noted for the range and depth of analyses of human relationship as a correlative to the study of the individual and society. Aspects about tradition and change enter into an evaluation of relationship in modern times. Tradition is subverted as far as relationships are concerned in a Desai novel, for in a fast changing, modern urban society relationships are undergoing both subtle and drastic changes. Accepted infallibility in filial, sibling, conjugal relations within the family and outside have become uncertain. Traditional institutions like the family or marriage are also seeing disintegration, which she notes in her fiction. In her varied studies on novel aspects of relationships, their impact on society and the individual
make her a pioneer in this area in Indian English fiction, and a forerunner among the new breed of Indian English fiction writers.

The critic R.K Dhawan emphasising on the fact that Anita Desai has added a new dimension to fiction has analyzed her work in the following way:

In Desai's novels, it is the exploration of sensibility, the inner workings of the mind that that assume significance, Anita Desai is interested in the psychic life of her characters and her novels reveal that her real concern is with the exploration of human psyche. (Dhawan 11)

As emphasised, Desai is a great analyst of the human mind and a creator of sharp brilliant images, sensitive vignettes of life and characters vivid, tragic and very real. The characters and situations rendered in their tragic intensity, weakness and potentiality present a world most human. Desai has an unique gift of plumbing the depths of human nature by her fictional rendering of neurotic behaviour, which help the reader grasp their inner reality intuitively. Desai's characters are caught in a web of their own compulsions and when studied psychologically we begin to visualize their ambitions, disappointments, and loneliness as real. The concerns of the psychologists and social scientists are treated subjectively and aesthetically by Desai. Therefore, Anita Desai's characters cannot be treated as "case studies of neurosis." (Bande 168) They are living, breathing, human beings interested in life, and its reality.

Anita Desai depicts life in its entirety, the beautiful, and the ugly. The thorough artist that she is, she shows in Hardy's words "the sorriness underlying the grandest things, and the grandeur underlying the sorriest things." (Bande 169) The totality of human experience imparts a metaphysical perspective to her fiction and she creates a situation in which the inner and the outer worlds fuse. The writings are
largely reflective and mirror the social conditions in traditional as well modern Indian society. She believes strongly that the human condition does not change though situation and the environment does. Her protagonists are lost in their personal, psychological problems and are shown as laboring to come to grips with reality in this situation.

As a pioneer among writers preoccupied with the lives of Indian women against the backdrop of a changing society, she is one of the most widely read and researched among the Indian English writers. The portrayal of urban reality and her intense plumbing of the depths of the human condition in a sensitively sophisticated manner make her a most interesting and popular writer. Her portrayals of Indian women barring a few like Sarah, in *Bye Bye Blackbird* and Lotte in *Baumgartner's Bombay* (who are foreigners) belong to varied age groups, are a depiction of individuals in conflict with society. She, like her protagonists, yearns for a kind of revolutionary change, which would usher in the freedom and self-assertion they had always craved for. All these deeply held concerns find expression in her novels. As she herself had always insisted that all statements she wishes to make on women has been made in her novels in some form or other. Her novels, however, are not just tracts that discuss theories of philosophy or psychology but talk about issues, which arise from subjugation and oppression, domestic discord and unequal relationships and are garnered intuitively and depicted intricately: “Anita Desai’s characters reveal her vision of life, they share her perceptions and they set out in quest of meaning. Like their creator, they love solitude and privacy.” (Bande 20)

This observation by Usha Bande talks about Desai’s total identification and involvement in her characters. A quality, which highlights each of them with a passionate intensity. Her interest in marginal, unconventional, doomed and
obsessive characters is well known. Thus we have her gallery of poignant portraits ranging from Maya, Monisha, Sarah, Sita, Nirode, Raka, Nanda Kaul, Bim, Tara, Raja and Mira Masi to Lotte, Deven, Uma, Melanie and Arun. These interesting, varied ultra sensitive people find life and meaning from Desai’s own perceptions when she says:

I am interested in characters who are not average but have retreated or been driven into some extremity of despair and so turned against or made to stand against the general current. (Interview, 1979, 49)

Anita Desai is different from many other Indian English novelists – particularly her contemporaries these novelists most of who are interested in the outer rather than the inner world. Desai herself is interested in inner qualities and in the psychic aspects of human reality. In her novels, there is a thorough analysis of her characters, and plot and situation are important only as far as they reflect obsessions, preoccupations and problems of her protagonists. Not for her is the journalistic zeal and the portrayal of socio-political realities of India. Each of her works is a incisive quest of the ‘self’ – the psychic self. Desai’s primary intention as a novelist is to depict the psycho-emotional and socio-psychological states the protagonists living in alien and cloistered worlds. Focusing mainly on the female psyche particularly in her early fiction where her women emerge largely as victims of the traditional system, who try to protest, but whose voice is unheard. Desai’s preoccupation in studying the inner psyche of her character leads to a deep delving into the “labyrinthine depths of the Indian psyche”. (Rajeshwar 7) This is done to come to terms with the changing realities of modern Indian life and the disturbing psychic conflicts of personal life. Anita Desai’s mode appears particularly suitable
for this as she believes in discovering reality by: “plunging below the surface and plumbing the depths, then illuminating these depths till they become a more lucid, brilliant and explicable reflection of the visible world.” (Rajeshwar 7)

Anita Desai has employed the method of the psychological novel “which stresses moments of feeling rather than...matters of fact”. (Fernandes 183) Through this is the case; Desai is adept at depicting the social and political angle through analysis of the mental states of her characters. The writer probes the reasons as to why her characters specially women need to behave in a obsessive, neurotic manner. She discovers reasons in insecurity, alienation and a search for identity, which originate in – psychological issues pertaining to social, political and historical causes. The lonely childless Maya, the oppressed Monisha and the traumatised Sita in her early novels speak about a heartless society where patriarchal bias and materialistic tendencies bring about a break up in lives and destruction of relations.

In a novel like *Bye Bye Blackbird*, the problem of identity crises and rootlessness plaguing the central character Sarah has at its roots socio-political causes - the problem of the alien in exile. The need to withdraw is as important as the need to be involved and the problem of total disorientation occurs when the individuals cut themselves off from society as Nanda Kaul discovers in the novel *Fire On The Mountains. Clear Light of Day*, Desai’s much acclaimed novel, deals once again with the theme of belonging and escape and gives us one of the author’s most nature characters in Bim – Bimala Das. In the later novels of Anita Desai, there is a fusion of the inner and outer world.

Desai’s novels are intense studies of modern urban relationships. The roles of different persons involved in these relationships are minutely detailed and the strength and weakness of such relationships are studied. The psychological
unraveling of character so much a part of a Desai novel is revealed through the intimate relationships particularly within the family. Anita Desai studies the role of the family in both sustaining and destroying relationships. Though traditionally a sheltering haven, the roots of violence and psychological inhibitions, complexes and attitudes lie within this structure and affect the individual placed within it. Anita Desai views the family from within as a writer and the reader views it from the outside and things fall into place. As Uma (Fasting Feasting) realizes perceptively: “The tightly knit fabric of family that had seemed so stifling and confining, now revealed gaps and holes that were frightening” (Fasting 86) Desai in various novels shows the confining bondage of family ties, the shattering of some, through the break up of sacred institutions like marriages, sibling ties and filial relations. Myths of the family as an unifying unit are thus shattered.

Against the background of such shattering of myths of the traditional relationships, Desai’s novels are an honest and frank appraisal of modern relationships their strengths and weaknesses.

Man-women relationships receive considerable focus in Anita Desai’s novels. Desai broods over the fate of the modern Indian women against the gender-bias of a largely patriarchal society. Marital relations - marriages for love and companionship turns incongruous and farcical in many of Desai novels. From Cry The Peacock to Voices In The City, Where Shall We Go This Summer and Fire On The Mountain, we find Desai portraying a series of tragic conjugal relationships. The novel Bye Bye Blackbird is interesting for it projects marriage and conjugal relationships from the viewpoint of an English woman Sarah who believes in the sanctity of the marital tie.
Among relationships within and outside the family the importance of female relationships in India can never be over emphasised in a society where the gender divide and segregation is very strong. Among these, of course the mother-daughter relations are primary. Indian girls often are assured of their worth by their mothers who play a significant role in their lives as Sudhir Kakkar remarks: “Mindful of her daughter’s development fate, the mother re-experiences the emotional conflicts her own separation once aroused and this in turn leads to increase her indulgence and solicitude towards her daughter”. (Kakkar 61)

Mothers and mother figures form an important matrix in a Desai novel. Mothers may not always be physically present in the action but they remain just near the surface of the consciousness of the characters. Many a time troubles occur because of the absence of mothers, or their too dominating presence. The neurotic difficulties of both Maya and Sita spring from a motherless childhood. In Fire On The Mountain, Raka, the precocious child-heroine’s trauma starts from the lack of parental love (particularly mother-love). Raka turns into a social misfit and even shies away from the maternal overtures made by her great-grandmother Nanda Kaul. However, a mother surrogate like Mira Masi (Clear Light Of Day) the widowed, castaway aunt is for the Das children the sheltering tree who gives protection to the children in the absence of their real mother who was totally self-absorbed.

A great deal of social criticism is implied in the portrayal of fathers husbands and mothers whose inconsiderate behaviour create psychological conflict in relations within the family. Men usually on the fringes of a Anita Desai novel, yet at times they control and influence events. In Fasting Feasting, it is Papa who controls the household in a typically patriarchal situation and dominates and influences the
course of events. In *Cry The Peacock* Maya’s father is responsible for the maladjustment in her life.

Anita Desai presents the female existence in modern urban India in most cases as a life of paralyzing bondage – an agonizing defeat. She often presents the tragedy of a tortured self, which is in conflict with society and constantly in search of a meaning, which eludes them while in this search they wish to avoid the commitments of society. The individual craves for freedom of a bird flying high in the skies – the bird image sharply brings into focus the caged condition of the individual in general and women in particular. Anita Desai particularly highlights the plight of the ultra sensitive, emotional women driven almost to the point of desperation by a sense of neglect, loneliness and loss of identity: “the existential problem of the alienated self finally emerges to be the theme of her novels”. (Dhawan 49)

Desai’s focus on the emotional – the inner psychological realities with special emphasis on the sensibilities of women takes her very near the phase of total self-discovery. The inner search, the desperate groping for their identity is a factor common to all women protagonists of Desai from the neurotic, the alienated, the insecure rebel and the lonely, but triumphant survivors. Facets of the disintegration of the self suffered by women at various levels in urban Indian society is focused in these novels. Instances of murder and suicides and other destructive action speak of Desai’s pain and anger at the social, institutional domination and cruelty and the destruction of the individual sensibility. Desai at the same time is extremely sensitive to the plight of the marginal in society – the unusual, less than average psyche who suffer the most as not belonging to the general mould.
A new image of womanhood, one where a woman’s traditional role is being emphasized in newer and more efficient ways is becoming fast evident. This is the result of change – an inevitable aspect of modern Indian society. Today we find gender differences and discriminations is new guises. Thus in Anita Desai though the women are liberated from the *pativrata* image yet they are still burdened by forces inimical to the fullest expression of individual identity. Nanda Kaul is the super efficient wife of a V.C, Sarah a liberated English working woman, Bim, born leader, the outgoing smart personality, are still far from becoming fulfilled, liberated individuals.

Taking our cue from such characters, we can conclude that the female protagonists of Anita Desai come dynamically alive. Their creator Desai is engrossed not only with their present, but look backward to them past and visualizes their future as well. Their relevance to modern Indian life is in their strength and weakness, sensitivity, mutability variety and unconventionality. Desai has contributed tremendously to Indian feminist writing by delving deep into women’s psyche and opening up avenues for the study of social, cultural, and sexual issues. Desai as a consummate artist has been able to represent minutely the attitude and feelings of her hypersensitive female characters. Therefore grounding of unusual behavioural traits and female experience of Desai’s above the average and sometimes marginal characters emphasize once again her deep sensitivity.

Since Desai’s forte has been the exploration of sensibility and her writings reveal the psychological aspects of female experience, she has made significant efforts to deviate from the traditional literary techniques and the general current of narrative devices. She depicts feelings, frustrations, desires and attitude with consummate skill and artistic sensitivity. As a critic says: “Her feminist viewpoint
are aesthetically, artistically and psychologically sound.” (Chandra 57) To express feminine sensibility, she uses a number of literary devices like specific feminist discourse, use of associations, symbols and images.

Most of her female protagonists face conflicts on account of marital disharmony, claustrophobic tortured existence and emotional maladjustment. These hypersensitive personalities use language that is indicative of their tortured psychic problems mood changes and conflicting emotions. As the writer tries to find a suitable, medium to express the conflict she exploits new verbal areas.

Use of evocative language, recurring through and through for indication of change of mood like: ‘loneliness’, ‘isolated’, ‘darkness’, ‘futile’, ‘hopeless’, ‘stormy’, ‘silence’, ‘empty’ etc. Desai’s protagonists also use repetition for emphasis and expressing their disgust and disenchantment and the use of multiple and striking adjectives for emphasis of emotions through images. It has been said that women have no option but to create a language of their own which might enable them to convey their thoughts and feeling authentically, and accurately in order to compensate for the negative semantic space.

Desai’s female protagonists similarly express the oppressive nature of their lives with the use of suggestive images. For example, the circumscribed existence of women in Indian life is aptly described with images of traps, bonds and cages. The women at times feel as if they are acting a part in a role assigned to them in the drama of pain and prosecution.

Jain comments on role-playing or image creation, self and imposed, in females in the following way: “Roles become facades, they cloud the reality, they confine and blind and order the behaviour of the characters.” (Jain 134)
A distinctive feature to be note in the use of language by Anita Desai is that her female characters' choice of language is significantly different from that of their male counterparts. The broken, torturous syntax, syntactic constructions, symbols and images and other features of female discourse talk about the dilemma of their existence and the conflicts and contradictions of their life. Anita Desai has added new meaning to these areas of Indian English literature.

The quest for the self and the peace therein is a moral need. This is to be found within oneself, when one lives a life of awareness of one's being an awareness that stimulates the growth of inner strength and resources. A life of social pretences destroys these very same resources and the individual dies a slow agonizing death. This truth is realised by Nanda Kaul, the chief protagonist of Anita Desai's 1977 novel Fire On The Mountain which has been described by the critic Paul Scott as 'infinitely moving'. It tells the moving story of an aged, tired individual in search of peace away from all ties at a mountain retreat, only to face truths and a tragedy that is irrevocable. Nanda Kaul, the elderly protagonist, has suffered a destruction of selfhood being immersed in a life of social convention as the venerated wife of a Vice-Chancellor in a Punjab town. Nanda Kaul's life is empty because in spite of her position of indispensability as a perfect wife and mother, she is not happy in her marriage with a husband who has had a mistress Miss David all his life. As the respected and admired wife of an honorable citizen, Nanda has to bear the burden of the 'feminine' image of the perfect wife, the doting mother and a most efficient keeper of her husband's house. The image, which strangles individuality, tramples on one's sensitivity and projects the female as a household slave, a social ornament and a sexual convenience. It is a situation when the protagonist struggles to escape from the vice like grip of responsibilities and relationships of a tradition dominated...
by a patriarchal value system. With the creation of the character of Nanda Kaul, Desai has moved away from the docile victim stereotype and has tried her hand at creating an, “acceptable depiction of women in literature” who “would serve as models both for women readers and for contemporary women writers.” (Dinesh 107) Anita Desai’s protagonists including Nanda Kaul can be taken as not only being portrayed in opposition to the stereotyped ‘Savitri’ image of traditional Indian womanhood, but also distanced from the role model approach. This role of a woman who balanced her duties of the ideal wife, mother and homemaker and her wider one in the public arena of modern life. Nanda Kaul then has moved away from her docile existence and has found independence to choose her own life. Liberated from these roles she has searched and found an alternative in the privacy of the mountain retreat at Carignano on the Kasauli hills. Her unhappy and marginalised existence of the past in the house, which was her husband’s house, never hers, where she never had a sense of belonging, is expressive of her anguish. The alternative image of the liberated but secluded life at the hill retreat to which she had escaped is similarly unsatisfactory. She is disturbed, alienated and insecure in this lonely set up no more and no less was all she was prepared. She finds her liberation to be unreal, her satisfaction hollow - at Carignano it is mere escapism. There is an impression of death, decay and withering away of Nanda Kaul’s life in her utopian retreat emphasized through descriptions of the bleak landscape, the wild garden and the old house on the hilltop. She no more wished to add to her garden as to her pared and reduced life. In Carignano, Nanda Kaul has sought refuge from her unpalatable past, liberated as she thought she was from her abhorred traditional feminine role. She has now tried to carve a new identity for herself, but which proved a failure, for she is still playing a role. What emerges from a reading of the
novel is that Nanda Kaul has never been true to herself either in her past as the V.C's wife, or as a recluse at Carignano in the present.

Nanda Kaul’s role, her image and identity is related to a set of complex relationships in the novel, for *Fire On the Mountain* is a novel of subtle relationships. Nanda’s marital unhappiness results from her uneasy relations with her husband — resulting from his indifference and extra marital preoccupation as well as the selfish indifference of her children frustration and silent agony at her being forced to bear the burden of carrying on the role of the perfect wife for the sake of convention makes her life a misery. Liberated at last from this tortured relationship, she is forced into a new one with her problematic, great-grand child – Raka. At first disturbed and resentful of the child’s presence at her, secluded retreat, Nanda later feels the need to establish human contact with Raka. She makes overtures, which are rejected by her great-grand daughter. Traumatised by a disturbed and violent childhood, Raka is totally hostile to any kind of relationship which she feels to be a bondage, a kind of chain and collar existence, and she rejects Carignano and Nanda Kaul’s world. The strange obsessed child at the end sets the forest on fire it is for her an annihilation of the conventional world with its bogus relationships, and its injustice. Nanda Kaul tries to win over Raka, through a fabrication of the past because she felt Raka to be a kindred soul. Raka, she felt, understood that Carignano stood for the life that she tried to create for herself, blocking and negating her unhappy past. Unable to live up to her role, Nanda tried to relocate herself in a new identity. Nanda was however, being dishonest and untrue to herself as she withheld herself and remained indifferent to Ila Das, who also belonged to her past and Ila becomes a victim of circumstances. Thus, her
carefully created image of cold indifference cracks under the burden of her past and Carignano, the mountain retreat, is destroyed.

Ila Das's relationship with Nanda Kaul was powerful, complex and tragic. The tragedy is that of a shared past of emotional bankruptcy, a past of rejection of selfhood. Ila Das-Nanda's childhood friend and close associate- a tragic personality who had come down in this world, due to adverse circumstances symbolized for Nanda her unhappy past of lost identity and self-deception. Therefore, at Carignano, Nanda rejects Ila Das for she feels that, "there had not been anyone more doomed, more menaced than she ...(Fire 133) Later on when Nanda hears of Ila Das's rape and murder she is overwhelmed by a sense of guilt for in the degradation of Ila who loved and trusted her (Nanda) is the humiliation and degradation of womanhood -- the rape of woman's self esteem. Nanda's guilt is increased when she feels she has been a party to this monstrous crime by her indifferent and apathy to Ila Das. This realization overwhelms her and she dies burdened with the weight of guilt.

Three generations of women suffering at the hands of the patriarchal system, form the mainstay of Fire On the Mountain -- Nanda Kaul, Ila Das, Tara and Raka exploited by husbands, brothers and father. Gender discrimination and abuse an accepted and almost inevitable fact of a patriarchal society is unerringly demonstrated at different levels, from the regal, affluent, scholarly ambience of the Vice-Chancellor's residence, to the smoke filled, grimy hovels of the village where Ila Das works as a social worker. From the stately, dignified Nanda Kaul, to the sickly, jittery Tara, to the pathetic, ridiculous Ila Das all suffer in the different incarnations of the persecuted female. It is significant that Nanda Kaul, wife of a distinguished scholar leading a life of affluence has removed herself totally from her role of a mother and wife. Her retreat to her mountain refuge was her escape from
the rejection and frustrations of her past life. This escape was her greatest relief:
"She had been glad to leave it all behind, in the plains like a great, heavy, difficult
book that she had read through and was not required to read again." (Fire 27) She
was Parvati taking refuge in her mountain retreat shedding her former image of
mother and wife now living only for the self—the 'Brahmachari' retreating into her
samsyas.

Raka, Nanda Kaul's great-grand child is perhaps the most mysterious and
complex child character in Indian English fiction. She is just the antithesis of her
name, which means the, calm or radiant moon. The secretive, dark, bulging eyed
Raka who is more at home among the ravines and lonely mountains and abandoned
houses are reminiscent of forces other than positive and acquiescent. She has a
propensity for violence and death. A craze to visit the Pasteur institute and the
ravine, which collects the remains of dead animals, indicates this. Described in
animal imagery, Raka, to her grandmother “is one of those dark crickets that leap up
in fright but do not sing, or a mosquito minute and on their thin fine precarious
legs.” (Fire 39) She is also like “a rabbit conjured up by a magicians.” (Fire 47)
The scene of perverted, bizarre acts and dress of the merrymakers at the club party
unearth the disturbing, frightening memories of Raka’s early life with her drunken
abusive father and sickly, cowering mother; As she flees the scene it is as if the
devils of the past, of her lost childhood is pursuing her—"Hate them – hate them.”
(Fire 71) Commenting on this strange child character, Shanta Krishnaswamy says,
“The conventional sweet smells and sounds of childhood are ignored. She feels
drawn by scenes of devastation and failure. The forest fires tingle her.”
(Krishnaswamy 273) She is the personification of ruined, lost childhood, the girl
child victimised by her mother’s trauma, the individual destroyed by society, she has
developed instincts that are destructive, negative and abnormal.

It was the ravaged, destroyed and barren space in Kasauli that drew her... and the seared remains of the safe cosy, civilized world in which Raka had no part
and to which she owed no attachment. (Fire 91) She is Desai’s sensitive study of the
complex and far reaching psychological maladjustment of childhood and its impact
on society. This young girl with her fascination for empty houses, the Pasteur
Institute, which destroys to cure and the ravine with snakes, is a symbol and a
statement of the state of society, which is responsible for such maladjustments.

Desai’s perception of society lashed by an erosion of values as well as the
traditional concepts of power structure is expressed in its misuse on the basis of
class/gender creating suffering marginalised, individuals like Ila Das. Ila Das, a
doomed character, is a victim of patriarchal oppression by her own brothers and the
socio-economic changes in the country. Made puny and negligible by
circumstances, she however is a socially conscious individual and tries to fight
social evils like superstition, child abuse, child marriages etc. She dies a pathetic,
violent death. Her death and rape poses not only the question of gender
victimisation, but also the eternal domination of the negative power structures and
the law of the jungle.

The incisive portrayal of these three female characters each unique in her
own way make Fire On The Mountain one of the most powerful novels of Anita
Desai and points of the writer’s deep psychological insight as well as opening
widows to the world we are living in at present.

The novel emerges as a strong statement on female experience in Indian
society. In Nanda Kaul, we recognize a tussle between her traditional constraints
and her desire to escape from them. Nanda represents a stance in the female position
in India, which supports and accepts the domestic role of woman while recognizing
and the desire for freedom from the bondage of the domestic role. The desire
remains unarticulated. She is placed by Desai in a position between tradition and
change. Her chance of escape from the duties of traditional womanhood to find her
identity comes to her only at widowhood; and the prospect to realize her
unexpressed desires at the Kasuali hills. But this satisfaction is denied to her and her
dream remains unfulfilled. As she accepts her burden instinctively but reluctantly,
Nanda is once again caught in the conflict between the duties and obligations of
Indian tradition and the expression of one's selfhood and identity. She is a
representation of the glory of ideal womanhood imbibed in colonial education and a
privileged past, who nurture dreams of emancipation and freedom but cannot free
themselves from the chains of the traditional past.

Nanda Kaul and Ila Das with a similar elitist colonial background and
education is distanced from the general mass, which made them handicapped. It is
this upbringing and mind set which makes Ila a misfit in today's society. However,
as a socially conscious, humane individual, she tries to help women and children
overcome blind beliefs in the backward villages, incurring the wrath of tradition for
example, the village priest. As she tries to take legal action against Preet Singh for
selling his seven-year-old daughter to an old man, she poses a threat to Singh, who
takes revenge and rapes and kills Ila. Her death is the death of idealism and
humanity and the triumph of evil.

These two portraits and their circumstances are relevant from the historical
and social context of an India caught between tradition and change. Brought up in
the semi-liberal, privileged life of upper middle class families in the colonial period,
enriched by liberated idealism. Nanda and Ila find themselves misfits in an uncultured materialistic world. Ila Das and her sister are victimised, and exploited by their selfish, cruel brothers who suck away their very lifeblood, leaving them as pathetic wrecks. Nanda Kaul also from a similar affluent, educated background suffers from a spiritual barrenness and is degraded by her own kin. In both their desire for freedom, assertion of identity and uplift of the self are hampered. Ila and Nanda’s endeavours emerge in Raka, child of the future who is portrayed as the symbol of emergent radical feminism, fearless, bold and destructive of convention and hollow hypocritical notions. Her action of setting the forest on fire, is symbolic of the desire for destruction and annihilation prior to the process of the emergence of the new. Raka is Desai’s presentation of the new feminism hesitant, awkward but explosively passionate.

Nanda and Ila’s endeavours though relevant cannot flourish and develop as they are changes shackled by tradition. It is significant that they are both portrayed as old and infirm and they ultimately die. Raka, who is “an impatient kernel, small and explosive.” (Fire 48) bursts out and scatters her ideas far and wide is significantly a child. It is an expression of women’s emancipation that is tentative and latent.

The strong feminist as well as sociological statement made by Desai’s Fire On The Mountain, however does not detract it from its status as a document of human psyche. The projection of marital discord, loneliness and withdrawal-basic to the human predicament is treated in this novel in an extremely restrained and controlled manner. This is befitting of the mature personality of the main protagonist Nanda and her reclusive great-grand-daughter Raka. This is a gradual departure and more mature treatment of the same theme in her earlier novels like
Cry the Peacock and Voices In The City. The setting of the novel corresponds closely to the reclusive nature of the three central characters, who are the sole actors in the novel, apart from the marginal presence of the servant Ramlal. It is significant that the action takes place in an isolated house, Carignano. The landscape of the hill station is depicted as barren, dry and craggy, the scene of numerous raging forest fires. A certain ambiguity prevails over the novel, with the withdrawal desire and the self-imposed seclusion of Nanda Kaul with her wish to black out the past which ironically comes back again and again impinging on the present invading Nanda’s privacy and distracting her vision. The whole novel is interspersed with scenes from the past. The past in the form of the tragic history of the house Carignano, life at Nanda’s husband’s house, scenes from Nanda’s childhood, the history of Ila Das’s life. The present is represented by Raka, her exploits and adventures, culminating in her action of setting the forest on fire. Raka is the catalyst in the novel, the cause of various happenings and she leads Nanda to the truth. Nanda who had imagined herself alienated at Carignano now becomes emotionally dependent on Raka- “But now Nanda Kaul seemed unwilling to stop talking to let Raka out of her sight.” (Fire 56)

Raka’s presence is represented for bringing about the spiritual awakening in Nanda Kaul. The recognition of her need for others, the craving for love and belonging is the symbolic fire of spirit, which purges her and makes her realize the truth. Nanda had till this time been living in an illusory world, but Ila Das’s brutal rape and murder shatter her illusions. It is a dreary unloved world of oppression fit to be destroyed Raka feels as she sets the forest on fire. Thus, each of the characters lives a life of tragedy and disaster. The imagery setting the tone of melancholy and doom.
The images scattered through the novel help follow the stream of impulses, thoughts and feelings flowing through the minds of the main characters. The imagery emphasizes their psychic states evoking the atmosphere, all the while delineating their changed perceptions. Nanda’s desire for withdrawal and seclusion and her unconscious death-wish is indicated by equating her to the stately pine trees on the lonely hillside –

She was grey, tall and thin ....... and she fancied
she could merge with the pine trees and be mistaken
for one. To be a tree, no more and no less, was
all she was prepared to undertake. (*Fire 4*)

Anita Desai is one of those few writers, alive to the psychic states of her protagonists, which she co-relates with the landscape. The emotions of Nanda on reading her granddaughter’s letter and the impending arrival of Raka, which upsets her as it means the loss of freedom, is expressed in a flower image:

...the yellow rose creeper which had blossomed so
youthfully last month was now reduced to an
exhausted mass of grey creaks and groans again. (*Fire 17*)

The letter brings back unpleasant memories of the past and her family life, which she had found wearisome, and a terrible burden.

Looking down, over all those years she had survived and
borne, she saw them.. like the gorge cluttered, choked
and blackened with herds of children and servant and guests,
all restlessly surging, clamouring about her. (*Fire 17*)

Nanda’s walking inadvertently into the badminton court which evokes the emotions of anger and distaste – the court being the symbol of her husband’s
infidelity (the place where he plays the game with his mistress). The negative connotations of this reveal Nanda's sense of injury and insult.

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{the badminton net that hung grey and spidery as to be invisible in the ghostly night} \\
\text{a waxen moon was climbing over the ghost grey branches of the eucalyptus trees along the drive eerily silent.} 
\end{align*}
\]

Fire 25

Raka too, obsessed with the idea of freedom feels uncomfortable at the slightest sign of emotion. She feels restless indoors and longs to explore the exotic outdoors.

She walked about as the newly caged, the newly termed wild ones do, sliding from wall to wall on silent investigating pads. Fire 20

Raka’s is a disturbed mind, a child of a problematical, disturbed family; her diseased psyche has created a perverted nature in her. Even the normal, everyday things and pleasant aspects of nature assume monstrous proportions for her. Attracted to the malevolent, the violent and the dangerous, the Pasteur Institute’s aspect of death and destruction is a source of fascination for Raka——

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Raka sniffed the air and smelt cinders, smelt serum boiling} \\
\text{...smelt the smell of dog's brains boiled in vats, of guinea pigs guts, of rabbits secreting fear in cages packed with coiled snakes,} \\
\text{watched by doctors in white.} 
\end{align*}
\]

Fire 49

Flowers, birds, fairies, dolls and other delights of childhood do not attract this unusual, morbid child. She is fascinated all the time by the grotesque and the macabre. The club episode where Raka has a glimpse of the wild, boisterous party where the party revelers seem like madmen to her is a nightmarish reminder of tortured, unhappy home life. A string of images involving Raka, like the burnt house, the masquerade at the club, the gorge signifying violence, hatred and...
morbidity, foreshadows the forest fire and the disaster about to befall on the protagonists. The fire ignited by Raka is symbolic of her pent up fury signifying her desire to destroy the hypocritical, cruel world which all three have become victims of. The violence in the world of Raka, Ila Das and Nanda, corresponds to the violence of the world at large. The crucial forest fire suggests the fire of purgation as well as the funeral fire.

Ila Das’s picture is highlighted with a prey-predator image particularly the scene of her being teased and taunted by a bunch of schoolboys. Images foreshadow the death of Ila Das expressed in this observation by Nanda Kaul- “Her (Ila’s) rickety existence looked so precarious.” (Fire 133) The word precarious suggests the danger ahead of Ila Das. The images evocative of fear and tension are expressed in lines like: “climbed down a slippery pile of pebbles.” (Fire 141) In spite of the overwhelming tragedy of her life and the final disaster about to befall, Ila Das’s optimism, her genuine concern for others less fortunate and her indefigable spirit is expressed in her longing for “the lamp flowering into light in her dark hut” (Fire 142)

The incident of Ila’s brutal rape and murder so gory and vicious is Desai’s comment on the violence and brutality of society—the meaningless tragedy and cruelty of life. The final statement is that Ila Das in spite of the inglorious end, attains a certain heroic stature in death, which could never be hers in life. Nanda’s pretences, her carefully built up façade of indifference disintegrate totally and she falls into a state of psychological shock and guilt at her own selfishness and conviction of betraying the cause of the distressed when informed of Ila’s Das terrible fate. Raka’s act of setting the forest on fire is her way of destroying the world of deceit, and cruelty—a total annihilation which forms the climax of the
novel. Her whispered words to her great-grandmother- "Look Nani, I have set the forest on fire......" (Fire 145) is her way of consoling her Nani and of lessening her conflicts and saving her ideal self from self-annihilation. The finale of the novel is that the old lady who had lived all her life with illusions, is now unable to face harsh reality. Burdened by her self-rage and the guilt over her friends demise she dies a swift death. The fire on the mountain has annihilated both Nanda and Ila’s world and Raka- child of the future is left to rise from the ashes.

Nanda Kaul had rejected marriage family and society as oppressive, destructive forces, like her predecessors Maya and Monisha. Two other Desai heroines Sita and Sarah however differ in their acceptance of family, marriage and motherhood after their initial revolt. A common thread of deep existentialist anguish runs through the portraits of all these women. Bim-Bimala Das central protagonist of Desai’s novel *Clear Light of Day* (1980) is the exception. She provides a refreshing contrast to this brood of Desai heroines with her social concerns, her acceptance of family values and her strength and spirit of resilience. *Clear Light of Day* is one of the most affirmative of Desai’s novels, and the sense of affirmation is from the central character of Bim, conceived as totally different from the others in being a single lady and leading the useful life of a working woman. Industrious and independent, she is not tormented by anguish or defeated by frustration. In many of Desai’s other novels, social institutions particularly the family, becomes the source of grief and frustration hampering the interest of the self. However, in *Clear Light Of Day*, relationships form the core of the novel and through at times defeated and burdened by the weight of relationships-Bim the central protagonist is sustained and enriched by her family. Her world is irradiated with these relationships. The story of intertwined lives of four children, their aunt (Mira Masi) and their parents, self
absorbed and disinterested is paralleled with a historical truth - the trauma of the partition of India. Bim and Raja - siblings, friends and close companions are torn apart by Raja marrying their Muslim neighbour’s daughter and moving away to Hyderabad. Relationships are revived at the end when Bim breaks the ice and decides to re-establish contact with her brother Raja.

When we first meet her, Bim appears as a middle-aged woman, teaching history in a college and leading an ascetic life. Eldest in the family she is burdened, especially after the death of her parents in to looking after the alcoholic Mira Masi (their mother surrogate) and brothers the tubercular Raja and the mentally retarded Baba, without drawing back at any stage. With Mira Masi’s death, Raja’s desertion and Tara’s marriage she begins to live in her small world of cobwebs, dust and memories; the dank disused well containing dark secrets, and the oft repeated old fashioned music of Baba. Her calmness, her independent self-assurance impresses her sister Tara, who with her feminine submissiveness is her exact foil. Bim’s air of assurance hides her sense of rejection by her own family. However, she is ready to see every flaw in others in the light of understanding - ready to forgive even her parents who deprived them of the emotional basics of love and care. In Bim, with her confidence, care and self-assurance, we observe a woman, urbane and human.

Bim decides to carry the burden of responsibility in spite of the brooding dismal atmosphere after the death of her parents, the alcoholism of Mira Masi and Raja’s illness. She, with her faults and failings is not of course the ideal woman, but her going against the general current of patriarchal society and her quest for identity she emerges as an expression of Desai’s new woman. In this novel, Desai treats time as a preserver and destroyer – Bim here resists the onslaught, the
decay of time, she refuses to let herself be tormented by loneliness and anguish or age creates a heroic aura about her character.

The novel divided into four chapters, effectively in four parts, deals with distinct periods in the life of the principal characters; the first and the last chapter being set in the present. The scenes from the past are made to relate unmistakably to the present consciousness of the characters. Tara’s home coming triggers off in Bim, memories of a past that has lost much of its beauty and enchantment. The past is sought to be suppressed by Bim because much of it is unpalatable to her. Bim appears to the readers in relation to a myth that developed round her—that of a heroine—a woman who from girlhood has been so competent that she had always been a leader. But the present Bim that her sister Tara encounters, with her unkempt appearance, stamping through the untidy house falls far short of the myth. Tara wonders at the change:

She had always thought Bim so competent, so capable. Everyone had thought that— but Bim seemed to stampede through the house like a disheveled storm creating more havoc than order. (Clear Light 148)

Tara’s return home, her blundering into the past, force Bim to face the real emptiness of her life, which till now she had tried to suppress. The present Bim is shown to be rather neurotic, talking to herself, imagining her sister to be prying on her, and venting her anger on the helpless Baba. This loss of control however awakens her and helps her introspect where she sees by the clear light of day that her life is inextricably bound up to her siblings, she is as dependent on them as they are on her. There is a significant, organic growth in the character of Bim. The dilemma that Bim face in life is typical of the modern Indian reality of a society in transition. A single, independent modern woman however is not entirely liberated enough to throw off the yoke of her traditional duties of the family. In a typical compromising
Indian situation she accommodated her alcoholic aunt and mentally retarded brother too into her scheme of things after her brother Raja and sister Tara abandoned her. In this situation she suffers remaining devoid of male companionship with her youth slowly ebbing away.

The other characters in the novel like Tara, Raja and Mira Masi are true to type. Raja is the characteristic Indian elder son, spoilt, self-centered, largely irresponsible who always wished to be a ‘hero’ but who emerges as one with feet of clay. He marries Hyder Ali’s daughter, goes away and shelves the burden of the family on his sister-Bim. Tara the timid younger daughter in typically feminine and submissive. From her earliest childhood, emotionally the weakest, she had never been able to cope with the indifference of her parents and feels protected only when wrapped in the folds of her Aunt’s sari. Her escape from the house and marriage to the diplomat Bakul does give her a new identity of assurance and security, but burdens her with guilt. The same guilt she had felt when she had abandoned her sister Bim to the attack by the bees at the Lodi Garden Picnic. The incident is symbolic of and a forewarning of the later abandonment of Bim by both Raja and herself. Raja too is burdened by guilt, the letter he writes to Bim and his justification of his action after he has packed his bags and about to leave for Hyderabad are expressions of this same emotion provoked by Bim’s silence—more effective than any reproof: -

“I have to go.......you don’t think I can go on living just to keep my brother and sister company, do you?”

“I never said a word”- said Bim “You don’t have to, it’s written all over your face. Just go, go take your face away....” (Clear Light 100-101)
In Bim’s silence, Raja feels deeply uneasy and burdened with guilt. However, the letter that he wrote is a means to prove that he cares for his sister Bim and wants to make amends.

Tara’s marriage in a way liberates her from the restricted semi-normal life of her own family household. But coming back she feels the present slipping away and the past coming back to haunt her. Tara finds a lot of things changed in her childhood home, the house fallen into disrepair, the garden into decay but most of all her competent capable sister has become a disoriented person close to neurosis. Tara realizes that apart from changes she and others had believed in a myth about Bim. Tara’s realization about her mistaken notion—“Tara saw how little she had really observed either as a child or as a grown up woman.” (Clear Light 148) leads to a demythification of the character of Bim in the novel. The myth that as an independent woman she can live a life of isolation cutting off all ties is shattered when Bim becomes sensitized to her growing loneliness, and her need of love realizes the emptiness of her life without ties. Tara reciprocates to her sister’s need and tries to sustain Bim with the old relationship. The analysis of Bim’s character gives us a type of contemporary urban Indian woman liberated from the traditional mould who yet is susceptible to family ties and older values.

Bim achieves a self-inseparable as it is from her family set up emphasizing the Indian reality. Her strength in facing problems, her unflinching courage against the toughest situation, her future as a prisoner of circumstances, are all suggested by the bee episode at the Lodhi gardens: -

Bim too had her head bent and her arms crossed over her face but she was not screaming. She seemed locked into the hive as if she were the chosen queen, made
prisoner……Bim their appointed victim, The sacrificial victim on whom they had draped the ceremonial shawl……

(*Clear Light* 135)

Bim's future as the imprisoned queen of her house trapped with no freedom to lead her own life is expressed here. Her tragically wasted youth and her unexpressed sorrow are vividly depicted through an insect image.

She (Bim) shook her head sleepily. "I never wish it back. I would never be young again for anything." An invisible cricket by her feet at that moment began to weep inconsolably.

(*Clear Light* 43)

Externalization of emotions through natural images is an integral part of Desai's fiction. A dust storm expressing the inner rage, turbulence and restlessness of Bim at Raja's letter, Baba's helpless, miserable condition, her own frustration and underlying fear of being left alone in their dead house. All this translates into an important symbolic event in the novel, are like a volcano about to erupt and this corresponds to the storm outside: -

All the doors were shut against the dust storm raging outside, so that they could only hear the sand and gravel scraping past the walls and window panes and not see it...... (*Clear Light* 142)

The development of Bim's character, through the passing moments, the journey from childhood to youth to adulthood is depicted through symbols and images. The changing emotions and relationships of all characters, most specifically of Bim are rendered through the images of time which is the haunting presence in the novel. Time in this novel has been used not only to show movement in the
journey of life, both backward and forward, but also denote change and transition in emotion attitude and outlook corresponding to historical and social changes. The unique feature of time shown, as depicting the emotional turmoil of the protagonists is a significant aspect of the novel. The lives of the two sisters Bim and Tara are unraveled with the joys and sorrows of the past and the agonies of the present. They seem to travel through the lanes and bye lanes of the past and the present giving us glimpses of their childhood and adolescence against the backdrop of the political and social changes of the land.

Change and changelessness in character and situation is reflected in images and symbols strewn through the novel. Tara’s difference with her sister Bim and the change in her personality from childhood to her adulthood is shown in the juxtaposition of the old and new selves in character.

......like a pebble she had been picked up hurled back into the pond......why was the pond so stagnant and muddy?....she had changed......Why did it not keep up with her?

(Clear Light 12)

Tara feels she has changed now, her life purposeful, orderly, so her resentment against the changelessness of the house: - the stifling, heavy atmosphere that threatens to pin her down

"It seemed to her that the dullness and boredom of her childhood, her youth were stored here in this room under the worn dusty rugs........."(Clear Light 20)

The dullness, boredom and the chilling, ghostly image of the house recall to both Tara and Bim the memories of their parents—indifferent, selfish, self-absorbed leaving the children love starved. The black stagnant waters of the well at
the back of the house is the image used to evoke the oppressive spirit of the house and their lifeless, barren childhood. "She felt the waters of her childhood closing over her head again-black and scummy as in the well at the back." (Clear Light 25).

There is a suggestion of the stagnant domestic life and the drowning of motherly instincts indicated by the cow drowned at the well. Mira Masi, symbol of the degrading position of the Indian widow identifies herself with the drowned cow because she too has died a spiritual death as a widow subjected to inhuman tortures at her in-laws house. The cruel oppressive traditional system is the stagnant well where women like her are drowned. Both Mira Masi and Bim are haunted by the well, for Bim as an abandoned, unwanted family member identifies herself with Mira Masi and the cow drowned there.

Over and above, the story of Bim and her siblings are traced through long years from childhood to adulthood. The significant point in the novel is that all the disparate elements that threaten to destroy and disrupt life are brought into a harmonious control by certain essential values of life like love, forgiveness, understanding and acceptance. The triumph of these values over the negative ones like despair over destruction are expressed in the music recited at the end where the main protagonists participate whole-heartedly.

In this novel, there is a definite shift in relationships particularly within the family. Here kin ties become bonds and not bondage and the role the family plays is significant – The role of the family in this novel become in many ways the reverse of the familial roles in earlier novels have performed. The claustrophobia of the family in *Fire On The Mountain* have given way to the bracing supportive part relationships and family plays in the life of the protagonists. In the earlier novel the past is often unhappy and has in it roots of the present upheavals.
In *Clear Light of Day*, the family allows for space and freedom and the past acquires a life of its own, blending gracefully into the present in a continuous process.

Change- positive, encouraging though tentative is projected towards the end of the novel when Bim has a change of heart regarding her estranged brother, who she wants to be reunited to. The 1947 riots and the festering wounds of post-independent India are paralleled in the broken relations of Bim and Raja and the lingering hatred. Later however, memories of Mira Masi’s care and Tara’s efforts rekindle in Bim the old emotions, bitterness clears up and she renews her efforts towards positive change rewriting the old ties of love and togetherness. Bim’s character reflects changes, psychological and social. From her early days, Bim defied tradition, while other girls of her time and age turned to marriage, she preferred to remain independent and unattached. Her action of defiance and rebellion becomes her strength. These expressions of non-conformity are not just public gestures directed against society, they become necessary for development of character. She attains her firmness and independence not overnight but gradually through self-questioning. The fact that she (Bim) becomes the most attractive and admired character shows Desai’s own approval of her. In her, there is cohesion of the disparate elements of one’s being-emotion, reason and instinct. Both in Bim and in Tara there is a thorough development of character as they move out of themselves. They are symbolic of positive change in the social and the individual.

The theme of alienation, so close to Desai’s heart right from her first novel is treated with utmost sensitivity in her third novel *Bye Bye Blackbird* (1971). It is the story of Sarah the English wife of the young Indian (Bengali) immigrant Adit whose predicament is her marriage to an Asian in a segregated white society. Here we have Desai exploring the individual existence (Sarah’s) dilemma, the dilemma of
dual existence and the feminine one of living up to an image. "Her whole existence is spilt into two different role ……the real Sarah is lost somewhere between the two worlds." (Blackbird 36). Sarah felt that her life was a make believe one, inside the house where she tried to play the Indian wife and at her, work place where she is the efficient English secretary. However, she was not easy in switching from what she felt were 'roles' and "when she was not playing them (her role) she was nobody. Her face was a mask and her body only a costume." (Blackbird 35). Sarah's conviction that she is living in a make believe world constantly play acting gives her a feeling of inadequacy and insecurity. She feels a sense of rootlessness----as of not belonging either to the Indian or the English world and it engulfs her in a wave of loneliness and pushes her almost to the brink of despair.

She wondered with great sadness if she would ever be allowed to step off the stage, leave the theatre and enter the real world whether English or Indian, she did not care, she wanted only its sincerity. (Blackbird 35)

Though Anita Desai was treading on virgin territory here, through the projection of the predicament of an English heroine in British society and moving from Indian to foreign soil, the predicament is eternally feminine very close to the traditional Indian one of role playing and living up to an image. In this novel, Desai studies the whole range of Indo British experience in the relationship of Sarah and Adit. Thus, social and psychological realism runs side by side in the narrative. Sarah lives in a dual world, the two social worlds, which do not meet and the two cultures which are incompatible. The study of this character is specially interesting because Desai demolishes the myth of an English woman married to an Indian as secure in her homeland with her 'exotic' Indian husband. The soul-tormenting
agonizing shame that Sarah feels about the dark secret of her Indian association tells the truth about her split lifestyle. The contempt directed at Indians who have trespassed into Britain is reflected in the self-same contempt, which Sarah feels at herself. As Sarah steals out of her house loaded with guilt she feels as if taunting voices are calling after her—"Hurry, hurry Mrs. Curry." (Blackbird 34). This is an expression of the two social worlds, which do not meet, the two incompatible cultures, which tends to split her.

Meenakshi Mukherjee considers Sarah as the most successful and a typical Desai character, complex, hypersensitive and intelligent. But this book is a departure from her two earlier novels in that, it emphasizes cultural factors in shaping the individual psyche. Thematically it is the story of Adit and Dev, two young immigrants in England. However, though these two dominate the action, yet it is Sarah-withdrawn, reticent, sensitive who is “the palpitating presence throughout the narrative.” (Bande 120). The plot revolves round the story of the young Bengali immigrant Adit Sen who marries Sarah an Englishwoman and settles in England to the life of interracial and multicultural existence. His friend Dev soon arrives in England for higher studies/opportunities and is soon disillusioned by racial prejudice. However, a weekend spent in the tranquil British countryside changes the perspectives of both, with their attitudes reversed. Adit now becomes strongly conscious of British racial prejudices and Dev becomes enamoured of British ways and life. The novel ends with Adit and Sarah leaving for India and Dev deciding to stay back in England. Although the plot revolves round the activities of the two male characters, the crux of the story is always Sarah who lives in a dual world—the worlds that do not meet.
Sarah's sense of alienation begins at home, in the midst of her husband's Indian prejudices. He hates English food and cribs because Sarah has not learnt Bengali cooking to his taste. Sarah remains an alien in Adit's social circle. However, they respect each other's culture and try to maintain their respective cultural identities. Adit is in love with England, as with Sarah whereas Sarah harbours romantic visions about India. In spite of all this, she dreads being labelled the wife of an Indian in her own society. Sarah then moves hesitantly between her two selves, public and private. Her image as the efficient private secretary - the English working woman needs assertion in public whereas in the privacy of her home with Adit she is content to act the perfect Indian wife. As she moves between her two selves she is uncomfortable, almost guilt ridden. She dreams - of being carried on the back of a water mammoth her face smeared with black mud signifying her inability to fight off the mammoth of self-hatred - and of being smeared with the mud of self-pity. Her sense of insecurity results in self-probing. 'Who was she? Mrs. Sen? or Sarah?' She realizes both the images are charades and that she had only been role-playing and feels an equal imposter in each. Sarah's dilemma is aggravated because she is unable play a single part which she knows to be true as both her images have merged and are inseparable. Her real self, her spontaneous actions are blocked because she cannot discard the mask she wears. Given Sarah's situation, it is difficult to imagine her recovering her lost identity in the alien atmosphere (India). Sarah however is willing to experience the birth of a child and a new identity in a new land. In the development and study of the characters of the novel, Desai is concerned with the spatial effect on the psychology of her characters. We notice the characters of Adit, Dev and Sarah passing through the stages of attraction, hostility and frustration in their encounter with the adopted country which
in turn affect their psychological development. It is seen that in most Desai novels, outside pressures drive a character to a certain stage of mind. Sarah’s schizophrenia like Maya’s (Cry The Peacock) insanity is the result of her encounter with her alien Indian husband Adit. As Desai says—“Schizophrenia amused me while I was with them……… I wrote it in an effort to understand the split psychology, the double loyalties of the immigrants.” (Desai 1973,24)

As a writer concerned with thought, emotion and sensation, Desai treats the ups and downs of the lives of the two immigrants, Adit and Dev and the gamut of emotions, problems and experiences they undergo in an effort to relate to the immigrant experience. In a sense, Adit’s desire for freedom from the traditional bonds of his native land to pursue a dream of success lands him in England. However, frustration and alienation engulfs him even after becoming a pucca Sahib and marrying an English wife and the life itself appears unreal and artificial. ~“All our records and lamb curries and sing songs, its all so unreal, whatever it is, it will be Indian, it will be my natural condition, my true circumstance. He pronounces” (Blackbird 204).

The novel delineates the nature of the immigrant experiences in this case highlighting the hopes, aspirations and frustrations of Dev and Adit as well as their social and cultural displacement. The novel explores at a deeper level the strategies by which the characters regain and repossess their sense of racial and cultural identity in an alien land. This novel is a study of alieness experienced by the central protagonist, Adit and Sarah. Adit tries to counter his feelings of not belonging by clutching on his Indianess. He tries to impose an Indian identity on Sarah by denying her English one. At a deeper psychological level, Adit’s behaviour explains his strategies to cope with his alienation. For Adit, his life has come a full
circle. He had broken bonds with his own culture and tradition. Now he wishes to return to his roots. He has tried change, transplanting his tradition to an alien land. But he feels himself in the grip of an artificial self. Now he returns to seek his real identity—his roots. But he has also brought change to the traditional way, by taking his English wife home to India.

Sarah’s predicament is more intense than that of her husband Adit’s or his friend Dev’s because unlike them she will never be accepted where her roots lie. In search of individuality and freedom, she had cut off her umbilical cord when she leaves her parents’ home to do her secretarial course in London. The severance with her past, her British identity is further emphasized when she marries Adit, and it becomes total when she leaves the country for India with Adit.

The total severance with her roots inflicts a sense of insecurity in Sarah because she is not sure of her acceptance in her husband’s culture, her crossover in the meantime having divested her of her English identity. She feels herself an isolated, divided being posing questions about her being:

In the centre, she sat feeling the waves rock her and the fears and questionings began: who is she ………. felt these creatures were frauds, each had a large shadowed element of charade about it…………her face was only a mask, her body only a costume. (Blackbird 43)

Sarah shows a total submission to her husband’s wishes for their migration to India and to integrate herself totally with her husband’s culture, though there is a lot of pain involved in the process. The change in Sarah’s life is not merely social and cultural but also psychological—a transcendence from one set of tradition and values to another. When the question of freedom comes up, it is not tradition and convention, which threaten her freedom, it is the particular self. She
years for freedom from the self: the self that carries the stigma of Mrs. Sen. The self she wants to hide from, after her marriage to Adit which made her an alien in her own culture unacceptable as she feels in her own society. She feels her life to be empty because she ceases to possess any defined status. Sarah's case is the ambiguous one of an intercultural being rejected by one tradition, yet unaccepted/unready for another. This situation, the feeling of isolation and alienation becomes very strong—"Rain streamed down the window panes, she had deliberately left uncurtained .......separating her from the world with its lustrous curtains." (Blackbird 39)

The character of Sarah remains ambiguous to the reader. She refuses to share her childhood memories with her husband Adit. Is it because he is an alien, or is it because she wants to deny the past? It may also explain her rejection of her association with her very English childhood with the present self, not purely English. Sarah's anguish, her sense of bereavement is deep when she is bidding goodbye to her English self-the self that had for so long been an instinctive and natural part of her. At the end when they are leaving the shores of England behind them. "It was her English self that was receding and fading and dying, she knew it was her English self to which she must say goodbye. That was what hurt-not saying goodbye to England........her instinctive reaction was to clutch at something and hold on to what was slipping through her fingers already". (Blackbird 221) The anguish is that of shedding, this time totally her own identity, so precious her involuntary reaction was to hold on. But at the same, she is hopeful of another life, of newer possibilities opening up before her.

Through the character of Sarah, her most memorable and psychologically viable, non-Indian character, Desai goes against the archetypal
portrayal of a foreigner in Indian English fiction. She looks at this young woman
from a new perspective of a sensitive young person caught in the midst of a cross-
cultural encounter. The given image of a typical English wife in England is
demolished in case of Sarah, when Dev, Adit’s’ friend comments that English wives
are quite manageable very quiet, and hardworking. The quiet, reticent sensitive
Sarah though not quite falling into the mould of the submissive dominated Indian
wife is treated by Desai from a psychological angle. The Sarah who becomes a
‘nowhere woman’ in England because of her Indian connection. Her split
personality and divided self, the result of soul-searching and anguish form the
central crisis of the novel. Through the story of Adit and Sarah, Desai explores the
east-west theme. Sarah’s dilemma is both personal and social. She is the victim of a
mildly insensitive husband bred in the Indian patriarchal system and also of a world
of great social and cultural divide. While Dev and Adit face the alienation of the
immigrant experience in the foreign land, Sarah is an alien in her own land, of her
own land of her own choice. It is a very interesting study of human loneliness as
Desai says—“of all my novels it is most rooted in experience and the least literary in
derivation.” (Desai Interview 1979)

In most of her novels Anita Desai shows marriage as a misalliance
and the problematic man-woman relationship within marriage in novels as varied as
Cry the Peacock, Voices in the City, Where Shall We go this Summer, Fire On the
Mountain. In these novels, problems occur because the women encounter the
oppressive, domination of a conventional Indian marriage. We observe therefore the
break up of matrimonial relationship and sometimes—even tragedy by death. Sara’s
predicament like those of her sister heroines after marriage is the annihilation of her
identity after marriage. But there is a difference between Sarah and Desai’s earlier
heroines. She unlike them tries her best to adjust to her husband’s life and society by agreeing to his crucial choice of leaving London for India. She does this at the cost of great internal turmoil and an uncertain future. Sarah is a tormented woman like Desai’s other heroines, in her loneliness and alienation. In her we see the predicament of the eternal alien—the immigrant who belong, yet do not, of the female caught between tradition and modernity. Desai, in her depiction of Sarah Sen, lives up to her reputation as a master in the art of psychoanalysis in this case presenting the loneliness of a woman due to the cultural hiatus.

Sarah’s predicament is given a sense of immediacy by Desai’s exploration of her psyche using visual, colour and sound imagery with accuracy and passionate intensity. Desai’s lyrical style comes to the fore in her evocation of the beauty of the English countryside and the sights and sounds of London. The novel opens with the description of the morning light, which sets the tone of optimism of the novel.

The morning light slid down the lane lengths of telephone wires, perched awhile on the peaks of television aerials and then rolled down the drain pipes into the new-leafed hedges...Blackbird 5)

Adit Sen’s first appearance in the morning is theatrical and exaggeratedly colourful indicating his desire for opulence and richness of the Promised Land to which he has migrated—England.

Wearing his wife’s pink fur lined slippers and a dressing gown of cornflower blue that looked particularly resplendent (Blackbird 7)

In contrast to her husband Adit, Sarah is described in “tones of colorlessness that went with the long straight fall of her pale hair.” (Blackbird 5).
Her sense of alienation and insecurity, her fear of taunts from her racially prejudiced neighbors and acquaintances makes her wear a mask as if in self-defence—

she kept a sharp look-out for those who walked their dogs at
this hour, keeping to the loneliest path, walking under the trees
and drawing across her face a mask of secrecy. (Blackbird 31)

Sarah is comfortable only within her own house feeling safe when the green door of their house shut. At school she is happy surrounded by her books and copies playing her part of the English secretary, in her other incarnation—"...and sitting down at the desk, she heaped about her, registers and copy books like a fortress." (Blackbird 34). The sense of inadequacy that she faces at her constant struggle to be herself, her inner turmoil and her existence, which is a heavy burden on her, is expressed in her dream of the mammoth.

She had dreamt she was borne upon the back of a mighty water Mammoth that suddenly rose out of its underwater lair... (Blackbird 151)

The water Mammoth represents her past which surface again and again, accusing her of her betrayal of her English self despite her effort to bury it in her consciousness.

In the use of colour imagery in the novel, it is mostly the colour grey that is predominant. The city of London looks bright to Dev when he is happy. It appears in all its greyness when he is sick and despondent. Her grey and silent eyes suggest Sarah’s reticent personality. Sarah aware of the fact that Adit’s roots are in India, and shares with Adit the hope and fear, the trepidation and uncertainty of change expressed in the following image.

Silent frozen on the dawn, Sarah and Adit holds hands like a pair of children, feeling Bengal, feeling India sweep into their room like a flooded river, drawing all that had been
English in it....... They themselves were tossed about by the 
flood like flotsam and then because a part of it, the black flood.

(Blackbird 224)

The change coming into their lives which both Sarah and Adit have 
opted for brings in its wake, a grey melancholy—a reflection of regret and nostalgia 
which come in the wake of letting go of the familiar and losing forever the known. 
The new, the change engulfs them as a flood, inevitable, reversible, both hopelessly 
tossed about like flotsam. Dev on the other hand is eager for change and new vistas 
opening out.

Believing in the sanctity of marriage, family and relationships Sarah 
and Adit decide to retrace then steps back to tradition represented by India rather 
then chasing mirages in the modern lifestyle of London. Adit hopes to go back to 
his roots and Sarah hoping for an end to her sense of alienation, for them tradition 
represents security, steadfastness and hope. Sarah’s difference with the other 
heroines is that though she suffers anguish, loneliness and frustrations, she never 
withdraws. She has been described as a “silent volcano not dead, yet not bursting.” ( 
Blackbird 51). The complexity of Sarah’s situation and ambiguous nature of the 
novel in emphasized by Meenakshi Mukherjee thus------“Sarah is an unusual 
character who is displaced in her own country, whose crises of identity will perhaps 
ever be solved although she believes that going to India will be the final resolution 
of her ambiguous existence.”(Mukherjee 53).

From the earlier single heroined, conjugal relationships interspersed 
with psychological problems we come back to the theme of the family but this time 
transcending continents—cultures. Though the conflict between the self and the 
system still find a place of prominence in the character of Uma an exploration of a 
wider range of a themes is evident in this later novel of Anita Desai. Tightly
structured and concentrated *Fasting Feasting* structurally and thematically is vintage Desai. *Fasting Feasting*, Anita Desai’s 1999 Booker nominated novel explores a wide range of themes, starting from family conflicts, the problem of entrapment of the self, in a welter of obligations, enforcements, culture and system. As also different ways of assuaging human hunger, desires and appetites. The hunger and desire that transcends culture, religions and oceans, is the desire for power, for recognition the intense craving for happiness, fulfillment and most important of all for an identity and freedom.

In this novel, Desai returns to the theme of the family. An Indian middle class nuclear family in a small provincial town and its plastic representation in far off Massachusetts U.S.A. From the vantage point of the familiar set up, the writer studies the cruelties, frustrations, desire, dreams of interpersonal relationships amidst traditional set ups, social institutions, habits and cross cultural encounters. All these within the boundaries of a very normal human existence on both sides of the ocean. Anita Desai in *Fasting Feasting* reverses the archetypal image of the Indian family as tightly knit, loving and binding—a haven of security from the tumult of society outside. Instead, the family becomes confining, claustrophobic, where bonds become a bondage and relationships show fissures. From family to society

The tightly knit fabric of family that had seemed so stifling and confining, now revealed holes and gaps that were frightening, perhaps the fabric would not hold, perhaps it would not protect after all. (*Fasting* 70)

The tearing apart at the seams of the ties of relationships, of the holes and gaps in the fabric of family life produced by cruelties, injustices and selfishness leads to a total break down and destruction of both the individual and society.
Indian women novelists in general and Desai in particular have concerned themselves with cultural, political and social issues and their impact on women. Desai in particular has concerned herself with probing the inner realities of her characters with the cultural, and social as a backdrop. For her the foci have always been the human condition artistically rendered with a deep sense of compassion for the characters. Desai's concern for her central character Uma in *Fasting Feasting* shines through as she probes the deep recesses of Uma's psyche, her subtle feelings and repressed desires, with sensitivity. So Uma in her suffering appears not defeated but a most recognizable and appealing character. In Uma the much-maligned, eldest daughter of Papa-Mama, Desai has reposed an unusual sensitivity and astuteness. All the members of the Indian family go through some form of deprivation, of will (Mama Papa) Passion (Aruna), love care (Uma). This is in sharp contrast to the world of excesses on the other side of the ocean the Patton family of the U.S. where there is an abundance, of food of freedom, individualism, money etc. But ironically the excesses pall and they fail to bring joy. Melanie's bulimia, the children's indifference towards their parents, Mrs. Patton's loneliness leading to her obsessions, point to this.

Anita Desai had asserted in a famous interview that she had always been interested in and has tried to portray characters who are not average, but have retreated or been driven into despair and so turned against or made to stand against the general current. In this novel however Uma is a average character, she is the archetypal Indian victim of patriarchy. The kind of deprived figure common to many Indian families—the marginal characters in many Indian homes—widows, spinsters, orphans, elderly castaways who are victims of a cruel tradition and the
selfishness of society. These people who while living on the margins serve as rudders and in their tragedy lies a strange triumph.

In Uma, Desai has deviated from her earlier notion of portraying the above the average and has illuminated the realities of average Indian life in an average middle class family. In the march of day-to-day life, in the routine normalcy of everyday existence, such characters are overlooked and by passed. Uma’s existence falls within this framework. Her tragedy does not assume the dramatic grandeur of Maya, Nanda Kaul, Monisha or Sita, yet in its own way hers is the tragedy of everyday reality, constraints and disabilities, which she however is able to transcend. Uma is the fasting individual, deprived, living and suffering for others — first for her siblings (baby brother Arun) and later for her aged parents. It is as if destiny created for her this role. She is the clumsy, plain, uncoordinated elder daughter who finds it difficult to succeed in anything she does at home or at school.

She becomes the symbol of self-denial and self-sacrifice, the sufferings and deprivations of an average young woman. To the world Uma is a dismal failure, she loves school, but fails in her exams. Plain; shortsighted, clumsy, she is an embarrassment to her family, humiliated and victimized throughout by her near ones. She however refuses to be cowed down. School life which to Uma was a window to a world of freedom and dreams and happiness free from the cares of the home is snatched away, to act as nursemaid to her baby brother born late to a middle-aged mother. Her dreams of a married life and escape from the drudgery of the parental home are shattered when two attempts at marriage fails, when suitors reject her and a third attempt traps her into a disastrous marriage to a father of four. She returns home, permanently disgraced, her existence once more confined to the home-verandah, kitchen and bedroom, constantly at the beck and call of Papa-
Mama. All chances of escape fail, thereafter, even an offer for a job at the hospital by Dr. Dutt is rejected by Papa-Mama on some pretext. Uma, the abject failure of the house, though ostensibly a victim, is however the real survivor. She survives through an inner life of her own. Influenced by Mira Masi's stories of Mira Bai and Lord Krishna, Uma felt that one cannot only survive but live a life of fulfillment through an inner life, which could pierce through the dreary outer world, to a secret world of romance and colour. When she visits the place of pilgrimage and the holy river, Uma feels that this was where she belonged. She feels an unconscious urge to rush into the water, as she feels that the river would sustain her.

When she had plunged into the dark water and let it close quickly
And tightly over her..........more thrilling, it was exactly
what she had always wants she realized...............

She has the same "subterranean feelings" stirred within her by the words intoned during prayers in the convent where she studied.

The Lord is my Shepherd... He leadeth me beside the
still water. He restoreth my soul. (Fasting 20)

The secret world (depth) she felt herself drawn by the power of prayers and pilgrimage is a world which ultimately sustains her. Uma, unlike Melanie is able to transcend her disabilities and constrains and transform the negative aspects of her life into something that is powerful and positive. The fasting individual can now feast on her new and powerful status. No longer, a victim she is now the saviour-" The murky waters catch the blaze of the sun and flashes fire." (Fasting 156)

Anita Desai’s concept of putting forward her vision of life through her pivotal women characters is amply evident in the portrayal of the character of Uma in this sensitive novel. Desai’s concern for gender bias in the patriarchal set up
of Indian society is strongly evident in this novel, which makes a sweeping survey of other related issues like entrapment of the individual, materialism and education, denial and deprivation and lastly consumerism and excesses. The novel begins with the strongly patriarchal statement in the Siamese twin existence of Uma’s parents referred to as Papa-Mama. Her father completely rules over the household and leaves no space for her mother, even to think, let alone decide. He rules over her completely, decides all crucial matters for her, and leaves her to voice only the mundane. “It was hard to believe that they had separate existence, that they had been separate entities and not Mama-Papa in one breath.” (Fasting 5) The only time Mama voiced her opposition was when she pleaded against her late pregnancy. But it is overridden, for Papa wanted the precious heir and son by Indian tradition the premium in Indian society. This is manifested in Mama’s condition (middle aged pregnancy) and Uma’s fate (deprivation) at the birth of the precious son Arun. When the son is born, the family is thrilled, Mama’s status is elevated and the narrator ironically states—“He (Papa) ……had made her the mother of his son what honour what status. She had matched Papa’s achievement you could say and they were more equal than ever…” (Fasting 31)

The father remaining the hub still, the son Arun now becomes the focal point and the pivot round which the family moves Arun becomes the means of fulfillment of his father’s terms but the cause of his sister (Uma’s) destruction. Uma is taken out of school to serve as surrogate mother for brother Arun shattering all her dreams of freedom. The privileged sought-after male offspring is however also not allowed freedom, throughout his life surmounting his own desires and dreams, he has to live to fulfill his father’s wishes. So that even when he wins a scholarship
to U.S.A he is totally unmoved—after all it is only an obligation he has fulfilled.

There is no real pleasure for Arun——-

She (Uma) watched and searched for an expression of
relief, of joy, doubt fear anything at all. But there was none.

All the years of scholarly toil had worn down any distinguishing
features, Arun's face once have had...........(Fasting 75)

In America though the son experiences the total freedom of
anonymity—“He was Arun. He had no past, no family and no country.” (Fasting
172). But when he is forced to go to the Patton's for the summer vacation, he loses
his new-fond freedom and is once more entrapped by the tentacles of relationships
an obligations.

Marriage and the family here emerge as the oppressive forces of the
traditional system. Among the victims caught in the tentacles of this system the
most significant is Anamika, Uma's brilliant, beautiful cousin. A talented young
girl, she even wins a scholarship to Oxford, but perversely her academic distinction
is used as an asset to win her a good marriage proposal. Marriage in this case
becomes a malevolent, dangerous force inimical to the individual. Totally
insensitive to the beauty grace and talent of the doomed Anamika, the husband and
family torture and abuse her. The cruelty this young girl meets after her marriage
destroy her bit by bit mentally, physically and psychologically until she is literally
devoured by the conflagration of the traditional marriage. The ritual marriage fire
devours her and becomes her funeral pyre. Marriage and the tradition that
propounds this, in Anamika’s case becomes a means of a killing system. Not only
as a symbol of the destruction of the self, but a total elimination of it. In Uma’s case
too, marriage and the degrading and the degenerating aspects that prompts it reveals
the worst aspects of the social system. Uma and her family's honour suffer a terrible
jolt when they are cheated and fleeced by unscrupulous marriage traders for material gain. Such indignities, injustice and diabolical designs are only possible in a system where the perpetrators intentionally push the victims towards destruction and where ironically the victims are their own kin. Desai paints a horrifying picture of a society moulded and propelled by conventions and traditions, which is totally inimical and exploitative.

However, Anita Desai’s deviation from her earlier feminist approach and her ambivalent viewpoint regarding marriage, tradition and convention is evident from Arana’s story. Arana, Uma’s pretty, outgoing sister is a liberated individual right from her youth. From her girlhood, she always knew what she wanted and refused to be dominated by tradition and the system. Destiny had offered her the best opportunities and she had taken it with alacrity turning her life into a ‘fantastic’ one ‘like a dream.’ Having chosen her life partner from among the best offers of her marriage proposals, she leads a life of luxury, affluence and glamour. But she is still not happy, she runs after perfection, is given to pursuit of further elusive greatness and glory. There is no contentment and happiness in her life and she constantly seeks to rectify the trivialities round her it is a constant endeavor, which is never fulfilled. Uma’s feelings record Aruna’s endeavour:

Seeing Aruna vexed to the point of tears because cook’s pudding had sunk... or because Arvind had come to dinner in his bedroom slippers....Uma felt pity for her. Was this the realm of case and comfort for which Aruna had always pined and some might say had attained? (Fasting 109)

From the grim tragedy of a deprivation and emptiness of Uma’s life one is given the view of the incredible excesses of a consumerist society and the malady brought by it, signified in the characters of Mrs. Patton and Melanie who
Arun meets in the U.S. Mrs. Patton’s obsession is shopping, (buying food items to fill the freezer) and feeding Arun, while Melanie suffers from bulimia. Their obsessions denote spiritual hunger and emotional barrenness; in spite of material excesses (feasting). Melanie’s illness is the result of her feeling of neglect and deprivation and Mrs. Patton’s obsession the result of the emotional vacuum in her life—due to the indifference of her husband and children. People like Mrs. Patton, Melanie and Rod (the fitness freak) all go through this inexplicable pain and real hunger. Aran understands that the people of the west (US- the land of plenty) go through the same frustration, loneliness lovelessness and real hunger as in India. It is a universal phenomenon, this hunger for love, attention, caring, freedom, identity etc. Though the shawl presented by Aran to Mrs. Patton to some extent appeases the hunger (for love and attention) in Mrs. Patton as it symbolizes the bonds of love and caring even from a distance.

The family is treated as a trap, its bonds become human bondage. Even Arun who wants to remain aloof and anonymous, he who has always been strangulate by familial bonds of endless concern, love and attention believes when he reaches the promised land United States that he has at last freed himself from this very trap—“He had at last experienced the total freedom of anonymity, total absence of relations…… he was Arun. He had no past, no family and no country.” (Fasting 172) but his freedom is short lived, when Papa takes a decision for him and he is offered a home for the summer by Mrs. Patton, and Arun helpless has to take, this, “kind offer generously made.” (Fasting 170)

He feels himself drawn inside the trap of the family affection once again—“Arun was overcome by the sensation of his family laying its hands upon him, pushing him down.” (Fasting 175). Arun has the feeling of escaping from one trap
to fall into another. A feeling of total helplessness engulfs him—"No he had not escaped, he had traveled and he had stumbled into what was like a plastic representation of what he had known at home..." (Fasting 185). Desai through Arun’s predicament analyses a person’s desire for freedom amidst claustrophobic bondage of human ties imposed by tradition. On the other hand, she talks about total loss of ties, which brings emptiness to life and a freedom that, as in the west with the Patton’s- the total impersonality of the modern urban situation.

Anamika, Uma’s beautiful, talented cousin is a character simply obliterated by the system, by marriage—“She is sacrificed at the altar of marriage.” (Oliver 247). The beautiful Anamika “simply lovely as a flower...with a good natural like a radiance about her ...” (Fasting 67) is literally, cruelly pushed into the diabolical clutches of the traditional social system where she was trapped and finally killed.

Interesting facts appear from a study of the young female characters as psychological types reflecting ideas, aspects of society. Uma, her sister, Arana and cousin Anamika are all very different from each other. Uma, dowdy, plain, short sighted a nonentity both at home and at school—a total failure in life. Arana is the liberated woman, confident, attractive, clever, who knows what she wants in life. Anamika blessed by nature, as the epitome of beauty, grace and brilliance is a doomed character. Melanie the bulimic daughter of the American Patton family is a defeatist failure. The only way, she expresses her frustration is she “merely spits and forth in ineffectual protest.” (Fasting 214).

However, in many ways Uma’s is superior to both Anamika and Aruna and also Melanie because she is a survivor. This through an inner life of her own and her own unobtrusive ways of resistance... Paradoxically Uma, the failure of the family emerges a fighter against all odds, meted out by her family and the traditional
system. Numerous instances bear testimony to this, Uma the woman of spirit: her resistance to Mama-Papa over their opposition to the job offer by Dr. Dutt, her indefigible spirit even after being disgraced thrice in the name of marriage, ultimately emerging as the sole survivor and the saviour of her parents.

In *Fasting Feasting*, the tragic scene of the immersion of the ashes of the innocent doomed Anamika is a climatic one. The river flowing down from the mountains seems to carry with it the weight of grief, of unspoken thoughts, unarticulated desires carrying with its current the frustrations and tragedies of individuals. Expressed in this image—"The glassy water of the river, swollen by rains up in the mountains from which it comes, seems solid, weighty, a huge mass of grief holding them up on its heaving surface, flowing swiftly and unheeding by beneath." (*Fasting* 154) The river seems to carry along with it Anamika's unarticulated dreams, desires and griefs and the frustrations and potentialities of Uma. Uma attains a new sense of inner power to come out of herself and comfort her grief stricken mother—"Mama', she whispers, and squeezes the hand back, thinking they are together still......I told cook to make *alu-puri* for breakfast... Mama gives a sob and tightens her hold on Uma's hand as though she too finds the *puri-alu* comforting..." (*Fasting* 155).

The *puri-alu* is a bond between the aged mother and the aging Uma. It is perhaps significant that the water that Uma pours out of her jar “catches the blaze of the sun and flashes fire.........” (*Fasting* 156). Uma emerges as the new woman made powerful with the wisdom of tragedy and the strength of denial.

Desai like most of the other sensitive writers of Indian English stresses on relationships, healthy relationships, providing the gratification of basic needs—emotional, mental, spiritual the individual developing into a fulfilled, wholesome
being. Relationships based on traditional ties and obligations in Uma's case have an adverse effect on the individual. These ties become a bondage, chaining her to obligations, duties and destroying her freedom. Melanie and Mrs. Patton's sufferings result from the lack of ties, relationships, which make life barren. If changes are to be brought in to relationships, a balance must to be maintained. So instead of becoming a bondage relationships should become a bond. Hungers are assuaged, not in the way of Melanie Patton, who fills herself up with excesses and throws it all up wasted, but in the way of Uma who though deprived, finds a way out of the emotional hunger and turns the fasting to a benefit. Uma develops a self-esteem and remains psychologically whole and sociologically an asset redeeming the self and society.

Among the older generation of writers, there are very few to surpass Anita Desai in her delineation of the human psyche. She has very few parallels in her capacity of covering the gamut of emotions and in her probing of character. The study of the inner life being her forte, she concentrates on the same, always with a vision that is tragic. The tragedy of universal existence, as well as that of the hard realities of daily life, rather than issues of epic dimension forms the basis of her tragedy. The harsh cruelties of everyday existence, unbalanced relationships that change from a bond to a bondage nominated with a rare perception. The portrayal of the crushing cruelties of modern existence resulting in a dearth of warmth in relations and of impersonal mechanical intercourse bringing in its wake loneliness, alienation and frustration, marks Desai out as one of the most discerning and sensitive portayers of life. Desai is particularly sensitive to the plight of the marginal characters in her fiction. Spinsters, widows, unwanted children, cast away aunts and cousins, orphans etc, all of who are pushed to the brinks of everyday
existence appear as interesting cameo portrayals in her fiction. Their frailties, oddities, eccentricities and sometimes their tenacity add extra dimension to her novels. Mira Masi and Baba (*Clear Light Of Day*), Ramu and Mira Masi (*Fasting Feasting*) Ila Das (*Fire On The Mountain*), Lotte (*Baumgartner’s Bombay*) are characters who though marginal, add that extra dimension to the story which make it living and vibrant. At the same time, it is their very oddity and imperfection, which supply the dash of realism to her fiction by bringing it down to the level of ordinary normal life. It also opens our eyes to the harsher unpalatable realities of existence, by pointing to those aspects of society, which are responsible for creating these very characters.

In the eleven novels and two collection of short stories she wrote, Desai’s shows a remarkable sense of feeling for her characters for their lives and of the times they lived in. Except for her latest novel, *The Zigzag Way* (2004) and *Baumgartner’s Bombay*, she has in her novels explored the lives of middle class Indians particularly of women. The encounter between India and the west and the conflict or coalescing of tradition and change enter this area are also aspects of study Desai has explored.

Anita Desai as a sensitive writer is the right person to narrate about the times and the world which is fast changing about rapid changes in India she says in her interview that the modern day India is fast slipping away from her. Desai is also the writer best known for her exploration of the Indian women’s psyche and as such record the growth and change in their lives. In an essay written for *The Times Literary Supplement* in 1999 “A Secret Connivance”, she has made some interesting observations on Indian women’s aspirations and the myth and reality of their position in society. In this essay she argues that Indian women connive at there own
subordination because they aspire to certain mythic role models mainly those of
Goddesses Durga, Lakshmi or Sita. Desai however says that Indian women and
society has since undergone changes but not so radically. She believes that women
today are breaking out of their shackles in the family and home. They are being
encouraged to work mainly for economic reasons and not necessarily for any kind of
emancipation. The old obligations are all there and now there are increased pressures
on women. In Desai’s latest fictional and non-fictional writings she says she has
become an observer for they come after a lifetime’s experience of the Indian scene
and has been made from the vantage point of her distance from India, as she now
lives and works abroad.

Markandaya, Sahgal and Desai, one is convinced, has contributed
significantly to the tradition of Indian English fiction because of their balanced
outlook towards the women’s situation in post-independence India and their critical
analysis of the concept of change vis-à-vis tradition in a transitional society. The
three writers have been unsparing in their criticism of the imbalances of society the
deficiencies in customs and rituals, human relationships and culture, aspects which
had been the essence of the great tradition of Indian civilization. This they do
without bitterness or rancour but with tolerant humour.

Anita Desai’s is the intense probing of the nitty-gritty of relationships
between individuals, in social institutions and families- the accepted, the unusual,
and its impact on the social circumstances. Her sensitive portrayal of marginalised
characters is a critique of the atrocities and cruelties the world. Similarly, Sahgel’s
study of the political and social as a mirror to the human situation is an indication of
the writers’ anxiety about contemporary Indian life. As also, her strong criticism of
aspects of Hindu religious belief indicated through the sati incident in *Rich Like Us* as she voices her concern about evil that is not explained.

The trio justifying their name as the big three among women writers have been responsible for removing the romance element in their interpretation of life and incorporating a frank realism in Indian English fiction. Their work then reflects the infinite reservoirs of humanity and most important of all they have not let themselves be:

  divided on the battlefront from those who suffer, not to let
  the poignant and violent moments of history be immobilized
  through the distinction of the chronicler from the victim.

(Iyengar xi)
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