CHAPTER I
THEME AND STRUCTURE

The raw material out of which Anita Desai's work has been fashioned, does not come from the trite superficialities of existence but comprises the inherent truths and the profounder verities. Her principal concern is with 'life'—its shapelessness, its meaninglessness, its apparent lack of design. The passions, conflicts, and problems which are an inevitable part of the texture of life, provide the groundwork of her stories. The novels, on the whole, have a direct appeal to us in that they acquaint us with the struggles and fortunes of our common humanity.

Since character-revelation and theme-exploration are the major concerns in the narrative, conflict is central in at least three areas—physical, social, and spiritual (or psychological). The focus in Desai, is on the psychological problems of her characters. As in several of her contemporaries (Sudhin Ghose, B.Rajan, and Nayantara Sehgal), we see her creative genius turning away from the political and economic themes (which used to fascinate earlier generation of writers like Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao) to the theme of everyday social life and the inner world of the human mind. She repeats the theme of the individual's discontent and his desire to live...
The stories bear close relation to our real-life problems — the problem of
wrestling a living from an indifferent or hostile environment.

Aspects of existentialism are in evidence in the total
framework of her stories. Its emphasis on the alienation of
man from an 'absurd' world, his consequent estrangement from
normal society, and his recognition of the world as negative
and meaningless — presents the sensitive individual, fragmented
and spiritually destroyed by the particular social conditions
of life. This particular phase of existentialism — "the one
alone," the man who has no second, seems to be favourite subject
of Desai. Loneliness is not something unique, but is, in fact,
a characteristic of the society of our time. Today, many
individuals feel alone, unrelated to others, unable to
communicate with those around them, unable to feel at one with
them. This problem of an individual who feels emotionally and
spiritually alone forms the backbone of Desai's themes. The
inner yearning of the lonely one for understanding and affection
— a recurrent theme in poetry and fiction — occurs here also.
The moving descriptions of loneliness leave a lasting impression
on the reader's mind. Maya, Mirole, Anla, Komisha, Sarah, Sita,
Nanda Kaul — all suffer from an isolation that is not merely
physical but also psychic. What is more, their respective
personality traits and attitudes also determine the mental
and emotional effect of their isolation. This estrangement from
which they suffer is, in fact, the consequence of the absence of desired relationships rather than the absence of contacts, the lack, not of company but of companionship. They find themselves alone and anxious in a world in which they are unable to establish emotionally satisfying social affinities. Characters like Maya and Sita are isolated — firstly by their own inability "to see things steadily and see them whole" which disrupts their relationship with others, and secondly, by the tendency of others to withdraw from them and treat them as if they were in some way a different and frightful kind of beings. Bewildered by a world which they do not understand and which does not understand them, they feel tragically and pathetically alone. In their retreat from reality, they cut themselves off from communication with the rest of the world. And ironically the retreat begun by such "mentally ill" characters, in an effort to escape from situations of intolerable loneliness ends, as in the case of Maya, in a state of utter isolation far more fearsome. Through her cry reverberates the anguish of acute loneliness: "I am in a fever, stop me! silence me! Or I will fly on; fly up, at you, through you, past you, and away. For I am ill. I am in a fever, God, in a fever." (p. 181)

Apart from loneliness, another recurrent theme in Desai's stories is the lack of communication between husband and wife, a discord resulting from an incompatibility of temperaments. While
her female characters usually belong to a world operating on sensuous-irrational terms, the behaviour of male characters is guided by reasonableness and practicality. Apparently, when such a polarity exists, there is bound to be some misunderstanding even in the simplest things. This phenomenon of dissimilarity in attitudes, resulting in unsatisfactory relationships, runs through all the six novels.

As regards structure, one can hardly do better than begin by quoting the novelist herself:

I start writing without having very much of a 'plot' in my mind or on paper — only a very hazy idea of what the pattern of the book is to be. But it seems to work itself out as I go along, quite naturally and inevitably. I prefer the word 'pattern' to 'plot' as it sounds more natural — and even better, if I dare, use it, is Hopkins' word 'inseams' — while 'plot' sounds arbitrary, heavy-headed and artificial — all that I wish to avoid. One should have a pattern and then fit the characters, the setting, the scenes into it — each piece in keeping with the others and so forming a balanced whole.1

This is the Keystone of her structural method: a basic pattern, and then a natural, "inevitable" unfolding. At the same time, she is not unaware of the need to relate the different parts to one another, and to organise them into a whole:

No one aspect of the novel can assume a supremacy over another, or one would have a body without a head, or a trunk without limbs—some grotesque deformation in place of a novel. The perfect novel achieves the perfect balance, with just as much story or as much fantasy as its structure can bear, no more. So, of all Forster's requirements, I would stress 'Pattern and Rhythm' as these imply a balance, a synthesis and proportion. One sees a novel as a certain distinct pattern and then one puts in the pieces so that they may fit. Also, like a symphony, the whole must have a rhythm, or it will have no life.2

So, we should not look for a conventional hard-and-fast "plot" in any of her novels. Rather, there are actions, happenings, incidents and excursuses which stick together, dovetail and cohere into a total organic framework. Though episodic in nature, her novels end up by being little masterpieces in which the elements of character, fable and language combine together spontaneously and "inevitably" into a whole, and result in a balanced, well-ordered structure.

II

In almost every piece of writing, the principle of fidelity is regarded as essential. It is obviously not true to say that since fiction is fiction, it should be divorced

2Ibid., p.100.
from reality. Rather, it is to be emphasized that a work can be treated as being really great if it bears a close relation to truth or reality. The writer's aim is not merely to tell a story, to amuse us or move us, but "to force us to think, to understand the hidden meaning of events." In Anita Desai's novels, life is depicted as it really is - life, as a rule, of the upper middle class which she knows very well and which she can treat sympathetically. She does not draw upon second-hand information for the groundwork of her plots. Rather by seeing life itself and depicting it in her stories exactly as she views it, she gives to her work an authenticity and a validity of its own. This ample knowledge of life is obtained through direct observation and insight. Her carefully pondered observations help to make her treatment of the events, actions, and men more realistic. The profound sensation of truth she effects, is provided through artful and expert transitions and by the dexterity of the composition. "To write a novel," noted Dostoyevsky, "there must be one or more strong impressions that the author has really experienced to the depth of his being."\(^3\)

Anita Desai states in an interview, "In countless, small ways, the scenes and settings certainly belong to my life. Many of the minor characters and incidents are also based on real life. But the major characters and the major events are either entirely

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imaginary or an amalgamation of several characters and happenings. One can use the raw material of life only very selectively. It is common among writers to pick out something from real life and develop their situations around that while there are others who start from some real experience, which continuously grows in their imagination. You use it as a base but don't confine yourself to it.¹

Amita Desai's world, however, is not peopled solely with the "upper crust". The faculty of creative and realistic imagination enables her to attain substantial fidelity even when she is handling people, scenes, incidents which have not come within the range of her personal experience, — for instance, the world of the villagers, the shopkeepers, the servants, the gardeners, and the like. "One must be something in order to do something," Goethe wrote. Again, "he could not be a great poet," opined Carlyle of Byron, "because he was not a good man." So the quality of self-development is the basis of good writing, and knowledge, observation and feeling are the keystones of a writing career. All these gifts Desai possesses — ample knowledge of life, keen observation, and deep feeling.

The achievement of reality, let me repeat, is the fiction writer's first aim. The story is an account of certain people in

a given situation. Since the novelist's subject is man-in-society, his subject matter must also be the texture of manners and conventions by which a social being defines his own identity. In the sphere of Indo-Anglian writing, one finds that a great many writers have been concerned with depicting real life. Realism, in one form or the other, had always been used in Hindu scriptures like Puranas, Mahabharata, Ramayana etc. The fact is that "the art of novel in India found its cradle in realism." The earliest Indian novels written in Bengali, consisted of sketches of contemporary Bengali society. Social realism was depicted in the twenties by various writers like Sarat Chandra Chatterjee and Humshi Prem Chand who wrote in Bengali and Hindi/Urdu respectively. Since then, Indian writers in English have shown interest in contemporary social and political issues. Whereas all the novels up to 1947 and most of the novels from 1947 to 1963 were, what David Daiches has called "public instrument" "... basing its view of what was significant in human affairs on a generally agreed standard," in Anita Desai's first novel "such public machinery was no longer used in order to achieve the plot pattern and the true inwardness of the characters' moral and psychological problems." In the present age in Indo-Anglian


7 Ibid., p.26.
writing, like its western counterpart, social and political realism has been largely replaced by psychology. Psychological fiction has come to dominate the scene, attempting to probe into human thought and conduct for the reasons underlying human behaviour.

As pointed out earlier, in Desai's stories action is subordinated to psychology. The central themes revolve around the mental and spiritual developments of the dramatic persons, and not on their physical adventures. This relegation of action to a secondary place enables us to understand more profoundly the how and why of a situation. In this respect the writer shows a close affinity with Virginia Woolf who also entered the consciousness of the characters and showed little concern for the actual outside action. The theme of Desai's novels like that of the novels of James Joyce and Virginia Woolf, is human nature and human relationships. Her stories are peopled with men and women such as we see around us and with happenings such as might occur any day to such people. The central theme of man-woman relationship with which Desai deals has been treated by several other Indian writers like Nayantara Sahgal, Nargis Dalal, and Kamala Das. But in Desai the themes are governed by existential tones. The existential perspective on the theme of individual and society is evident in all the stories. By way of definition, it may be said that the main themes dealt with by the existential thinkers are those of
alienation, despair, frustration, anxiety, and the emotional life of the individuals. In the words of F.R.Heinemann, "The problems of existentialism are in a narrower sense expressive of the present crisis of man, and in a broader sense, of the enduring human condition." Today's thinkers speak more readily of 'human condition' than of human nature. By condition, they mean more or less definitely, the limits which outline man's fundamental situation in the universe. And in this respect, Desai is essentially an existentialist novelist as she is seriously concerned with this "human condition", and also shows profound skill in exploring the "emotional life" of the people in the stories. Says she in an interview with Yashodhara Dalmia, "Most things are so very ethereal. ... They pass and they change so very quickly. To make a report on some general events is not, of so much consequence. There are other elements which remain basic to our lives. I mean the human condition itself. It is only superficially affected by the day-to-day changes. We continue to live in the same way as we have in the past centuries -- with the same tragedies and the same comedies. And that is why it interests me." In the same interview, she frankly remarks that "one's preoccupation can only be a perpetual search -- for meaning, for value, for -- dare I say it -- truth. I think of the world as an ice-berg -- the one-tenth visible above the surface of the water.


9 The Times of India, April 29, 1979.
is what we call reality, but the nine-tenths that are submerged make up the truth, and again that is what one is trying to explore. Writing is an effort to discover, and then to underline, and finally to convey the true significance of things.\textsuperscript{10}

Existentialists right from the Danish Theologian, Soren Kierkegaard in the nineteenth century to the French novelist-philosopher, Jean Paul Sartre, believe that "man is alone in the godless universe." They insist that the universe is meaningless and hence their doctrine favours a concept that produces anxiety, loneliness, frustration, discomfort, and despair. Such feelings of angst, alienation and futility that have struck deep roots in the Western life, also form the background of the urban life in India. The legend 'existentialist' may be appropriately applied to the novels of Anita Desai, for many of her characters -- frustrated, lonely, and alienated -- come to realize the helplessness, the absurdity of their existence in a meaningless world. It is regarding her concern with this philosophy that a critic remarks about her world as a world in which one feels one is "lost among some dark forgotten city streets where the sun penetrates feebly between high-leaning old houses, full of shadows, ghosts and

\textsuperscript{10}Ibid.
skeletal cats. Streets smelling of generations of welcome
death and regretted birth, loneliness, dread, old clothes,
and damp wood. And as you walk through, the lane usually
ends in a cul-de-sac."11

III

The first novel Cry, The Peacock (1963) deals with the
existential aspect of the emotional reaction of the protagonist
to things and people around her. It is clearly her over-sensitive
nature that ultimately brings about her doom. Here alienation,
the cardinal concept in existentialism, shows the problem of
adjustment and inner conflicts from which the heroine, Maya,
suffers. Her neuraxis "denotes a collective neuraxis which tries
to shatter the very identity of woman in our contemporary society
dominated by man in which woman longing for love is driven mad
or compelled to commit suicide."12

The novel is divided into three parts. Part I, narrated
in the third person, sets before our-mind's eye, in the form of
direct authorial description, the state of mind of Maya. It
functions as a sort of 'exposition scene', Fred B. Millet in his

11 Subhadra Sen Gupta, "The Blooming of a Novel Talent,"

Reading Fiction points out that a good expository material furnishes the information essential to an understanding of the situation out of which the problem arises. This essential information may be said to consist of the characters and their relationship to each other and to their environment. The expository material in this story tells us the main facts about the situation and defines the line of conflict. It is rendered with a remarkable economy of word and phrase. The death of Tote with which the book begins, is only one of the happenings that reflect and widen the gulf that separates the two characters--Maya and Gautama. As pointed out by D.S. Maini, "The death motif ... is built into the structure of the story. ..."13 This motif, provided by the opening scene, forms the origin of Maya's neurosis, and occurs throughout the story. We come to know from this scene that Maya is a highly sensitive young woman who, as her name signifies "is not only a creature of graceful illusion, but also a creature of song, dance, and flower." Though obsessed by the idea of death from the beginning, she is highly responsive to the beauty of life.

Part II, consisting of seven chapters and narrated in the first person, shows the development of Maya's neurosis. We see her deeply obsessed by the impending disaster, and also

her longing for love, beauty, and life, and ultimately her encounter with the albino astrologer who had long ago predicted death for her or her husband after four years of marriage; it also presents her experience with her father, her marriage to Gautama, and her inability to form a sound relation with him. At the end of this section, her deteriorating psyche goes from bad to worse, and her 'inner emotional storm' makes her hurl down her husband to death.

Part III of the book, that forms the culmination of the neurotic state of Maya, is short and is again narrated in the third person — the author giving her own comments on the situation. Maya’s final leap to death provides, so to say, a balancing finale to the structure of the story.

The framework of this novel is thus well-balanced. "Desai has constructed this novel very carefully, demonstrating her early aesthetic concern for structuralism as an art form — a very promising quality, which though noticeable in her very first novel, has been well-developed in all her later novels with remarkable care." It is a story of conjugal incompatibility between Maya and Gautama, resulting from their altogether divergent views on life. This is an important existential theme — the husband-wife alienation — (which finds a parallel in the fourth novel Where Shall We Go This Summer?). Gautama is

14 Madhusudan Prasad, p.4.
pragmatic, unsentimental, practical, and rational, and thus stands in sharp contrast to his wife, Maya, who is temperamentally sensitive, emotional, irrational, and imaginative. The mental and emotional incompatibility between Gautama and Maya "is revealed in their reactions to their surroundings and more particularly in their attitudes to death."¹⁵ In the very beginning of the story, Toto's death shows the difference in their outlooks. Maya is unable to stand this tragic event. She rushes to "the garden tap to wash the vision from her eyes" (p.5). She thinks "she saw the evil glint of a blue bottle and grew hysterical" (p.5). This hysterical and whimsical response is in total contrast to the response shown by Gautama to this happening. Such casual remarks as "The sweeper will do it," "It is all over, come and drink your tea, and stop crying. You mustn't cry" (p.6), show that he considers the happening as only natural and not of very deep import. Such suggestions of the lack of communication between the two characters, and references to the steadily recurrent theme of incompatible relations, are repeated many times in the story, even in Maya's reflection on their unsuccessful marriage:

... it was discouraging to reflect on how much in our marriage was based upon a nobility forced upon us from outside, and therefore neither true nor lasting. It was broken up repeatedly; and repeatedly the pieces were picked up and put together again, as of a sacred icon with which, out of the pettiest superstition, we could not bear to part (p. 40).

This lack of conciliation between the two entirely opposite temperaments, is highlighted throughout the novel, even in such trifling incidents as the smell of the lemons and petunias that according to Maya, Gautama is unable to distinguish between:

... the blossoms of the lemon tree were different, quite different: of much stronger, crisper character, they seemed cut out of hard moon shells, by a sharp knife of mother-of-pearl, into curving, scimitar petals that guarded the heart of fragrance. Their scent, too, was more vivid — a sour, astringent scent, refreshing as that of ground lemon peel, a crushed lemon leaf. I tried to explain this to Gautama, stammering with anxiety, for now, when his companionship was a necessity, I required his closest understanding (p. 19).

But this alienation results more from their detachment and attachment, respectively, to worldly things. Since Gautama is totally detached, he might not be able to realize the feelings and emotions that enter a particular Urdu couplet he quotes: "Even if each star in the sky were an heart, what of it? Give to me one heart that is capable of sorrow" (p. 23). Maya is deeply fascinated by the underlying emotions of the couplet and seems to achieve her transcendence.
And my heart stretched and stretched, painfully, agonizingly, expanding and swelling with the vastness of a single moment of absolute happiness, and my body followed its long sweet curve, arching with the searing, annihilating torture of it. Ultimate. A word dropped down the tall tunnel of memory--it had been used that evening--ultimate. Ah, this was it, the ultimate, absolute joy. Here lay perfection, suspending, bearing all that it could bear, so full was it. Were one more flower to unfurl that night, one small bird to cry, if one bright star were to be shattered and fall now--I could not have borne it, no. I was filled, filled to the point of destruction God, God, I grasped--enough, enough, no more. Let it remain so. Let it remain.... (pp. 23-24)

This sense of incommunication and alienation can only result in deep mental anguish. Maya remains mentally disturbed and baffled. She turns to childhood memories and even resorts to behaving like a child--crying and bursting into a fit of furious pillow-beating, which she finds "sweetly exhausting."

At the end of the novel, this fact reaches its highest point when we hear "the patter of a child's laughter cascading up and down the scales of some new delight--a brilliant peacock feather perhaps?" (pp. 217-18).

It is evidently the attachment to life--the love of life and love of freedom that instigate her to kill her husband. Her quest for such things is existential in nature. She feels that she is utterly alone and helpless in the world and this aloneness turns her love of life into love of death. Here, to use Heidegger's analysis of the human being, Maya is a fallen being who finds herself thrown in the world; the
only meaning she can find for her existence is to view herself authentically as a solitary being-unto-death. It is, moreover, this awareness of her lone existence that affects her psyche and makes her aware "of the loneliness of time, and impossible vastness of space" (p.26). She herself seems to be aware of her predicament in the universe: "For there never was a doubt in my mind, now that I remember, as to the definite truth that I did indeed have a place in it. Not only I, but my small dog whose sad journey I followed with my mind, even as my eye traced pattern after majestic pattern amidst the proud constellation" (p.26).

The use of appropriate images and symbols serves to establish the incompatibility of the couple. They not only highlight this aspect of theme but also enrich the texture of the novel. The imagery of peacocks is handy for describing Maya’s kind of life: "Peacocks are wise. The hundred eyes upon their tails have seen the truth of life and death and known them to be one. Living they are aware of death. Dying they are in love with life" (pp.95-96). The agony, the distress, of the peacocks mirrors Maya’s sorrow:

And the rain-clouds emerged again from the horizon that was eternally pregnant with promise at one end, and at its opposite pole, was an eternally hungry and open grave. In the shadows I saw peacocks dancing, the thousand eyes upon their shimmering feathers gazing steadfastly, unwinkingly upon the final truth — death. I heard their cry and echoed it. I felt
their thirst as they gazed at the rain-clouds, their passion as they hunted for their mates. With them I trembled and panted and paced the burning rocks. Agony, agony, the mortal agony of their cry for love and for death. (p. 96)

This identity with the peacocks makes her brood over her own situation: "I am dying, and I am in love with living. I am in love, and I am dying. God, let me sleep, forget, rest. But no, I'll never sleep again. There is no rest anymore -- only death and waiting" (p. 96).

To quote Madhusudan Prasad, "... Desai has dexterously employed numerous images which have also helped her to create a rich textural density in the novel." These images are not merely illuminative but also functional. The image of the albino astrolger occurs frequently. It appears in Chapter I of Part II and serves to remind Maya of her encounter with him in her childhood:

He had been -- large or small? I cannot remember, but his eyes I do; they were pale, opaque, and gave him an appearance of morbidity, as though he had lived, like a sluggish white worm, indoors always, in his dark room at the temple gates, where the central lingam was painted a bright, vivid red, as though plunged in sacrificial blood, and light burned in a single lamp from which oil spilled into a large, spreading pool. Just as his shadow spread and spread, a stain edging towards me who stood, clutching my amah's hand, in paralyzed terror and even fiercer fascination, my toes curling away from the oil, from his shadow, (pp. 28-29)

16 Madhusudan Prasad, OP. cit., p. 15.
Then the image of the train, rushing through the dark countryside, reveals Maya's world of utter loneliness and agony:

Somewhere his train rushed crazily through this same night, screaming as it came to the green signal at a remote level crossing and, without slowing, sped on, leaving the small signalman waving a pointless flag, lonely and sad at the door of his white washed hut in the middle of the desert that was so cold at night. The train had woken up his dog, and the night was rent in two by its long howl, filled with mourning for the pitiless, bitter world where men found no security, no repose. (p.49)

Apart from this, the loneliness of the caged monkey in the railway platform "staring out with the glazed eyes of tragedy at the horrible vision of hell before them, close and warm and stifling" (p.154), also mirrors Maya's solitude.

The dance image also occurs again and again. That of 'Kathakali' dancer is the most important one, reflecting the doom of the heroine, and also simultaneously adding to the rhythm of the novel: "It was the mad demon of Kathakali ballets, masked, with heavy skirts swirling, feet stamping, eyes shooting beams of fire. It was a phantom gone berserk, and from a body of absolute white, assumed terrible colours, rose out of the realms of silence into one of the thunderous drumming." (p.28) Even the animal images bear a close relation to the main theme of the novel. When Maya's mental tension enlarges slowly, images as of creeping, crawling creatures
succeed one another: "Iguanas!" My blood ran cold, and I heard the slither of its dragging tail even now, in white daylight. "Get off—I tell you, get off!" (p.128). She dreams of, and is terrified by, the illusionary rats, lizards etc.

We can say with Westbrook that Maya's situation illustrates a number of points made by Simone de Beauvoir concerning women's plight in a man-dominated society. But her problem is more than a socio-cultural one. It is, rather, spiritual and is incurable, deteriorating from "wild hysteria at the beginning of the book to full-fledged psychosis at the end." The novel shows a successful combination of structure with texture, and theme with intent. "Its success -- limited though it is -- in working out the configuration of the inner world helps establish the subjective reality of being as the most crucial part of living. The ardent introspection of Maya marks a valuable introversion in Indian fiction. It points to a line of significant development -- exploration not of the "social" man, but 'the lone individual'."18

IV

This exploration of "the lone individual" is continued


in the second novel *Voices in the City* (1965). There is an exploration of the same existential theme — "the introspective quality and essential loneliness of modern man."  As pointed out by Raje Narasimhan, "Apart from the hazards and complexities of man-woman relationships, the founding and nurturing of individuality, the establishing of individualism, is another testing ground for Anita Desai. ..."  But here "... the theme of alienation is treated in terms of mother-child relationship, which itself is a consequence of dissonance in husband-wife relationship."  In this novel, the structural pattern gives a sense of unity, achieved through the use of parallelisms and contrasts operating both on the thematic and the structural level. It is indeed, a commendable existential novel for laying the emphasis upon what Anita Desai describes, quoting Gortaga Y Gasset, "the terror of facing single handed the ferocious assaults of existence."  These assaults are suffered by the three characters — Hirode, Monisha, and Amla, whose existence are futile and meaningless in the metropolis of Calcutta. The theme of 'loneliness', of 'aloneness alone' pervades the story.


22 An interview with Yashodhara Dalmia, *op. cit.*
The novel is divided into four parts, named after the four main characters — Part I, Hirode; Part II, Monisha; Part III, Amla; and Part IV, Mother. Hirode, the hero of the novel, plays a dominant role. The typical qualities of Desai's art are once again displayed in this novel. Her talent for presenting the observed life — "the coolies throwing bedding-rolls and tiffin carriers and late-arrivals into carriages, the tea vendors holding out their shirts to receive the last of the copper coins, the station master in grimy white, all stained with the sweat of haste and overwork" — is clearly evident. In this novel the environment plays a vital role, affecting the characters to their bones. A marked characteristic of the characters of western fiction is a conscious sense of relation to their physical environment. Here also, Desai "seeks to relate the subjective world of the individual to the spirit of the place," and also attempts "to delineate a sensitivity to locale, as it operates within the consciousness of her characters." The writer seems to dwell on human degradation, pointing out everywhere the sordid, the gloomy, the shady aspects of life against which the characters revolt. As an "existential" writer, Desai neglects the gracious, the


24 Ibid., p.27.
beautiful, the bright side of human nature. Throughout the story, there runs a vein of darkness and isolation.

The four sections of the novel deal with members of a family quartet whose individual development serves to provide momentum for the plot. Mirode is a typical Bengali youth who bears a grudge against all those better off than him. In the beginning of the novel, he is shown contrasting his failures with the successes of his brother, Arun, and eagerly desiring to live in "shadows, silence, stillness." That, he tells himself, was exactly what he would always be left with. As B.R. Sharma observes, "Actually, the bulk of the narrative is devoted to Mirode's conscious past with failure." First, he is a journalist, but resigns his job in the hope of editing a literary magazine "Voice." But this attempt is no success, and he takes to writing. Later on, he opens a bookshop in a grim surrounding. Even the company of his friends, Sunny, Jit Nair, Dharma and David, who all assemble in a coffee house which is "the notorious gathering place of the displaced and dangerous literates of Bengal," and hold intellectual and spiritual discussions, is no fascination for him. He feels he has no specific goal in life towards which to move. He keeps changing his goals one after the other and is

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obsessed by a profound sense of failure, but strangely enough, he wants to move from failure to failure:

... I want to fail quickly. Then I want to see if I have the spirit to start moving again towards my next failure. I want to move from failure to failure, step by step to rock bottom. I want to explore that depth. When you climb a ladder, all you find at the top is space, all you can do is to leap off — fall to the bottom. I want to get there without that meaningless climbing. I want to descend quickly. (p.40)

To confirm his statement, he quotes Camus: "In default of inexhaustible happiness, eternal suffering at least would give us a destiny. But we do not have even that consolation, and our worst agonies come to an end one day." (p.40). And afterwards, "Happiness, suffering — I want to be done with them, disregard them, see beyond them to the very end." (p.40).

"This existential quest of Hirode indicates an intellectual inevitability engendered by an emptiness in our complicated contemporary society that offers us little and squeezes out all our moral, spiritual and emotional vitality, reducing us to utter bankruptcy."26 Hirode's personality showing the existential perspective has been depicted beautifully by the author:

He was wearied by his own uncertainty in which he swept back and forth like a long weed undulating under water, a weed that could live only in aqueous gloom, would never rise and sprout into clear daylight. He was proud to the point of being a fanatic, he was intense enough to be capable of whole-hearted dedication—yet he drifted, a shadowy cipher, and his life consisted of one rejection following another. He loathed the world that could offer him no crusade, no pilgrimage, and he loathed himself for not having the true, unwavering spirit of either within him. There was only this endless waiting, bated out by an intrinsic knowledge that there was nothing to wait for. (pp. 63–64)

The disintegrative effect of "the terrifying meaninglessness of the city of Calcutta," 27 makes Nirode utterly alienated from family and society and submerges him in a life of dissolution and dissipation.

In Part IX of the novel, Anita Desai offers a moving description of the life of Monisha, the married sister of Nirode. She is mentally shattered and suffers from emptiness within as well as without. Her marriage with Jiban only adds to her frustration. Here again, Desai's favourite theme of husband-wife alienation and incommunication comes to the surface. Monisha feels trapped in her in-laws' house: "Is this what life is then, my life? Only a conundrum that I shall brood over forever with

passion and pain, never to arrive at a solution? Only a conundrum -- is that, then, life?" (pp. 124-25).

Ultimately, Monisha finds that it is the absence of the element of love that accounts for the tragedy of Hirode and herself: "... I discover that it is the absence of it [the element of love] that makes us, brother and sister, such abject rebels, such craven tragedians" (p.135). Her lack of communication with her husband, her inability to bear a child, the absence of love in her life and evidently the profound sense of loneliness -- all torture her mentally, and consequently she dies -- first, a spiritual death, and then -- by suicide -- a physical death.

In Part III, the somewhat gay and enthusiastic Amla, the younger sister of Hirode, starts her career as a commercial artist but her emotional zeal for her work and the city is ultimately replaced by disillusionment. She comes to feel that "this monster city that lived no normal, healthy, red-blooded life but one that was subterranean, underlit, stealthy and odorous of mortality, had captured and enchanted-- or disenchanted -- both her sister and brother" (p.150). Though she leads a gay life, attending cocktail parties, dances etc., yet -- as if from an existentialist realization -- she complains to Hirode that "this city, this city of yours, it conspires against all who wish to enjoy it, doesn't it?" (p.153). She
finds her existence futile and hollow. This is how the writer summarises her personality:

Despite all the stimulation of new experiences, new occupations, new acquaintances and the mild sweet winter air, this sense of hollowness and futility persisted. Daily it pursued her to the office, hid quietly under the black mouthpiece of her telephone, shook -- ever so slightly -- the tip of her pen as she traced the severe lines of a well-draped sari; then engulfed her in the evenings when she attended parties at which she still knew no one well, and at night when she tried to compose her unsteady thoughts for sleep. (pp. 157-58)

Her agonising and frustrating experiences make her wonder why she ever came to Calcutta -- "why didn't I stay away, in Bombay, or go home to Kalimpong?" (pp. 176-77).

To understand this novel well, we must understand the locale, the environment in which the characters are doomed to live. The three characters are all sensitive creatures fighting against the dullness, the smugness, the sordidness of the environment of Calcutta. While the earlier novel Cry, the Peacock was set in Delhi and Lucknow, Noise in the City focuses on Calcutta, which itself is a powerful character in the story. Desai has very skilfully explored, through necessary details, the characteristic tempo of this large ugly-beautiful metropolis. The various facets of Calcutta are emphasised through a large number of terse descriptions. The nocturnal aspect, for example, comes alive in the following illustrations:
... Striding off the bridge into the coagulated blaze of light and sound and odour that was the city of Calcutta. Hirdes cried: Unfair, life is unfair -- and how faint and senseless it sounded in all that tumult of traffic and commerce about him...

... The wanderers past the empty food stalls, the prostitutes who stood still at the corners, now and then crying out in harsh, arresting tones of nightjars, into the wide streets where vendors and beggars lay sleeping, wrapped in white sheets, against empty barrows and on doorsteps. From some concealed nightclubs came the frenzied sounds of drums and castanets, and the wistful passion of a violin. At a traffic signal, an archin stood trying to peddle his last bunch of roses, their petals already veined with the dark purple of asphyxia. Under a mauve gaslight several watchmen had gathered to play cards and, in the intense silence, their dice rattled like small skulls.

(p.95)

And here, the crowded city of Calcutta, with its hustle and bustle, is portrayed with striking realism:

But even the lakes formed no pocket of solitude and balm, and here came the train, rocking and walling and warning away all travellers that were fearful. On all sides the city pressed down, slant, aglow and stirring with its own marsh-bred, monster life that, like an ogre, kept one eye open through sleep and waking. Calcutta, Calcutta -- like the rattle of the reckless train; Calcutta, Calcutta -- the very pulsebeat in its people's veined wrists.... Beneath a brief canvas roof, a skeletal old gnome with electric white hair served kebabs, still sizzling on their red-hot spikes.... From the balconies above the streets long saris hung limply down, and voices murmured, reciting prayers or lessons.... Calcutta was not merely the bazaars ringed by cinemas, slaughter houses and pan booths, but also the history of those old Georgian houses that lined still gaslight streets, their sweeping marble staircases and deep pillared verandas, their shuttered windows.... The city was as much atmosphere as odour, as much a haunting ghost of the past as a frenzied passage towards early death. (pp.41-42)
The city of Calcutta is also depicted indirectly through the reactions of the three major characters. Hirode describes it as "this dark pandemonium" (p.7) and as "the coagulated blaze of light and sound and odour." Monisha gives the significant details of Calcutta in a fascinating manner:

I see the great Belur Math, the Jain temple, the Kali temple and then the newest and biggest and most popular one of all — New Market that was once known more appropriately, as Hogs Market. It is fairly early in the morning when we visit it, the merchants are yawning and rubbing slime out of their eyes and the itch out of their noses as they light joss sticks in their stores of jewellery and silk, confectionery and fish, hardware and fruit. I watch them pay obeisances to their favourite celestial pair, Ganesh and Lakhshmi, god of Fortune, Goddess of wealth. These two I meet everywhere in this bright temple of commerce. ... There are no ethics in these houses of trade, anymore than there is anything aesthetic in the little plaster idols. Ethics are shammed, all is shammed except the swelling and fattening of the iron safe and of mortals, male flesh. (pp.116-17).

Mala also sees the abject, the smug aspects of this city on all sides:

At every turn, on every road, the city thrust its ugly apathy at her like a beggar thrusting his mutilated hand through the window and laughing because he knew she must pay him her conscience money. Everywhere, there was the tip-tilted rubbish bin, the nude child playing in an open drain, the vast confectioners stirring great cauldrons of milk while perspiration made their bare torsos glitter metallically. Everywhere the sullen, prophetic queues at dark doorways that bore signboards celebrating Ayurvedic Eye Specialists, Urinary and Venereal Disease Specialists.... Everywhere traders sat beneath their plaster idols of Ganesh and Lakhshmi....
Once more credit goes to Anita Desai for the keenness of her perception, and the precise realism of her description.

In the previous novel, Maya suffers from father-fixation; in the present novel, Kirode suffers from mother-fixation. This fact is clearly manifest in the story: "... To think that all through his life he has despised his father and adored his mother, only to turn, after his father's death, to pity for him and loathing of that same, unchanged mother --this moved him now..." (p.64). Later on, when after the death of Monisha, Kirode goes to receive his mother at the airport, he feels so fascinated by her beauty that "he could not take his eyes off her, he watched her, petrified, as she came up with her exact and measured walk, straight towards him" (p.251).

In this novel also, colour symbolism, effectively employed, serves to enhance the opulent texture of the story. Black is the main colour that illustrates the theme of this novel. The symbolism of darkness in relation to characters and scenes persists throughout: "darkly shadowed," "dark wintry evenings," "in the half-dark," "busy black chimneys," "black spirit," "the gigantic black wardrobe," etc. The city of Calcutta is endowed with the dark personality of some sleeping and breathing monster.
Apart from symbolism, the writer exhibits her profound capacity for creating memorable images as those of filth, ugliness, misery, poverty, decay, death, and disintegration. Animal and bird-imagery also appear frequently. Arun is "like a bird poised on the roof's edge for flight" (p.5). Hirode is called "a grounded, broken brother bird," (p.128) and Amal is like "a wild bird, flushed from some unexplored depth of jungle" (p.160). Another frequently-occurring image is that of the goddess Kali, the black goddess of death.

V

The next novel Bye-Bye, Blackbird (1971) deals with a theme entirely different from the one dealt with in the earlier novels as well as the later ones. But here also, as in other novels, the writer's existential concern forms the core of the story. In this, Anita Desai, like Arun Joshi in The Foreigner, lingers in a leisurely manner "on the mental agony of those who by choice, or under circumstantial compulsion, find themselves alienated."28 Here, it is the conflict of culture between the East and the West that forms the central point. Though concerned primarily with the exploration of the

28 R.S. Singh, op.cit., p.175.
lives of the Indian immigrants in England, it reveals their essential problem of adjustment, especially that of the three major characters — Dev, Adit, and Sarah. The reader sees them brooding over their states of hollowness and loneliness, and their lack of "belonging." But there is also a touch of Desai's personal experience. In an interview with Atma Ram, she states that "Of all my novels, it is most rooted in experience and the least literary in derivation." But in the absence of biographical data, it is not possible to ascertain how far the personal element mingles in the story.

The novel starts with the arrival of Dev in England, with his ambition to join the London School of Economics "well in advance to make all the right approaches" (p.9). By right approaches, he means "approaching the professors and impressing them with the subtle complexities and the deep wisdom of the Oriental mind" (p.99). The author describes the various experiences Dev undergoes in the alien land. He is repelled to see the kind of treatment the immigrants are given. They are affronted and abused and are called "wogs" and "Mussulay's bastards". They are not even allowed to use the lavatory meant for the English, as: "... the London docks have three kinds of lavatories — Ladies, Gents and Asaitics" (p.19). A

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pedlar refuses to tell Dev the price of a Russian icon, thinking that he is too poor to buy it. It affects Dev's feelings and he cries out in disgust: "I wouldn't live in a country where I was insulted and unwanted" (p.18).

The silence and emptiness of the houses and streets of London that makes Dev uneasy and worried, is in keeping with the quiet, empty existence of the Indian immigrants in London:

Another thing to which Dev cannot grow accustomed, in all his walks and bus rides through the city, is the silence and emptiness of it -- the houses and blocks of flats, streets and squares and crescents -- all, to his eyes and ears, dead, unsalive, revealing so little of the lives that go in, surely must go on, inside them.... He walks down the street, thinking surely somewhere a child will cry, somewhere a radio will be playing. ... Such is the emptiness of that city that he finds he can be startled by the sight of a woman emerging from a shut, silence house, with a shopping bag or a baby in a pram, as though she were making a casual and bizarre appearance in a bombed -- out street in wartime. It never fails to make Dev uneasy to walk down a street he knows to be heavily populated and yet find it utterly silent, deserted -- a cold wasteland of brick and tile. (p.70)

The ill-treatment meted out to the Indian immigrants by the English is condemned by Dev but commended by Adit. Says the latter: "I love it here. I am so happy here I hardly notice the few drawbacks. I'll tell you -- I did go back, three years ago, when I got engaged to Sarah and my parents wanted me to come home with her. I stayed there looking for a job for four months. All I could find was a ruddy clerking job
in some Government of India Tourist Bureau. They were going to pay me two hundred and fifty rupees and after thirty years I could expect to have five hundred rupees; that is what depressed me ... and I said, no thank you. I'm not made for this ... I'm happy here. I like going into the local for a pint on my way home to Sarah ... I like the Covent Garden opera house ... I like steamed pudding with treacle" (pp.19-20).

In Part II of the novel "Discovery and Recognition", Dev discovers the hidden fascination of London. He undergoes a change in his attitude to it and feels charmed by its spell. This gradual change is depicted in the lyrical prose characteristic of Desai:

And so he walks the streets and parks of the city, grateful for its daffodil patches of sun-shine... Eats toffee apples in Petticoat Lane.... His heart expands and fountains with warmth at the sight, from a rain-shrouded window in a bus, of a crescent of Georgian houses. ... He is intoxicated to think that of all the long programmes of music, theatre, cinema, and art exhibitions that he sees in the papers, he can choose any to go to on any day at all (pp.94-95).

As this slow change overpowers him, he is stuck in an existential duality as to whether or not he should stay back in England: "To Adit, he explains, glibly, that the streets of London are an education so rich that he can't possibly put it short by entering the stuffy halls of some ancient college. It is partly the reason. The other part is something he cannot explain, even to himself, for it is only a tumult inside him, a growing bewilderment, a kind
of schizophrenia that wakes him in the middle of the night and shadows him by day, driving him along on endless tramps in all weathers while he wonders whether he should stay or go back." (p. 96). But finally he decides to stay back in London: "... All I want is -- well, yes, a good time. Not to return to India, not to marry and breed, go to office, come home and go to office again but -- to know a little freedom, to indulge in a little adventure, to know, to know--" (p. 140).

In Part III "Departure", ironically it is Adit, not Dev who feels nostalgic for his native land. It is in part the consequence of the outbreak of Indo-Pak War. He feels so homesick that he desires "to see again an Indian sunset": "The long, lingering twilight of the English summer trembling over the garden had seemed to him like an invalid stricken with anaemia, had aroused in him a sudden clamour, like a child's tantrum, to see again an Indian sunset, its wild conflagration, rose and orange, flamingo pink and lemon, scattering into a million sparks in the night sky" (p. 202).

Adit's nostalgia reaches its highest point when while talking to his friend, Samar, he reveals his mental anguish:

... Sometimes it stifles me -- this business of always hanging together with people, like ourselves all wearing the label Indian immigrant, never daring to try and make contact outside this circle. This business of burrowing about those grisly side-streets, looking for Indian shops and Indian restaurants. All our jokes about Indians in England, all our talk about our own situation,
never about anyone or anything else. It's so stifling -- all the time, all the damn time being aware of who one is and where one is, God, I am fed up! (p.214)

His initial Anglophilia, his love for England that is so much clear in the first two parts of the story is eventually replaced by Anglophobia, his hate and dislike for England. He now comes to consider himself a stranger, and a sense of "not-belonging" fills his mind:

He simply could not recognise his workaday, weary London as his once-golden Mecca. He took to tramping it after office hours in a kind of mermaid search.... He visited all his favourable places and could recognise none of them.

Then he went into all the pubs he had ever known, one by one, and in each was hunted out the black sensation of not belonging. It was as though, in the one summer night that he had been away, London had been blitzed and he returned to find the grey ash of a nuclear war fallen from the skies already frosted with winter's breath, and the whole city shrouded with it. The footsteps on the pavement sounded different -- there was no gay briskness, no determined bustle in them but a furtive hurriedness, the sound of a shameful escape" (pp.205-06).

Adit's ultimate awareness of the meaninglessness of his stay in England is dwelt upon in great detail, while Dev's cognizance of his attraction for the new habitat is
hinted at only meagrely. It is on this structural point that the story eventually fails to satisfy the reader. Though it is written beautifully in parts, the whole appears to lack unity. A few drawbacks on this structural point can easily be listed. The story is divided into three sections but only two are given names. Besides this, at some places, words are enclosed in brackets which seem superfluous e.g. "... this world of beer-soft, plum thick semi-darkness and its (soft, hazy, thick) characters..." (p.11). But such flaws in structure are more than counterbalanced by the overall beauty of the style.

Like Adit and Dev, Sarah also suffers from an existential dilemma as she has to set foot in two incompatible worlds. She remains silent in the face of sufferings, and questions her own identity:

who was she -- Mrs.Sen who had been married in a red and gold Benares brocade sari one burning, bronzed day in September, or Mrs.Sen, the Head's secretary who sent out the bills and took in the cheques, kept order in school and was known for her efficiency. Both these creatures were frauds, each had a large, shadowed element of charade about it. When she briskly dealt with letters and bills in her room under the stairs, she felt an imposter, but, equally, she was playing a part when she tapped her fingers to the sitar music on Adit's records or ground spices for a curry she did not care to eat. She had so little command over these two charades she played each day, one in the morning at school and one in the evening at home, that she could not even tell with how much sincerity she played one role or the other--They were roles -- and when she was not playing them, she was nobody. Her face was only a mask,
her body only a costume. Where was Sarah? ... she wondered if Sarah had any existence at all, and then 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, its truth. (p. 38)

Her suffering is intense, but the writer leaves her half-way without fully exploiting her character.

To sum up, it may be said that despite the "challenging" quality of the theme, the reader is left only partly impressed by the writer's success in dealing with it.

VI

The fourth novel Where Shall We Go This Summer? (1975) is in some ways reminiscent of the first novel Cry, the Peacock. From the structural point of view, it bears a family resemblance to Virginia Woolf's To the Lighthouse. Like the latter, Where Shall We Go This Summer? is also divided into three parts — Part I/Monsoon '67; Part II/Inter '47; and Part III/Monsoon '67.

It reveals Desai's mastery of the "stream of consciousness" method — a device she uses in almost all the novels. Throughout the novel there is an attempt to probe into the mental world of the protagonist, Sita. In an interview with Atma Ram, Desai speaks of "the inner and the outer rhythms", when asked 'Of all aspects of the novel (enumerated by E.M. Forster) which would
you stress most and why?' Mrs. Desai replied, "Pattern and rhythm." "... One sees a novel as a certain distinct pattern and then one puts in the pieces so that they may fit." And definitely, formal symmetry gives to this novel 'a detached tranquillity'. It reminds us of D.H. Lawrence's *The Woman Who Rode Away* because Sita's predicament is very much like that of Lawrence's heroine, though the locale and the milieu in which they are conditioned, are entirely different.

As in the first two novels *Cry, The Peacock* and *Voices in the City*, here also the author exploits "the terror of facing, single handed, the ferocious assaults of existence." The theme is her favourite recurrent existential theme of husband-wife alienation and irresolution. It treats the estranged relationship between Raman and Sita -- an exploration of the relationship between logical and illogical temperaments. Both in terms of theme and technique, the story represents an artistic unity; it treats not only the strained relations of a woman with her husband, but also the plight of a wife given to intense outbursts of emotion. The story revolves around Sita and successfully brings out the two diametrically opposed viewpoints represented by her and her husband, Raman. She is an extremely sensitive and emotional middle-aged woman who is alienated from her husband and children because of her intensely

30 "An Interview with Anita Desai," *World Literature Written in English*, XVI (1), April'77.
emotional reaction to even the most trifling things about her. Her existential sensibility and emotionality make her suffer from loneliness and isolation. "Here is a case of incurable existentialist angst and agony, boredom and ennui that ineluctably grip a modern sensitive person." The following, said in reference to existentialism, is equally applicable to the leit-motif of Sita's view of the world: "A philosophy that conceives of man's status amidst reality as that of a total stranger. It holds that considered in themselves, the things around us are meaningless...."32

Part I of the story deals with the present state of affairs with Sita. Part II with her remote past, and Part III with her present and the near future. The first section abounds with descriptions of brutality and violence, which is evident not only in incidents but also in the behaviour of the people concerned. Amman's delight in Sita's failure to protect an eagle: "They have made a good job of your eagle," and coming out, with his morning cup of tea -- "Look at the feathers sticking out of that crow's beak" (p.27), he laughed; Menaka "crumbling a sheaf of new buds on the small potted plant which Sita had been labouring to grow on the balcony" (p.30); Karen building "a tower of blocks only for the pure,...."31

31 Madhumita Prasad, *Sita*, p.64.

lustful joy of throwing it over with a great clatter," (p.30) -- are all expressive of the violence to which Sita cannot be reconciled.

Tortured by this violence and hustle and bustle, and also by the fear of her fifth pregnancy, Sita, along with her two children, flees to the island of Memori "to achieve the miracle of not giving birth." The lines quoted from D.H. Lawrence's poem *End of Another Holiday* illustrate the purpose of her flight to Memori to solve her dilemma:

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The wild young heifer, gazing distraught,  
With a strange, new knowing of life at her side  
Hums seeking a loneliness.  
The little grain draws down the earth, to hide,  
Hay, even the glimmerous egg as it labours  
under the shell  
Patiently to divide and subdivide,  
Asks to be hidden, and wishes nothing to tell.  
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(p.109)

Sita's flight to the island of Memori, so to say, her retreat, forms the core of the novel. She thinks of this journey as a pilgrimage as: "she had gone on a pilgrimage for the miracle of keeping her baby unborn" (p.20).

Moses, the caretaker of the house, takes Sita and her children across the sea to the house built by her father. As she settles down there, she indulges in retrospection. This retrospective summary is rather lengthy, but is nevertheless, interesting because it helps the plot to grow. She broods over her unhappy conjugal life with Raman. Unlike the legendary Rama
and Sita, the characters in this story do not represent an ideal relationship. In fact, there is irony implied in their names. It is rather a relation marked by disharmony and misunderstanding.

When after her marriage, Sita goes to her in-laws' house, she finds the company of her husband's family disgusting. She feels that they live in "their age-rotted flat" and lead inhuman lives. She is all vibrated and throbbed in revolt against their almost "subhuman placidity, calmness and sluggishness" (p.32). As a result, she starts behaving provocatively by smoking, and speaking in "sudden rushes of emotion, as though flinging darts at their smooth, unscarred faces". Her temperamental incapacity to adjust herself to the norms of society, makes her treat all people around her as "animals" — "They are nothing — nothing but appetite and sex. Only food, sex and money matter. Animals" (pp.31-32). And later on: "My pet animals — or wild animals in the forest, yes. But these are neither — they are like pariahs you see in the streets, hanging about drains and dustbins, waiting to pounce, and kill and eat." (p.32). But even when she starts living in a small flat with her husband and children, her temperament is no better. She finds people and visitors as unacceptable: "... she took their insularity and complacency as well as the aggression and violence of others as affronts upon her own living nerves...." (p.33)
Wherever she lives and wherever she happens to go, she finds her existence troubled by such existential problems as boredom and loneliness — problems that eventually enter the world of a sensitive individual. She refuses to accept the dictates of society that are accepted by normal people. Her frustrated soul cries out "the great No":

He who refuses does not repent. Should he be asked again, he would say No again, And yet that No -- the right No -- crushes him for the rest of his life. (p.24)

She faces "the ferocious assaults of existence" though she knows full well that her "No" would only crush her.

Part II of the novel is based on Sita's recollection of her childhood spent on the island of Manori with her father, who became a legend in his own lifetime. Her first visit to the island in her childhood is followed by a second visit after a gap of twenty long years. She decides to visit the island of Manori -- "that piece of land in which memory and desire, romance and reality, the beautiful and the sinister are inextricably mixed together." This second journey is a self-conscious attempt to relive and to recreate the past. In dealing with her childhood experiences, Desai presents the contrast between Sita and her father. The life on the island is treated

by the old man as the life in an ashram, while Sita sees the island as "a piece of magic, a magic mirror." The contrast, however, remains unsatisfactory because the father is depicted through the eyes of Sita only. She is charmed by the magic he created. She finds the water of the well "not sweet" but finds that "his miracle cures." The mystery about her father's identity overtakes her mind: "Was her father a saint and true patriot? Why did his second wife desert him?"

"His chelas called him a saint, his critics a charlatan, the villagers called him a wizard and each produced evidence to prove his theory" (p.54). However, such puzzling questions about her father, which pass through Sita's mind, have nothing to do with the flow of the narrative. They only impair the taut structure and contribute little to Sita's present spiritual crisis.

In the concluding section of the novel, Menaka and Karen fail to adapt themselves to the primitive conditions of the house at Manorii. They want to go back to Bombay and live the comfortable lives they are used to. The conflict between Sita and Menaka occurs in the scene in which there is a discussion about the poverty of science and the opulence of art. Sita says, "Science can't be as satisfactory. It's all figures, statistics, logic, science is believing that two and two make four -- pooh" (p.65). And later she says, "It
leads you to a dead-end. There are no dead-ends, now, in art. That is something spontaneous, Menaka, and alive, and creative. "..." (p.85). But Menaka retorts, "That's all nonsense." This temperamentl conflict between the two characters remains unsolved, however.

Raman, on an invitation from Menaka, goes to the island to take them back to Bombay. The children feel intensely excited to go back, and Sita feels that "they were being disloyal to her, disloyal to the island and its wild nature" (p.94). But she also realizes that her escape from the realities of life would not offer any solution to her spiritual impasse. It is here that Sita gets out of her existential dilemma. She puts the whole blame on herself for being a coward:

She had escaped from duties and responsibilities, from order and routine, from life and the city, to an unlivable island. She had refused to give birth to a child in a world not fit to receive the child. She had the imagination to offer it an alternative—a life unlived, a life bewitched. She had cried out her great "No" but now the time had come for her epitaph to be written -- She face per viliate il gran rifuso. Very soon now that epitaph would have to be written. (pp.101-02)

It is at this stage that she comes to realize that the flow of life must be continued, and admits what Raman said: "life must be continued, and all its business -- Menaka's admission to medical college gained, wife led to hospital, new child safely brought forth, the children reared, the factory seen
to, a salary earned, a salary spent," (p.101) — was courageous; it was a matter of shame for her to squirm away — dodging and running from such responsibilities in life. So, the conclusion of the novel is a "healing" return to the normalcy of life — to the regularity that initially so appalled Sita.  

Hence, the denouement takes the form of a gradual discovery by Sita of the fact that the island (Once called the magic land) can offer her no help whatsoever, and so she must move away from it. All incidents in the action give an air of naturalness. All that happens appears to come spontaneously from Sita's character and her nature. The crisis follows logically from both the heroine and the previous incidents. The story ends the way it started — with a chorus offering ironic contrast between the father and the daughter. It is suggested again in Moses' remark, "After all, she -- she is not like her father."

One of the most remarkable things about this novel is the fact that the ending is not negative and life-destroying. Rather, it is positive and life-enhancing. Unlike other stories (like Cry, The Peacock, Voices in the City and Fire on the

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34 Charmazal Lust, "Past and Present: A Journey to Confrontation," The Journal of Indian Writing in English, Vol. 9, No.1, Jan'81, p.73.
Mountain where the heroines come to violent and tragic ends), there is no tragedy but reconciliation here. Sita neither goes mad, nor commits suicide or murder, but she compromises with her fate and learns to face boldly all the ups and downs, the hardships of life, through connecting the inward with the outward, the individual with society. From this point of view, the story is of much parabolical significance. The remarks of B.R. Rao on this point are apt:

The novel may thus be seen as a parable on the inability of human beings to relate the inner with the outer, the individual with society. It is a story of illusions melting away in the cold light of the everyday and the commonplace, while it is clear that the author's sympathies are with those who say No to society, if not in thunder, at least with a quiet passion and defiance, it is also evident that the author does not project an one-sided view of the human problem. A life of complete inwardness, of neurotic subjective indulgence is not the solution to the problems of life. Nor is the other extreme of complete conformity and total draining out of the individuality and of the imagination of the human being the proper way out of the dilemma.35

The only solution is to "connect", as Desai writes in the novel, "only connect, they say." Here, there is an echo of E.M. Forster, in whose novel Howard's End, Margaret Wilcox also remarks, "only connect the prose and the passion, and both will be

exalted and human love will be seen at its height. Live in fragments no longer. Only connect, and the beast and the monk, robbed of the isolation that is life to either, will die."36

Desai's use of imagery in this story is as remarkable as in the earlier stories. In Parts I and II, the pages abound with the imagery of violence. There are numerous symbols and images that convey a vivid sense of the violence operating in the mind of Sita. The most significant image of violence is in the scene where the crows form a "shadow civilization", symbolizing fear and destruction:

Crows formed the shadow civilization in that city of flats and alleys. She watched them from the balcony, hopping clownishly about the rocks on which the sea broke, scrambling to catch a rotten fish or scraps of edible flotsam left by the waves to stink in the sun. They even sat on the ledges and balcony rails of the flats, waiting for lazy corks to throw out a bucketful of kitchen garbage into the alley -- scraps were caught by them in mid-air, expert for all their clownishness, tattered wings holding them aloft as they twisted and flapped to get the largest hits. There was always much black drama in this crow-theatre -- murder, infanticide, incest, theft, and robbery, all were much practised by these rough, faneous, rasping tatterdemalions. (p.25)

The most important image, however, is that of prey and predator, found in the scene where the crows attack a wounded eagle: "... it was an exceptionally cruel drama that had aroused, the crow

world outside and made them churn the air, joyously screeching, then slash with rapacious claws and beaks at something that lay struggling in a mound of rust on the ledge that jutted out below their balcony, ... the tortured creature cowering unshaded in that sun was an eagle, wounded or else too young to fly.* (p.25) This pursuit of the prey by the predator looks disgusting even in the animal world, and surely enough the human world it symbolically suggests, is all the more gruesome, terrible and murderous.

Part III of the novel is remarkably free from the images of violence and destruction. Here instead, is an abundance of the imagery of sea and sunshine, of flowers and colours. They reveal Desai's delicate sensitivity and her awareness of the fascinating and the beautiful in nature. We find several passages of lyrical beauty reminiscent of the poetic passages of D.H.Lawrence and Virginia Woolf. For instance, this passage about the monsoon: "The monsoon flowed — now thin, now dense; now slow, now fast; now whispering, now drumming; then gushing. There was never silence — always the roar and sigh of the tide, the moan of the casuarinas in the grove below, tossed and hurled about in grey, tattered billows, the clatter of palm leaves that hung their ragged fingers down and made channels for the rain to spout down into the roof" (p.75). Similarly the clouds during a break in the monsoon are graphically
portrayed: "Sita and children went out on the terrace to watch the massed clouds, knob black, floating and shifting, now engulfing, now releasing the sky, casting a shadow over the alaty sea, turning it to a trough of green-black chill, then moving on to let a shaft of white sunlight stream down and scatter its dull, silver coins upon the waves. The clouds did not mass together again -- they remained loose, buoyant..." (p.57). And below, the colourful image of flowers: "...The earth seethed with weeds and the weeds with minute wildflowers in brilliant tints -- wax white stars, curled yellow ones, small blue eyes and clusters of vermilion and coral inors that Sita plucked and scattered for the pleasure of smelling their sweet, tarry sap on her hands. Butter-yellow and kingfisher-blue butterflies flew up like so many petals taking flight" (p.65).

To sum up, this novel appears to lack the textural density of the earlier novel Cry. The Peacock -- a density which is the logical outcome of the interaction of characters and situations, of intent and tone, of one state of mind and another. Nevertheless, the writer's skilful manipulation of the existential problems in the modern world, her recourse to sound imagery and symbolism, and, above all, her sensitive observation of the realities of existence do in large measure, compensate for whatever structural flaws there may be.
VII

With her fifth novel, *Fire on the Mountain* (1977) which promptly won her the Sahitya Academy Award (1978), Anita Desai joined the ranks of distinguished Indian writers like R.K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao, and Bhabani Bhattacharya. But in one way she stands distinct and apart—a class by herself; she is almost the only one who has chosen to devote her fiction to an in-depth treatment of the existential problems of the upper middle-class, particularly the women.

In this novel, again, the theme of 'withdrawal and loneliness' continues. The inner emotional world of the principal character, Nanda Kaul, carries with it the familiar existential overtones. It deals with her lonely and isolated life and presents an unforgettable portrait of old age. The stylistic and structural techniques used in the earlier stories have been employed in this novel too. The novel is divided into three parts—Part I "Nanda Kaul at Carignano," Part II "Raka comes to Carignano," and Part III "Ila Das Leaves Carignano." In the first section, Kaul is seen living the life of a "recluse" in the deserted loneliness of her house at "Carignano" in Kasauli. She is as alone as "a charred tree trunk in the forest, a broken pillar of marble in the desert, a lizard on a stone wall" (p.23). After having led a long life of duties, obligations and responsibilities, she now
wants to live all alone, undisturbed: "Everything she wanted was here, at Carignano, in Kasauli. Here on the ridge of the mountain, in this quiet house. It was the place, and the time of life, that she had wanted and prepared for all her life -- as she realized on her first day at Carignano, with a great, cool flowering of relief -- and at last she had it. She wanted no one and nothing else. Whatever else came, or happened here, would be an unwelcome intrusion and distraction" (p.3). She is irritated even by the sight of the postman, plodding his way to Carignano: "... the sight of him, inexorably closing in with his swollen bag, rolled a fat ball of irritation into the cool cave of her day blocking it stupidly: bags and letters, messages and demands, requests, promises and queries, she had wanted to be done with them all, at Carignano. She asked to be left to the pines and cicadas alone..." (p.3).

However, her strong feeling for the silence and quiet of the hills, is distracted every now and then by movements and sounds. As pointed out by R.S. Shama, "The novel is a unique conglomeration of these movements, sounds and voices."37 Even the imagined sounds out of her earlier life come to disturb her solitude:

37 R.S. Shama, op.cit., p.119.
She had practised this stillness, this composure, for years, for an hour every afternoon; it was an art, not easily acquired. The most difficult had been those years in that busy house where doors were never shut, and feet flew, or tramped, without ceasing. She remembered how she had tried to shut out sound by shutting out light, how she had spent the sleepless hour making out the direction from which a shout came, or a burst of giggles, an ominous growling from the dogs, the spray of gravel under bicycle wheels on the drive, a contest of squirrels over the guavas in the orchard, the dry rattle of eucalyptus leaves in the sun, a drop, then spray and rush of water from a tap. All was subdued but nothing was ever still. (p.23)

The story is structurally compact. Amita Desai follows the convention of the classical epic that the action should begin, as Horace phrased it, in medias res, i.e., in the middle of the story, and not at its chronological beginning. She follows the device here (as in other stories) and begins at a point later than that which initiated the action. Once the action is under way and interest is aroused, we are given whatever action preceded the point at which the telling of the story begins.

And this action is conveyed here through flash-back. Time keeps moving through Nanda Kaul’s past which she ruminates upon while reacting to the present still surroundings. Ila Das keeps reminding her through telephone, of her days as the Vice-Chancellor’s wife, of her days of youth and childhood. The writer gives this background information by shifting the scene to an earlier time and presenting the action dramatically.
She would barely have splashed her face with some water and combed out her hair when the baby would come crawling in, the first to hear her stir, the most insistent in its needs. Lifting it into her arms, she would go to the kitchen to see the milk taken out of the icebox, the layer of cream drawn off, the row of mugs on a tray filled and carried out to the green table on the veranda around which the children already sat on their low cane stools—the little girls still having their long hair plaited and their fresh cotton dresses buttoned, and the boys throwing themselves backwards and kicking the table legs and clamouring with hunger. Then there was the bread to be spread with butter, jam jars opened and dug into, knives taken away from babies and boys, girls questioned about homework, servants summoned to mop up spilt milk and fetch tea, and life would swirl on again, in an eddy, a whirlpool of which she was the still, fixed eye on the centre. (p.24)

But now when she is leading "a radiantly single life," she again has to shoulder the responsibility of looking after Raka, her great granddaughter. She feels disturbed with "self pity and pain" to think that her arrival would shatter her happy solitude:

Hanging her head miserably it seemed too much to her that she should now have to meet Raka, discover her as an individual, and worse, as a relation, a dependent. She would have to urge her to eat eggs and spinach, caution her against lifting stones in the garden under which scorpions might lie asleep, see her to bed at night and lie in the next room, wondering if the child slept, straining to catch a sound from the bedroom, their opposing thoughts colliding in the dark like jittery bats in flight. She would never be able to sleep, Nanda Kaul moaned to herself, how could she sleep with someone else in the house? She was so unused to it, it would upset her so. (p.35)
Hence, Part I of the story gives us the essential setting, reveals the life pattern of the main character, and also depicts her fear to meet Raka, "intruder" whom she calls, in her isolated world. Part II deals with the arrival of Raka in Carignano and shows how the two characters react to each other. Initially, they are hostile towards each other but finally there grows, a strong rapport between them. Kaul regards Raka's arrival as an unwelcome intrusion. As they embrace each other, they feel "a sound of bones colliding. Each felt how bony, angular and unaccommodating the other was and they quickly separated."

Raka is fascinated by the life in Carignano; by the movements around her;

Left to herself in the afternoon, Raka felt over the room with her bare feet. She walked about as the newly caged, the newly tamed wild ones do, sliding from wall to wall on silent investigating pads. She patted a check of wood here, smoothed a ridge of plaster there. She met a spider that groomed its hairs in a corner, saw lizard's eyes blinking out of a dark groove. She probed the depth of dust on shelves and ledges, licked a window-pane to cool her tongue-tip. She sagged across the bed on her stomach, hung her head over its edge, but the sun caught her eye, slipped in its yellow wedge and would not allow her to close it. (p.41)

Natural surroundings have a strong appeal for Raka. She is always absorbed in the beauties and delights of nature. Nanda
Kaul does not want to involve herself in "a child’s world again — real or imaginary," as it is "bound to betray". The natural feelings of Raka to remain aloof and the willed indifference of Nanda Kaul poses a polarity in the novel. Both try their best to avoid each other but find "it was not so simple to exist and yet appear not to exist" (p. 47).

Nanda Kaul discovers gradually that Raka is very different from other children of her age. The natural detachment of Raka is beautifully narrated: "It made her nostrils flare and her fingers twitch but she had to admit that Raka was not like any other child she had known, not like any of her own children or grandchildren. Amongst them, she appeared a freak by virtue of never making a demand. She appeared to have no needs. Like an insect burrowing through the sandy loam and pine-needles of the hillsides, like her own great grandmother, Raka wanted only one thing — to be left alone and pursue her own secret life amongst the rocks and pines of Kasauli." (pp. 47-48). The juxtaposition of these two characters is interesting — the natural, instinctive aloofness of Raka, and the planned, self-imposed withdrawal of Nanda. The latter herself is fully conscious of this polarity: "Nanda Kaul turned a look on her (Raka) that was reproachful rather than welcoming.... But Raka ignored her, she ignored her so calmly, so totally that it made Nanda
breathless. She eyed the child with apprehension now, wondering at this total rejection, so natural, instinctive and effortless when compared with her own planned and wilful rejection of the child" (p.47). Again, "If Nanda Kaul was a recluse out of vengeance for a long life of duty and obligation, her great grand-daughter was a recluse by nature, by instinct. She had not arrived at this condition by a long route of rejection and sacrifice -- she was born to it, simply" (p.48).

With her remarkable gift of suggestion, Anita Desai uses the scenic method to give us a glimpse of the tragic childhood of Raka:

Somewhere behind them, behind it all, was her father, home from a party, stumbling and crashing through the curtains of night, his mouth opening to let out a flood of rotten stench, beating at her mother with hammers and fists of abuse—harsh, filthy abuse that made Raka cover under her bedclothes and wet the mattress in fright, feeling the stream of urine warm and weakening between her legs like a stream of blood, and her mother lay down on the floor and shut her eyes and wept. Under her feet in the dark, Raka felt that flat, wet jelly of her mother's being squelching and quivering, so that she didn't know where to put her feet and wept as she tried to get free of it. Ahead of her, no longer on the ground but at some distance now, her mother was crying. Then it was a jackal crying. (pp.71-72)

The contrast between Nanda Kaul and Raka takes us back to
the theme of withdrawal and loneliness. Kaul feels greatly hurt to find that the child is totally indifferent to her, and does not bother about her own isolation: "She was not sure if it was poignant, ironical or merely irritating that Raka herself remained totally unaware of her dependence, was indeed as independent and solitary as ever. Watching her wandering amongst the rocks and agaves of the ravine, tossing a horse chestnut rhythmically from hand to hand, Nanda Kaul wondered if she at all realized how solitary she was. She certainly never asked nor bothered to see if there were a letter for her, or news. Solitude never disturbed her." (p.79)

In order to win over Raka, Nanda Kaul tries every possible measure. She tells her about her own imaginary childhood -- how her father once brought a bronze statue of the Buddha from Tibet, and that he was "an explorer and a discoverer," and "travelled, hunted, and collected exquisite things that he eventually brought home to us," -- this and much more is narrated by Kaul in an effort, so to say, to bring Raka into her own world, but to her amusement, the child does not give way as she desires to be left alone, and nothing else. Raka, as a matter of fact, is "a wild creature" who feels attracted only by destruction and ravage. "This hill, with its one destroyed house and one unbuilt one, on the ridge under the fire-singed pines, appealed to Raka with the strength of a strong sea-current -- pulling, dragging. There was something
about it — illegitimate, uncompromising and lawless — that made her tingle. The scene of devastation and failure somehow drew her, inspired her" (pp. 90-91). Again, "It was the ravaged, destroyed and barren spaces in Kasauli that drew her: the ravine where yellow snakes slept under grey rocks and agaves growing out of the dust and rubble, the skeletal pines that rattled in the wind, the wind-levelled hill-tops and the seared remains of the safe, cosy, civilized world in which Raka had no part and to which she owed no attachment" (p. 91).

Part III of the novel takes up the story of Ila Das who meets with a tragic end while sincerely involved in social welfare work. The contrast between the life of Ila Das and that of Nanda Kaul is well presented. While the former is concerned with the welfare of the masses, the latter is concerned with no one and with nothing else, but her own desolate existence. Ila Das recounts a few "hair-raising stories of her experiences as a welfare officer." She tells her how as a social worker, she had advised and prevented one farmer, Preet Singh, from marrying his daughter to an old man for money and a few animals. After relating this story to Nanda Kaul, she bids her good-bye and starts rushing to her house to get there before it was dark. Ironically, on the way, Preet Singh overpowers her, "his eyes blazing at her in rage," and strangled her to death with his neck-scarf.
On hearing the news of Ila Das' rape and murder, Nanda Kaul is dazed and shocked. The writer presents a memorable description, marked by verbal economy and control of the fictive world:

But Nanda Kaul had ceased to listen. She had dropped the telephone. With her head still thrown back, far back, she gasped: No, no, it is a lie! No, it cannot be. It was a lie — Ila was not raped, nor dead. It was all a lie, all. She had lied to Raka, lied about everything. Her father had never been to Tibet — he had bought the little Buddha from a travelling pedlar. They had not had bears and leopards in their home, nothing but overfed dogs and bad-tempered parrots. Her husband loved and cherished her and kept her like a queen — he had only done enough to keep her quiet while he carried on a life-long affair with Miss Davila, the mathematics mistress, whom he had not married because she was a Christian but whom he had loved, all his life loved. And her children — the children were all alien to her nature. She neither understood nor loved them. She did not live here alone by choice — she lived here alone because that was what she was forced to do, reduced to doing. All those graces and glories with which she had tried to captivate Raka were only a fabrication; they had helped her to sleep at night, they were tranquiliser pills. She had lied to Raka. And Ila had lied, too. Ila, too, had lied, had tried, No, she wanted to tell the man on the phone, No, she wanted to cry but could not make a sound. Instead, it choked and swelled inside her throat. She twisted her head, then hung it down, down, let it hang. (p.145)

The narrative is laden with symbolic devices and meanings which, as we interpret them, add richness and subtlety to characterization, and reveal a sensitive observation of Indian life. It is mainly these symbols and images that make the novel 'poetically engrossing and aesthetically satisfying'.
In the first place, Carignano is symbolic of the secluded and lonely life of the protagonist. Before Independence, it was full of life and animation but now lies deserted on a lonely hill. Similarly, Nanda Kaul's life had been a busy and noisy one with children and guests, but is now empty, entirely free from cares and responsibilities.

The most important symbol, however, is that of the forest fire, which threatens the lives of people living in the forests. It is symbolic of the impending tragedy that finally occurs in the story. This symbol is found in Chapter VII of Part II when Nanda Kaul and Raka go together for a stroll, the former refers to the burnt house: "Upon the hill there, Raka, you will see the burnt black shell of a house. It was burnt down in a terrible forest fire one summer when there wasn't a drop of water to fight it with. An old lady lived there alone and they say she went mad and was put away. Poor woman, I wonder if she would not have preferred to die in the fire" (pp.56-57). In the last paragraph of the story, the symbol assumes a poignantly ironical significance. Raka, unaware of the tragic end of her great grandmother, says, "Look Nani -- Look -- the forest is on fire." (p.145).

Apart from this, there are numerous images of birds and beasts that add to the cohesion of the texture and bespeak
the writer's artistic maturity and originality. The images prepare us for the tragic end of the story and unify it into an artistic whole. The image of prey and predator that occurs in the previous stories like * voces in the City and Where Shall We Go This Summer?* figures prominently in this novel also, symbolic of destruction and annihilation, forming the crux of the story. One such image occurs in Chapter VI of Part I: "... She watched the white hen drag out a worm inch by resisting inch from the ground till it snapped in two. She felt like the worm herself, she winced at its mutilation" (p.21). Another in Part II: "... closer to her, the hoopoe promenaded under the apricot trees, smartly furling and unfurling the striped fan on top of its head. Its young had flown and it appeared to be celebrating, even flaunting its independence, its new youth and freedom. It pounced upon a grasshopper and stabbed it to death with its victorious beak" (p.104). This image of the prey and the predator is skilfully transferred to the human world in the scene in which Preet Singh assaults and murders Ila Das:

Just then a black shape detached itself from the jagged pile of the rock, that last rock between her and the hamlet, and sprang soundlessly at her. She staggered under its weight with a gasp that ripped through her chest. It had her by the throat. She struggled choking, trying to stretch and stretch and stretch that gasp till it became a shout, a shout that the villagers would hear, the red dog would hear, a shout for help. But the fingers tightened. Now she tore her mouth open for breath, now she opened her eyes till they boggled, and popped, and stood out
of her head as she saw, is the cold shadow, that it was Preet Singh, his lips lifted back from his teeth, his eyes blazing down at her in rage, in a passion of rage. She lifted her hands to dislodge his from her throat and she did dislodge them. They fell away but only to tear at the cotton scarf that hung, about his neck, only to wrap that about her throat, tighter, tighter, tighter, so that the last gasp rattled inside her, shook and rattled and was still. Her eyes still swivelled in their sockets, two alarmed marbles of black and white and quickly he left the ends of the scarf, tore at her clothes, tore them off her, in long, screeching rips, till he came to her, to the dry, shrivelled, starved stick inside the wrappings, and raped her, pinned her down into the dust and the goat droppings, and raped her. Crushed back, crushed down into the earth, she lay raped, broken, still and finished. Now it was dark. (pp.142-43)

All such images add to the structural significance of the novel. Moreover, the environment of Kasauli in which the protagonist is destined, or rather forced, to live, is captured in its true spirit. It is primarily through descriptions of the natural surroundings that the plot develops. Throughout, we can hear the dry rattle of leaves in the sun, the scream of parrots, the cries of birds and animals.

The novel conveys the same message as that conveyed by Where Shall We Go This Summer? — that one must learn “to connect”, in order to make life authentic and meaningful. There should be a balance between reality and illusion because, to lack this balance is to invite suffering and tragedy. This
is the case with Nanda Kaul and Ila Das. The former leads an illusionary life full of dreams and reveries, and therefore, the news of Ila's death shatters her world of fantasy. On the other hand, Ila Das is too realistic and practical to have any illusions, but her extreme involvement in real life only brings about her own tragic end. Thus reality and illusion, personified through these two characters, result in their respective tragedies. "It is this imbalance in the lives of these female protagonists in the novel, which is its real strength, throwing its real insight into the missing essential link, in the absence of which life becomes but a long tale of woe and suffering." 38

Fire on the Mountain is a carefully constructed novel according to Madhusudan Prasad "a model of structural perfection." 39 A calm and tranquil beginning takes the story forward towards its violent, climactic end. At the same time, however, there is a certain sense of insubstantiality about the whole thing. Nanda Kaul's world seems to lack the tangibility and solidity that we usually associate with life. One feels a thinness of character-drawing, and a sense of disappointment that such remarkable facility with language of


great beauty should not have been spent for gains not quite commensurate with the effort. The texture is well-woven, the setting is majestic, but the dimensions of Nanda Kaul are not heroic, and one is left with the impression that Nanda's tale is essentially trivial -- an "insubstantial pageant" which fades and leaves "not a rack behind" (The Tempest, IV, i).

VIII

Anita Desai's recent novel Clear Light of Day (1980) was nominated for the prestigious Britain's Booker McConnell Prize, but unluckily it was lost to William Golding's new novel Rites of Passage. It is "a four dimensional piece,"\(^{40}\) that clearly illustrates on first reading, how the writer has matured and developed her craft since her earlier books where she was still groping for style and form, to the latest, the product of a fertile and mellowed craftsmanship. In this novel, she "meant to do far more than I actually covered, I wanted it to be like a mine, to tunnel into the past, coming out with lumps of coal and possibly a diamond. One knows one's limits. One fails because of lack of vigour, of energy, of confidence."\(^{41}\)


\(^{41}\)Quoted by Ranjana Sen Gupta, OP-ed.
The response to this novel in the West surprised her: "I suppose it has a certain universality which I wasn't aware of. To me it is a very private book, a small personal reaching out. I suppose it's because it deals with childhood and death -- themes which people empathise with."\(^2\)

**Clear Light of Day** is undoubtedly a remarkable novel -- the one, perhaps the only one in Indo-Anglian writing, that dwells on the theme of time. In all the previous stories, the writer's preoccupation has been with the existential phenomena like anxiety, despair, loneliness, frustration, death etc. The present novel also deals with a different existential theme -- that of time. Here, the noticeable treatment of time, depicting the emotional turmoil in the main protagonist, adds a new dimension in the sphere of Indo-Anglian writing. Not surprisingly, Existentialist thinkers like Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and Marcel Proust seem to have influenced Desai in her treatment of the time-element. What she is trying to do in this novel is to plumb the depths of time and to connect the changes, distortions, and revelations of the past and the present. The theme is elucidated by the author herself: "My novel is set in Old Delhi and records the

\(^2\)Harjana Sen Gupta, *PD-Cit.*
tremendous changes that a Hindu family goes through since
1947. Basically, my preoccupation was with recording the
passage of time: I was trying to write a four-dimensional
piece on how a family's life moves backwards and forwards
in a period of time. My novel is about time as a destroyer,
as a preserver, and about what the bondage of time does to
people. I have tried to tunnel under the mundane surface
of domesticity." She is a believer in the universality
of people and situations. Her remark in an interview with
Ranjana Sen Gupta that "one reads Chekhov not for a knowledge
of nineteenth century Russia -- that is incidental -- one
reads his books for their insight into humanity, into life
everywhere," applies to her own work also, which though
localized in Delhi since 1947, touches upon aspects of life
that are universal.

The "musical structure"¹⁴ of the novel shows the
writer in command of the material at hand. There is, certainly,
no tangible story in the true sense of the term, related
cronologically in a straightforward manner, but there are
separate episodes from the past shattered life of the family
which are recollected after a long span of time and put into

¹³"An interview with Sunil Sethi", pp. 129.
¹⁴R.S. Sharma, pp. 129, p. 129.
a unified whole, presenting the connection of the old and
the new, the past and the present, of love and sacrifice, of
anger and accusation, death and betrayal -- which all combine
to give a dark texture to the novel. The four sub-divisions
of the novel suggest "the four dimensions of time." They
record the transitions that a family undergoes since
independence. The story revolves around two brothers and
two sisters who are brought up in a house in Old Delhi. It
begins with Tara, the younger sister visiting the family,
along with her husband, Bakul, after a long lapse of time. She
feels engulfed by the memories of her childhood. Childhood is
remembered not as sunlit but as uncertain and confused. The
first section of the story, thus, provides the writer with an
opportunity to set the action from the perspectives of the
past and the present. The reader clearly sees the real world
of the family from the eyes of the children. Tara remarks to
Bakul, "How everything goes on and on here, and never changes? I
used to think about it all, and it is all exactly the same,
whenever we come home," (p.4) and Bakul replies, "But you
wouldn't want to return to life as it used to be, would you?
All that dullness, boredom, waiting. Would you care to live
that over again? Of course not. Do you know anyone who
would -- secretly, sincerely, in his innermost self -- really
prefer to return to childhood?" (p.4). Again, she links up
the boredom prevailing in the house with the boredom prevailing
in Old Delhi:
That is the risk of coming home to Old Delhi. Old Delhi does not change. It only decays. My students tell me it is a great cemetery, every house a tomb. Nothing but sleeping graves. New New Delhi, they say, is different. That is where things happen. The way they described it, it sounds like a nest of fleas. So much happens there, it must be a jumping place. I never go. Baba never goes. And here, here nothing happens at all. Whatever happened, happened long ago — in the time of the Tughlaks, the Khiljis, the Sultanate, the Moghuls — that lot. And then the British built New Delhi — and moved everything out. Here we are left rocking on the backwaters, getting duller and greyer, I suppose... (p.5)

But Tara is not much convinced by Him's explanation. She is too much obsessed with childhood memories, in fact, has not fully outgrown her childhood. This is noticed by Him in the beginning of the story when Tara chances upon "her childhood snail slowly, resignedly making its way from under the flower up a clod of earth only to tumble off the top onto its side — an eternal miniature plague," "and bringing "her hands together in a clap," she cries like a child, "Look, a snail!" Him is surprised and begins to think: "Was Tara, grown woman, mother of grown daughters, still child enough to play with a snail? would she go down on her knees to scoop it up on a leaf and watch it draw its luminous trail, lift its tiny antennae, gaze about it with protruding eyes and then, the instant before the leaf dipped and it slid downwards, draw itself into its pale pod?" (p.2). The writer enters the world of the children and childhood with an astounding ease, love and understanding, so that nothing that happens to children or comes their way, escapes her notice. Tara's obsession with olden days reflects her
inability to comprehend the passage of time. She is not able to realize that time passes, changes, distorts or destroys various things in life. But afterwards, she does realize the existential significance of time when she has to live in her old family with a changed pattern of relationship.

Raja, the elder brother, marries Benaizar, the daughter of his landlord, Hyder Ali, and settles down in Hyderabad. Only Bim and Baba are left in the old house. While pulling out the drawers to find the verses written by Raja, Bim comes across an old letter addressed to her by him. It was written by Raja after the death of his father-in-law. He mentioned in it that "When Hyder Ali was ill and making out his will, Benaizar herself spoke to him about the house and asked him to allow you to keep it at the rent we used to pay when father and mother were alive ... and I want to assure you that now that he is dead and has left all his property to us, you may continue to have it at the same rent, I shall never think of raising it or of selling the house as long as you and Baba need it..." (p.27). Bim feels humiliated and deeply hurt to read this letter. It creates in her mind a "misunderstanding" with Raja. Tara, who was earlier immature in her understanding of the existential significance of time, now comes to realize fully well how the human relationship -- even the intimate relationship between a brother and a sister -- changes with the passage of time.
Part II of the novel deals with the life in Delhi during the Partition riots in 1947. This partition scene has had much significance for Desai, because at that time, she herself was living in Old Delhi, and so experienced the effects of this Partition in her early life. Says she, "I was 10 at the time of Partition and profoundly affected by it; so much in our life suddenly changed character." This concern of the writer with the Partition of India reminds us of other Indo-English writers like Khushwant Singh, C.Nehal, and Manohar Malgonkar who deal with it in their novels. But in Desai's work, it is depicted only in an episodic manner and not fully elaborated as is the case with other writers.

Apart from the Partition scene, this section of the novel also presents the tragic portrait of Aunt Mira, a widow who looks after the four children. She is described to be suffering from a strange disease -- writhing in a delirium or sinking into an alcoholic stupor. Her strong obsession with the image of the well in which bride-like cow drowned, symbolically suggests her own condition as she was widowed when young:

^5India Today, OP-Ed.
Only one night did she rouse herself out of the stupor that Bim had thought permanent, and then she tore at her clothes as if they were a net, tore at invisible things that seemed attached to her throat and fingers and hair, even screamed. Let me go -- let me jump into the wall -- let me! " She screamed that intermittently all through the night, like an owl, or nightjar starting out of the silence, waking Bim. She seemed obsessed with the idea of the wall -- the hidden swampy pool in which the bride-like cow they had once had, had drowned, and to which she seemed drawn. Bim held her wrists all night, wondering why of all things in this house and garden, it was the wall she wanted, to drown in that green swamp that had never shown a ripple in its blackened crust since the cow's death.... Now it seemed to encroach on the aunt's enclosing darkness like a dark flood and she seemed helpless to resist it -- on the contrary, hopelessly attracted by it. (pp.98-99)

Part III of the novel again deals with episodes of the early life of Bim, Tara, and Raja. It is, in a sense, an elaboration of Part I in which the early childhood is remembered by Bim and Tara, and hence the spreading pattern of Part I is successfully connected with the last part. It parallels the narrative structure of the first section. The incident and the reaction related in Page 2 of Part I is retold in pp.102-103 of Part III. It is an episode of Tara's childhood joy at the discovery of a snail under the leaves:

Suddenly she stopped with a shout: she spied, something under the rose-bushes -- a glint of pearly white. Perhaps a jewel, a ring; Tara was always expecting to find treasure, to make her fortune, discover herself a princess. She stopped to part the leaves that hid it and saw the pale, whorled orb of a stopped
mail. For a while she stayed on her knees, crushed with disappointment, then lifted it onto a leaf and immediately delight gushed up as in a newly mined well at seeing the small creature unfold, tentatively protrude its antennae and begin to slide forward on a stream of slime. Look, Mama, look what I've found!, she cried, darting forwards, and of course it tumbled off the leaf and when the mother turned to look, there was Tara staring at the slimy leaf, then searching for the lost creature in the mud. (pp. 102-03)

This minor episode of Tara's childhood that occurs in Part III reminds us of a similar episode in Part I in which she showed the same joy and ecstasy on the sudden spying of a snail. Now, when she is no more a child but a mother of grown-up daughters, the episode not only indicates the significance of her obsession but also contributes to the total structural pattern of the story. Apart from this, a few other episodes also, like that of the father daily injecting the mother, and the description of the bride-like cow, are given in detail in this section though these had already figured in the first section. This section also brings about the contrast between the two sisters. In school days, Him was intelligent and bright, and Tara dull and mediocre. Him regarded school as a challenge that incited "her natural intelligence and mental curiosity." But to Tara, it was a "terror":

Whereas school brought out Him's natural energy and vivacity down at home because of the peculiar atmosphere of their house, school to Tara was a terror, a blight, a gathering of large, loud, malicious forces that threatened and mocked her fragility. When confined within its high stone boundary walls, she thought of home with tearful
yearning, almost unable to bear the separation from Aunt Mira, from Baba, from the comfortable, old, accustomed ayah, the somnolent matter of the pigeons in the sunny veranda caves, all of which took on an aura of paradise for her when she was separated from it. (pp.123-24)

Every Thursday the girls were sent two by two, with a teacher at the head, to the mission hospital on the other side of the thick stone wall to distribute fruit and blankets to the non-paying patients. These blankets were made up of squares of red wool that the girls knitted during craft class on thick, blunt wooden needles. (p.125). Here again, the contrast between Him and Tara: whereas Him takes it as an opportunity to serve humanity, it causes Tara "genuine physical agonies". The episode is also helpful for us in forming an understanding of their lives when they grow old. Tara marries and becomes a housewife; Him does not marry and serves humanity. Raja's childhood dream of becoming "a hero", remains unfulfilled, but Him's dream of becoming "an heroine" is fully realized. She follows her ideal faithfully and in her early youth, proves this aspect of her personality by serving and looking after Raja and Aunt Mira during their illnesses. But to her amusement and grief -- both of them leave her -- Aunt Mira dies and Raja deserts her by escaping to another city to build his fortune. Ultimately Him is left alone in the old house with her younger mentally retarded brother, Baba, and now onwards
spends her life looking after Baba with care and devotion. Yet for all this, she remains a pathetic character with whom the reader feels a compelling sympathy.

Part IV, the final section of the novel is once again a continuation of the same incidents of the shared family life that occurred in Part I. It not only reveals the writer's artistic sense of compact structure, but also shows how the passage of time has destroyed, distorted and altered the earlier family relations. Tara persuades Him that she and Baba should go to Hyderabad to attend the wedding of Raja's eldest daughter, Mayna. But Him is unbearably offended by it: "Oh you, want to talk about Raja again. I'm bored with Raja, utterly bored. He is too rich to be interesting anymore, too fat, and too successful. Rich, fat and successful people are boring. I'm not interested, Tara." (p.143). But still Tara says, "You should go and visit them, Him, and see for yourself how it is. There's the wedding. They want you there. Here's a letter. Let me read it to you..." (p.145). This letter is addressed to Tara, not to Him, and in this Raja did not even mention Him-- this further deepens her agony, her resentment against Raja. It reminds her of an earlier letter in which he had mentioned the reversal of his role 'from brother to landlord' -- all for his selfish motives. Him utterly disgusted begins to think over how the passage of time has ravaged and destroyed the sound relationship of childhoods.
... At last the adored, the admired elder brother ... had turned his back on Him. Him saw all their backs, turned on her, a row of backs turned. She folded her arms across her face — she did not want to see the ugly sight. She wanted them to go away and leave her.

They had come like mosquitoes — Tara and Bakul, and behind them the Miras, and somewhere in the distance Raja and Benazir — only to torment her and, mosquito-like, sip her blood. All of them fed on her blood, at some time or the other had fed — it must have been good blood, sweet and nourishing. Now, when they were full, they rose in swarms, humming away, turning their backs on her.

All these years she had felt, herself to be the centre — she had watched them all circling in the air, then returning, landing like birds, folding up their wings and letting down their legs till they touched solid ground. Solid ground. That was what the house had been — the lawn, the rose walk, the guava tree, the veranda, Him's domain. The sound of Baba's gramophone and the pigeons. Summer days and nights. In winter, flower-beds and nuts and cotton quilts. Aunt Mira and the dog, rosses and the cat — and Him. Him who had stayed and become part of the pattern inseparable. They had needed her as much as they had needed the sound of the pigeons in the veranda and the ritual of the family gathering on the lawn in the evening. But the pattern was now very old. Tara called it old. It had all faded. The childhood colours, blood-red and pigeon-blue, were all faded and sunk into the muddy grays and browns of the Jumna river itself. Him, too, grey-haired, and-faced, was only a brown fleck in the faded pattern. If you struck her, dust would fly. If you sniffed, she'd make you sneeze. An hair-loss, that was all -- not valuable, not beautiful, but precious on account of age... (p. 153)

Towards the end of the section, when Him finds herself unable to run the insurance business of her father after his death, and for which Raja never cared, she feels irritated, and in a fit of anger, decides to sell her share to Mr. Sharma. In her
anger, she attacks Baba also -- "If I sell, it'll mean the end of that part of our income. It was too small to count anyway, but it did cover some of the expenses. With my salary, I'll be able to pay the rent, keep on the house. I'll manage--but I might have to send you to live with Raja. I come to ask you -- what would you think of that? Are you willing to go and live, with Raja in Hyderabad?" (p.163). Baba feels surely hurt by his's attack. But this was the peak of her rage. It was spent at last. She begins to feel sorry for her wrong attitude towards Baba, and also towards Raja and Tara. "... the darkest depths of the past have been plumbed, all emotions -- anger, guilt, fear and remorse -- are spent, there remains for Him only an engulfing love, luminous like a clear day."46

Him's remorse is at last replaced by a new self-knowledge, enabling her to see everything by "the clear light of day" --

Although it was shadowy and dark, Him could see as well as by the clear light of day that she felt only love and yearning for them all, and if there were hurts, these gashes and wounds in her side, that bled, then it was only because her love was imperfect and did not encompas them thoroughly enough, and because it had flaws and inadequacies and did not extend to all equally. She did not feel enough for her dead parents, her understanding of them was incomplete and she would have to work and labour to acquire it. Her love for Raja had had too

much of a battering, she had felt herself so
humiliated by his going away and leaving her,
by his reversal of role from brother to landlord,
that it had never recovered and become the tall,
shining thing it had been once. Her love for Baba
was too inarticulate, too unthinking; she had not
given him enough thought, her concern had not been
keen, acute enough. All these would have to be
mended, these rents and tears, she would have to
send and make her net whole so that it would suffice
her in her passage through the ocean. Somehow, she
would have to forgive Raja that unforgivable letter.
Somehow she would have to wrest forgiveness from
Baba for herself. These were great rents a torn in
the net that the knife of love had made. Stains of
blood that the arrow of love had left. Stains that
darkened the light that afternoon. She laid her
hands across her eyes again. (pp.165–66)

Towards the close of the novel, when Him attends the musical
performance where Mulk's guru sings, she notices the difference
between Mulk's "rich, dark voice," and the Guru's "sharp, cracked
voice" mingled with "bitterness", "sadness", and "frustration".
She infers that they "belonged to the same school and had the
same style of singing and there was this similarity despite
the gulf between them" (p.182). This fact resolves the tension
in her mind also, clearing the emotional tangles that continuously
disturbed her state of mind. It reminds her of the famous lines
from I. S. Mist's Enur Quariita -- 'Time the destroyer is time
the preserver; with her ultimate realization that despite the
gulf between her and Tara, Raja, and Baba, there is a strong
instinctive closeness between them. Now she feels that they
are linked together as brothers and sisters and understands the
existential significance of time in relation to eternity.
With her inner eye she saw how her own house and its particular history linked and contained her as well as her own family with all their separate histories and experiences — not binding them within some dead and airless cell but giving them the soil in which to send down their roots, and food to make them grow and spread, reach out to new experiences and new lives, but always drawing from the same soil, the same secret darkness. That soil contained all time, past and future, in it. It was dark with time, rich with time. It was where her deepest self lived, and the deepest selves of her sister and brothers and all those who shared that time with her. (p. 182)

Like two previous novels of Desai, *Eve-Eye, Blackyard* and *Where Shall We Go This Summer?,* this also is free of murder and suicide. No dreadful secrets, chilling climaxes or sick twists as are found in the other three novels *City, The Peacock, Noises in the City,* and *Fire on the Mountain.* Unlike the other stories, the protagonist is not here a helpless victim of over-sensuousness -- she is obviously not a highly-strung creature baffled by the uncertainties here and there in life -- but the entire focus has shifted to the past in the perspective of time. There is a kind of "surface sleepiness, a menacing calm."#7

The other novels of Anita Desai are full of imagery and symbolism, but *Clear Light of Day* is comparatively deficient in this aspect. There are, of course, a few images that repeat themselves -- those of violence and destruction -- a cow drowned (p. 107), a dog shot dead (p. 128), a bunch of

#7 Sabhadra Sen Gupta, *92-641.*
mulberries crushed (p.161) -- reminding continuously of the inevitable phenomenon of death. All these images are bound up with the course of the action, and are aesthetically relevant to the main design. The novelist moves from one episode to another, linking them together to form a unified pattern.

"The episodes used in the novel are like the pieces of the thematic jigsaw puzzle which the reader has to piece together to see a clear picture of the family life in the right perspective." Apart from this, the writer's prose style is less lyrical than in other stories, but is somewhat laboured and perhaps in keeping with the serious subject matter in hand. "That so much is accomplished without excessive narrative or flashbacks, or a complex plot, is virtually a miracle in Indo-English fiction."*

In summing up, the novels of Anita Desai exhibit the art of careful planning. Kamoda's conviction that the sense of ending is the major consideration of a novelist is not shared by her. She sees the ending in proportion to "beginning" and "middle" -- each part of a whole, balanced and complete. Like Henry James, she asserts that "when I begin a novel I have only the vaguest idea how it will end, but as I write, this vague idea gradually becomes clearer and clearer so that

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at last, the ending seems inevitable. The stories show an abundance of incidents, scenes, and characters. We delight in new scenes, as they arise in turn for their own sake. 'Here is God's plenty', we may murmur, borrowing Dryden's comment on Chaucer. All incidents occupy an important place in the train of events, arranged with a due sense of balance and proportion. There is a certain unity, a certain completeness carrying everything necessary to create a sense of organic wholeness and containing almost nothing that distracts the attention from the total effect. The writer's artistic maturity is to be found in the fact that she rejects everything that is irrelevant and superficial and concentrates her attention on what is essential. The result is that in her novels, there is a happy "fusion of form with content, of texture with structure."^{51}

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