4.1 Introduction

Literature reveals principally three sets of relationships – human beings in relation to universe, individual in relation to society and man in relation to woman. Indian novelists have risen to the occasion and adequately reflected the various human relationships including the image of woman and man-woman relationships. Anita Desai explores man-woman relationships from different angles. This chapter examines husband-wife relationships first and then the women protagonists of the novels of Desai are given an existential stance. For this purpose, the traditional place occupied by woman in Indian cultural set-up has been briefly outlined. In addition to these, the present chapter also intends to show that the aspects of feminism found in the novels of Desai are merely an extension of existentialism and that Desai has a leaning towards womanism.

Existential literature claims to be a witness to its times. Though it is linked to philosophy, it is also related to naturalism and to the involvement which draws its witness to a subject with a contemporary setting or situation. Existential literature claim that they have received the revelation of the age of catastrophe in which they live and an urgent mandate to warn the world about
it. Sartre and Beauvoir are of the opinion that the writer is en situation in his age. The intention of the writer is to participate in the occurrence and development of changes in the society that surrounds him.

Women are a part of the human reality. Therefore, the existentialist writer cannot ignore the predicaments of women in the contemporary world. Existential philosophers have not been occupied by sexuality. Heidegger makes no mention of it; his “dasein” or mere “being there” seems to be asexual. Sartre comments that sexual differentiation has nothing to do with existence since every man exists and nothing more or less. Existentialism denies the existence of a common human nature. In Sartre’s words, men have a metaphysical condition in common and not nature. They differ from one another in as much as their situations differ. Therefore existential approach is to study the unfolding of a human venture where the protagonists, male or female, are involved in the search for their identity as subjects in freely chosen project. There is a synchronization between existential literature and its times.

Anita Desai, like an existentialist writer, is also aware of the peculiar predicament of the Indian woman and the awakening among modern educated women who are engaged in the quest to determine their place in the society, to establish their identity, to see themselves as humans and not objects. Woman is a subject as much as she is a human consciousness. She surrenders her
subjectivity when she unfolds her concrete existence and becomes an object. Like every human being, she is "an autonomous freedom." In other words, when she chooses to be the one which has been created by a subject other than herself, she confines herself to being an object, each time she wears the features that others have chosen for her she becomes a captive. When she makes the choice herself, she asserts herself and the problem becomes one of values. The ratio of failures and successes gives the measure of the authenticity of her existence.

Desai's woman protagonists are for ever in quest of answers, eager to question the various differences, but their efforts go very often unanswered. The reason is the indifferent behaviour of the male members of the family. There exists a large dichotomy in their relationship with each other. The theme of the other or the others has been raised by existentialism to a place of prominence. The foundation of the problem of existence of others is common to both sexes and independent from sexuality. In other words the emphasis is on the relationship of an individual as a being with the being of others. The being-for-others is distinct from "being-for-itself." In Sartre's words, "while I am attempting to free myself from others hold on me he is trying to free himself from mine. While I am seeking to enslave the other, the other is seeking to enslave me - conflict is the original name of being-for-others."1
4.2 Man – Woman Relationship

Desai’s novels portray women eager to be close and attached to their husbands, the husbands either preach or behave in a detached, indifferent manner. In such a situation, there is bound to be depression. If the women, are particularly sensitive, the depression would result in breakdown, as in the case of Maya of *Cry the Peacock*. The existential anguish encountered by each woman protagonist will be more comprehensible if each is analyzed in the light of their relationship with their husbands.

4.2.1 Maya – Gautama

Gautama is characterized as an unsympathetic husband having no tender feelings for Maya. Maya accuses him of being insensitive to her feelings. Whenever he gets an opportunity he preaches detachment to Maya. Maya’s approach to life is sensuous and Gautama’s is based on reason. For Gautama, the ultimate goal is to achieve peace or serenity but for Maya it is happiness. Gautama, in reality, is not a cruel husband. There are many instances in the novel, which show that he is kind and considerate to his wife. Maya sees everything in the light of emotion and not truth. She is responsible for her own woes. These differences account for the lack of communication between them. Maya herself comments that their marriage was “broken repeatedly and
repeatedly the pieces were picked up and put together again, as if a sacred icon with which out of the pettiest superstition we could not bear to part."

Throughout the novel their relationship is that of a father and a daughter, not that of a husband and wife. Maya herself admits that Gautama is a surrogate father. Maya feels grateful to him for being gentle and tender to her as her father was. Maya’s father fixation is obvious in her expectation of the affection of a father from Gautama and also the love of a husband. Though Gautama is a success as a substitute for father, he fails to play the role of a husband. For him, drinking tea is a sensible solution to Maya’s problem. His cruel remark, “it’s all over, come and drink your tea” drives her to uncontrollable fury. When Toto dies he does not feel sorry for he knows that death is certain for the born. According to Gautama, Maya lives in a world of illusions and is not able to understand reality:

Life is a fairytale to you still. What have you learnt of the realities? The realities of common human existence not love and romance, but living and dying and working, all that constitutes for the ordinary man [. . .] . Yes and all you ever knew was happiness. What a crime! A crime because it was a delusion.

Maya does not tell her husband about her childhood encounter with the astrologer and his prophecy. She becomes miserable and makes life miserable for Gautama too. His indifference or forgetfulness makes Maya decide in
favour of murder. Her failure to see things in an objective way causes her downfall.

4.2.2 Monisha – Jiban

Monisha is not like any other Bengali woman she is not “one of those, vast, soft, masses-of-rice-Bengali woman, with a bunch of keys at their waist and nothing in her head but a reckoning of the stores in her pantry, and nothing in her heart but a stupid sense of injury and affront.” She is a voracious reader, an intellectual with a liking for Kafka, Hopkins, Dostoyevsky and French and Sanskrit works. She feels oppressed and persecuted as she is deprived of privacy and solitude. Even when her sister Amla visits her, she is not left alone with her. When Amla departs from the Bow Bazar house Monisha appears to her like a spectre, “her head protruding from the dark window was like that of a stuffed rag doll with a very white face nodding insecurely on its neck, its eyebrows and mouth painted unnaturally dark.”

Monisha feels like a trapped animal in Calcutta. Jiban, her husband, knows very little of her misery. He does not know how to comfort her. Absence of love results in husband-wife alienation. He is not kind and considerate towards his wife. Instead of caring for her feelings he sides with his own people. He does not sympathize with her. When Monisha is accused of theft he too joins them. As there is no love in her relationship with Jiban, she does not
feel hurt and she does not regret a total separation from him. Added to this is the stigma of barrenness. All these make her feel imprisoned in her husband’s parents’ house. “There is no escape from it,” she cries and reacts with such a hysterical intensity that even her emotionless husband is surprised. When Nirode takes her out for a stroll Monisha enjoys her temporary freedom like a free bird.

Monisha who wants to lead an intellectual life is caught in an oppressive milieu. She longs for unbinding love but this kind of love is not available to her. Jiban destroys whatever meaning their relationship might have had. Her attempts to make her relationship with Jiban meaningful, makes her lonely. She withdraws from the material concerns of the family. Monisha realizes that she has never given herself completely. Her fear of touch and passion reveal that she has confined herself to her own private prison:

I could not bear to have her touch me while she is singing and humming and swaying to this loud music. I cannot bear to touch, however vicariously, this appalling exhibition, of a passion, that ravages the soul, body and being [. . .]. I have never touched anyone, never left the imprint of my fingers on anyone’s shoulders; of my tongue on anyone’s damp palate.
She realizes that she is completely alienated. So she sets herself ablaze and dies before help could reach her.

4.2.3 Adit – Sarah

Adit and Sarah differ in several respects. Though aware of the hostile attitude of the whites, he makes himself at home. But, Sarah is not able to make her external and personal world meet. Adit is a good conversationalist whereas Sarah prefers silence. Adit prefers a gay life and enjoys himself whereas Sarah takes refuge in the kitchen. Adit accepts his existence at London as a temporary sojourn. He is an exile in an alien land and his alienation springs from being torn between acceptance and rejection. Adit has the guarantee that he will be accepted in his own country. But, Sarah has no assurance in her own homeland. When she is sent to London for a secretarial course she finds herself cut from her homeland. She is not eager to visit her parents. She meets them out of duty than feeling. Life is unreal to her as she is constantly under tension.

When she marries Adit, an Indian, her personality disintegrates. Though very devoted to Adit, she avoids answering any personal questions and is ashamed of her Indian husband. She is suffering from the fear of facing the unknown and so she prefers solitude. Adit is the very cause of her isolation and alienation. Sarah never protests to him. Adit takes the decision to return to India as he feels the problem of identity crisis will be solved only through this
decision. In seeking his own self, Adit is responsible for the loss of self that his decision implies for Sarah. But, there is no loss of identity in the case of Sarah. She is optimistic that at least in India she would have an identity. When Adit explodes, “My son will be born in India,” she is repelled but still swallows it and submits to the household activities. She refuses a promotion in her job in order to accompany her husband to the east. In fact the nature of the relatedness of Sarah and Adit can be described in Erich Fromm’s words:

Both persons involved have lost their integrity and freedom, they live each other and from each other, satisfying their craving for closeness. Yet suffering from the lack of inner strength and self-reliance which would require freedom and independence and further more constantly threatened by the conscious and unconscious hostility which is bound to arise from the symbiotic relationship.¹⁰

4.2.4 Sita – Raman

Raman, the husband of Sita represents the prose of life. Like Gautama of Cry the Peacock, Raman is unable to understand the violence and the passion with which Sita reacts against every incident. Their marriage is not the result of love or affection but a result arising out of circumstances. When soon after her marriage Sita goes to live with her husband’s parents, she finds the company of
the men and woman of her husband's family intolerable. According to Sita, they are leading unauthentic existences. They lack inwardness and a capacity for self-examination, which in Sita's opinion are the signs of an authentic existence. She finds "the vegetarian complacence, the stolidity of the well fed"[11] infuriating. The predicament of Sita is expressed clearly below:

She took their insularity and complacence as well as the aggression and violence of others as affronts upon her own living nerves.[12]

Raman represents sanity, rationality and an acceptance of the norms and values of society. Sita on the other hand is highly sensitive and emotional in her behavior and she refuses to conform to the values of the society. When she informs Raman of her trip to Manori Island to prevent the fifth child from being born into a world of destruction, Raman is puzzled. He thinks that she is a fool as she is not thinking of her own condition. He is of the view that Sita is going mad. He even suspects that her distress is only a drama. He tells her to behave like an adult and cope up with small incidents as they occur in everyone's life. Raman regards people as his friends, visitors, business associates, colleagues or acquaintances. But, Sita could never get used to any formalities and she finds people intolerable. Raman is courageous and faces the challenges of life boldly. Sita prefers to escape from them and runs away to
Manori Island. Their children depend on Raman for strength and support and not on Sita. Raman gets accustomed to Sita's occasional emotional outbursts.

Raman arrives on Manori Island to take Sita and his children away. When Sita refuses to return and deliver the child, he remarks:

Other people put up with it – it's not so - so insufferable [ . . . ]
why can't you? Perhaps one should be grateful if life is only a matter of disappointment, not disaster.\textsuperscript{13}

Sita, according to Raman, is inhuman to deny motherhood. He accuses her of running away from the dull but safe routine. Though Raman is practical he does not give Sita the love and understanding that she is craving for. For Raman reality has only one way – the logical way. Sita feels that she is unloved as a wife and rejected as a mother. She realizes the futility of escape and reconciles with Raman. She returns and decides to have the child.

4.2.5 Nanda – Kaul

Nanda Kaul's role as the wife of a Vice-chancellor had filled her life with suffering. When she recalls her past-life, she is filled with disgust. Her indifference to the past or busy world is born out of her dislike of the call of duty. Visitors called on them frequently at the house in the university town in Punjab. She had to mend clothes, sew on strings and buttons. She had to concentrate in cooking and in giving instructions to the servant girl. She had to
look after her children. In the midst of this din, the wives and daughters of lecturers and professors who worked under her husband paid sudden visits. Nanda Kaul managed very well and when she heard them praising her for her efforts she pretended not to hear. She tried hard to suppress her dislike for them. She had to put up with neurotic ayahs as there was a great deal of washing and ironing to do. Mr. Kaul wanted her to be dressed always in silk and “at the head of the long rosewood table in the dining-room, entertaining his guests.”

After the death of her husband she shifted to Carignano as she wanted to lead a life of solitude. Eventually, Nanda Kaul realizes that she has been deceiving herself with fabrications. Her husband had not loved her at all. These fabrications helped her to sleep at night. They were sleeping pills to her. She reflects:

Nor had 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 David, the mathematics mistress whom he had not married because she was a Christian but whom he had loved, all his life loved.
She was also coerced to acknowledge the fact that she did not come to carignano by choice but she was forced to do so. Her children never loved her and were all alien to her.

4.2.6 Deven – Sarla

Deven is considered a 'boring teacher' of Hindi at Mirpore. He loves Urdu poets. His life on the domestic front is not bright. Marriage with Sarla does not bring him any joy or security in his life. Sarla was not his choice. Sarla his wife is a plain, penny-pinching and congenitally pessimistic woman who has been selected by Deven's aunt as a bride for him for these very virtues. As a young girl she had the usual aspirations of her girl friends, to own the three F's. "Fan, Phone, Frigideaire – They would shout whenever anyone mentioned a wedding, a bridegroom, a betrothal and dissolve in hectic laughter."16 But by marrying into the academic profession and by living in a small town, all her dreams had been rudely swept away. Desai comments:

The thwarting of her aspirations that cut two dark furrows from the corners of her nostrils to the corners of her mouth as deep and permanent as surgical scars [. . .]. They made her look forbidding and perhaps that was why her husband looked so perpetually forbidden even if he understood their cause. He understood

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because, like her he had been defeated too, like her he was a victim.17

Disappointment had not brought them closer. To live on a lecturer’s salary is an oppressive experience to Sarla. Though Deven and Sarla have no choice, it has given their marriage a permanent quality of despair:

Although each understood the secret truth about the other, it did not bring about any closeness of spirit any comradeship, because they also sensed that two victims ought to avoid each other, not yoke together their joint disappointments.18

Deven finds himself in a financial mess. Sarla is expecting a child and so he is forced to do a feature on Nur’s poetry in Murad’s, his friend’s journal. Deven, at least, takes refuge in urdu poetry whereas Sarla has nothing to sustain her in life. He is an average husband, shouts at his wife and blames her for everything. He actually protests against her disappointment and tries to take revenge upon her for harbouring it.

The most prominent feature of Desai’s fiction is her mode of individualizing the character. She is preoccupied with the portrayal of woman as living in a world in which fear, doubt and uncertainty prevail. Almost all her protagonists are hypersensitive, lonely and introspective. Each of them is alone in the world. She writes as a woman projecting only the feminine point of
view in most of her early novels. Dr. Pathak's opinion is very much to the point:

Through her themes, characterization and images about confinement and lack of freedom Anita Desai has raised pertinent questions regarding the status and role of women in society. The most crucial issue that she takes up for discussion again and again is the question of women's freedom.\(^\text{19}\)

The woman protagonists in the novels of Desai are envisaged in the perspective of this conflict. Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* says, "The drama of woman is played in the conflict between the fundamental claim of every subject to set itself up as essential and the demands of her situation."\(^\text{20}\)

The for-itself and in-itself are two key words in existential philosophical vocabulary. The in-itself in the women protagonists in Desai's novels is just there and exists independently from them. The for-itself projects itself causing an upheaval of their in-itself when they try to achieve their goals. This upheaval of the for-itself concerns the individual venture or in other words this upsurge is the existence of the self.

For the existentialist, to love is the project of being loved by another subject and not by another object. This establishes the difference between love and desire, between love and mere possession. Maya of *Cry the Peacock* is in
love with life. When she longs for love and involvement what she gets from the partner is a harangue on the greatness of detachment and practicality.

Maya's suffering emanates from her existential struggle to make her relationship with Gautama meaningful and her desire to experience life with all the pleasures it is capable of offering. Maya thinks that her husband knows very little of her misery and that, he does not know how to comfort her. She feels lonely and neglected. Telling her to go to sleep, he works at his papers, not giving another thought to her, to either the soft willing body or the lonely waiting mind that waits at his bed. Maya is sexually frustrated and takes refuge in "furious pillow-beating, kicking, everything but crying." Maya's cry for love is clearly evident in, "I am dying, and I am in love with living. I am in love and I am dying."

For Maya, love is a great and splendid ideal and her unhappiness results from her feeling of a lack of love in life. Her father loved her intensely and now she longs for her husband's love. Love is the basic fact of her existence and deprived of it from the only one who could have given it she gets frustrated.

Monisha of Voices in the City seeks to find love that is free and unbinding. She feels like a craven tragedian due to lack of love in her life. She is afraid of the inroads that love may make into her life:
I see now that both Nirode and I shy from love, fear it as attachment, for from attachment arises longing [...] if only love existed that is not binding that is free of rules, obligations, complicity and all stirrings of mind or conscience, then [...] but there is no such love.²³

Sita, the protagonist of Where Shall We Go This Summer?, strongly feels that marriage is a farce and all the human relationships are false in the absence of love. Her husband is scant in expressing his love and his understanding of her desires is very meager. Like wise, Nanda Kaul's life though full on the surface, is empty at the core due to lack of love. There is no love or affection between the two when Nanda kaul and Raka embrace each other. The union is a mechanical one. The trauma of childhood made Raka silent and reserved in nature.

The endless quarrels of her parents had left a scar on the child. She is a very lonesome and prematurely serious child and for this reason she seems indifferent to Nanda Kaul. Solitude never disturbed Raka. This extraordinary attribute of Raka makes her appear almost a kindred spirit to Nanda Kaul. She restrains herself from being drawn to Raka with great difficulty. Nanda Kaul as well as Raka, are human portents of isolation. Both of them need to do away with the mutual barriers of communication. Both Raka and Nanda seek to
exclude what they need most – security and fulfillment of love. Nanda Kaul’s gradual involvement in Raka’s world is suggestive of this need. Both of them need to overcome the obstacles in the path of affection and need to respond to each other’s intense desire for love.

In Clear Light of Day, Bim loves Raja intensely but he runs away and reverses his role from that of a brother to one of land lord. Raja sends an invitation for his daughter’s marriage to Tara and he does not even mention Bim’s name on it. Bim, who plays the role of a foster-mother, is humiliated and comes to the conclusion that she is being neglected. This accounts for Bim’s existential anguish. But towards the end of the novel there is a transition in Bim from hatred to love and this enables her to willingly forgive Raja. Sarla of In Custody also yearns for love in her relationship with Deven. She is disappointed in Deven as he shouts at her and accuses her without reason. All her dreams and desires are shattered completely. She finds it difficult to make both ends meet with the meager salary that Deven draws as a lecturer. This discontent did not bring her any closer to Deven.

†Women in order "to exist” must choose herself in a project. She is then Transcendence and not Immanence. Transcendence is the attribute of mind, which allows it to reach out beyond itself. It is the beckoning of "the distant self", the "remote being" of Heidegger towards which we aspire. It
expresses the trust that moves the self in the direction of self-fulfilment. It moves ahead always in search of a "tantalizing me" which is elsewhere. It resembles metaphysical anguish, a phenomenon experienced in one's soul as well as in one's body. It is that source of physical disturbance, which Sartre baptized with the now famous name "Nausea". Nausea is a feeling of dizziness experienced when a being, feeling "being there" (dasein) pulls away from the surge of nothingness in suspension over the abyss of existence. Kierkegaard uses a metaphor to describe the feeling -- "alone in a small embarkation over seventy fathoms of water."25

The portrait of a woman starts with a measure of her anguish. Metaphysical anguish becomes more violent when a woman is more evolved. Psychological anguish settles in her throat, her heart and her bowels and is less passive. The more a heroine is conscious, the more she is a prey to anguish and refuses the passive life of a vegetable. The woman who remains at the level of passive acceptance, is less susceptible to anguish or Nausea. Most of Desai's woman protagonists are susceptible to that "Nauseous emptiness" which hollows out their being.

In Bye-Bye Blackbird, Sarah becomes suspicious of her acceptance anywhere and she yearns for freedom. It is not freedom from conventions or traditions but freedom from the self; the self which carries the stigma of
"Mrs. Sen" which she wants to hide, conceal and escape from. Her psychological anguish or neurosis is caused by her inability to attach meaning to experience as well as to establish contact with her environment. When she ceases to possess any defined status in society she responds by retreat into an exile. She avoids the outside world because the social framework begins to disintegrate. Maya's anguish is due to her inability to strike a meaningful relationship with Gautam. She muses:

Already we belonged to separated worlds [. . .] it was mind that was hell. Torture, guilt, dread, imprisonment, these were the four walls of my private hell, one that no one could survive in long.²⁶

Monisha's nausea springs from her wanting to be free. She finds it difficult to free herself from her duties. The change in Monisha due to her inner conflict is described by Amla as "not so much a change on the surface and body [. . .] something seemed to have seized the girl and turned her inside out giving her an eerie unreality."²⁷ Sita's bitterness stems from her inability to remain contented in a world of kitchen and bedroom. She finds that majority of the members of the society live lives of boredom and deadness. She puts it dramatically as, "They are animals – nothing but appetite and sex. Only food, sex and money matter. Animals."²⁸ Sita’s bitterness is in many ways akin to the bitterness experienced by hundreds of new women in America, Europe and
other developed and developing countries who undergo inner turmoil of a strange, unknown nature. If man wants to fulfill himself by making his own commitment to life, why not women be given their chance to realize themselves. This irks women all over the world and so does it irk Sita.

Bim is not tormented by the present. What agonizes her comes from the past. She suffers from neither the trauma of a shattered childhood nor an incompatible marriage. Her brother's rejection or neglect, makes her angry and unhappy. Staying in the same place teaching in the same college and looking after those who have remained behind like Baba it seems to her sister Tara at first that Bim is very contented having everything she wants. Yet before long Tara too realizes that Bim is no less contented than herself.

Nanda Kaul's angst or anguish is seen in her attempt to shut out the world of light and shade, sounds and voices. She had practised the art of remaining still for years and "the most difficult had been those years in that busy house where doors were never shut, and feet flew, 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 [. . .]. All was subdued, but nothing was ever still." Sarla is also not spared from this nauseous feeling. Her angst...
evident on her face in the form of “two dark furrows from the corners of her nostrils to the corners of her mouth.” 30

4.3 Existential Predicament of Desai’s Woman Protagonists

The woman protagonists of Desai’s novels are strangely situated in their times. Maya, Monisha, Sita, Sarah, Nanda Kaul, Bim, Sarla, all represent women of a tormented age. They dwell in city streets rather than country lanes and are made to view world in a somber light dominated by anguish and desperation as per the philosophical postulates of their creator. They represent, a restless and tragic generation. In addition to the search for being, they are also confronted with a time when individual as well as traditional human values are on trial.

4.3.1 Dereliction

At the heart of a consciousness, the existentialist finds an ontological situation labeled “dereliction” by Heidegger. The word conjures the obsession of the individual who feels as a stranger stranded in an absurd world and wonders: What is the use? What for? Why am I trapped in this huge machinery? Woman is singled out as the privileged victim of desperation caught up by tradition in a situation that leads her down the path to immanence. In Voices in the City, Calcutta is shown as following a pattern of monotonous activity without acquiring any meaning. Monisha feels like a caged animal in
Calcutta. The city does not offer privacy to her. She wonders if she could adapt herself to this oppressive city:

Has this city a conscience at all, this Calcutta that holds its head between its knees and grins toothlessly up at me from beneath a bottom black with the dirt that it sits on? 31

Looking at the women around her Monisha asks herself:

Why are lives such as these lived? At their conclusion what solution; What truth falls into the waiting palm of one's hand, the still pit of one's heart? 32

All the pettiness and trivialities of a mean existence overwhelm her. She is aware that most women survive pretending to forget to believe in these trivialities, in this meanness of stifling existence.

Sarah, like an existentialist, wants to know her identity and therefore she questions herself:

Who was she [. . .] Mrs. Sen who had been married in a red and gold Benares brocade Sari one burning, bronzed day in September [. . .] she could not even tell with how much sincerity she played one role or 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? 33
Nanda Kaul enjoyed the status of the wife of a Vice-chancellor when her husband was alive. Her house was filled with children, grandchildren, servants, guests, all clamouring about her. This busy and intense world failed to give her satisfaction she feels stifled and so she shifts to Carignano where she is leading a life of solitude. She is informed through a letter that her great-granddaughter Raka would come to Carignano for the summer. The letter seemed to remind her of duty to the family and, it also seemed to her as a signal of intrusion into her lonely world. The news disturbs her and she questions herself:

Have I not done enough and had enough? I want no more. I want nothing. Can I be not left with nothing?\textsuperscript{34}

Maya longs for Gautam’s companionship. She becomes frustrated when she hears him preach about detachment from the Gita. She wonders what she had done to deserve such a treatment from her husband who was cold and rational always:

Did I deserve that? [. . .] was it so unforgivable to wish to share in human friendliness? In companionship?\textsuperscript{35}

Maya becomes utterly confused when she tries to uncover the meaning behind this futile existence. She wonders about values and asks herself, “What was true? What was lasting? What to believe in? What reject?”\textsuperscript{36}
4.3.2 Alienation and Mythomania

Alienation is rooted in facticity and deception, the non-acceptance of reality. One of the partners refuses to assume reality and seeks refuge in a world that he or she creates. These are the "Mythomaniacs". The flight from reality is a fundamental human activity. When a woman suffers from mythomania she selects from the world a few particles and creates that mosaic of an inner chapel where she retries herself to a life of pretense. Ann of Nausea has built herself a closed world in her hotel rooms. She has decorated them with shawls, draperies, masks, mementoes of her past. The outside world stops at her door. Like wise, Nanda Kaul of Fire on the Mountain isolates herself from her sons and daughters after her husband's death. She isolated herself at Carignano. Finding reality unbearable she builds a protective wall of solitude at Carignano. She had reached such a stage that she felt much closer to the trees than to any human being. She longs to be one with the pine trees and "be mistaken for one. To be a tree, no more and no less, was all she was prepared to undertake." She loves the freedom she enjoys at Carignano. For her, moment of loneliness is a moment of private triumph. She has alienated herself from others to such an extent that the presence of another person in the house is enough to upset her:
She would never be able to sleep --- how could she sleep with someone else in the house? She was so unused to it. It would upset her so.\textsuperscript{38}

Nanda Kaul's life was mere fabrication. Ila's death rips the curtain off and reveals the hideous reality:

It was all a lie [...] the children were all alien to her nature. She neither understood nor loved them. She did not live alone by choice; that was what she was forced to do, reduced to doing.\textsuperscript{39}

Sarah's is a case of personal and psychological alienation. With her marriage to a dark man a crisis sets in. She endeavours hard to assimilate and to belong and becomes more of an alien. There is an attempt on her part to hide and to be unnoticed. This is clearly evident in her desire to be enveloped by rain:

Rain steamed down the window panes. She had deliberately left uncurtained for she loved the sight of it closing about her surrounding her, separating her from the world with its lustrous curtains.\textsuperscript{40}

After marriage she stops caring for her past life she fears the world, their looks and their enquiries. She feels secure once she enters her room at school. The registers and copybooks are like a fortress for her. Her anxiety, her fears
all vanish once she takes up her role of the Head's secretary. She feels safe in her own private world. In her little world, cocoa mugs and potted plants, she is laconic and reserved but self-possessed and casual. But, she is always on the defensive once outside. She keeps to the loneliest path, "walking under the trees and drawing across her face a mask of secrecy."\textsuperscript{41}

Sita finds the men and women of her husband's family leading an unusual existence. To challenge them, to shatter their calmness and sluggishness she behaves provocatively. She feels suffocated and wants to shake herself free of this existence, which offers no meaning. She comes to the conclusion that existence is degeneration. She finds herself an alien in her own world. The wide gulf that alienates her from her husband and children is evident from the crow – eagle episode. One Sunday morning Sita sees a crowd of crows attacking an eagle and tearing it to pieces with their beaks. Sita identifies herself with the proud, defiant eagle. The situation is expressive of the conflict in her own life. Sita is hopeful that Manori would enable her to achieve the miracle of not giving birth to her child. Sita's retreat to Manori with its promise of renewal and regeneration implies alienation. In Sita's case it is social alienation.
Maya is psychologically and personally alienated from her husband. This feeling of being alienated explains the loneliness felt by her in her own house:

Something slipped into my tear [. . .] hazed vision. A shadowy something that prodded me into admitting that it was not my pet's death alone that I mourned today but another sorrow, unremembered, perhaps yet not even experienced, and it filled me with this despair [. . .]. It is that [. . .] my loneliness in this house.42

Monisha's pride in being different from others, turn into the most potent cause of her agony. She is alienated from the members of Jiban's family and is not able to find solace in their company:

Every one in that afternoon audience seemed intensely capable of responding to passion with passion, to sorrow with sorrow. Monisha alone stood apart, unnaturally cool, too perfectly aloof, too inviolably whole and alone and apart.43
4.3.3 Rebellion and Existence

The pressure of social traditions, lead the young woman protagonists of Desai’s novels along alleys to nowhere and make puppets out of them. But, their critical efforts to exist take the form of a rebellion. The first step towards the search for being is to rebel.

Monisha is a young wife who is unable to adjust herself to the demands of marriage. She could not tolerate being part of a joint family that leaves her with no privacy. She rebels inwardly against passive existence within the rigid confines of a traditional Hindu family. She confines herself to her room. She advises Amla to always "go in the opposite direction."\(^{44}\) It is an advice to rebel. Monisha's suicide is an attempt to rebel against this meaningless death-like isolation. It is an attempt to give a meaning to herself, at least in death. Her suicide asserts her freedom, as it is an exercise of her choice. In the novel, it is Nirode who alone realizes the significance of his sister's death. Like Monisha, Maya in *Cry the Peacock* rebels against Gautama internally for his autocratic and selfish behaviour. She knows the fact that "In his world there were vast areas in which he would never permit me and he couldn't understand that I could even wish to enter them, foreign as they were to me."\(^{45}\)
According to existential philosophy, idleness and boredom can breed sadistic yearnings. Sexual weariness brings about violence and a taste for killing. Maya kills her husband Gautam by pushing him off the roof. Sexuality represents womanness and selfhood and is a significant aspect of a woman’s experience. Sexually frustrated she feels that her world of sensuous abundance can be protected only in this way. According to Albert Camus, suicide and murder are thus two aspects of a single system, “the system of an unhappy intellect which rather than suffer limitation choose the dark victory which annihilates earth and heaven.”

Sita rebels against the sub-humanity of her husband's family by smoking, an unusual habit for a Hindu house- wife, and by speaking in sudden rushes of emotion. She does not wish to bring her child into the destructive world. She is anxious about the safety of the unborn child. She muses:

How could civilization survive? How could she hold them whole and pure and unimpeached in the midst of this bloodshed? They would surely be wounded, fall and die.

Sita's decision to go to Manori in the middle of the monsoon and her refusal to give birth to her child are acts of rebellion.
Bim rebels against male hierarchy and so opts out of marriage. She chooses to be independent entirely out of volition. She is too intelligent to conform to the tradition. She refuses to accept an existence that would be at the mercy of male hierarchy, which surrounds her.

The women in the novels of Desai are caught in problems and conflicts that deal with their condition as being-in-the world. Protagonists Maya, Monisha, Nanda Kaul etc., are lonely and long desperately for love. Their consciousness, seem unable to open themselves to others and they remain their own prisons. Their self-centered activity has removed them from the highest exercise of a consciousness and the very condition of its existence i.e., communication with another. What is significant in Desai's novels is that the question of institution of marriage, of the vocation of motherhood, of fidelity are tied to the search for being. This fundamental quest is situated in the specific roles of mother or wife and is not determined by them.

Based on the analysis of the characteristics of existentialism, it would not be out of context if the woman protagonists of Desai's novels, are baptized as "the existential woman".
4.4 Position of women in Indian cultural set up

The psychic or existential needs of each individual vary according to the cultural set-up, the social status and sex. In India, family plays a dominant role in the life of a woman. Woman in India survive on the threads of attachment. The family ties are more important than her own welfare. Her own emotional well being depends on her relationship with her family members. In a cultural environment where a woman is known by her family and is identified with it, the bonds should be strong. The woman feels completely lost without this familial binding force. If this binding force is missing as is shown by Desai, the quest for linkage can well lead a woman to serious emotional problems.

Before marriage women are brought up strictly according to the traditional codes. The moment a girl reaches adolescence she is constantly reminded of her feminity. She is also reminded by society that she need not assert her individuality as she is destined for man, which is the ultimate goal of her life. The world or society at large is acceptable only through man. If the thread of attachment is broken the very meaning of life is lost for them.

With the western influence on India, the position of woman started undergoing a change. With the country's independence in 1947, an awareness in all walks of life dawned on them and woman took pains to acquire her own identity. A great stress has been laid on the education of
women after independence and attempts are being made ever since to redefine their role in family and society. Higher education has instilled confidence in women and they started asserting themselves in various walks of life.

Analyzing man-woman relationship, Germaine Greer uses the analogy of employer and employee and considers women as "life - contracted unpaid workers" who cannot expect liberation from the clutches of the male. In her essay on "Women: persons or possessions", Nayantara Sahgal, the noted Indian novelist, castigates those who regard women as "property" and discourage individuality in them:

> When I hear someone remark "we never allow our daughter to go out," or I can't do that , my husband would not like it", it sounded a very peculiar alien jargon. As if, I thought, women were property. Not persons.

None would disagree with Simone de Beauvoir's observation that marriage is the destiny traditionally offered to women by society and this is nowhere truer than in India. Women seek marriage as an alternative to the bondage created by the parental family. She resents the role of a daughter and looks forward to the role of a wife with the hope that her new role will help her in winning her freedom. Marriage proves to be another trap and women feel
like caged animals. The traditional attitude of our society is contained in the following advice from Manusmriti:

Pita raksati Kaumarye bharta raksah. Yauvane raksanti sathavire putrah na stri svatantryam arhati.

The father looks after her during childhood, the husband protects her during youth and the sons take care of her when she becomes old. The woman is never fit for freedom.50

The reaction of a woman to a threat in the prevalent cultural context is depression, where as a man's is aggression. Severe depression combined with the feeling of helplessness can result in madness. The western woman has already gone through the stress and strain of breaking the chains of meekness and docility, she is still unsuccessful in finding a ground firm enough to stand all by herself. In the Indian situation, most women have reconciled themselves to their lot. Their crippled state is taken for granted. For such women, depression is not a part of their life. But, if a woman is as eager and questioning as Anita Desai's protagonists, she is bound to be disturbed with her meaningless existence.

The existential struggle to establish one's identity, to assert one's individuality and the desperate struggle to exist as a separate entity appears in all its intensity in the novels of women writers. It is not only in the novels
written by women that we hear the dissent of the existential woman. In R.K.Narayan's *The Dark Room*, Savitri a docile lady expresses her righteous anger by quitting her husband's house. Raman, Savitri's husband gets infatuated with Shanta Bai, a colleague of his and brushes aside Savitri's protests. Like Ibsen's Nora, Savitri refuses to be treated as a pet dog and leaves the house. The fact that she comes back for the sake of her children only enhances her glory as a mother.

When Savitri bewails, "What possession can a woman call her own except her body? Everything else is her father's, her husband's or her son's," she is presenting the predicament of women in male chauvinistic society. It is an echo of the emotional and psychological oppression faced by women and her dependence on father, husband or son for her existence. Likewise, in MulkRaj Anand's *The Old Woman and The Cow*, Gauri leaves her husband when it becomes impossible to bear his taunts. In order to protect her self-respect she has to leave him. These women protest and rebel when they find the world around them hostile for the individual to thrive. Their voice of protest is the cry of the sensitive souls in their existential struggle.

In India, both men and women writers have seen women in different relationships. Both intellectualists and sociologists regard Indian society as a male dominated one. Woman has often been a victim of male oppression and
treated like a beast of burden. In *Voices in the City*, when Aunt Lila remarked that “our country belongs to its men,” she was speaking the truth. According to her, “they like to imagine they run everything, so women ought to just go on and let them imagine it while they get on with the work.” As a result, woman’s individual self has very little recognition and self-effacement is the only course left to her. Indian woman has traditionally surrendered to this hierarchy, accepted her position and lived with it for ages. To quote Bolinger, “women are taught their place along with other lesser breeds.” This unfortunate state of affairs has been responsible for many problems and confusion which women have been condemned to face.

In the rigidly - formed and tradition bound society one has to put up with very severe repression and the resultant suffering often assumes pathetic proportions for sensitive individuals. Women happen to be the worst sufferers as the social norms and moral codes have been so formed as to be particularly disadvantageous to them. This is perhaps why the Indian English women novelists encouraged to a certain extent by their historical and cultural context consistently treated the neurotic phenomenon in their fictional works. In doing so, they have expressed the secret wishes of Indian women whose lot it has been to silently suffer repression for ages at the hands of the establishment.
Society compels every individual to repress his instinctuality. He or she is compelled to forego the chances of deriving pleasure in the act of living. Society's values enter the unconscious of these characters and regulate their behaviour. The protagonists are shown as grappling with psychic conflicts of personal origin. These conflicts and traumas become too pronounced at a particular point of time in their life when a part of their self refuses to submit to repression. In the resultant neurotic struggle against several hostile factors the protagonists display three discreet tendencies: Some move from neurosis to psychosis, others arrive at a compromise solution for their problems and yet another group sets out to become compulsive idealists because they find the realities of life too harsh to put up with.

The protagonists of the novels of Anita Desai have found themselves at odds with societal norms and have undergone psychological transformations. Maya has taken a giant leap from neurosis into psychosis with a final act of violence. Those unwilling to take risks tried to work out a compromise and find fulfilment in the "givens" of their existence. Sita of Where Shall We Go This Summer?, has ultimately accepted her lot in life after having undergone a sobering experience.

Desai has explicitly shown in her novels how the young women of the new generation lead themselves to greater tragedies and struggles and subject
themselves to unspeakable agonies. These women having no faith in conventional religion and joint family and not following any conspicuous ideal, meet nothing but disaster in their lives. Some meet with unnatural death and a few lose their mental equilibrium. Monisha of *Voices in the City* seeks refuge in suicide and Maya of *Cry the Peacock* loses her mental balance in her attempt to get rid of her suffocating environments.

4.5 Aspects of Feminism in Desai’s Novels

Desai’s novels are peopled by women who are in perpetual quest for meaning and value of life. The existential struggle of the women who refuse to float along the current form the core of Desai’s novels. Her inability to compromise and surrender inevitably result in isolation and loneliness. Their bruised selves let out a silent cry. They refuse to yield and compromise and prefer death and miserable life. In their existential struggle they suffer intensely but refuse to be crushed. The refusal to be crushed, the attempt to fight and voice protest is the core of feminism.

Feminism can be defined as a struggle against the hardships, neglect and dual moral standards to which women are subjected. In other words, woman’s demand for her rightful place, recognition and respect due to her is prompted by an inner urge to make her existence a meaningful one. The novelist does not wish to propound “that brand of ‘feminism’, which advocates irrational non-co-
operation with the male species." \(^{55}\) "Feminism" does not restrict itself to a particular dogma or a rigid stand point. On the other hand it regards woman's world as an integral and important part of the world.

At the outset it may be clarified that Anita Desai is not interested in "feminism" as a movement. In one of her interviews she asserts that she does not subscribe to feminism as a mass movement:

> I find it impossible to whip up any interest in a mass of women marching forward under the banner of feminism. \(^{56}\)

But, she agrees that women and their problems interest her.

The term "Feminism" was first used by the French dramatist Alexander Dumas, the younger, in 1872 in a pamphlet 'L' Homme femmme, to designate the then emerging movement for women's rights. It gradually emerged to be a world-wide cultural movement to secure a complete equality of women with men in the enjoyment of all human rights - moral, religious, social, political, educational, legal, economic and so on. Feminism in Indian literature or specifically in Indian English writing is a by-product of the western feminist movement. But, our freedom struggle, spread of education, concern for economic development and stability, employment opportunities and above all the resultant new awareness of our women have also contributed to this
movement. A search for identity and a quest for the meaning of existence have become the prime features of feminism in literature.

Alice Walker divided women into three kinds "suspended", "part of the mainstream" and "awakened by political force." Indian women are reconciled to the position of a lack of understanding between them and their men characters. In other words, they belong to the "suspended" kind. Some question their lot but are unable to break away and resign themselves as "part of the mainstream." Monisha of Voices in the City questions her lot but she has no alternative but to stay in the joint family, nor has she the ability to attain detachment. She had to choose between mean existence and death.

She chose death, as it seems to be the easy way out. Hence in all the novels written by women about women there is very little satisfaction or victory that a woman can aspire for in a male-dominated world. There is never a total breaking away for her. Desai in Where Shall We Go This Summer? seems to be saying just that through her protagonist Sita, who may rebel against annihilation and depersonalization, but return she does. For a more self-assertive woman, divorce is the only form of release. However, divorced women are subjected to even greater harassment. Women are scoffed at whenever they have tried to climb out of the traditional limitations of domestic obligations by claiming to be a human being.
In a patriarchal social set-up "masculinity" is associated with superiority whereas "feminity" is linked with inferiority. Masculinity implies strength, action, self-assertion and domination; feminity implies weakness, passivity, docility, obedience and self-negation. Traditionally man has been regarded as a protector, a master, a guardian of woman. So far man has treated her as a child and she too accepted it mutely. But her new found identity would not approve of it any more. And here begins her conflict. The old habit compels her to accept to be treated as a child, while the realization of her new identity compels her to liberate herself from the ages old guardian-child chain.

Gautama treats Maya as a child in *Cry the Peacock* and she resents it. Once when both of them were walking together and Maya talks of the flower, Gautama plucks it and hands it to Maya saying, "Who should deny you that?" he said "and smiled at me as to a winsome child." Later in a debate, Maya says, "And you will think me a tiresome child for it, for showing what you once called my 'third-rate poetess mind.' The existential woman has started resenting this attitude. She has finally realized that she is not as helpless and dependent as a child. She is as much competent as a man. Unlike a conventional woman, Maya fearlessly fights to assert her point of view. She has the courage to tell Gautama:
You know nothing of me and of how I can love you. How I want to love. How it is important to me. But you, you've never loved.\footnote{59}

In another situation, Gautama wants Maya to listen to him, but then she says "No" and further adds "you listen to me tonight."\footnote{60} This is the voice of the awakened woman. While fighting against the old sanskars, there are occasions when all of them suffer from the feeling of aloneness and alienation. She is struggling to come out by breaking away from its shackles.

The existential woman has begun to resent man's willful overlooking of woman's wishes, likes and dislikes. Raman in Where Shall We Go This Summer? muses on this point:

All through their married life they had preferred to avoid a confrontation. All that they have done, he now saw, was to pile on the fury till now when it exploded. Perhaps there had been incidents, thoughts during the day he had not known about, would have left undisturbed had he known [. . .].\footnote{61}

Maya is genuinely interested in Kathakali dances, the ballet etc., so she requests Gautama to take her to the south. To this he says, "If that is your only reason for wanting to go all the way to south, I suggest you wait till a Kathakali troupe comes to give performance in Delhi [. . .] It will be less expensive."\footnote{62}
Present day woman has realized the unjust nature of such an attitude and has started thinking on different lines.

As long as the thought and feelings of the woman in all respects flowed together with those of man's she had the feeling of security and togetherness. Now when she has started thinking and feeling different she has started feeling alienated from man. She has started thinking of independent and self-reliant life. Bim of *Clear Light of Day* translates this thinking into reality. Unlike most Indian girls, she opts out of marriage. She chooses the path of spinsterhood to pursue a career and a way of life, which she accepts gracefully despite its limitations. She refuses to play the conventional role of a sex object and submissive wife and becomes in a sense, a truly liberated woman. The existential woman has started fighting against her own timid self as well as man's protectoral shell.

Women had mutely accepted and practised the ages - old traditions and customs like clearing up the mess with her bare hands after each meal, eating off the same dirty plate her husband had eaten earlier, getting married and bearing children and sharing the belief that a woman can't live alone. Monisha of *Voices in the City* makes a similar sad observation on her visit to the zoo with her nephews:
I see many women, always Bengali women, who follow five paces, behind their men [. . .] Kalyani and Jiban's mother [. . .] and I think of generations of Bengali women hidden behind the barred windows of half dark rooms spending centuries in washing clothes, kneading dough and murmuring aloud verses from the Bhagavad-Gita and the Ramayana in the dim light of sooty lamps.63

Women have spent their lives waiting for their husbands, waiting for them to take their decisions. The life of Indian women, passive and dependent, spent in waiting is subtly evoked in all her novels. In Cry the Peacock, the entire situation of hopelessness, waiting that is too nauseating is summed up in “She sat there, sobbing and waiting for her husband to come home.”64

The life of ceaseless passive waiting has been evoked in all the novels. This kind of life has been referred to in Voices in the City as, “Lives spent in waiting for nothing, waiting on men self-centred.”65 The meaningless waiting and fruitless involvement act as the catalysis of their unrest.

A humiliating sense of neglect, of loneliness, of desperation is the lot of most of Desai’s women characters. Sarla of In Custody represents the destiny of most of them:
Sarla never lifted her voice in his (Deven’s) presence countless generations of Hindu womanhood behind her stood in her way, preventing her from displaying open rebellion. Deven knew she would scream and abuse only when she was safely out of her way, to go into the bedroom and snivel, refusing to speak at all, inciting their child to wail in sympathy.66

Women find themselves in a world where men condemn them to “immanence” and their existence is justified only as an object of sex. They are defined as Simone de Beauvoir says, “with reference to man and not he with reference to her, she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the subject, he is the Absolute — she is the other.”67 Women and their lives are circumscribed by traditional values. Though she is a free and autonomous being like all creatures, she finds herself living in a world where men compel her to assume the status of the other. In Voices in the City when Monisha forgets to proceed according to the prescribed rituals, she is pushed by her husband “into the embrace of his mother who is all in white and smells of clean rice and who, while placing her hand on my head in blessing, also pushes a little harder, till I realize what it means, and go down on my knees to touch her feet [. . .].”68

Women are victims of loneliness and isolation due to the ill-treatment they receive at the hands of men. Women are subjected to mental and physical
oppression as in the case of Tara, Nanda Kaul and Ila Das. Nanda Kaul suffers from mental oppression because she had to live with the knowledge that her husband was carrying on a life-long affair with a Christian woman. He had kept her in comfort only to keep her mouth shut. Tara faces acute mental agony "as a result of his (Rakesh's) ill-treatment of her, the affairs he had, his drinking and brutality, and was reduced to a helpless jelly, put away out of sight and treated as an embarrassment [. . .] ."69 Nanda Kaul's childhood friend, Ila Das's life is marked by painful events. Faced with acute financial problems she becomes a welfare officer in the hills. Her attempts to prevent an orthodox villager, Preet Singh from getting his seven year old daughter married to a farmer who was a widower with seven children results in her tragic death. On her way to Nanda Kaul's house, Ila Das is brutally raped and murdered by Preet Singh for whom it was an act of vengeance.

The crusade of the existential woman against years of suppression is a serious one. In the process of this crusade the Indian woman suffers from certain weaknesses. One can be summed up in what Pope has said of Addison "willing to wound and yet afraid to strike."70 Maya realizes that she and her husband are physically together but emotionally far apart. She hates it, resents it and yet prefers to live with him. She doesn't have the courage to leave him and live the life of her choice. So also is the case with Monisha. She prefers death rather than detaching herself from Jiban and his family. Sita also lacks
the courage to strike. She prefers to compromise than to being crushed by the society. Only Bim has the courage to opt out of marriage and live the life of her choice.

It is a gross error to think that womanly instinct is a sign of dependence, woman is basically a woman as well as a person. As a woman, she definitely needs a man and vice-versa. But as a person she can claim to be free and independent. In Indian social set-up, the two identities i.e., of a woman and a person have been rolled into one -- only a woman. And this has led to the confusion. As in the case of Sarah. Sarah wants to keep her two roles, that of a wife and of a secretary apart. She muses:

If only she were allowed to keep her one role apart from the other, one play from the other, she would not feel so cut and slashed into living, bleeding pieces. Apart, apart that enviable, cool, clear, quiet state of apartness.

Her unhappiness arises from her inability to do so.

The existential woman is conscious of the fact that she should liberate herself from the clutches of unjust taboos and customs forced on her by the male dominance. She should also liberate herself from an overdose of suspicion and doubt. In her search for identity, she tends to see not only certain designs or some selfish motive in man's intentions and behaviour but see it being
magnified. For instance, Maya accuses Gautama of treating her as a tiresome child and of calling her a third-rate poetess mind; he sincerely denies them. But, she overlooks that and asserts, "you did and you believe it now." The existential woman in her struggle for liberty and equality can't wink at the fact that as the blind submission is undesirable, so is the warranted suspicion.

The existential woman has been unsuccessful in freeing herself from the clutches of fear. What she urgently needs is "to live without fear [. . .] fear of being unloved, misjudged, misunderstood, displeasing with the fear of failure." In her book *The Female Eunuch* (1970), Germaine Greer suggests woman ought not to enter into socially sanctioned relationship like marriage because "if women are to attract a significant amelioration in their condition, it seems obvious that they must refuse to marry."74

4.6 Womanism and Desai

There is a leaning towards womanism in Desai. Ogunyemi describes womanism as accomodationist:

It believes in the freedom and independence of women like feminism; unlike feminism, it wants meaningful union between women and men and will wait patiently for men to change from their sexist stance.75
Feminism in the proper sense of the term is uncompromising in its opposition to any form of masculine assertiveness. The attitudes of men to women in terms of masculine superiority over women and the exercise of the right to protect women as well as think for them without their assent help to create feminism. Womanism precedes feminism in its external manifestations. It advocates a state of being that is natural to woman. Womanism "being a woman" is derived from two distinct viewpoints namely traditionalism and modernism. Traditional womanism derives from the customs of people and these customs as have been discussed earlier, assign specific roles, attitudes and decorum to the woman. Modern womanism expects mutual understanding between men and women. The specific roles assigned to both sexes are of equal importance in the strengthening of the alliance between them. It should progress; despite the differences of opinion between the two partners. Modern womanism asks the woman to assert her presence, exercise her rights and to legitimise her aspirations through the usage of intelligence, wit, patience and tolerance.

Desai's characters like Maya and Monisha escape from the struggles of existence by choosing the path of death and violence as a result of neurosis. But her matured characters like Sita and Bim face alienation and conflict but they compromise with life and these characters show that Desai is not for militant feminism but for womanism. Sita becomes the representative of the
modern woman who is a helpless victim caught up between illusion and reality. Sita realizes that all reality is existence. This discovery brings her knowledge but it does not resolve her anxiety. She learns a lesson, to say yes because there would be no other alternative but to be crushed. In Sita's revolt and her subsequent reconciliation, Anita Desai reveals a strong assimilation of the modern and the traditional outlook of Indian woman. She will be able to arrive at a synthesis if only she could connect tradition and modernity, new demands and old values.

Woman is essentially a loving mother, a dutiful and obedient wife who seeks the welfare of the husband, respects him, takes advice from him and looks up to him for protection though this does not deny her the privilege of the right to personal initiative when occasion demands it. In the earlier novels, marriages are shattering failures because Maya and Monisha are unable to adjust themselves to their challenging new roles. To Sarah of Bye-Bye Blackbird adjustment comes naturally. Despite her wedding to an Indian, she bravely sticks to her marriage and does not mind the silent hostility of her people. She is indulgent to her husband's moods, generous in understanding when he decides to go back to India. Though she has a world of her own, her thoughts are firmly pedastalled on sanity.
The position of woman has been paradoxical. She has been the key person, the master-figure in the family and yet she has lived the life of suppression and suffering. Now she has started becoming conscious of her rights and responsibilities. Accordingly she has waged her war too. Presently the period she is passing through is a transitional one and she has miles to go before the goal is reached.

4.7 Conclusion

To think that marriage is an obstacle in the path of woman's growth is a folly. Bim remains single and her acceptance of the family and motherhood embodies Desai's vision of the new Indian woman. Yet she is tormented by the ghosts of the past. Nanda with all her children, grand children and great-grand children and the unmarried Ila Das equally face alienation, which perhaps is meant to show up the futility of existence whether married or single. The fact is that life has to go on with all its shades of attraction, love, hate, tiffs etc., it is only when some deliberate injustice is done to her or some basic right is willfully violated or snatched from her she has to rise, stand and fight, paying any price. Deasi's leaning towards womanism is clearly spelled out in her later novels. While marching on the path of one's choice a woman should not overlook the fact that man-woman relationship can be restored to the axis of
equality and liberty only through love, respect and dilution of egos or in other words self-adjustment.

Choices for women are cast along the existential paths of transcendence or immanence. Transcendence is characterized by an attitude towards future, to look at tomorrow as the future is what saves the individual, whereas to look at tomorrow as a repetition of today is immanence. A very small group of woman, enter the path of transcendence, live freely and manage to remain that way. The reason is the double burden of a consciousness. The first one - concerns the self; the second one deals with the other. The first burden derives from the fact that freedom is not permanently secured. Nor is it a status in which one settles down. No one has ever finished with the task of remaining free. One cannot exist without recognizing and assuming others and becoming involved. Again involvement in turn is not definitive as the choice of oneself.

Existentialism offers "advice" to reach authenticity. It condemns escapism from action and concludes that one must try to live "with a tear in one's being." The possibility of effecting a rupture with one's self is another name of freedom. Men and women must be ready to change. A woman must move away from stability to instability. This will be the ground of action where she will transcend the world in the direction of her possibilities. Action must remain under constant scrutiny. Such an impossible goal maintains an
everlasting distance between the project and its realization. Existence of any strife is characterized by the yearning for a goal that is never reached. The futility of existence is nowhere else better expressed than in Where Shall We Go This Summer? Sita muses:

Life had no periods, no stretches. It simply swirled around, muddling and confusing, leading nowhere.\textsuperscript{76}
Notes


2 Anita Desai, Cry the Peacock (New Delhi: Orient, 1980) 40.

3 Desai, Cry the Peacock, 6.

4 Desai, Cry the Peacock, 115.

5 Anita Desai, Voices in the City (New Delhi: Orient, 1985) 81.

6 Desai, Voices in the City, 160.

7 Desai, Voices in the City, 113.

8 Desai, Voices in the City, 239–40.

9 Anita Desai, Bye-Bye Blackbird (New Delhi: Orient, 1985) 204.


12 Anita Desai, Where Shall We Go This Summer? (Delhi: Vikas, 1975) 33.
13 Anita Desai, Where Shall We Go This Summer? (Delhi: Orient, 1982) 143.


15 Desai, Fire on the Mountain, 145.


17 Desai, In Custody, 67.

18 Desai, In Custody, 68.


21 Desai, Cry the Peacock, 9.

22 Desai, Cry the Peacock, 18.

23 Desai, Voices in the City, 135.


26 Desai, *Cry the Peacock*, 102.

27 Desai, *Voices in the City*, 142.

28 Desai, *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*, 32.


32 Desai, *Cry the Peacock*, 121.


34 Desai, *Fire on the Mountain*, 17.

35 Desai, *Cry the Peacock*, 104.

36 Desai, *Cry the Peacock*, 86.


38 Desai, *Fire on the Mountain*, 35.


42 Desai, *Cry the Peacock*, 8.

43 Desai, *Voices in the City*, 238.

44 Desai, *Voices in the City*, 160.

45 Desai, *Cry the Peacock*, 104.


47 Desai, *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* 55-56.


50 Quoted in Sushila Singh, ed., *Feminism and Recent Fiction in English* (New Delhi: Prestige, 1991) 98.


52 Desai, *Voices in the City*, 143.

53 Desai, *Voices in the City*, 199.


56 Quoted in Usha Bande, "Is Sita mad?" *Indian Literature* 33.5 (1990) 179.


58 Desai, *Cry the Peacock*, 113.

59 Desai, *Cry the Peacock*, 112.

60 Desai, *Cry the Peacock*, 113.

61 Desai, *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*, 33.

62 Desai, *Cry the Peacock*, 43.

63 Desai, *Voices in the City*, 120.

64 Desai, *Cry the Peacock*, 5.

65 Desai, *Voices in the City*, 120.


67 Beauvoir, xvi.
68 Desai, *Voices in the City*, 109.


72 Desai, *Cry the Peacock*, 113.


74 Greer, 319.


76 Desai, *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*, 155.