Chapter 2

Existentialist Relevance and Orientation

2.1 Introduction

This thesis draws upon the climate of opinion in which existentialism and absurdism in literature have been active for long enough to have penetrated the attitudes of the common reader. It is a very modern situation to find mutual respect between creative writers and writers of philosophy. Modern philosophy is experiencing a need to approach being as it is felt from within. Hence the sudden awareness of the relevance of imaginative insight. John Wild, writing in the 19th century on the need of philosophy makes this point the burden of a whole book:

Every phase of human existence also can be regarded from the outside, even human thinking and action once it is finished, in its deposits and results. This is the act as it is proceeding, as lived and experienced from within.1

2.2 Literature and Philosophy

Literature, which is originally rooted in fiction, has always used the imaginative insight. The novel is essentially a social form for it records
mankind's struggle with itself. It explores the human condition through the use of narrative fiction. A successful novel manages to document what is known in German as "Zeitgeist", the spirit of the age. The new millennium, which marks a thousand years of the novel, is witnessing extraordinary amount of experimentation, which the twentieth century has been prepared to accept in its writers.

One is conscious of the fact that out of tensions, which produce art, there may emerge a new concept of human condition. Periods of introspection and accelerated change bring about a search for identity, which often creates stimulating conditions for a fictional narrative and the novel. According to Simon de Beauvoir, the novel is of particular importance to existentialism. She explains that in her article "Literature et metaphysique" in detail:

While philosophy objectifies human reality, the novel captures it as it is lived, in all its subjectivity, complexity and ambiguity. Only the novel, she asserts, can evoke the original upsurge of existence. This is because it presents existence not as an object of thought but as action, feeling and experience.²

2.3 Existentialist Literature and Philosophy

Existential literature is linked to philosophy and also to naturalism, which is deeply rooted in an age. Its writers draw their subjects from a
contemporary setting or represent a contemporary situation in allegorical form. The typical plot of the English novel had love for the starting point and marriage for the finish line. At the outset of the 20th century, the interest in amorous adventures is displaced by the contemporary problems of the world. Merleau-ponty greets this long awaited change with relief:

Everything had been going on for a long time as if there existed between Literature and philosophy not only differences in techniques on the mode of expression but also a difference in objectives.3

The existential philosophers differ in their answers to the question "What am I?". Modern philosophy's central question is that of the nature of being and literature has ever been concerned with the question "what is man?". Contemporary existential writers tail back to a long philosophical lineage. Their mottoes are interiority and subjectivity. Their first step is to examine the life of the existent in its intensity and its responsibilities. Emmanuel Mounier puts it in his "Introduction aux existentialismes," that the primary concern of existential philosophy is not existence in its totality, its universality, but the existence of the singular person, too often overlooked in the quest for a philosophy of the world.
Existential writers have little to do with escapism or anticipation. They claim that they have received the revelation of the age in which they live and consider it their duty to warn the world about it. They do not dissect human nature into fragments and categorize it into segments. For existential writers, the importance of language is second to none. They reject the traditional conception that considers the body as a thing that can be defined from the outside; conversely body is not an object. When the individual exists he ceases to be an object. By an act of self-deprecation the individual can make himself an object. The existentialists have probed deeper into the uneasiness of the modern consciousness and found within it a core of anguish.

Existentialism basically considers the enduring human condition in relation to unchanging human destiny. According to existentialist philosophy, the individual himself is responsible for what he is and the more he seeks to explore the uncertainty of relationships of every kind the greater is the burden. Existentialists make their appeal to the reader’s awareness of this condition. It is a situation in which communication itself becomes problematic and truth an elusive factor.

Anita Desai’s response to this situation is examined in this chapter. Her awareness of inter-relationship of literature and philosophy in the twentieth century is also demonstrated here.
Having set these general premises certain basic theories of existential thought are defined.

2.4 What is Existentialism?

John Macquarrie avoids defining existentialism because of its inherent transitoriness. He says, "Existentialism is too protean a phenomenon to circumscribe it with a blanket definition." However by way of defining it he remarks, "that existentialism is a style of philosophizing rather than a body of philosophical doctrines." Most of the existentialist thinkers concern themselves with freedom, decision making, responsibility, the quest for meaning, finitude, guilt, alienation, despair, death, anxiety, boredom, nausea and the emotional life of human beings. Time as a fourth dimension, interpersonal relations, sexuality, the problem of truth, nihilism, lostness are other recurring themes in existentialist literature.

Existentialist thinkers right from Soren Kierkegaard down to Jean Paul Sartre have defined existentialism variedly highlighting only certain aspects of it. But no better definition of existentialism is available than the one given by F.H.Heinemann for the purpose of relating it to literature:

The problems of existentialism are [. . .] in a narrow sense expressive of the present crises of man and in a broader sense of the enduring human condition.
Viewed in the light of the existentialist themes mentioned by Macquarrie and the apt definition of existentialism given by Heinemann, Desai is essentially an existentialist novelist in Indian-English fiction as she seriously considers "the enduring human condition."\(^7\)

2.5 Desai – a true existentialist

The novels of Anita Desai incorporates existential thoughts and for this reason she is considered a grass root existentialist. She asserts more than once that she is interested in individuals and not in social concerns. An essentially subjective novelist Anita Desai writes about the inner emotional world of her characters struggling against the absurdity of life or trying to cope with existentialist problems with utmost sincerity.

Anita Desai is always ruminating on eternal quest for meaning and value, freedom and truth that can back us up in the disordered and unsubstantial world. She aptly says in an interview with Yashodhara Dalmia that "one's preoccupation can only be a perpetual search for meanings, for value, for dare I say it – truth."\(^8\) Desai seeks to explore the human condition removed from social securities. The given social sensibilities are dubious. The honest character rejects them. He or she responds in an isolating rather than a socializing movement. This necessitates the basic anxiety wedded to the experience of being and yet not being. It is this process of character
development which establishes a relationship between Anita Desai's work and existential thought. Since existentialism centers upon the individual experience, Desai's work seeks to know by the criteria of inward awareness, how the individual partakes of being and to account in some way for his sense of non-being. All her woman characters, Maya, Monisha, Sita, Bim, and Nanda Kaul are endowed with exceptional sensibility. Her heroes are highly imaginative and their response to life is never prosaic. Nirode in *Voices in the City*, Dev in *Bye-Bye Blackbird*, Deven in *In Custody* and Baumgartner in *Baumgartner's Bombay* make passionate attempts to find order in the disordered world in which they exist. All her protagonists suffer because they refuse to conform. Past is not able to bring them consolation and present does not offer any to them. This awareness brings them fresh pain.

*Cry the Peacock*, *Voices in the City*, *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* and *Fire on the Mountain* deal with problem of marital discord. *Bye-Bye Blackbird* deals with the theme of exile and alienation in a foreign land. *In Custody* and *Baumgartners' Bombay* mark the beginning of a new phase in Anita Desai's fiction. *In Custody* expresses Desai's anguish over the disintegration of multicultural society in India. *Baumgartner's Bombay* is partly auto-biographical. Like her, her creation is an exile, who has no place in society. Through her German mother she has known what exile means. The nostalgia for childhood and a lost country and the pain of exile form the theme
in the afore-mentioned novel. For the first time in *Clear Light of Day*, Desai has explored an existential theme of time in relation to eternity.

2.6 Major Thoughts of Some Existential Philosophers

The main philosophical ideas of some of the important thinkers among the recognized existentialists are explained and demonstrated to show that certain major preoccupations of existentialist thinkers do find their way into Anita Desai's novels. The existentialists vary widely from one another in their metaphysical views. But they all underscore the significance of the individual man as well as his freedom and the responsibility for being what he is, his place and function in the world and his relationship or lack of one with God.

2.6.1 Kierkegaard

The beginning of existentialism can be traced down to Kierkegaard. In every age there exists individuals who abhor the rigour and discipline as well as the pretensions of abstract thought and would attach more significance to feeling. Romanticism, Nietzscheanism and Bergsonianism are in the same line and existentialism happens to be the latest expression of same temper. In *Fear and Trembling* (1843), *The Concept of Dread* and *Sickness unto Death* (1848) and other works, Kierkegaard was developing on the conviction that through God and in God man may succeed in freeing himself from tension and discontent and may find peace of mind and spiritual serenity. In other words, Kierkegaard
insisted that "Truth" lies in subjectivity. He refused to regard God as an object. He was of the opinion that if "God is truth" then subjectivity is truth. Man becomes truth to the extent he becomes a spiritual person or pure subjectivity.

To Kierkegaard an individual is quite unique in nature and insisted that the highest good for the individual is to find his or her unique vocation. He wrote in his journal that an individual must find a truth that is true for him the idea for which he can live or die. The individual is always becoming or making himself which is the result of his inner passion for freedom and it is a continuous effort. He finds himself enveloped by uncertainty but he decides to take risks. The individual’s choice and decision are quite personal. No God or absolute decides in him but he does it on his account. Other existential writers have echoed Kierkegaard's belief that one must choose ones way without the aid of universal objective standards. The development of the characters in these terms is of course especially interesting in Where Shall We Go This Summer? and Fire on the Mountain.

Kierkegaard associates anxiety with man’s peculiar constitution as body and soul, established in spirit. In the very way he is constituted, man is subject to tension and, this tension is despair, the "sickness unto death." Kierkegaard discusses the theme of despair at some length in his book Sickness unto Death. Kierkegaard observes:
The despair which is conscious of being, despair as also it is conscious of being a self wherein there is after all something eternal, and then is either in despair at not willing to be itself, or in despair at willing to be itself.\(^9\)

This despair can take any one of these forms: despair at not willing to be one self, a despair at not willing to be a self, despair at willing to be another than one self i.e., wishing for a new self. The immediate man helps himself in a different way, he wishes to be another. Kierkegaard assigns a positive role to despair as a propaedeutic to faith.

The individual is undoubtedly a subject, in other words, complete person with feelings and choices. But there can be no existence except in relation to an object or a being. Therefore existence means the individual being in contact with something beyond itself. Kierkegaard, the pioneer of modern Christian existentialism could think only as a Christian and according to him, existence means existing in the presence of God, the absolute other. For the same reason, his influence was not effectively felt in current European thought.

After Kierkegaard existential thought was greatly explored by two German philosophers, Heidegger and Jaspers whose ideas in turn influenced a large number of European philosophers. They focused on aesthetic existentialism.
2.6.2 Martin Heidegger

A significant feature of existentialism is that existence precedes essence. Heidegger makes a sharp distinction between essence and existence or being. Essence stands for what a thing is and excludes existence. Being is experienced in the case of the self alone and is called existence. In other words in experiencing oneself one experiences existence itself. The existentialists concern themselves with existence and not essence.

According to Heidegger, the main philosophical problem is the problem of “being” given in an authentic or improper form. As stated earlier, “being” in its authentic form is what is called existence and being in its improper form is “symbolically meant or believed”. The disassociation of one's existence from any essence constitutes one's metaphysical freedom. Discussing Martin Heidegger's concept of an authentic existence, Mary Warnock comments:

Authentic existence can begin only when we have realized and thoroughly understood what we are. Once we have grasped that human reality is characterized by the fact that each human being is uniquely himself, and no one else, and that each of us has his own possibilities to fulfill.¹⁰

Man would be a mere abstraction if he does not exist in relation to his fellow beings and if the contents of his thoughts, feelings and choices are not
derived from his position in the world. According to Heidegger, man is thrown into a particular situation (hineingeworfen) in the world and burdened with certain inborn character and intelligences. The situation is not chosen by the individual but it all happens without his knowledge and assistance. This determining factor in man's existence Heidegger calls "fate" (schicksal). For Heidegger, "anguish" (Angst) is another fundamental experience which runs through human life. Anguish does not refer to death, it is the anguish of death which is the end, the nothing (das Nichts). When the individual experiences this anguish he experiences a state of nothingness. This indirectly drives home the point that human existence is uncertain and in our inner being we are alone.

Human individual has the knowledge, will and freedom to act as the situation demands. Heidegger insists on obeying its demands rather than run after dreamy ideas. Anita Desai does not advocate escapism in her novels and they tend to reflect the rise and fall of currency of these ideas.

2.6.3 Jean Paul Sartre

Another major preoccupation of existential thought is that which is found in the writings of Jean Paul Sartre, the hierophant of modern existentialism. In Sartre's vision, man is born into a kind of void (le heant) and leads a passive existence. But, when he becomes aware of himself and experiences "agnnoisse" (anguish) he may come out of his passive existence. He would then feel the absurdity of his existence and despair. This awareness
gives him the energy to take decisions, which would assist him in existing and
by exercising his volition, he is able to render meaning to existence and to the
universe.

According to Eric Fromm, these concepts analyzed under context are
psychic needs:

Man's existential conflict produces certain psychic needs
common to all men. He is forced to overcome the horror of
separateness, of powerlessness and of lostness and find new
forms of relating himself to the world to enable him to feel at
home. I have called these psychic needs existential because they
are rooted in the very conditions of human existence. They are
shared by all men and their fulfillment is as necessary for man's
remaining sane as the fulfillment of organic drive is necessary for
his remaining alive.¹¹

The first two novels, Cry the Peacock and Voices in the City are
nihilistic in terms of what this thinking implies about the absence of security or
stability. The prospect is bleak indeed for the characters of Anita Desai. In
these, we find the breadth of anguish in the perception that there is no external
help for the environmental factors which exert a bad influence on them. The
consequences of these observations on the absurdity of life leave the characters
in these two novels with a stultifying sense of despair.
While Heidegger's works were known only to philosophical specialists, Sartre through his novels and dramas has been largely responsible for the spread of existential ideas among the educated public. Sartre's *La Nausea* describes nausea as the experience of the uncertainty and absurdity attaching to all existence. In *existentialism est unhumanisme* (1946), Sartre expressed the conviction that man may come out from his passive situation by an act of will. In doing so he is relating himself to social and political life.

This action provides a reason for his existence and thus helps to unite society. The protagonists of *Clear Light of Day* and *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* show positive growth. Though Bim feels alienated in the beginning of the novel towards the end she is able to forgive and make compromises with her brother Raja. Sita's approach to the existential predicament of loneliness and absurdity is also positive. She compromises with her destiny and returns home to her husband to lead an ordinary life with him. She made an attempt to escape to Manori island to prevent her fifth child from being born into a world of destruction. By an act of will she is able to come to terms with reality.

Sartre's existential man is a conscious being, a "being-for-itself." Sartre makes a distinction between "being-in-itself" (en-soi) and "being for itself" (pour-soi). "Being-in-itself" means being which is self-identical and has no reference beyond itself whereas "being-for-itself" is best understood as
consciousness. This term consciousness, which appears through annihilation, corresponds to the negative function ascribed to nothing in Heidegger.

Nothingness constitutes the distances which divide him from his world and it lies coiled in the heart of being like a worm. Man aims to eradicate this emptiness within him by his own thoughts, actions and perceptions. The course of action he adopts enables him to understand the world and also to act in it. Maurice Cranston rightly remarks:

Man first of all exists, surges up in the world and defines himself afterwards. If man or the existentialist sees him, is not definable it is because to begin with he is nothing. He will not be anything until later and then he will be what he makes himself.\textsuperscript{12}

The protagonist of Baumgartner's Bombay is uncertain even after fifty years of stay in India. He was nobody and his existence is "an absurd odyssey from nothingness to nothingness."\textsuperscript{13}

Freedom occupies a central place in Sartre's thought. He defines it as "Human freedom precedes essence in man and makes it possible; the essence of human being is suspended in his freedom [. . .]. Man does not exist first in order to be free subsequently there is no difference between the being of man and his being free."\textsuperscript{14}
The individual is free to make his own choices but his freedom is limited in innumerable ways. Death is another restricting factor of human freedom. The individual's freedom, which is the fundamental tenet of existential philosophy, prominently figures in Anita Desai's novels. Anguish, which is fundamental to an understanding of existentialism is defined by Sartre as "a revealing instruction of being; it is in anguish that freedom is in its being, in question for itself." According to Sartre, man strives for ever to extricate himself from the oppressive structures that alienate freedom. Freedom is experienced by man only when man is released from his present bondage and relieved of the tragic sense of life.

Sartre asserts that time is the relationship of consciousness to things. In *Clear Light of Day*, Anita Desai explores the theme of time in relation to eternity. In this four dimensional novel Desai delves into the depths of time "as a destroyer" and "as a preserver" connecting the great changes brought about by the passage of time. The main motif of the novel is borrowed from T.S. Eliot's famous poetical work *Four Quartets* from which Desai quotes a very significant line on the last page of the novel "Time the destroyer is time the preserver." 

2.6.4 Gabriel Marcel and Jaspers

A third major preoccupation of the existentialist movement is explained by the religious existentialists, Jaspers and Marcel. To both Jaspers and Marcel
being is cloaked in mystery. Man experiences self in act and will and this existential self is thus related to consciousness and to the world and it exists in Time. Existential self has its own limitation, which can be known only symbolically, and this symbolic experience imparts depth and significance to individual's life in the world. Philosophically, Anita Desai's Fire on the Mountain is a fictionalization of the quintessence of existentialism.

Jaspers is of the view that in this modern age man becomes conscious of being as whole, of himself and his limitations. He experiences the terror of the world and his own powerlessness. He asks radical questions face to face with the void and he strives for liberation and redemption. This accounts for the anguish faced by him. Jaspers writes on the theme of anxiety:

By consciously recognizing his limits, he sets himself the highest goals. He experiences absoluteness in the depths of selfhood and in the lucidity of transcendence.\(^{17}\)

The theme of anxiety appears in Marcel too. Marcel’s reaction to despair is contained in his short book The Philosophy of Existence and in Homoviator. Despair, he says, is an expression of the will of negation as applied to being. Hope and despair are correlated in the view of Marcel:
The truth is that there can, strictly speaking, be no hope except when the temptation to despair exists. Hope is the act by which this temptation is actively or victoriously overcome.\textsuperscript{18}

Hence according to Marcel, Despair is connected with isolation, hope with the bonds of communication.

According to Jaspers, Kafka and most of the existential philosophers the basic features of man's existence is a series of inescapable situations. These risky situations are at the mercy of chance. Man's existence is full of suffering, conflict, guilt and eventually leads to the final situation of death.

\textbf{2.6.5 Marcel Proust}

Marcel Proust on the other hand describes existential progress as moving from the burden of having towards the freedom of being. Having implies possession, which is a burden and Being means freedom from encumbrance. Releasing oneself from the encumbrance of all possessions occurs at the time of death when one is preparing oneself for eternal life, says Marcel. Death does not mean void for him but a step towards eternity and for this reason sometimes his view is described as Christian existentialism. Anita Desai in her second novel \textit{Voices in the City} explores the theme of death. Monisha's death becomes instrumental in bringing about significant changes in the attitudes of the major characters.
2.6.6 Albert Camus

Camus seeks in the revolt of man against the conditions of life, which is one of the essential dimensions of mankind, a principle of existence. A man rebels when he refuses to submit to conditions that he considers intolerable or when he is confusedly convinced that his position is justified. But as stated repeatedly revolt has no meaning outside society. The spirit of rebellion gain intensity when the individual is convinced of the absurdity of his existence. In absurdist experience, suffering is individual and this feeling is shared with all men and the entire human race suffers from the division between itself and the rest of the world. Sometimes this feeling of strangeness leads to suicide or murder. Rather than suffering limitations, the unhappy self chooses the dark victory which annihilates world.

Eric Fromm clarifies the reasons behind such hostile attitudes among individuals:

Life has inner dynamism of its own It tends to grow, to be expressed, to be lived. When this tendency is thwarted, the energy directed towards life undergoes a process of decomposition and changes into energies directed toward destruction.¹⁹
This is what happens in the disturbed mind of Maya the protagonist of *Cry the Peacock*. Maya's psychic disintegration instigates her to hurl Gautama down the terrace to his death. In *Voices in the City*, Monisha kills herself in solitude but her death recognizes a value which justified her existence.

2.7 Existential Themes in the Novels of Desai

The researcher’s intention in demonstrating the major preoccupations of existentialist thinkers is to relate them to the substratum of existentialist thoughts or tensions which characterize the novels of Anita Desai and to categorize Desai's novels from existential stand point as consisting of six tenets of existential philosophy - existence preceding essence, anguish, absurdity, alienation, nothingness, death and also time as four dimension connecting past-present and future.

2.7.1 Existence Precedes Essence

First there is the basic existentialist stand point that existence precedes essence. Man is a conscious subject and he exists as a conscious being and not in accordance with any definition. Existentialism says, “I am nothing else but my own conscious existence.” Soren Kiekegaard, Kafka, Camus, Proust, Sartre and other existentialists insist that the individual has to decide for himself. R.K.Shringy remarks:
The division of consciousness in terms of self and non-self, the me and the other is responsible for the ceaseless strife and in existence that is the problem, the essence of the problem of existence.\textsuperscript{20}

Maya, the protagonist of \textit{Cry the Peacock}, fears the prediction of the astrologer of an early death to one of them by unnatural causes and the idea of death could not be dismissed from her consciousness and not assimilated in her conscious behaviour. Her obsession with death drives her into a curious insanity. She could not bear life changing and never being the same again. Maya wants Gautama to love her fiercely because her love would give a meaning to her existence and help her fulfill her desires. She tries to enter his world but to no avail. She struggles to get her father's image out of her mind. She feels that Gautama with his ideas of negation has no right to live. She convinces herself that he is the one who should die. Her insanity prevails over her common sense and ultimately she murders Gautama. Thus, \textit{Cry the Peacock} is a tragedy of self-consciousness over reaching its limits.

\textit{Voices in the City} focuses on human futility in the lives of three sensitive individuals - Nirode and his two sisters Monisha and Amla. Nirode strongly obsessed by failure, endeavours to escape from the stark realities of the world.
Camus says, "In default of inexhaustible happiness eternal suffering would at least give us a destiny. But we do not even have that consolation and our worst agonies come to an end one day."\textsuperscript{21} Monisha's death brings his rebellion to an end. His wish to touch and to feel and to be involved and to share the suffering of others is Nirode's ultimate reconciliation. Monisha, like Maya, is a young wife who is unable to adjust herself to the demands of marriage. She rebels inwardly against the confines of a traditional Hindu family. Like Nirode, Monisha wants to be free and she longs for privacy and solitude. She is suddenly conscious of having lost all the right to exist. Her withdrawal from the material concerns of family confines her to her own private prison. Monisha's suicide is an attempt to give meaning to her "self" in death. Amla, unlike her sister, could think in clear terms and her heart too is in the right place and she lays the emphasis on life. Thus Nirode, Amla and Monisha are preoccupied with the essentials of existence.

\textbf{Bye-Bye Blackbird} is built upon the theme of crisis of identity. Sarah's whole existence is split into two different roles - one in the morning at school and the other in the evening at home. She is conscious of her individuality and her feelings. Sarah's resolve to accompany Adit from England back to India is not the result of any illusion. She looks upon it as a blessing in disguise as it enables her to resolve the crisis that comforts her. Adit feels like an exile caught in an alien land. He is torn between acceptance and rejection. Ultimately
he takes his decision to return to India with his wife who is accepting her first child. This movement is a medium of self-knowledge and an encounter with reality.

The protagonist of *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* Sita, is a middle aged woman saddled with four children, awaiting the birth of her fifth. Her unhappiness arises from her inability to accept the values and attitudes of the society. She does not wish to bring her child into the world which is not fit enough to receive it since destruction is the main element. She decides to go to Manori island in the hope of achieving a miracle. The island becomes the focal point of her consciousness where she comes to discover the meaning of life. She decides to come back home and to her husband. It is a self-conscious attempt to relive and to recreate.

Anita Desai deals with loneliness and isolation in the deserted life of Nanda Kaul, a great-grandmother. Carignano constitutes an inseparable part of the protagonist's consciousness in *Fire on the Mountain*. She loves the freedom she enjoys at Carignano. But she was leading a life, which does not involve her self. Her life though full on the surface was empty at the core. Both Nanda and her grand-daughter Raka, seek relief in the fire on the mountainside. Nanda was fleeing from her past and Raka from a battered home life. Nanda's tragedy results from her withdrawal from the world of realities. Ila's death rips the curtain and reveals the hideous reality.
Bim, the protagonist of *Clear Light of Day*, was very content with everything she had. Staying in the same place, teaching in the old college and looking after those who have remained behind. Yet before long she was suffering from rejection and unhappiness. Raja, her elder brother, left for Hyderabad leaving her behind with an aunt and a mentally retarded brother. She refuses to accept an existence that would be at the mercy of male hierarchy, which surrounds her. She makes a contrast between her own life and that of the Mughal Emperor, which is not only a moment of realization but also one of reconciliation. In that moment of awakening and recognition she makes an evaluation of her own self and rejects all that has hindered her growth into a truly liberated soul.

*In Custody* concerns Deven's growth from a person who disowns responsibility to who learns to accept it. He learns to face challenges as they come. In these lessons lie the essence of life. *Baumgartner's Bombay* is a revolt against human degradation. Baumgartner, realizes that life is nothing and this consciousness of his existence leaves him aimless and absurd.

### 2.7.2 The Theme of Anguish

Anguish is as old as Kierkegaard within existentialism. Kierkegaard held that it is spiritually crucial to recognize that one experiences not only a fear of specific objects but also a feeling of general apprehension which he
called dread. He interpreted it as God's way of calling each individual to make a commitment to a personally valid way of life. The word anxiety (German Angst) has a similarly crucial role in the work of the 20th century. German philosopher, Martin Heidegger, holds the conviction that anxiety leads to the individual's confrontation with nothingness, with the impossibility of finding an ultimate justification for the choices he or she must make. Choice is central to human existence and one cannot escape from it. Paul Tillich has treated the theme of anxiety in his book *The Courage to Be*. He points out that, "Man is drawn into the world of objects and has lost his subjectivity in it. But, he is still aware of what he has lost or is continuously losing. He is still man enough to experience his dehumanization as despair." In the philosophy of Sartre, the word nausea is used for the individual's recognition of the pure contingency of the universe and the word anguish is used for the recognition of the total freedom of choice that confronts the individual at every moment.

Maya finds it difficult to accept the view of life preached to her by her husband and father. If she were to accept their view she must resign herself to her fate and thus must die as the soothsayer had foretold in order to atone for sins committed in some previous life. Enmeshed in such a nightmare Maya cries out in anguish, "Father, Brother, Husband, who is my saviour? I am in need of one." This anguish leads Maya to look for salvation to the moon.
Maya loses her sanity despite the fact that she is able to achieve communion with the women in her husband's family.

Monisha's anguish arises from the realization that she had to choose between death and mean existence. It was not a difficult choice and she thought it was better for her to prefer death. Nirode's childhood stems from his memory of his mother's infidelity to her husband. The nightmares about his mother become Nirode's modus operandi with the test of the world as well. Having been hurt and betrayed once, Nirode thinks all attempts at communication are hopeless, doomed to destruction. His anxiety is his nemesis as he is unable to accept the burden of his past and to live a socially responsible life.

Sita's angst is the result of a conflict within her, the conflict of conformity versus non-conformity. This theme, which is embodied in a poem by C.P.Cavafy, is quoted so often in the novel:

To certain people there comes a day when they must say the great Yes or the great No. He who has the yes ready within him revels himself at once and saying it crosses over the path of honour and his own conviction. 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.
Bye-Bye Blackbird explores the complexities of the dilemma of immigration with its scene laid in Clapham (London). Sarah suffers from a sense of guilt and keeps to the loneliest path to avoid London crowds and their curiosity after her marriage to Adit Sen, an Indian. Once when Adit sees her from a distance, he too notices her anguish:

An anguish it seemed to him, of loneliness -- and then it becomes absurd to call her by her own name, to call her by any name: she had become nameless, she had shed her name as she had shed her ancestry and identity And she sat there, staring as though she watched them disappear.25

Sarah's inner struggle is due to her own choice as described by Kafka in The Castle, "To live is to exist, to choose, to decide; and one decides in anguish."26

In Clear Light of Day, the protagonist deals with her struggle to recreate reality of her own by her faith in her will. Bim conceives an egocentric worldview wherein she places herself centrally. She sees herself as toiling and sacrificing for her brother and sister. And in doing so, she feels that the freedom of her will is thwarted and she moans in anguish to find herself in a world deprived of reason and reality. Mr. Sharma's letter about the family
insurance business triggers off her nausea, which leads her to recapitulating the past and to examining innermost self:

I don't understand the insurance business. Father never bothered to teach me [. . .] so I had to teach myself history and teach myself to teach [. . .]. How my students would laugh at me. I'm always trying to teach them, train them to be different from what we were at their age [. . .] still am, how I myself have'nt been able to manage on my own -- they would laugh, wouldn't they?27

Such an excrutiatingly painful self-scrutiny, fills her with an emergent and unwarranted anguish. Deven is a socially secure person in In Custody, with a family and profession. Deven is a teacher of Hindi in Lala Ram Lal College, Mirpore and he seeks to reach out into a wider world in the hope of shades and complexities. Deven's sense of anguish arises from a deep sense of failure. He finds his job oppressive. His sense of despair on the professional front finds its ripples in his domestic life as well because Sarla seemed "too prosaic and had not been his choice."28 Both he and Sarla have little understanding of each other:

He understood because, like her he had been defeated too; like her he was a victim.29
In order to escape from a terrible sense of isolation he seeks refuge in the fantasy world of Urdu poetry. Eventually his angst helps him emerge a wiser man with a more complete knowledge of being in this world.

Baumgartner relies on the strategy of escape when he feels inadequate or weak. But withdrawal, escape and aggression only weaken his grip on reality. His existential anxiety leads "to fragmentation of consciousness and consequent disorder, confusion, conflict and chaos." Nanda Kaul's existential despair is caused by her need to belong though she put in a great deal of effort to maintain her state of withdrawal. But this type of withdrawal again did not give any meaning to her that is why she is sometimes seen pining for contact.

2.7.3 The Theme of Absurdity

Absurdity is another existential thought that characterizes Anita Desai's novels. Expressive of absurdity are these words by Blaise Pascal, a French mathematician and philosopher of Descartes's time, who was also an early forerunner of existentialism:

When I consider the short duration of my life, swallowed up in the eternity before and after that little space, I fill and even [...] engulfed in the infinite immensity of space of which I am ignorant and which knows me not, I am frightened and am
astonished at being here rather than there, why now rather than then.31

The non-conformist attitude of Mrs. Desai's characters shows that reality is unbearable to them. Finding involvement destructive they express their willingness to withdraw from it. But, withdrawal leads them nowhere. This leads them to the realization that life by itself is meaningless no matter whatever be the path they chose. In Cry the Peacock, it is Arjuna who rebels against the expectations of his father, the claims of his family and the standards of upper middle-class life. He prefers a bicycle when his father wants him to buy a car; spends time in slums with lower class people and makes friends with his own dhobi's son Hari. He does all this because he finds life meaningless especially as lived by his father who follows all the social norms without any questioning.

Voices in the City meticulously explores the ferocious assaults of existence in the monster metropolis, Calcutta. Nirode, Monisha and Amla all feel tortured by their meaningless absurd existence. Eugene Ionesco, a leading French writer of absurd drama said in commenting on absurdism in Literature "cut off from his religious, metaphysical and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless". Human being is an isolant existent searching for truth, value or meaning in an alien universe. Nirode, the hero of the novel, like a true existential, achieves nothing in his quest for a
meaning in life. This existential quest for a meaning in life leads him to a couple of realizations in the end. Monisha, the married sister of Nirode also experiences emptiness within as well as without. Married to Jiban who is quite well off, Monisha's relationship with him is marked only by loneliness and though she desperately tries to search for a real meaning in life eventually she feels utterly frustrated. Amla, too, is in no way immune from the existential feeling of hollowness and absurdity in her life.

Sita, the protagonist of Where Shall We Go This Summer?, finds life monotonous, meaningless, full of violence and refuses to conform to such a life, as she finds it difficult to tolerate the womenfolk of her husband's family. She indulges in outrageous actions which reflect her disturbed psyche. As Camus said in The Myth of Sisyphus (1942), "In a universe that is suddenly deprived of illusions and of light, man feels a stranger. His is an irremediable exile [. . .]. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, truly constitutes the feeling of absurdity."32

In Mrs.Desai's fifth novel Fire on the Mountain, life is seen by Nanda as dull, monotonous, insignificant and absurd. She longs to withdraw from the hectic life she lead in the past. But, the withdrawal to which she resorts does not render any meaning to her life. Nanda Kaul, wife of the late Vice-chancellor, has had a life cluttered up with children, servants and guests, all of whom made demands on her and she felt the pressure was much more than she
could bear. It is because she had meaninglessly tiring a life that after her husband's death Nanda comes to Carignano at Kasauli. Dev's withdrawal also is spurred by a heightened awareness of absurdity (Bye-Bye Blackbird), which according to Albert Camus is "the failure of the world to satisfy the human demand that it provides a basis for human values [. . .]. For our personal ideas and for our judgement of right and wrong."33 This awareness of absurdity, which gradually becomes more and more intense, has been realized in the novel by different aspects of life. The background against which meaninglessness and absurdity have been explored has been provided by London. It serves as a force exerting pressure on the characters and affecting their attitudes. Also in Voices in the City, Calcutta is made to serve as a force and an agent that renders life meaningless and as a fitting background against which meaninglessness and absurdity is explored.

Baumgartner's Bombay in philosophical terms, projects an attitude towards life in which Hugo, like Sisyphus, leads an absurd existence. He exists apparently without any meaningful relation either to the society or the world or nature. This purposelessness of life leaves him in a state of "the absurd". The protagonist of Clear Light of Day seeks discovery of an identity in a rootless and meaningless life in a small Hindu family. Sharma observes, "In this ability to see meaning in an apparently absurd existence, Anita Desai strikes the strongest note of hope and affirmation."34
2.7.4 The Theme of Alienation

Alienation or estrangement is another existential tenet explored by Anita Desai in her novels. Alienation is the theme, which Hegel opened up for the modern world on many levels. Thus, "the absolute is estranged from itself as it exists only in the development of finite spirit in historical time." But the finite spirit also lives in alienation from its true consciousness of its own freedom. There is also that alienation that exists in individual society, the alienation of human being, who pursue their own desires in estrangement from the actual working of their society. And there is alienation of those who do not identify with the institutions' workings of their society. And there is alienation of those who do not identify with the institutions of their own society, who find their society empty and meaningless.

In Mrs. Desai's novels, the interpersonal relations have been dealt with in terms of husband -- wife, parents - children, brothers-sisters and individual-society relations. Amongst these the husband-wife relationship figures most prominently. This temperamental incompatibility between the male and female protagonists, naturally lead to alienation. In Cry the Peacock, Maya's emotional and romantic needs having met with Gautama's practical attitude lead them towards alienation. There are repeated literal and symbolic references in the novel to Maya's physical needs being left unfulfilled and this leads to frustration and alienation:
I turned upon my side, closer to him, conscious of the swell of my hip that rose under the white sheet, which fell in sculptured folds about my rounded form. His eyes remained blank of appraisal, of any response. It was as though he had seen only what he had expected to see nothing less and nothing more.\textsuperscript{36}

In \textit{Voices in the City}, Monisha having been confined behind bars in Jiban's house feels like a prisoner. Even the ordinary communication and understanding is missing in the relationship of Monisha and Jiban.

Jiban lacked the capacity to enter the world of Monisha. Nirode's mother alienates herself from her drunkard husband by seeking refuge in flowers and gardens. The relationship between Dharma and his wife is based on a type of passive suffering on the part of the wife to all the impositions of her husband.

In \textit{Where Shall We Go This Summer?}, the sense of marital alienation stems from the fact that Sita and Raman live at different planes of existence. Consequently though they live close together they often feel that they do not know each other and lack of understanding causes lack of co-operation and love.

Marital alienation in \textit{In Custody} is a problem caused by scarcity of money, uncertainty of job and lack of time etc. Sarala was dissatisfied with her husband's poorly paid temporary job as lecturer, bitterness sets in this
relationship. Deven's dull life, lack of communication with his students, colleagues and relatives only add to this alienation. Though Sarala is unable to express her bitterness and disappointment freely in words, the reader is able to get the feel of alienation between her and her husband. Nanda Kaul (Fire on the Mountain) is doubly alienated from her over busy husband and also from her children. She is hardly able to derive pleasure from the memories of her husband who had a life long affair with Miss David. He concentrated on doing only as much for Nanda as was necessary to keep her in content. To escape from these self-contradictory conflicts, she alienates herself to the barrenness of Carignano.

In Bye-Bye Blackbird, alienation has been dealt with mainly in terms of child-parent and individual-society relationships. The two contradictory roles, that of an Indian wife at home and the other of an English woman at work, are nerve racking for her. The corresponding indifference of Sarah's parents is also shocking. In Voices in the City also, alienation has been treated in terms of mother-children relationship, which is another aspect of inter-personal relations. Monisha finds her relationship with mother filled with a sense of duty, honour and concern. In the case of Nirode, though his alienation might have begun with his suspicion of mother's relations with Major Chaddha, yet in the end of the novel, it leads Nirode to identify his mother with Goddess Kali.
In *Clear Light of Day*, alienation has been realized as influence of time on the relationship of Bim with her younger brother Raja. As children, Bim and Raja loved and praised each other, but in due course of time Bim feels betrayed and is disappointed by Raja's neglect of his duties after their parent's death and running away to Hyderabad. She had felt herself so humiliated by his going away and leaving her and by his reversal of role from brother to Landlord. Though Mrs. Desai basically seems to be saying—the longer one lives the deeper he suffers the bitter assaults of existence—yet in her later novels, the change to a more positive attitude towards life is also noticeable.

Alienation in Bim's case ends with forgiveness and compromise and at the end of the novel one can find Bim urging Tara to ask Raja to come and see her. *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* also presents a positive approach to the existential predicament. Sita neither dies in the end nor kills anybody nor does she become mad. She simply compromises with her destiny.

### 2.7.5 The Theme of Nothingness

Another thought, which pervades existentialism, is that of nothingness or void. Kierkegaard remarks:

> I am my own existence, but my existence is a nothingness I live then without anything to structure my being and my world and I
am looking into emptiness and the void, hovering over the abyss
in fear and trembling and living the life of dread.  

Baumgartner is a victim figure whose life proves that human existence is
devoid of any meaning and has simply ceased to make sense. It is
Baumgartner's desire to settle in Venice. But he is driven to India and his quest
for a tangible pattern in life proves futile. He is uncertain even after fifty years
of stay in India. He was nobody and his existence "a nothing". The
nothingness in Monisha's life makes her muse like an existentialist. Monisha's
mental agony keeps increasingly mounting and she feels more and more
tormented. All that recurs in life make her realize the futility of her hollow
existence and ultimately drive her to suicide. Nirode and Amla are in no way
immune to this feeling of nothingness.

The house-wife role has a certain aspect that makes it "almost
impossible for a woman of intelligence to retain a sense of human identity, the
firm core of self or I without which a human being, man or woman is not truly
alive." Sita is left with a feeling of emptiness, futility and a sense of
nothingness. Willing to give birth to her fifth child she escapes to the island.
This move assists her in shedding her inhibitions and sees that part of her self
she had not realized before. Nanda Kaul was leading a life of a recluse in the
lonely house at Carignano where she had been living all these years all alone
"with no one and nothing else." This sense of nothingness not only shuts her out from the outside world but also isolates her from her own self.

2.7.6 The Theme of Death

Related to theme of nothingness is the existentialist idea of death. Martin Heidegger remarks, "Nothingness, in the form of death, is my final Nothingness." The unaware person tries to live as if death is not actual he tries to escape its reality. Jean Paul Sartre said," Death is my total nonexistence. Death is as absurd as birth - It is nothing but the wiping out of my existence as conscious being." In a world sharply characterized by alienation, Mrs.Desai's characters feel intensely lonely. This loneliness and emotional insecurity make them sensitive towards violence and death.

The fear of death is the predominant note in Cry the Peacock. The novel begins with a reference to Maya's pet dog Toto's body. This reminds her of the albino astrologer who has predicted an unnatural death of either her or her husband's within four years of marriage. This reminder develops into a morbid obsession from which Maya is incapable of detaching herself. The obsession results in Maya's psychic disintegration. Maya's hysteria increases and at the end of the novel, it is insane Maya herself, who hurls Gautam down the terrace to his death. She felt that Gautam is responsible for her fear and she decides to
end this fear by putting an end to Gautam's life. This is explained clearly by Sartre in *Being and Nothingness*:

> The origin of struggle always lies, in fact, in some concrete antagonism whose material condition is scarcity, in a particular form and the real aim is objective conquest or even creation, in relation to which the destruction of the adversary is the only means. ⁴²

In *Voices in the City* death is not as immediate and haunting yet it recurs and its influence on all events helps the novelist present life as a meaningless journey. Death becomes instrumental in bringing about self-awareness and significant changes in the attitudes of some of the major characters. At the race-course, the dead horse is identified with an outsider like herself in the metropolitan city Calcutta. At the end of the novel, it is Monisha's death that transforms Nirode from a rebel to a person deeply involved in life and indulging in the concerns of the people around him.

Death does not rise to the surface till the end. Throughout the novel, death hovers in the background throwing light on the futility of Nanda's withdrawal and Ila's involvement. Death engulfs them both expressing the absurdity of their attitudes to life. Ila was raped and murdered because of her active involvement in life. Nanda realized that her own fabrication lead her to a
state of withdrawal and in the end the novelist describes her as lying "with her head hanging, the black telephone hanging, the long wire dangling,"43 encircled by the raging forest fire.

In Custody depicts the death of a stray dog, which is run over by Deven's bus to Delhi and later on attacked by a flock of crows. This death adds a bitter shade of reality to the scene and is one of the means of drawing Deven back to the meaninglessness of reality from a world of fame, money and the great poet Nur. Bim's death wish in Clear Light of Day is reflected in the lines from D.H.Lawrence's Ship of Death:

From too much love of living, From hope and fear set free, We thank with brief thanksgiving, Whatever Gods may be, That No man lives forever, That even the weariest river, Winds somewhere safe to sea.44

However, Bim masters this death wish and comes to terms with the changing realities.

Thus, Anita Desai is essentially an existential novelist. Having laid down the existential thoughts, which characterize Desai's novels, in the next chapter, varying techniques that figure prominently in the thematic mosaic of Mrs. Desai's fiction are discussed.
Notes


2 As quoted in Namita Gokhale, “A Thousand Years of the Novel,” *The Hindu* [Chennai], 4 March 2001 : B1+


5 Macquarrie, 10.


7 Prasad, 104.


15 Sartre, 29.

16 T.S. Eliot, Four Quartets (London: Faber and Faber, 1980).


21 Anita Desai, Voices in the City (New Delhi: Orient, 1985) 40.

23 Anita Desai, Cry the Peacock (New Delhi: Orient, 1980) 98.

24 Anita Desai, Where Shall We Go This Summer? (New Delhi: Vikas, 1982) 139.


29 Desai, 68.


31 Katherena Eirmann, The Realm of Existentialism 5 May 2001


35 Eirmann, online.


38 M.H. Waheed, “From self-alienation to self-adjustment in Anita Desai’s *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*” *Indian Literature* 33.5 (1990): 182.


41 Eirmann, Online.

42 Sartre, 113.

43 Desai, *Fire on the Mountain,* 145.

44 Narendra Kumar, 51-52.