Chapter 3

Thematic and Technical Variations: The Persisting Experimentation

3.1 Introduction

The novels of Anita Desai reflect aspects of the existential diagnosis of contemporary life. What one confronts in life today is a tragic alienation and dehumanization of man who is living in a poisoned cultural milieu. Inspite of all he has achieved by way of civilization, he always suffers from a sense of rootlessness, lack of purpose and insignificance. The adaptive function of the individual has been put out of joint in relation to himself as well as others. He can neither reach and understand nor grasp his world. In this chapter, an attempt is made to analyze the technical variations used by the novelist and to demonstrate that they are in keeping with the existential themes of her novels. The present chapter is an attempt at studying the plot, narrative technique, action, character, setting, symbolism and imagery and language and style of her eight novels. These concepts coming together from various directions make up for the cohesiveness of art. These merge together and stride the scene in the novels of Anita Desai.
3.2 Plots

By virtue of her distinct thematic concerns and technical innovations Anita Desai occupies a unique position in the world of Indian writing in English. One of the most important aspects of her work is her ability to fuse form and content. She does not lay emphasis on the subject matter like Mulk Raj Anand rather she is more concerned with form and technique. According to E.M. Forster, the basis of a novel is a story and a story is a narrative of events arranged in time sequence. “Story” and “Plot” may be distinguished from each other as observed by E.M.Froster:

We have defined a story as a narrative of events – arranged in their time sequence. A plot is also a narrative the emphasis falling on causality.¹

Anita Desai has a great skill in spinning a yarn for plots. Cry the Peacock is the story of crack up of the protagonist’s psyche. Voices in the City is the tale of the adventures of Nirode and his two sisters Monisha and Amla and his mother. In Bye-Bye Blackbird, the story of east-west enchantment and disenchantment goes on a journey in England with tourist view-point predominating. Where Shall We Go This Summer? is the story of Sita’s rebellion to cosmic violence and social outrage of sensibilities ending in acceptance and conformity. This novel is in contrast to the other novels like
Cry the Peacock, Voices in the City and Fire on the Mountain in which the problems of frustration of the female characters come to violent and tragic ends. This novel presents a positive approach to the existential predicament. Instead of contemplating on suicide or murder she simply compromises with her destiny.

Fire on the Mountain has for its plot the tale of Nanda Kaul – a widow seeking quietitude in the evening of her life, which was violated by two tragic intruders Ila Das and Raka. Clear Light of Day, is a story of Bimla Das’s sacrifice of her personal joys for her family. Baumgartner’s Bombay is a story of a jew who is searching for his roots and decides that India is his home, a decision which makes him realize that India also refuses to accept him like Germany. In Custody deals with Deven Sharma’s interview with Nur and the consequences. Most of the plots are well built and though most of Anita Desai’s novels lack in solid action they have a very gripping story to tell. According to Usha Bande, “[. . .] her verbal lullabies lead the reader to slumber on the cradle of her imagination and creativity and to suspend skeptical disbelief about her art. She galvanizes and redeems her plot by the magnetic force of her personality.”

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3.3 Narrative Technique

Under the impact of the new pressures of the scientific and technological advancement, the world around us shows the signs of disintegration of the individual. It is therefore imperative that Modern Indo-English novels should seek new techniques to articulate these newly experienced inner and outer realities. Technique for Anita Desai is discovering content through form. *Cry the Peacock* very well illustrates Desai’s ability to closely interweave form with content. *Cry the Peacock* is concerned with the terrors of existence and it achieves its effect through the stream of consciousness technique. Her careful artistry is revealed in her intelligent mixing of the first person narrative with third person rendering of the story for the purpose of contrast.

The post structuralists may have denied Anita Desai the controlling power over the form and theme of the text. In *Cry the Peacock*, Anita Desai has achieved the “feat of associating, of relating and of constructing a story with the image, the symbol and the myth and that too spontaneously and compulsively.”³ *Cry the Peacock* is thus a technical triumph. Anita Desai has made such an extensive use of the Gita philosophy to reveal the use of archetypes of the religious text as a technique for dramatizing human nature through character delineation. She has also used this technique to enhance the aesthetic appeal of her novel by giving it a philosophical edge but not to sympathize with one character or the other. She makes Maya a psychotic
towards the end to suit the requirements of the technique of fictionally working out the Gita philosophy. Through similies, metaphors and symbols, the two spouses, Maya and Gautama are evoked as opposed archetypes. The middle story is best rendered through her own consciousness and in her own agonized idiom. The “centrality of her truth being essentially subjective, the long smothered wail of a lacerated psyche finds an apt expression in this novel.”

In *Voices in the City*, Anita Desai adopts a different technique. She has employed the more conventional third person mode of narrating the story of the three voices in the city. The novel presents the sights and sounds of the antagonist city of Calcutta in which the three protagonists, Nirode, Monisha and Amla struggle for existence. Each character visualizes the city as a threat to his or her integrity as individual. All the techniques of the psychological novel such as flashback, stream of consciousness, diary entries, self-analysis, ruminations, dialogues and descriptions of place and people are employed in this novel. Anita Desai makes her intentions towards events and characters obvious by frequently, interrupting the narrative, interpreting the events and commenting on the characters.

In Anita Desai’s works the narrative is internalized or in other words the action is filtered through the minds of the characters. One is reminded of Virginia Woolf’s technical art. Anita Desai’s achievement in *Bye-Bye Blackbird* is a delicate exploration of bewilderment, rejection and resentment.
through Dev and Adit Sen, who experience the clichéd east-west encounter in their lives. The action of the novel is set in London of the early sixties among a group of Indian émigrés. The novel traces the cyclic pattern of attraction and repulsion. Adit sen and his friend Dev at the beginning of the novel inhabit two distinctly opposed countries of mind. Dev lives in the enchanted landscape of English literature and recognizes the dream images of his England everywhere.

Adit sen was not misty-eyed in his perception on England. By means of alignment with familiar images the enormity born of unfamiliarity has been reduced. Anita Desai recreates a picture of trends of a society, which bestows life on both people and places. The technique adopted by the novelist i.e., the journey pattern is in conformity with the unceasing journey of the process of being and of becoming an individual. The novel speaks volumes of her craftsmanship and of her control over form and content.

In Where Shall We Go This Summer?, the novelist presents a series of incidents to highlight the theme of marital tension. There are a number of scenes, which effectively reveal the secret inner life of her heroine. For instance, Sita’s chance meeting with the foreigner, who is waiting in the lift to Ajanta, the ayahs quarrelling, the crows savagely attacking the eagle etc. This technique of telescoping the inner crisis of the protagonist with the realities outside turn out to be effective through which the inner layers of Sita’s
unconscious are laid bare. This technique gives us a glimpse of the storm raging inside her.

Anita Desai’s fifth novel handles the existential theme of alienation. Her intense desire for alienation and solitariness find expression in the novelist’s mixing up of number of metaphors all in one passage:

She would be still, still – she would be a charred tree trunk in the forest, a broken pillar of marble in the desert, a lizard on a stone wall.5

Fire on the mountain threatened throughout the narrative at last comes about and may be considered a symbol of the ultimate consummation. Nanda Kaul is drawn towards her grandchild’s instinctive love of solitude. Through recurring images and symbols Anita Desai dramatizes effectively the terror of the dissolution of the human being. The creation and manipulation of scenes in her novels is a significant quality of Desai’s craft. Her definition of protagonists and elucidation of various psychic states, obsessions and existential predicaments contribute to the development of symbolic implications. The novelist employs traditional narrative modes such as flashback perspective, stream of consciousness point of view and relates it to associative thought process, which centre around memories and these are slowly transformed into symbols.
Clear Light of Day is a flawless fusion of structure, content and language. In the chapters dealing with the present, the narrator switches the focus repeatedly from one sister to the other each given equal room for reminiscence, expressing their thoughts and exchanging their views. This facilitates the association of events, incidents, experiences related to reality with visual impressions. Bim and Tara conceive of the past as a period lacking in meaning. Seemingly disconnected events establish a logical sequence of their own and evoke strong emotional and psychological responses in both of them. The author uses this technique to examine her characters' interior landscapes embedded in the historical background of the 1930s and the 1940s and very few exciting events in an uninteresting life.

Anita Desai uses flashback to modify the narrator's point of view by alternately relating the story to one or the other of Das' children as well as Aunt Mira. A further flashback extends our understanding of the Das's family and the events narrated here make us understand why Raja left his home to join the Hyder Ali family in Hyderabad, Tara married a young diplomat and Bim rejected the matrimonial advances of Mr. Biswas. The novelist presents a large number of characters than she had done ever before. Anita Desai works through her characters' interaction, through dialogue and reminiscence. As in most of her earlier novels there is little action in Clear Light of Day. The omniscient narrator in Clear Light of Day recounts the story during the early
1970's using the reunion of the two sisters to take them back into their childhood and adolescence.

The narrative pattern of *Clear Light of Day* bears a close resemblance to the sonata form in music which consists of five movements in which the first two sections introduce two opposite notes, the third is either an extension of the first or the second with the fourth affecting a reconciliation between the two till it is harmoniously reconciled in a climatic fifth section. The allusions to Eliot's *Four Quartets* and Mozart's symphony and the music concert with which the novel ends all testify to this musical pattern.

*Baumgartner's Bombay* projects an attitude towards life and a tone that underlies Desai's narrative in which Hugo, Sisyphus like leads an existence which is but a series of meaningless gestures. These gestures are a mark of alienation from society. Hugo exists without any meaningful interaction either with society or the world and the purposelessness of life leaves him in a state of mind. Desai's narrative often focuses upon the background against which the characters are made to enact their roles. She describes Bombay in deep colour and derives more meaning out of her description. The novelist uses flashback technique to take us to Hugo's childhood and to make it plausible. The episodes depicting an adolescent Hugo and his mother are, some of the most moving moments in Indian English fiction. There is no real change in the thematic interests and the technical concerns of Desai for the same gets
repeated in In Custody. The novelist goes back again and again to the same themes, in novel after novel and employs the same techniques for purposes of narration, evocation and description.

Memory of the past or Nostalgia is a conscious narrative technique that helps evaluating the individual’s relationship with the present. In her other novels except Bye-Bye Blackbird, nostalgia is an expression of a need to belong and to bridge the gulf between London and Calcutta. In Cry the Peacock, Maya’s nostalgic memories help to prolong her insanity. It is through nostalgia that the two worlds of her past and present are constantly juxtaposed and contrasted. Nostalgia in Voices in the City and Fire on the Mountain is used for distancing the past. Here the process of nostalgic memories is inverted. It is not Nirode who seeks the past, but the past that holds on to him. His conscious effort is geared to a rejection of his past. Monisha, like Nirode rejects a return to it. Her nostalgia is for the immediate past for the life in the district where she was alone and was left to herself. In this novel the past turns predator and swallows up the present.

In Fire on the Mountain, both the uses of the past are there, Nanda Kaul uses her memories to distance the past, while Ila Das, welcomes her nostalgic memories. In Baumgartner’s Bombay, Hugo’s childhood is recalled through memory. Bim and Tara in Clear Light of Day rely on the memory of the past to find meaning in life and it is done as an act of love. Sharing a number of
memories make them reflect and comment upon them – the rose walk in the
garden, Raja's illness, meeting the neighbours, playing by the river, Hyder Ali
on his horse, Aunt Mira's arrival and the fires burning on the horizon during
the fateful summer of 1947.

Memory also helps unfold the world of fantasy. The juxtaposition of the
past and the present, of the alternate world of fantasy and reality, of the inner
and the outer worlds of involvement and withdrawal, help to bring into focus
family relationships explored in detail.

3.4 Structure

Structure contributes the developing unity of a work. Novels of the
eighteenth and twentieth centuries have a discernible structure, which is often
carried explicitly in the novel. It is only towards the end of the nineteenth
century that the novelist withdraws, leaving the structure of the novel to
express its own nature. In Novelists on the Novel (1959), Miriam Allot
classifies "structural problems under three sub-headings (i) Unity and
Coherence (ii) Plot and Story and (iii) Time factor." Expressing her views on
the structure of the novel, Anita Desai remarks:

I prefer the word 'pattern' to plot as it sounds – more natural and
even better [. . .]. One should have a pattern and then fit the
characters, the setting and the scenes into it – each piece in keeping with the others and so forming a balanced whole.\(^7\)

*Cry the Peacock* is divided into three sections. Part one and three are so brief that they might be termed “Prologue” and “Epilogue” to Part II, which forms the core of the novel. The opening and concluding parts are rendered in the first person. Part II employing the protagonist’s stream of consciousness to trace the origin and growth of her anguish is written in the first person. The present and the past are juxtaposed to present the incompatibility between Maya and her husband, Gautama, a reputed lawyer.

The death motif is skillfully built in the structure of the novel. The novel begins with the description of the body of Maya’s pet dog rotting in the sun. The novelist builds up the atmosphere and tension through a carefully detailed description of things both big and small. This section which is less than four pages reveal the careful artistry of Desai. In the second section, Maya’s narration begins with her bemoaning the death of Toto, the pet dog. Her existential anguish is conveyed in a crucial passage here. She was awaiting with uncertainty for something to happen to her. But, immediately she contradicts herself by saying:

Yes, I did. It was that something else, that indefinable unease at the back of my mind, the grain of sand that irked, itched and remained meaningless.\(^8\)
Maya's ability to relate to experience has a feverish intensity. Her speech and her thoughts expressed through an abundance of adjectives symbolize her state of mind. Words like “hysterical”, “sobbing”, “polluted” and “purulent” suggest a neurotic sensibility responding hysterically to the death of the dog. In this section, Anita Desai succeeds in presenting two characters of opposed attitudes and suggests the possibility of this opposition leading to the ultimate destruction of marriage. The writer drops a hint about the more serious conflicts to come.

Desai deliberately chooses the first person mode of narrating the story to explore challenging possibilities. Though she does not identify herself with the character or narration, Desai succeeds in presenting the narrator with sympathy and distancing herself from the character.

The childhood prophecy of a future disaster once forgotten now comes back into her mind and has a traumatic effect on her life, which eventually destructs her married life and distorts her perspective. She knew her time was coming when she sees the dark dancer. Her fear and sense of alienation are intensified when she comes in contact with the outside world. She fails to communicate and withdraws into herself as she finds the world menacing and frightening.
Rebuffed by her husband Gautama who is coldly rational and badly mauled by society Maya is torn between her love of life and her fear of death. The gradual disintegration of her personality is powerfully dramatized. Anita Desai’s skill in portraying the feelings and emotions of a character who is insane, is demonstrated in this section. The last section of the novel narrated in the third person is an ironic comment on the world of sane and rational people. Desai is ironical in her description of the mother and daughter who has always skirted “the unimaginable realm of horror.”

Voices in the City is divided into four parts Part-I—“Nirode,” Part—II “Monisha”, Part—III “Amla” and Part—IV—“Mother” which deal with all the major characters. Only Part—II being an extract from Monisha’s dairy is written in the first person, while the rendering of the remaining three sections are in the author’s own voice. In Part-II, the diary technique lends a tone of immediacy and anguish to Monisha’s account of her miserably empty married life. The tragedy of husband wife alienation, as already delineated in Cry the Peacock, is re-enacted here through the Monisha - Jiban story.

Desai depicts the futility of existence and man’s vain attempt to survive in the face of all calamities through an exploration not of the social man but of “the lone individual.” Life to Desai is “a snail found a pearl lost.” It is “traceless, meaningless,” “only a conundrum.” Nirode is the main protagonist who is a failure and his search for freedom is an existential search.
Nirode wants negation and not acceptance. He does not want to continue and he feels isolated and cherishes this isolation. Life to him is absurd like the journey of Sisyphus. In the second section, Monisha is not able to continue in the oppressive atmosphere surrounding her at the Bow Bazar house. She reflects on the absurdity of existence. In the third section, Amla finds the city antagonistic towards the people. She also longs to release herself from the suffocation of city life. In the fourth section “Mother”, Monisha’s death shocks Nirode and puts an end to his rebellion.

The fire, which burns her to death, acts like a cathartic agent where Nirode is concerned. When he breaks his silence after seeing what is left of Monisha’s dead body his exile comes to an end. Amla was also able to change her outlook on life. Nirode’s desire to touch and to feel, to be involved and to share the suffering of others is in direct contrast to his earlier evasion of touch and contact. He was able to understand his mother for the first time. He was able to see Goddess Kali in her. The design of life and death seemed suddenly clear to him.

Though the theme of alienation or loneliness is explored again and again in her novels, techniques and intentions vary from novel to novel.

Edwin Muir expressed structure in terms of “Time, Space and Causality” in the Structure of the Novel:
We see things in terms of Time, Space and Causality; and only
the supreme Being, Kant affirmed, can see the whole unity from
beginning to end. Yet the imagination desires to see the whole
unity or an image of it; and it seems that the image can only be
conceived when the imagination accepts certain limitations, or
finds itself spontaneously working within them [. . .] those
limitations determine the principle of structure in the various
types of imaginative creation [. . .].¹⁴

Bye-Bye Blackbird split up into three parts viz. “Arrival”, “Discovery
and Recognition” and “Departure”, tells the tale of two Bengali youths - Dev
and Adit Sen and the latter’s English wife named Sarah.

The three successive parts of the novel trace Dev’s corresponding
responses to London. The locale of the town seen primarily from his point of
view reflects his psychic states as he wanders in quest of his new identity. The
novel is planned as a dialectical exercise, where perception (the present),
memory (the past) and dream (the future), are sought to be structured in that
order and also units of consciousness and time.

When the novel begins Dev has just arrived in London from Calcutta to
study Economics. He is staying with his school friend, Adit Sen, who has been
in England for several years and is married to an English girl. But soon he
starts trying to secure a job for himself. Although he gets initially frustrated he ultimately gets the job of a salesman in a bookshop. Initially he is an anglophobe, whereas Adit is an anglophile. Dev’s anglophobia stems chiefly from the sort of treatment the Indian immigrants get from the English. They are openly insulted and abused.

In Part II “Discovery and Recognition”, Dev begins to wander about in London like a tourist with wandering gaze observing its various attractions. This brings about a slow change in this attitude towards England from anglophobia to anglophilia. In Part III “Departure”, Adit’s attitude towards England undergoes a sea change. His anglophilia gives way to a sudden nostalgia for his homeland. The outbreak of Indo-Pak war intensified his nostalgia. This arouses in him a sense of patriotism, which compels him even to agree to fight for his country. He, like an existentialist, comes to consider himself to be “a stranger, a non belonger” in England. He moves about London, “in a kind of morbid search” for belonging, but London appears to him altogether different. Ultimately Adit takes the irrevocable existentialist decision to return to India with Sarah who is expecting her first child. Dev decides to stay on in England. Although the novel is concerned with the lives of Indian immigrants in England, as pointed out earlier, it mainly explores the existential problems of adjustment, belonging and ultimate decision in the lives
of the three characters Dev, Adit and Sarah. It is also scattered with numerous purple passages revealing Desai's existential musings.

Fire on the Mountain is divided into three clearly titled parts. Part – I: Nanda Kaul at Carignano, Part-II: Raka comes to Carignano and Part-III: Ila Das leaves Carignano. Part-I depicts Nanda Kaul’s loneliness. She has withdrawn herself totally from the world and identified herself with the barrenness of Carignano. In Part – II, she dreads her grandchild as “an intruder, an outsider, a mosquito flown from the plains to tease and worry.” On her arrival Raka too, reciprocates her grand mother’s indifference. Though they wish to lead a separate life, living under one roof, it is not easy for them “to exist and yet appear not to exist.” Nanda Kaul is drawn towards the child as she is in love with solitude.

In Part-III, Ila Das, Nanda Kaul’s childhood friend and a spinster working as a welfare officer among the hillfolks also tries to glorify falsely the painful past of Nanda Kaul with a view to delighting the child, but in vain. This is followed by Ila Das’ rape and murder by a village ruffian causing Nanda Kaul’s death. She was shocked at the news she received over the phone. By pointing out the futility of Ila Das’ involvement with reality as well as Nanda Kaul’s retirement to a life of illusion, the novelist seems to suggest a fusion of reality and illusion as a possible solution to the existential predicament. The
novel concludes with the forest fire. Thus the theme of loneliness, the image of the forest fire and the locale of Carignano lend structural unity to the novel.

Soren Kierkegaard, Henri Bergson, St.Augustine, Blaise Pascal and Martin Heidegger – the prominent existentialist thinkers have discussed at length the concept of time in their works. Kierkegaard’s *The Sickness Unto Death* and *The Concept of Dread*, Bergson’s *Time and Freewill*, St.Augustine’s *The City of God* and *The Confessions*, Pascal’s *Pensees* and Heidegger’s *Being and Time* seem to have influenced Desai considerably. *Clear Light of Day* comprising of four parts illustrates the truth of T.S.Eliot’s dictum, “Time the destroyer is time the preserver.” Her admirable treatment of time as a fourth dimension presenting the emotional turmoil in the main protagonist adds a thematic freshness to Indian English fiction.

Desai herself explicates the theme of this novel in an interview with Sunil Sethi:

My novel is set in old Delhi and records the tremendous changes that a Hindu family goes through since 1947. Basically, my preoccupation was with recording the passage of time. I was trying to write a four dimensional piece on how a family’s life moves backwards and forwards in a period of time.
This first part depicts Bim's nausea and her present encounter with Tara after a long interval of time. This section elaborates the possible relations that the protagonist shares with the others in the novel. It also introduces the major motifs in the novels – time, history, the self and others. To this extent this part functions as an expository section. Tara visits the house after a lapse of time prior to the wedding of Raja's daughter. In the beginning, Tara finds the house and garden neglected but later she begins to perceive the changes brought about by Time.

Part-II traces the effect of partition riots on the family. It describes the main events in the family against the background of the 1947 upheaval. For instance, Raja's fascination for their Muslim landlord's family, his love of Urdu and his desire to join the Jamia Millia, his affliction with tuberculosis and Bim's nursing him during his illness, his subsequent flight to Hyderabad to join Hyder Ali's family and marry his only daughter and Bim's rejection of Dr. Biswas' marriage proposal owing to her attachment for her family members and duty to her neurotic brother and ailing aunt.

Part – III takes us back to the remote days of the two sister's childhood. Many episodes, already recounted in Part-I are repeated here but with a difference. While in Part – I these are merely recollected, in Part – III these are re-enacted. As children Raja and Bim were bright and ambitious, whereas Tara was a mediocre with no unusual desires. In their later lives however their
careers are reversed. Part - IV is a continuation of Part- I. Tara is pained to discover the strained relations between Bim and Raja, who had almost incestuous relations when they were young. The first section of Part-IV ends with Bim’s violent outburst at Baba and her realization of the inadequacy of her love for him. The meaning of “being” cannot be achieved by a mere love for others. The second section of this part reconciles all contradictions developed in the earlier movements.

The arrival of her nieces delights Bim and she relents her rigid attitude towards Raja. This reconciliation enables the individual “to apprehend the point of intersection of the timeless with time [. . .].”21 This not only defines the essence of being, but also constitutes Desai’s vision of the individual’s existence in and out of time.

The novel is written in a jigsaw puzzle fashion which is suited to the existentialist theme handled. The thematic pieces left scattered are ultimately glued together very carefully into a remarkable whole. The skilful use of the shifting narrative perspectives of the past and present also proves well suited to the main theme. In terms of structure, the novel delineates the action at three time levels – the past, the present and the vision of the timeless in which past, present and future are fused. About the time structure of the novel Brijraj Singh observes:
the past is not at all in one lump and the present in another; the two are so interfused that we keep going back at different times in the present to the same event of the past [. . .] but always with the knowledge that the intervening description of the present has given.22

Baumgartner's Bombay opens with a terrified Lotte returning from the blood-splattered scene of crime. As the only foreigner known to be on intimate terms with the victim of multiple stabbings, Lotte was called, to identify the victim by the police. Back in her dusty one room apartment, the cards reveal a tale hidden beneath the faint spidery writing. The bunch of old letters written by an unknown inmate of a German concentration camp becomes a major prop in Desai’s narrative.

The novel is a moving account of the travails of a simple Jew and narrates the life of Hugo Baumgartner from his childhood days in Germany to his death, at the ripe old age of seventy in India. During the days of Hitler, Hugo had to leave Germany and come to India in search of living. Here his features and language construct barriers in his way to develop a sense of belonging. He is betrayed by his friends and is unable to forget his mother who decided to stay back in Germany. He finds it impossible to keep in touch with his mother caught in the political upheavals of India. While in Calcutta he falls in love with a German cabaret dancer, Lotte. He gets disappointed with human
company and so he prefers to live in the company of his cats in a dark shabby flat behind the Taj Hotel in Bombay. His financial resources are meager. One day he takes pity on a drug addict German boy and brings him home for rest and food. The most unexpected event takes place; the boy kills Baumgartner and runs away with his silver trophies.

In this novel, Desai brings into focus the existential viewpoint regarding interpersonal relationships. Absolute freedom in India causes existential anxiety for Hugo. His escape into the past is an effort to overcome his sense of insecurity, alienation and non-belongingness in a foreign land from where he has no option to escape physically. Desai's narrative projects a view of man which is marked by a robust confidence in his ability to generate good and take full knowledge of the existence of evil.

The story of Where Shall We Go this Summer? is told in a series of flashbacks with a clever ordering of past events. The division of the novel orders the events. This first section is devoted to Sita's coming to the "magic island" Manori along with her daughter Menaka and son Karan. In this section, Sita smokes heavily to overcome her disappointment at finding the house at Manori Island in a deplorable condition. She recalls one by one each episode in her life since her marriage to Raman. Her anguish is the outcome of her inability to adopt herself to the general current of society.
Part two narrates her childhood days on the island some twenty years ago. After India’s independence, her father who was a freedom fighter sought to create on the island a rural community uncontaminated by the forces of progress and civilization. Too many details about him are presented to us – his illicit relationship with Phool Maya; his incestuous relations with Rekha; his daughter by his first wife; his desertion by Sita’s mother; a fugitive son and rumours of mistresses. This part highlights the protagonist’s unusual upbringing accounting for her abnormality in later years.

The final section of the novel picks up the thread of the story left at the end of the opening section. Sita struggles to find an answer to her spiritual crisis. Her children long to return to Bombay. On Raman’s arrival she becomes disappointed to learn that he has come for the sake of children and not for her. She then reconciles with herself and returns to normalcy of life. The novel is divided into three well-defined parts in terms of time. Part One – Monsoon ’67 dealing with the present and immediate past of the protagonist Sita. Part Two – Winter’ 47 dealing with her remote past and Part three Monsoon’ 67 with her present and near future. About the pattern of the novel, the novelist herself remarks:

I wanted the book to follow the pattern of the Monsoon together darkly and threateningly, to pour down wildly and passionately, then, withdraw quietly and calmly.23
Where Shall We Go This Summer? is structurally akin to Virginia Woolf’s To the Light House. Both trace the flux of their respective heroine’s consciousness through three successive stages of perception, memory and dream. In both, the most remarkable characteristic is the skilful employment of the stream of consciousness technique, the revelation of the characters inner workings of mind through “interior monologues and the dramatizing of feelings.” Anita Desai weaves episodes and scenes in the main structure of the novel, which gives density to the story and supports the demand of the protagonist. Sita’s rationality in leaving her home, the episode of the Muslim couple in the Hanging gardens or the hitch - hiker incident, fits well into the pattern of the story and justifies Sita’s quest.

3.5 Characterization

An ardent champion of the individual, Desai is drawn towards individual’s freedom of choice or his estrangement, which lies at the heart of Sartrean existentialism. In Sartre, freedom is the human reality – “there is no determinism – man is free, man is freedom.”

There is no universal nature according to which man might pattern his action and conduct. The characters of Anita Desai represent man suffering from alienation and isolation in modern life in which emphasis is on standardization and conformity at the loss of man’s individuality. The novelist examines the
nature of man’s existence. The chaos and disorder the novels emphasize are not merely the characteristics of modern life but they convey a strong sense of meaninglessness of human existence in general.

Desai’s characters can be classified into two distinctive groups – those who fail to adjust to the harsh realities of life and those who compromise. What provides momentum to her creative activity is “the basic human condition”. The problems of the protagonists are existential. As rebels they seek ways and means by which they can protect their individuality against the pressures of conformity. “Rebel” is used in the sense Camus has used the term:

The rebel is a slave who has taken orders all his life, suddenly decides that he cannot obey some new command.26

The spiritual crisis of the main characters are merely narrated and not dramatized. Her characters are independent, frustrated, agonized, somewhat domineering and combating with angry defiance their individual problems and predicaments which are basically existentialist, make us feel as though we have noticed them in our neighbourhood and herein lies the charm of Desai’s characterization.

Desai does not portray characters in a traditional manner. The characters are portrayed as preoccupied with the present, look backward in time and visualize future as well. They come alive in their dynamic process “always
growing and changing, viable and mutable."\textsuperscript{27} They have been represented in recollection and fall back upon memory and with this use of memory and uncontrolled flow of thought Desai depicts reality. Her protagonists, both male and female, withdraw into a world of isolation and solitude. They belong to the middle class and upper middle class where economic hardship is conspicuous by its absence. They enjoy material prosperity but their emotional and intellectual aspirations remain unfulfilled. They aim at achieving a qualitative change in the life they lead but fail, consequently happiness deludes them and peace never comes to them.

The protagonists of Anita Desai's novels question themselves relentlessly and realization of their drawbacks brings them fresh pain. The man and the woman who inhabit the world of Desai resist the temptation to make a compromise with conscience. They possess a heightened imagination to realize the extraordinary strangeness, mystery of the world in which they live and the absurdity of their existence. Awareness of the fundamental absurdity, according to Camus, is the measure of man's achievement in terms of knowledge:

No code of ethics and no effort are justifiable a priori in the face of cruel mathematics that command our condition.\textsuperscript{28}
The non-conformist attitude of Desai’s characters shows that reality is unbearable to them. Therefore, they find their involvement destructive and want to withdraw from it. But, withdrawal leads them nowhere and ultimately there is the realization that the path they choose hardly matters for life by itself is meaningless. Man imbued with an existence, pour-soi is engaged in a senseless struggle against forces, which can neither be mastered nor comprehended:

We are a heap of existents inconvenienced, embarrassed by ourselves, we hadn’t the slightest reason for being there, any of us, each existent, embarrassed, vaguely ill at ease, felt superfluous in relation to the others.29

Faith in God, that could have provided some sustenance to this hopeless dark world is not sought by Desai’s intellectual characters. Finding no reason to live, almost all her characters revolt against the existing patterns of life but as they do not have anything to fight for, their fight ends in failure. Sometimes, instead of fighting they tend to withdraw in time but to their shock they realise that their attempts are failures because withdrawal is unattainable. If they try to seek relief in another world i.e., the world of fantasy, after entering it they come to realize that it is no better than the world of reality.
Some character patterns get fixed. Male protagonists are as a rule worldly, pragmatic, rational, unemotional devoted to work and business. They are undemanding and do not respond to the dictates of the heart. Gautama is an ardent follower of Hindu philosophy. He preaches detachment on every count and his approach to life is based on reason. For Gautama, peace or serenity is the ultimate goal to be achieved. He remarks:

Action or work or life whichever you please of that order is what I mean by vocation. I am certain, experience makes me certain, that only those who are capable of this manner of living and working are capable of peace or serenity — better words than happiness, both of them.  

Raman is more like Gautama in many respects. He is industrious, pragmatic and takes life seriously. But Raman is not an intellectual like Gautama, nor is he as detached in his approach to life as the latter. Desai’s description of Raman is very precise and adequate. She writes:

Not an introvert, nor an extrovert — a middling kind of man, he was dedicated unconsciously to the middle way.  

Unlike Gautama, Raman is a kind and considerate husband. Sita’s extreme sensibility and not Raman is the cause of her anguish.
Nirode who is at the center of things in *Voices in the City* is strongly obsessed by failure. Achieving success in life, creates an emptiness in life which is not at all acceptable to him. He says, “I want to fail quickly, then I want to have the spirit to start moving again, towards my next failure. I want to move from failure to failure step by step to rock bottom. I want to explore the depth [. . .]. I want to descend quickly.”\(^{32}\) Nirode, a dehumanized figure in the novel, feels bored and is in search of a cause to live. He is painfully aware of his joyless and rootless existence. Monisha’s tragic death redeems him from his one-dimensional existence and he reconciles himself to the company. He is thus Heidegger’s “dasman”\(^{33}\) anxious to lose himself in the crowd, to be one with the family.

Adit Sen and Dev are representatives of an alienated community. Adit is an exile in an alien land caught in a hostile milieu, torn between occupation and rejection and his crisis of identity is the outcome of his alienation. Ultimately, he takes the decision to return to India with his wife who is expecting her first child. Dev, on the other hand, is able to overcome the jaundiced view of England that he had in the beginning and decides against leaving England. He comes to the conclusion that it is better to serve in heaven than to reign in hell.

Desai’s representation of Deven as an utterly ignorant language teacher who cannot use the tape recorder even to record his interview with Nur, the celebrated Urdu poet, has the significance of the gulf that separates (to use
C.P.Snow’s words) the “two cultures”\(^{34}\) of Humanities and Technology. The ignorance of Deven symbolizes the existing gap between academic scholarship or learning and its total irrelevance in the work-a-day world. Deven is a passionate lover of Nur's poetry and goes to Delhi to interview Nur where he is confronted with reality. When he comes back he has to endure financial burdens, a lost friendship and a hopeless future. Deven is the existential hero, the haunted anguished creature of Sartre, a wraith surrounded by the void. He is absolutely alone and free creating for himself a personal way of life out of the void of nothingness. Though Deven's heart is hardened by repeated shocks, he grows in stature and decides to stand up and fight. He broods over his situation:

Perhaps when everyone had cut him off and he was absolutely alone, he would begin to find himself and his own strength.\(^{35}\)

Baumgartner is a wandering Jew all his life and his existence becomes a search for roots. A man of limited means, he begins to work after his father's death. The divorce between him and life makes him absurd. He eventually makes up his mind to return to India. He leaves his mother in Germany. He remains an alien in India also because of his appearance and his joy is short lived. He settles in India as a businessman. When the world war breaks Hugo is arrested and taken to an internment camp at Ahmadnagar. The defeat of Hitler is a telling blow to him. He makes up his mind to make India his home. The
communal riots in Calcutta before the partition create a void in him. He realizes that “an profound and unmitigated loneliness is the only truth of life.”36

Though Baumgartner represents “the figure of a displaced person,” which according to Walter Allen, “can of course be taken as a symbol of man’s essential situation on this earth”37 he is optimistic that he could be at home in Venice. One day he runs into Kurt a German youth whom out of compassion he takes to his apartment. But the youth kills Baumgartner when he is asleep and silently disappears with the trophies. He comes close to being “the absurd man.” The mythic symbol of this man, according to Albert Camus, is Sisyphus, who despite his being condemned “to ceaselessly rolling a rock to the top of a mountain, when the stone would fall back of its own weight,”38 not only endures but also finds joy in his task. Baumgartner’s optimism did not bear fruit. The end of the protagonist brings to one’s mind the words of Gautama in Cry the Peacock:

To me it has always seemed the ultimate absurdity, appropriate only in that it brings a meaningless life to a similarly meaningless end.39

All her female protagonists have a heightened physical and emotional sensitivity. They are the higher human species, gifted with deeper, emotional
artistic powers, romantic, passionate, demanding, confining to their secret souls their felt disappointments. The female protagonists value their individuality, privacy and freedom so much that they cannot bear to be possessed or suffer any encroachment on their world, even if it be by their husbands. Maya, Sita, Monisha, Amla, Nanda all of them want to be loved but the love they desire is one that is pure and non-binding, one that is capable of giving freedom, not taking it. This is impossible because love in this world is associated with duty, obligation and loss of freedom and individuality.

The individual’s struggle to penetrate the veil of maya in order to attain the essence of being figures in Desai’s novel Cry the Peacock. The novel portrays the existential plight of the protagonist Maya who constantly dangles between her apprehensions to readily identify with the temporal world. Maya falls a prey to her own morbid fears. Her narrow vision blinds her on the confrontation between the inner and outer realities. Her misery is the outcome of her actions and wills. Like Sartre’s pour-soi, Monisha is aware of a sense of nothingness. Having no belief in the permanence of life she is “always afraid of losing happiness.” Death for her is far more certain than God. Death is the only absolute value in her world. With death the nightmare of a future of boredom and indifference ends. Monisha feels if one “lose life and one would lose nothing again for ever.”
Both the psychically disintegrated characters like Maya or Monisha and those who are capable of maintaining their psychic balance to some extent (like Sarala in *In Custody*) against the absurdity of the traditional pattern of life, generally lead a life of despair and tend to revolt against them. Anguish or despair, is rooted in the awareness of each human being, that his choice and action involve not only himself but, all men. Sartre says, “I am thus responsible for myself and all men and I am creating a certain image of man as I would have him to be. In fashioning myself I fashion man.” As man’s freedom is complete and profound, there is nothing to assure him that he is on the right track. He suffers from existential anguish and forlornness. Sartre says, “In anguish [...] we apprehend our choice [...] i.e., ourselves as unjustifiable.”

In the delineation of the psychic disintegration Desai tends to be more on the positive and balanced side. Atma Ram rightly observes:

Maya is mad, despatched to the mental asylum in the end of the novel. Monisha is too desperate and on the verge of madness that she commits suicide. Sita is said to be mad, the heroine in *Bye-Bye Blackbird* is so disturbed that she is unable to know, whether her students call her ‘Miss Curry’ or ‘Miss Hurry’, Nanda Kaul is just crazy and Bim in the end gets a revelation of continuity in life.
Maya’s quest for fulfillment, Monisha’s futile search for a meaning in life and Sita’s vain attempt to recapture the charm and glory of her childhood are in fact Anita Desai’s attempt to probe the layers of consciousness and uncover what is at the core of a woman’s being. Similarly Bim and Nanda Kaul are free and independent and their sufferings are due to their inability to connect. Desai is able to reveal more and more of her protagonist’s true selves to us and to themselves by directing her exploration deeper and deeper into their lives. Tara and Bim eventually realize who they really are so that they can live more truthfully to themselves and each other.

Everything had been said at last, cleared put of the way finally.

There was nothing left in the way of a barrier or a shadow, only the clear light pouring down from the sun.45

The novels of Anita Desai live through her characterization. She concentrates on the nuances of character and her preference to analyze exceptional characters in exceptional circumstances is but an aim to express the truth or the final essence of subjective life and consciousness. For her, it is “depth which is interesting delving deeper and deeper in a character or scene rather than going round about it.”46 She incorporates themes such as the agony of existence, the metaphysical void, the fears and the trembling of her
protagonists whose values, beliefs and structures are endangered, which, in turn, stand in the way of the individual’s self-realization.

A scrutiny of her art shows that there is development from her first heroine, Maya, to her latest creations, Deven and Hugo. One can find an ascent towards self-realization in these depictions. Desai’s characters offer a telling picture of the hopeless mess the contemporary life is in. Stripped of family, home and country, man today is drifting from place to place in search of livelihood. Being a victim to the complexity of modern life he has lost the capacity to discriminate between the superfluous and the indispensable.

3.6 Setting

Most of Desai’s novels have for their setting, bleak and sultry Indian landscape. To a certain extent locale also make her characters withdraw from life in a particular way. In Voices in the City, Calcutta is made to serve not only as a befitting background against which meaninglessness and absurdity can be explored but also as a force that renders life meaningless. For the first time in Indian fiction, Desai has related the subjective world of the individual to the spirit of locale. The characters, who come within its influence, react directly to it.

In Bye-Bye Blackbird, also the novelist has rendered locale as a force exerting pressure on the characters and affecting their attitudes. In the
Dev is shown to have been influenced by the spirit of the place and he ignores all the insults thrust upon him by the English. On the other hand, Adit was proud of having adopted English ways of life. But he becomes disenchanted towards the end of the novel and leaves for his native land. England had let Adit go and enmeshed his friend Dev. In *Cry the Peacock*, the battering Delhi dust storm is a means of externalizing the heroine’s perceptions. It is symbolic of the nightmarish sounds and vibrations, which find echo in the tormented rhythms of her mind.

The setting of *Where Shall We Go this Summer?*, Manor islands, reminds the reader of the background in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*. The locale has a direct influence on the protagonist and assists her in self-realization. Old Delhi symbolizes the decaying minds of the protagonists and the decay of the house in *Clear Light of Day*. Like Calcutta in *Voices in the City*, Carignano may be regarded as an important character in *Fire on the Mountain*. In Baumgartner’s *Bombay*, Calcutta and Bombay are more sharply described than Berlin and Venice. In Venice, Hugo’s emotions and reactions take precedence over evocation of setting. She describes Bombay in deep colors and extracts more meaning out of her description. Desai’s narrative focuses on the background against which the characters are made to enact their roles.
3.7 Realism and Fantasy

The focus next is on the novelist’s awareness of how short a distance lies between the ordinary and the marvellous and how the novelist succeeds in using the concept of "Realism and Fantasy" as a technique in her depiction of reality or truth.

Novels are works of imagination, and they carry the impression of the writer's cast of mind. To talk of the design of a novel is to talk about how a writer sees the world. Every element of the structure of a novel from plot to sentence shows us something of the character of the author:

The design of a novel presents the nature of the world as it is refracted through the unique structure of one writer’s mind, just as light refracted through a crystal throws a characteristic image on a screen.\(^47\)

The various conceptions of reality as they exist in literature vary with different writers and critics. Desai's notion of "Reality" is strikingly similar to that of Virginia Woolf's. This is what the latter says of "reality" in fiction:

It would seem to be something very erratic, a scrap of newspaper in the street, now a daffodil in the sun. It lights up a group in a room and stamps some casual saying [. . .] but whatever it
touches, it fixes and makes permanent [...]. Now the writer, as I think, has the chance to live more than other people in the presence of this reality. It is his business to find out and collect it and communicate it to the rest of us. 48

Anita Desai, like Woolf, has faith in the “incomplete and chameleonic mass of reality around her” 49 and she achieves the sense of reality by probing the inner most depths of human psyche. That is to say, “to discover its significance by plunging below the surface and plumbing the depths, then illuminating those depths till they become a more lurid, brilliant and explicable reflection of the visible world.” 50

The novelist is much closer to western philosophical and humanistic concerns; her concept of reality is that of a distorted reality. It is one, which is man’s and woman’s task to find for him or herself. The very idea of achieving some kind of retreat or escape from the burdens of reality is rejected at the end of her novels. Such a response for Desai is unthinkable because it is ultimately a rejection of life in all its variety and leads only to insanity for those who chose it. Morally she is on the side of the critical and social realists. The strain of critical realism overshadows her language and her interest in the “lone individual” even in her earlier works.
In *Cry the Peacock*, Maya’s mind had lost the divisions between reality and unreality. When Gautama comes between her and the worshipped moon Maya loses her sanity and murders Gautama by plunging him down from the top of the building. Explaining her stand to her husband’s family members, she confesses, “It had to be one of us, you see, it was clear that it was I who was meant to live. You see, to Gautama it didn’t really matter. He didn’t care and I did.”\(^{51}\) In *Clear Light of Day*, the element of fantasy can be seen in the delineation of Bim’s character:

I shall work [. . .] I shall do things [. . .] I shall earn my own living and look after Mira-masi and Baba and [. . .] be independent.\(^{52}\)

The gratification of this ambition has prompted her to picture herself as a redeemer, redeeming the family from disintegration, which constitutes the central attribute of her self-apprehension. Her proclaimed contentment has prevented her from seeing reality without any preconceptions. In executing her role as a redeemer of the family, she had drawn a design for herself that when the actual moment of action comes, she is rendered incapable of rising to the occasion without a firm grasp of the real. She has become self-absorbed to such an extent that she has built an illusionistic pattern with it. When this pattern is corroded by forces, external to the self, be it Raja’s letter or Tara’s anxiety.
about her state of mind, she is overcome with an intense and anguished sense of dejection.

She moans in resentment in the face of reality. Her earlier decision to look after her family and to be independent is imposed on her by circumstances. That she never wishes to be young again is a testimonial to her denial of circumstances. This contradiction in her perception has heightened her faculty of fantasy and deprived her of self-realization or reality. In *Fire on the Mountain*, Nanda Kaul is also unable to differentiate between the world of fantasy and reality. Nanda likes to convince herself that she had a good past. She makes an attempt to draw Raka out by relating stories of her childhood. At first Raka is interested by the exotic tales that Nanda spins about her father and his travels. She becomes so engrossed in turning reality into fantasy that she is unable to stop. Realizing that Nanda is no longer telling her the truth Raka becomes dubious.

Nanda has fantasized the cruelty until it has become distorted. But in her imagination the images carry something of the horror of the Ovens of Auschwitz or Cracaw, when the Nazis incarcerated the Jews in their monstrous experiments done on human beings. Here the same is done to animals. Violence is shown as originating both from nature as well as from human beings and is directed towards nature as well as towards human beings.
The tension between "Reality" and "Fantasy" becomes Desai's major preoccupation. The side of "Reality" ultimately wins over "Fantasy". It entangles the protagonist Deven in its powerful grasp so tightly that ultimately he has to bend to compromise with it. The protagonist Deven is a temporary lecturer in Hindi at local college, Mirpore. Besides the demands of his job and his dissatisfied wife, he finds it difficult to face the obligations of his job and lacks confidence. To escape from this real world he searches for a world of fantasy, which consists in hopes of confirmation and promotion in the college, fame through successful accomplishment of his literary projects, his love of poetry and procurement of money. Whenever the world of fantasy allures Deven into its realm the forceful grasp of reality brings him back to it. Each time he returns to reality, he is more disheartened and finds himself deep in problems. Ultimately he has to compromise with reality as his attempts to retreat to the world of fantasy result in total disaster and as it leaves him broken to face the assaults of existence.

It is the dismal reality that gives colour and tone to the novels. Fantasy may gleam now and then but eventually leaves the scene as dark as before. Deven is transformed from an escapist into a realist who is ready to face reality unflinchingly, because man may not escape from his responsibilities and duties to those who are in his custody. With the realization that art is a mode of
projecting a vision, which perfects life, Deven grows out of his earlier illusion of the separateness of art and life.

Desai lets her imagination into her consciousness and gives it plenty of time and waits; she allows it to explore her submerged self. She is not sure of what she will pull up. But when she pulls up it is her idea of a novel. The novelist speaks further on this process:

The original germinating idea enters the mind quite obscurely and might be no more than a leaf dipping under a raindrop, a face seen on the bus, or a scrap of news read in the papers. It enters the consciousness as silently and unobtrusively as a grain of sand enters a shell. Then it grows and develops [...].

3.8 Symbols and Images

It would be injustice to conclude this chapter without mentioning some of the remarkable symbols and images through which the novelist has tried to crystallize the varying states of human psyche as well as the various complexities of man-woman relationship. She is in remarkable measure a symbolist and an imagist and has some times resorted to striking symbolism as well as telling imagery with a view of supporting some of her weakening narrative techniques which might not have given the desired effect otherwise in her novels such as Cry the Peacock, Voices in the City, Where Shall We Go.
This Summer? and Fire on the Mountain. This chapter highlights only those symbols and images, which reveal the existential plight of the protagonists.

The symbol of the peacock with its deathly mating habits signifies the psychic destruction of the heroine. The cry of the peacocks accentuates her death anxiety. The dance of the peacocks acquires an intensely personal significance for Maya and foreshadows the future course of her life. As the peacocks madly in love destroy, Maya views her married life with Gautama as a deadly struggle in which one is destined to kill the other. Maya muses:

Have you seen Peacocks make love, child? Before they mate, they fight. They will rip each other’s breast to strips and fall, bleeding, with their beaks open and panting, when they have exhausted themselves in battle they will mate. Peacocks are wise. The hundred eyes upon their tails have seen the truth of life and death and known them to be one. Living, they are aware of Death. Dying they are in love with life. "Lover, Lover", you will hear them cry in the forests, when the rain clouds come, “Lover I die [. . .] .”

The dance of the peacocks is traditionally associated with the Varsha ritu, the season of rains. For Maya, the dance of peacock merges with the sibilant whispers of the priest and its dance becomes the dance of death.
Maya’s initial absorption in death, desolation and violence symbolized by the dance image, the image of the albino and the dead Toto alienate her from life.

In the shadows of her sleepless nights, she sees the shadow of the dark dancer spring to life and for Maya the dancer represents death. She knows there is no time left. She or her mate is destined to die. Her desolation is symbolized by the cage in the train in which laboratory monkeys are awaiting shipment to the States. Maya’s condition is similar to that of gibbons and apes. She shrieks out of the bars of one of the cages into which Gautama has playfully led her, “Let me out; I want to live.”55 The rapacious lizard in the garden suggests a world of plunder and prey. Maya’s fear of an unknown future is paralleled and contrasted by the train journey of Gautama’s father, another self-exiled figure. The Nataraja glimpsed at the end becomes a symbol of liberation and identification. Her alienation leads her to annihilation of the self in its identification with death and violence.

Maya translates everything in the world outside into her personal idiom. The cabaret, the bear dancing, the monkeys in the cage, the orchids kept in a basket in the verandah of the Lalas - all remind her of death. The imagery of pit, corridor and well stands for her dread of isolation and darkness:

Upon this bed of hot, itching sand, I summoned up again the vision of the terrible albino who had cast his shadow like a net
across me as I had fled down the corridor of years from the
embrace of protection to embrace of love, Yet catching me as
surely as a giant fisherman striding through the shallows of
moonlit seas, throws his fine net with one brief, expert motion
and knows as it settles with a falling whisper upon the still water
that he will find in it a catch. I had not escaped. The years had
captured me and now the final, the decisive one held me in its
perspiring clasp from which release seemed impossible.\textsuperscript{56}

When Maya looks at the sky at night the dark spaces between the stars
frighten her. Death lurked in those space of the darkness, spoke of distance,
separation and loneliness. Eventually, the moon, the symbol of female
imagination takes reign of Maya’s life. It symbolizes the rebellion and the
anger raging within her and in the end turns out to be her saviour:

In the end it was not the stars which told me, but the moon, when
it rose out of the churn of my frenzy, vast and ghost white,
written even with dim, torturous signs in ash-grey [. . .] it was not
the gentle moon of love ballads and fairy revels [. . .] but a
demoniac creature [. . .] a phantom gone bersek trying to leap the
threshold of my mind.\textsuperscript{57}
The metaphor for the destruction of the self or what Kierkegaard has termed “chaotic non-being” is the heroine’s madness at the closure of the story. The images and symbols are very appropriate to the existential plight of the protagonist and congruent with time when they are evoked through association of ideas. They establish the incompatibility of the couple very well.

The interior orchestration of Maya’s anguish is expressed through imagery of trees, snakes etc. The fear is as real as the giant shadows cast by the trees:

It was that something else, that indefinable unease at the back of my mind, the grain of sand that irked, itched and remained meaningless [. . .] shadows cast by trees, split across the leaves and grasses towards me [. . .]. I leapt from my chair in terror, overcome by a sensation of snakes coiling and uncoiling their moist lengths about me [. . .].

The passages become objective correlatives, which evoke the picture of an imaginative and neurotic young woman who is in the grip of anguish, which she does not understand.

In *Voices in the City*, the image of Calcutta as the microcosm of life and action is central to the novel. All the characters are confronted with this problem of the inner self with relation to its external landscape. Nirode, Amla
and Monisha believe in the supremacy of the self and its need for freedom. This rigidity of Calcutta’s character and its refusal to accept outsiders are symbolized by Monisha’s tragedy. “Traceless, meaningless, uninvolved – does this not amount to non-existence, Please,” she wrote in her diary which was the only possible outlet for the release of pent-up emotions. The mention of bars and container can be taken as symbols of estrangement:

Lives spent in waiting for nothing, waiting on men self-centered and indifferent and hungry and demanding and critical, waiting for death and dying misunderstood, always behind bars, those terrifying black bars that shut us in, in the old houses in the old city.

Monisha isolates herself from others because she feels she is different from others:

They put me away in a steel container, a thick glass cubicle and I have lived in it all my life, without a touch of love or hate or warmth in me. I am locked apart from all of them, they cannot touch me, they can only lip-read and misinterpret.

The imagery of darkness suggest her existential anguish and her need for solitude:
I'll have only the darkness, only the dark spaces between the stars for they are the only things on earth that can comfort me, rub a balm into my wounds into my throbbing head and bring me this coolness, this stillness this interval of peace [...] sleep has nightmares. This, this empty darkness has not so much as a dream. It is one unlit waste, a desert to which my heart truly belongs.

The white horses, the mother and the city become symbols – the horses symbolizing the possibility of escape from the pressure of conformity and the mother and the city symbolizing destruction. Nirode, is all agog to end his long estrangement with the mother who stands alone and free, unmoved by the tragedy that has shattered the lives of her children. He asserts that she is a woman satiated by tragedy. Hence he identifies her with Kali-symbolic of life and death.

'She is Kali' [...] 'Mother, Mother-Kali is the mother of Bengal, she is the mother of us all [...] oh, I see so clearly now, I feel my skin is stripped away and my interior has melted into the exterior, I know it so well. I see now that she is everything we have been fighting against, you and Monisha and I, and she is also everything we have fought for. She is our consciousness and our
unconsciousness, she is all that is manifest and all that is unmanifest.\textsuperscript{63}

House is the symbol of decaying self for the protagonists. There are allusions in the novel to the Victorian houses, which indicate dejected minds, languishing in self - isolation. Nirode fears his isolation from his own past, his childhood home. To Monisha the house is a prison. In the first few pages of the novel, the concept of her husband’s house as a prison comes across very strongly. She does not belong to it. Her husband on the other hand lives securely in his own cage. To him, the house is a symbol of safety and shelter.

In \textit{Where Shall We Go This Summer?}, Sita’s bid for freedom from the shackles of male and domestic dominance is accompanied at first with images of darkness and despair:

\begin{quote}
So they stood despairingly in the deep veranda the white doors of the house all swinging outwards revealing the crowded darkness inside.\textsuperscript{64}
\end{quote}

Desai depicts the gulf between Sita and her family in the episode of the eagle and the crows with an emphasis on Sita’s sensibility to violence. The ruthless attack of an assembly of crows on a lone young eagle shocks Sita as the sight of her dead pet dog shocks Maya in \textit{Cry the Peacock}. The situation objectifies for Sita the conflict in her own life. She identifies herself with the
dead eagle. Another incident, which describes the fight of ayahs in the street who are immersed in the gossip about their lovers and memsahibs brings out Sita’s repression to violence with a stress on her sentiment being. She tells her husband that there is no security to anyone in the violent society. The tearing up of her sketches by her daughter Menaka who has none of her mother’s sympathy or advice again is a symbolic scene, which presents her bruised life. She recalls the one happy movement when she had seen a young pale Muslim woman being caressed by her aged man in the Hanging gardens of Bombay. The picture is highly suggestive of a solution to this existential predicament of Sita:

Near a tall hedge, on a bench, I saw a woman stretched out. A Muslim woman [. . .]. She raised her veil [. . .] I saw her face [. . .] a dead white flower [. . .]. Her head lay in the lap of an old man [. . .] the man and woman never looked at anyone else, they looked at each other with a strange, strange expression [. . .] tender, loving, yes but inhumanly so [. . .] quite divine or insane [. . .]. She was ill, dying perhaps [. . .]. They were like a work of art [. . .] So apart from the rest of us.65

Sita links the image of the couple with an atmosphere of transitoriness and death. The very fact that she feels compelled to view them in those terms accentuated the maladjustment of relations between the sexes. They are so
different from the couples she usually encounters that she has to place them in a world of art. The journey to the island symbolizes the attempt on the part of the heroine to recapture the magic of the past. Sita has a tendency to withdraw from the outer world into "the chrysalis of childhood for longer than is usual for most." Her return to Bombay is symbolic re-enactment of the scene twenty years ago when she followed Raman pitying herself for her helplessness but this time it is of her own free will that she follows him.

In this novel the house image is concerned with the quest for self-identification. Dissatisfied with their existence, the characters have a frantic desire to assert their identity with the forsaken house. The house here is linked with the melancholic psychic life of Sita. She lived in a flat in Bombay but now she retreats to the house built by her father in Manori island to isolate herself. She has the desire to set the house right but she finds the house in an awful state. The house also projects her wish to withdraw into an illusory world of silence. But later realizing the futility of her living in an imaginary world of illusions she compromises with the harsh realities of existence and returns to Bombay.

Much of the imagery of the novel Fire on the Mountain has to do with the animate non-human features of nature or the landscape, that of animals, birds and insects. The cicados, hoopoes, bulbuls, eagles, cuckoos, hens, parrots,
lapwings, nightjars, snakes, house-flies, langurs, owls and jackals appear and reappear throughout. They provide continuity to the sense of place. Persons are compared to animals. In fact, much of the action is revealed in the transformation of these ages as they reflect the change within the characters. The images portray the way the human and the natural world interact. Though sometimes different to each other they are often violent and cruel just as human beings are cruel to each other. The monkeys that Raka and Nanda had laughed at return again, but now they are also menacing like the parrots in the masquerade at the club, symbols of lunacy and madness.

In this novel the house is a static image appearing in clusters with the image of the garden and other botanical and inorganic images as portrayed in the picture of Carignano:

[...] She turned round and gazed at her house instead, simple and white and shining on the bleached ridge. On the north side the wall was washed by the blue shadows of the low, dense apricot trees. On the east wall the sun glared, scoured and sharp. It seemed so exactly right as a house for her, it satisfied her heart completely.67

Nanda Kaul’s house becomes her refuge. The house functions as extensions of the characters themselves. Though the novelist uses the technique
of inner narration much in the way that Virginia Woolf does, she is able to break the quality of sameness that the outer world assumes in most of Virginia Woolf's novels, in *The Waves* especially. The image of the burnt house, "at the top of the hill" mirrors the wild nature of Raka with her uncontrollable desire to set fire to the forest and her irresistible attraction towards the barren spaces in Kasauli. Raka's final act of setting fire on the mountain is an act of purification more than an act of violence. It is as though she wanted to burn away the lies or deceit of Nanda's portrayal of her childhood.

The house image in *In Custody* stands for Deven's failure to find harmony in conjugal ties. The couple's marital isolation leading to insanity is also revealed through this image. Siddiqui's blackened house that has neither lights nor curtains to colour the gloom symbolizes his imprisoned self, seeking an escape into the open atmosphere of Delhi. The kitchen in the house that is filthy serves as an image of rottenness projecting the isolation and neglect into which the house has fallen. In the novels of Anita Desai, the house occurs as an inorganic imagery serving as the focus of her thematic vision. There is another image, the image of the thorn, which symbolically suggests Deven's journey from alienation to identification. While rushing homeward Deven stops only "to pull a branch of thorn under his foot." He faces the thorny path of self-realization. He faces reality and is identified with growth-oriented individuals. Unlike Nirode's his is a journey from failure to success.
The rhyme of the blackbird that Adit and Dev remembered from their schooldays creates an apt image. The Blackbird of the English is a sweet songster but the Blackbird of the Indians is the useful scavenging crow that builds the nest. The Cuckoo lays her eggs in the crow’s nest. When the fledgling cuckoos open their mouths the crows discover their mistake and chase them out. Anita Desai’s choice of the Blackbird for the title of the novel is richly suggestive. The synaesthetic imagery of sound, smell and colour in her descriptions of England constitutes controlled lyricism and reveals the mood of the protagonist Dev:

They all lay still then. Some had their eyes closed to the honey sun that draped a brilliant sheen across the sky, the earth and garden. Others watched, through half-closed eyes, the humble of fat, striped bees from one drooping blossom to another, like thirsty drunkards from pub to pub. They listened to the pigeons dreaming aloud and breathed in the scents of seething earth, growing grass and wild profusion of roses. Dev, sighing, felt these droplets of sound and smell drip, drip, drip into him like drops of golden syrup, filling him with an intense sweetness that ached through his whole body, made it throb and illuminated it with delight so that supine and half-asleep as he was, he was as
brilliantly alive and receptive as an insect on a twig, its antennae 
trembling with latent adventure.\textsuperscript{69}

The image of Dev as "a Kafka stranger wandering through the dark 
labyrinth of a prison"\textsuperscript{70} is in accordance with the existential predicament of the 
protagonist.

Of all the novels of Desai, \textit{Clear Light of Day} is deficient in 
characteristic imagery and symbolism with which her other novels are replete. 
The novel begins with the song of Koel, symbol of emotional estrangement but 
ends with the song of the old master, the symbol of emotional identification. 
The house image here throws light on the musings of the imprisoned self’s 
immured existence. The house image throws light on the variegated moods of 
Tara and the behavioural eccentricities of Bim. The old unchanged house in 
Delhi to which Tara returns evokes the feeling of stagnation and a sense of 
boredom and nausea. Bim had never seriously thought of leaving the house, 
that symbol of the past of which both try to feel indifferent. Throughout, the 
house image figures as a threatening presence characterized by a detonating 
silence. This static image of the house with the neglected and overgrown 
gardens projects Bim’s shifted anger and acerbity, her longing for silence and 
staticity.
On the either side of their garden were more gardens, neighbours, houses, as still and faded and shabby as theirs, the gardens as overgrown and neglected and teeming with wild, wild uncontrolled life.71

Only once Desai has resorted to the characteristic technique of using an image as an objective correlative with a view to describing the moods or emotions of a particular character, when Tara begins to request Bim again and again to agree to join along with Baba in attending Raja’s eldest daughter’s marriage in Hyderabad.

3.9 Language and Style

In the next few pages the accent is on the language and style of Anita Desai. Desai employs the language of the interior to describe the inner tensions and crisis in the lives of her character whose problems are existential in nature and not political or social. The novelist herself agrees that she has not written “the kind of social document that demands the creation of realistic and typical character and the use of realistic and typical dialogue.”72 She has always depended on her uniquely private vision than on subjective writing in her rendering of external reality:

By writing the novels that have been catalogued by the critics as psychological and that are purely subjective I have been left free to employ simply, the language of the interior.73
For Desai, English is the language of both reason and instinct. Since in India the English language is an immigrant without roots and traditions, an Indian writer in English has to rely on his own intuition and individual vision. The novelist is able to use language in an intensely poetic fashion to project the states of mind of her protagonists. She has the ability to evolve the changing moods, the ebb and flow of emotion and the strange working of the human mind understanding and responding to reality. With her rare sensitivity she is able to explore the consciousness of her characters.

In the following passage, the choice of language and imagery by the novelist expresses Maya’s desire to see the extraordinary in the ordinary, the beautiful in the humdrum. She has to fight against this aesthetic pull to fulfill her realist desires for communion with others:

Looking down at his thin face [. . .] it seemed to me that I was climbing a mountain from the top of which could be seen the entire world, unfolded like a map, with sun-silkened trees and milk-mild rivers and jeweled townships [. . .] while he, because he did not care for walks or views [. . .] remained behind in the dusty enclosed cup of the small plain down below [. . .] and then the papaya tree itself [. . .] I contemplated that, smiling with pleasure at the thought of bridal flowers that flow out of the core of the female papaya tree and twine about her slim trunk and the
firm, wax – petalled blossoms that leap directly out of the solid trunk of the male.\textsuperscript{74}

The prose style of Desai is entirely different in \textit{Clear Light of Day}. The slightly laboured prose style used in this novel is instrumental in projecting the over wrought moods and complex workings of the oppressed protagonists apart from being suited to the existential subject matter dealt with. Shift from the present to the past and back create an appropriate mood of nostalgia so necessary for the rendering of the principal character's stream of consciousness as in Proust's \textit{Remembrance of Things Past}. The prose style in \textit{Fire on the Mountain} projects the moods of the characters through the ugly and desolate landscape of Kasauli:

Shoals of rusted tins, bundles of stained newspaper, peals, rags and bones, all struggling in grooves, hollows, cracks, and sometimes spilling. Pine trees with charred trunks and contorted branches striking melodramatic attitudes as on stage. Rocks arrested in mid roll, rearing up, drooping occasional in rooftops glinting.\textsuperscript{75}

The writer's unfailing command over English enables her to evoke a mood or character. For instance, the colour of the bruised thigh of Nanda Kaul is described as "the putrid colours of the old meat."\textsuperscript{76} Similarly when the old
woman meets her grand-daughter, they embrace as “There was a sound of bones colliding. Each felt how bony angular and unaccommodating the other was.” To her grand daughter Nanda Kaul looks like “another pine tree, the grey sari a rock.” While Raka looks like “One of those dark crickets that leap up in fright but do not sing, or a mosquito, minute and fine, on their precarious legs.” Such descriptions serve an important function. They underline the impossibility of communication between individuals.

In Baumgartner’s Bombay, beneath Desai’s prose style lies a furious indictment of humanity to have altered the evil to raise its head. Anita Desai’s novels are fine specimens of involved writing. She presents the dilemma of modern man effectively. The call of realism, which forms the moral bedrock of Anita Desai’s novels is the call of community, of communication with others and requires the individual to connect with and thus take some responsibility towards the other. This is conveyed in her work through the medium of her prose style:

I think of the world as an iceberg – the one truth visible above the structure of the water is what we call reality, but the nine tenth that is submerged make up the truth and that is what one is trying to explore. Writing is an effort to discover and then to underline and finally to convey the true significance of things.
Anita Desai’s prose is poetic and she has a fine ear for the nuances of Indian regional English. The lyrical imagery, few of which I had already mentioned under “Symbolism and Imagery”, in Cry the Peacock indicates a poetic and withdrawn sensibility at odds with the prosaic reality of the world.

In Where Shall We Go This Summer?, the eagle – crow episode has the kind of graphic beauty and vividness that are associated with Desai’s inset pictures. There are equally poetic descriptions of sand storms and rain, the forest fires, the birds and the animals, the snakes and the lizards, the langurs and the butterflies, and of the grotesque revellers at the Kasauli club in Fire on the Mountain. Poetic intensity, richness of observation, the ability to etch a character with very brief and telling phrases are qualities characteristic of Anita Desai’s art.

In Bye-Bye Blackbird, Desai depicts English with its bustling crowds and busy bazaars with remarkable fidelity. She paints rural England in a remarkably idyllic fashion with her superb lyricism. English milieu, her attempts at the explanation of the subconscious of characters, her restrained lyricism and synaesthetic imagery contribute to the success of the novels. And when finally Adit and Dev’s roles are reversed, this slow process of change has been beautifully depicted with marvellous lyrical flavour so characteristic of Desai:
Somewhere at some point that summer England’s green and gold fingers had let go of Adit and clutched at Dev instead [...] 81

Thus the technical variations employed by the novelist are very much in level with the existential themes of her novels. And the existential plights of Desai’s woman protagonists are examined in the next chapter.
Notes


12 Anita Desai, *Voices in the City*, (New Delhi: Orient, 1985) 140.

13 Desai, *Voices in the City*, 125.


16 Srivastava, 58.


18 Desai, *Fire on the Mountain*, 47.


21 Eliot, 24.

23 Atma Ram, 97-98.


27 Asnani, 53.


30 Desai, Cry the Peacock, 116-17.

31 Anita Desai, Where Shall We Go This Summer? (New Delhi: Vikas, 1975) 47.

32 Desai, Voices in the City, 40.

34 Quoted by A.V.Krishna Rao, “Powerful Satire,” The CRNLE Reviews
Journal Vol. 1 & 2 (South Australia: Flinders University Relations unit,
1988) 73.


37 Walter Allen, Tradition and Dream (London: Phoenix House, 1964)
223.

38 Camus, 107.

39 Desai, Cry the Peacock, 14.

40 Graham Greene, The Quite American (London: William Heinemann,
1955) 28.

41 Greene, 44.

42 Sartre, Existentialism and Humanism, 30.

43 Jean Paul Sartre, Being and Nothingness, trans. Barnes (London:
Penguin, 1957) 598.

44 Atma Ram, Essays on Indian Literature (Aurangabad: Parimal Prakashan,

45 Desai, Clear Light of Day, 177.


48 Virginia Woolf, A Room of One's Own (London: The Hogarth, 1979) 165-166.


51 Desai, Cry the Peacock, 215.

52 Desai, Clear Light of Day, 140.


54 Desai, Cry the Peacock, 95-96.

55 Desai, Cry the Peacock, 156.

56 Desai, Cry the Peacock, 94 – 95.

57 Desai, Cry the Peacock, 27 - 28

58 Desai, Cry the Peacock, 12-13
59 Desai, *Voices in the City*, 140.

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

61 Desai, *Voices in the City*, 239.

62 Desai, *Voices in the City*, 138.

63 Desai, *Voices in the City*, 255 - 56.

64 Desai, *Where Shall We Go This Summer*, 17.

65 Desai, *Where Shall We Go This Summer*, 106.

66 Desai, *Where Shall We Go This Summer*, 63.


68 Desai, *In Custody*, 204.


74 Desai, *Cry the Peacock*, 91.

75 Desai, *Fire on the Mountain*, 41.

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


