CHAPTER THREE

WOMAN AS A WIFE
CHAPTER THREE

WOMAN AS A WIFE

A wife prays for her husband asking the Lord to give her the greatness of heart to see the difference between duty and his love for her. She asks the Lord to give her the understanding that she may know when duty calls her husband he should go. She asks the Lord to give her a task to do each day to fill the time when her husband is away. When he's in a foreign land she asks the Lord to keep him safe in Lord’s loving hand. When her husband is in the field he should be protected by Lord and be his shield. When her husband’s deployment is so long she asks the Lord to stay with her and keep her strong. Thus does a wife care for her husband as the role of woman as a wife.

In order to understand a woman as a wife it is mandatory to know the state of the mind of a woman. A woman is an experience and she is an understanding, the deeper one delves the subtler the discovery. The experience and the discovery are always not the same or identical with different people at different contexts.

Of the many stages a woman is transformed the stage of being a wife cleverly creates a female compliment. It creates a strong impression that follows the entire life and delves into many of the interpretations of woman and highlights the female experience with the main character being strong, adventuresome, intelligent, sensitive and successful.

People see woman as wife differently based on the human experience and sometimes as a result of biology or culture. As a result each person's view of greatness of seeing a woman as a wife might be different and it is not possible to find a completely
neutral or fully encompassing and fair pedagogy to frame guidelines for perceiving a wife. It seems that there are still a lot of effective and meaningful unrecognised theories about the concept of woman. Interestingly all the greatness associated with woman in the beginning of this thesis were given by men and obviously they are not the only ones who note this still existing male domination. Perhaps women just have not had enough time to spread their message and see their influence but it may become obvious that the explanation is not that men are just greater in defining a woman.

The role of a woman as wife is the most significant role in the life of a woman. It is as a wife a woman is given full identity. The role of women as wife enfolds within it other roles namely the role of mother and the role of daughter. A wife can be a mother as well as a daughter by disseminating qualities thereof. A woman in Indian context is always at critical scrutiny.

In this study woman as a wife was analysed from view points confining within limits of the novels taken for study. The main characters in the select novels taken for study namely Cry, the Peacock, Voices in the City, Where Shall We Go This Summer? and Clear Light of Day form the significant part for the analysis. The characters Maya, Monisha, Sita and Tara are the wives whose roles form the core content of this chapter. There are also references made about women who are chronic spinsters who otherwise would have become intelligent wives.

Anita Desai through Maya makes an interesting introspective study of the role of a wife. Maya’s unhappiness in Cry, the Peacock is not related to the reality of her circumstances. It is a product of her own consciousness. Her unhappiness is in part related to the process of her growing up. She has led a protected life and has been brought
up on fantasies and now when confronted with the reality of life and its disappointments she is unable to face it. Toto’s death is but an event which triggers a set of responses and becomes a reason for her present misery. But even while mourning his death it is not tears which relieve her but: “...a fit of furious pillow beating, kicking, everything but crying. From childhood experiences I knew this to be sweetly exhausting” (9).

She is aware that her relationship with adult world is tenuous. When surrounded by her husband’s family she is quite aware of this and accepts being left out of many discussions.

Maya sensually aware of her own body both as a child and as a woman wants this to be recognised by the male world. She wants Gautama to be aware of it, aware in several different ways. There are moments when she deeply yearns to be with him for the closeness of this physical presence and during one such moment she rushes uninvited into a gathering of Gautama and his friends a group securely male but soon abandons it with a feeling of having been rejected. She says:

I contemplated that, smiling with pleasure at the thought of those long streamers of bridal flowers that flow out of the core of the female papaya tree and twine about his slim trunk and the firm wax-petalled blossoms that leap directly out of the solid trunk of the male ...I looked down at him and was not annoyed at the interruption, or his yawns, for even they were part of the vivid, explosive, mobile life that I rejoiced in – the world of sounds, senses, movements, odours, colours, tunes. Beside if I could pleasure in contemplation of the male papaya, how much more food for
delight in this male companion, surely. I melted with tenderness, my arms curled into an instinctive cradle. (92)

Maya, who is motherless herself and whose only memory of her mother is the photograph she has of her is also childless though married for almost four years. She refers to this fact on the death of her dog, Toto, when she thinks of the "...fantastic attachment which childless women often develop for their pets. It is no less a relationship than that of a woman and her child" (10).

Maya thinks of her father as a neat and tidy person who has been used to being obeyed, a man who had stepped out of his male role to look after her. She observes: "He has looked after me alone, and his beam is, especially tender, his attention especially loving ...His is open love" (39).

According to Maya Gautama is entirely different from her father. He is cold and unfeeling preoccupied with his work, efficient but indifferent to her presence who saw no value in anything less than the idea and theories born of human and preferably male brain. She feels Gautama to be a person who remained always untouched and unscalded.

Maya, through the act of marriage has transformed her love for her father and her expectations of him to Gautama, thus attempting to thrust a readymade image on him. Maya herself acknowledges that her version is in several ways one-sided and warns the reader:

But do not presume, no one must presume that our marriage was an empty one, a failure. Nor that Gautama was no more than a figure of granite to me, a mound of books that smelt faintly of mouldy rice and wisdom. For he was more so much more (201).
Maya’s wildness all the years had been suppressed by her father’s dominating presence. Perhaps it is the suppressed feeling of passion which now finds an expression in insanity. In her childhood, she feels, she had been like a partridge plump and content. She feels:

...for they knew that I would not understand a matter so involved and I know it myself. They spoke to me ...only when it had to do with babies, meals, shopping, marriages, for I was their toy, their indulgence, not to be taken seriously, and the world I come from was less than that – it was a luxury they considered it a crime to suffer, and so damned it with dismissal (48-49)

With a child’s desire for consolation she wants to be assured that all will be well. She is hurt when Gautama leaves her to attend a visitor’s call. She feels that she is lonely and neglected and nobody understands her. She imagines that her loneliness is of his making. For a while Maya is able to view him as a protector and guide. In her moments of lucidity Maya acknowledges that Gautama is an ally and that it is in her love for him that she had experienced pain and reflection and that he had enlarged her world. She says:

Something slipped into my tear-hazed vision, a shadowy something that prodded me into admitting that it was not my pet’s death alone that I mourned today, but another sorrow, unremembered, perhaps as yet not even experienced, and filled me with this despair (8).

Maya tries to analyse her feelings and examine her memories of the past in order to reach the source of this disturbance. She gropes for some kind of meaning and this comes to her in flashes. During a conversation with Gautama the word ‘ultimate’ reminds
her of a particular evening in her past and then in the stillness of the night when the moon
acquires for her a demoniac appearance she feels: “I was aware of a great, dead silence in
which my eyes opened to a vision that appeared through the curtains of the years, one by
one falling back till I saw again that shadow. A black and evil shadow …It was, I
remembered it now, Fate” (28).

It is not only the memory of the albino astrologer’s prophecy which pushes her
towards her insanity but her brother Arjuna’s letter which mentions the horoscope. After
that there are a number of incidents which force her to remember the prophecy. The
tension within her gives rise to her severe headaches which are symptomatic of her desire
to elude issues. Reality can no longer be eluded and her own fears and thoughts crowd
her mind.

Maya is unable to persuade Gautama to accompany her to the hills. Maya’s
emotional responses begin to fluctuate between involvement and apathy. Her inability
and unwillingness to confide in Gautama lead to her obsession with her fears, her
hallucinations and finally her insanity. She looks around for some guidance. The advice
available to her clashes with her inclinations. She remembers of her father’s saying of a
life full of acceptance than preference.

Besides her father Maya has her present circle of friends. And among them there
is Lila who is nursing a dying husband resigned to her fate and also to her choice. She
had married him knowing that he was a patient of tuberculosis. There is also Pom who
after flaunting her in-laws submits meekly to her mother-in-law where the birth of a son
is concerned. Her friends, her surroundings and her father’s fatalism all these lead her to
feel trapped in the shadow of the astrologer and the value of every moment of Gautama’s company. Only life is so very unaccommodating to her demands.

In her need for comfort Maya turns to Gautama’s advice of detachment. But detachment is difficult to attain and attachment leads to self-destruction. Gautama is for Maya, the ‘meditator’ beneath the bo tree. He seems to have arrived at detachment like the Buddha and she feels that he is unperturbed by her sorrow. But Maya wants Gautama to love her intensely for his love would provide meaning to her existence and help her fulfil her desires. It would be an extension of her ego.

Maya feels: “Is there nothing ...is there nothing in you that would be touched, ever so slightly, if I told you I live my life for you?” (114).

Gautama’s impertinence at the query alienates her and strengthens her sense of isolation. Maya’s version, however, is not an objective account although at times objectivity does get the better of her and she acknowledges that Gautama is perturbed by her behaviour, by her apathy, by her lack of vocation and self-control. Maya observes:

...and, for once I listened to him, listened fully and attentively. The dryness, the bleakness of his voice, of his theories, no longer bored me, or repelled me. I see them now as a mass of rock high and dry in the middle of a tossing sea. To hold to it was safety. To be borne away from it, by my inner passion, my weakness and lack of control - to perish (120)

It is in such a moment of sanity and control that Maya wishes for death, a wish Keatsian and romantic in its essence, a wish indicative of her desire to link her inner fears with the world of outer reality. She says: “Do you know ...I shouldn’t mind dying now, after all at this very moment. Then it would remain like this for me. We should never
walk a step further, or say a single other word. It would all come to a stop here, and rest. 
Gautama don't you wish it?” (121).

Gautama urges Maya to action. He believes that only those who have a vocation can attain peace and serenity. He believes: “He, who controlling the senses of the mind follows without attachment the path of action with his organs of action, he is esteemed” (123).

For Maya self-control is fast slipping away. Her preoccupation with the idea of death and with possible kinds of afterlife, the grip of the cyclic births- all these render her hold on reality and control tenuous and intermittent. Maya moves towards insanity. The prophecy or her circumstances are in themselves not a sufficient reason for her to push Gautama off the roof-the root of this tragic action lies within her. It is not the prophecy which haunts her. Moreover, her father had sent away the ayah and hounded the astrologer out of the city.

Gautama offers Maya logic but not faith. She is unable to extricate her thoughts from these fears of death and her sensuous love for her life and her desire for self-preservation makes her shift the burden of the prophecy to Gautama’s life. Perhaps it is Gautama who is destined to die. Maya does not feel prepared for death while she thinks that Gautama has reached a stage of detachment which approximates stillness. She tries to enter his world but he is absorbed in his work and does not realise that she had entered the room, had spoken and had had left.

Maya’s conscious mind tells her that they are not made for tragedy that their faces were of those who lived while her subconscious mind moves towards thoughts of murder. Moving from one fit of depression to another she assures herself that Gautama has no
contact with the world. Gautama is on trial as if to prove himself worthy of life. When he restrains himself from asking her questions she uses his restraint to convince herself that he is the one who should die. Later when she tells him that she misses Toto she waits for a response from him, for an offer of understanding and compassion. She observes:

Having offered the confession, I was overcome with a desperate timidity, begging him once more to answer, to come out and meet me half-way, in my own world, not merely demand of me, brusquely, to join me in his which, however safe, was so drab and no longer offered me security. Had he done so, all might have been quite different (198)

Gautama’s words are as grim as any death sentence absolute and unredeemable in Maya’s perception. Maya persuades him to go for a stroll on the roof and is at that moment consciously contemplating murder. She is quite aware in her moment of lucidity that it is not fate but a chain of attachment that hauled her slowly and steadily down the dark corridors to the pit where knowledge lay.

The central image of the novel is the confrontation between life and death and the inability on Maya’s part to accept them as they are. Her world is a world inhabited by animals. It is a closed, cosseted world where pity and fear mingle to become terror and not compassion; where the emotional fears she experiences cloud her sensibilities. She never grows up and never learns to live or to love - merely to destroy and depend. She is pure instinct without the necessary accompaniment of wisdom.

In Cry, the Peacock Maya longs for the protection of her childhood and for the pattern which her life had followed with her father. She longs for the holidays in the hills and for the calmness of stoic resignation. Maya wants neither the freedom nor the
responsibility of an adult world and her nostalgic memories help to prolong her immaturity. She is aware of her petulance and childishness. Her acceptance can have no meaning for it would not be born out of any confrontation with life rooted as she is in the past. She has not evolved emotionally. It is through her nostalgia that the two worlds of her past and present are constantly juxtaposed and contrasted – Toto’s death with the prophecy, her husband’s practicality with her father’s fatalism and her visits to the hill with her present inability to do so.

Maya’s act of aggression against her husband soon turns into an act of self-destruction. Filled with guilt and unable to bear the pangs of the conscience she also commits suicide.

The anger in Maya’s life is traced to the fact that she believes surrender of self to be subtracted from her personal freedom and wholeness. While Maya longs for love she is at the same time afraid of involvement. Life becomes meaningless to Maya. Her pervasive need for love, understanding and communion of souls she longs for are not available. Gautama and Maya are not kindred souls. There is a gradual disenchantment, frustration and a sense of loneliness. One of the most poignant features of the exploration of Maya’s inner landscape is that Maya is conscious of her descent into madness. She is helpless to arrest it.

R.S. Singh rightly says that by pushing Gautama towards his death, “She had destroyed the source of her uneasiness, her husband who had failed to play the role of the guardian to her” (Indian Novel in English: A Critical Study, 170).

Maya’s character has two very pronounced traits: helplessness, which is almost childlike and an intense longing for love. She is a compliant person for whom love holds
the key to all the problems of life. If a person loves the other person so well he must be
loved equally well by the other. Lack of response from the other is interpreted as
rejection.

Whatever marriages have been referred to in Cry the Peacock are not contented
marriages in the true sense of the term. Maya is greatly shattered at the apathy, hypocrisy
and hatred revealed through other marriages around her. Her own mother is absent. Maya
does not mention even about a photograph of her mother or in any conversation with her
father about her mother. It seems that it might be a painful and disgusting episode in her
father’s life. So he might be hiding it from Maya. Gautama’s parents also lived an
unnatural married life. Each one kept himself or herself busy with his or her vocation. An
apathetical approach is noticeable from them.

Alienation in the novel operates at two levels, the physical and the mental.
Physical alienation, which engenders an atmosphere of loneliness is lulled by psychic
alienation which escalates the spiritual anguish of Maya. Maya’s meditative frame of
mind, her tender sensibility and her artistic vision are also in a large measure responsible
for her alienation. Passion and emotion reign supreme in her character and not
ratiocination. The sense of her isolation from the milieu aggravates her feeling of
insecurity and uncertainty which in turn lead to her quest for identity. The disconsolate
Maya fails to realise and grasp the quintessence of conjugal life. Her mind is a sheaf of
desires which act as an impediment in her affinity with Gautama. The father in her sub-
conscious mind keeps on torturing her. In her father she identifies a part of her self - the
self that belonged to the halcyon days of the past. Her love for her father becomes an
obsession like the infantile love for Toto. This divided love brings about her a fission.
She regards Gautama not as husband but as father substitute, as a lover, which leads to alienation and detachment from him. The gnawing pangs of alienation perilously and persistently plague her resulting in dissociation of her tender sensibility. The thematic movement of the story on two planes, the natural and the unnatural, the normal and the abnormal is a positive indication on the vacillating and neurotic self of Maya in the crunch.

The theme of husband-wife alienation, a recurring theme in Anita Desai is not developed in a slow, incremental manner as one finds in typical psychological novels. Through simile, metaphor and symbol the two spouses are evoked for us as opposed archetypes. Whereas Gautama is an efficient, pragmatic unsentimental person, a thinking reed, in short Maya, as her name signifies, is not only a creature of graceful illusion, but also a creature of song, dance and flower.

A minute study of the novel reveals that the root of alienation between Maya and Gautama lay in their diverse family background. Gautama’s family was politically conscious. It was quite at home with the political turmoils, deliberations in parliament, cases of bribery and corruption revealed in government. They had innumerable subjects to speak on and they spoke incessantly but they never spoke of love, far less of affection.

Maya’s life in such an environment after marriage becomes a tight rope walking. The cake walk life which she wished for remained a dream. While the death of her pet dog Toto disturbs the very core of Maya’s nerve-centre, it does not cause even a ripple in the sedate and stagnant world of Gautama. Maya is shocked at her husband’s brute insensitivity, coldness towards life outside himself and his failure to feel and fathom the poignancy of her sorrow. Gautama wants to settle the whole issue and desires for a cup of
tea. But Maya’s ‘feminine principle’ emblematic of her deep eros and her sensitivity gets psychically imbalanced at Gautama’s matter-of-fact statement. Feminine psychology delves deeply into feeling and sensation. Here the reader gets ample perspective to the hiatus between the two polarities, masculine psychology of interaction and thinking and that of feminine psychology of feeling and sensation. According to Jung: “...female psychology is founded on the principles of eros, the great binder and deliverer while age old wisdom has ascribed logos to man as his ruling principle” (Contributions to Analytical Psychology, 77).

Gautama is a man who is wedded to the logos of man and in him thinking, intellect, reason and logic dominate whereas Maya is eros-laden and imaginative. If Gautama has abstract thinking and solidity of thought of facts as his domain Maya longs for the: “…long fall into the soft velvet well of the primordium, of original instinct, of first formed lover” (Cry, the Peacock, 11).

Gautama is annoyed at Maya’s chattering because he feels that he is interrupted in thinking. Maya’s sensitivity and Gautama’s cold detachment stand sharply contrasted and reflect extremities of the feminine and the masculine principles. Gautama, an Apollonian in form, discipline, order and logo is unable to appreciate the difference between the smell of the lemons and the petunias.

Life for Maya was all harmony and coherence till her marriage to an advocate, a young protégé of her father Gautama who supports the persona of a detached, rational and practical person. Theirs is a paradoxical union of temperaments inherently apart of rational and non-rational reason and imagination. Highly sensuous, tense and over wrought Maya finds herself incapable of reconciling to the indifferent attitude of her
husband which is marked by callous, casual perfunctory attitude to the fundamentals of life. The first few pages of the novel bear sufficient evidence in regard to the tremendous difference between their outlook on life. It is this difference which is at the root of their problems and places them on a different level of consciousness. Meena Belliappa observes:

> The very syntax and tone of Maya’s passionate outbursts and Gautama’s cool replies underline the contrast between a creature of impulse and emotion and a man of logic and commonsense. It is against the background of frustrated married life that the haunting sense of death obsesses her. The fatal distance between Gautama and Maya, arising from a temperamental incompatibility is basic in the theme of psychic disintegration (Anita Desai: A Study of Her Fiction, 10)

The novel begins: “...all day long the body lay rotten in the sun” (Cry, the Peacock, 5).

The tragedy happens without an ill intention on the part of either Maya or Gautama. Gautama had been a dutiful and clear-headed provider. In his own way he loved Maya even though he was exasperated by her childish tantrums. Maya observes of Gautama saying patiently,

> Maya do sit down. You look so hot and worn out. You need a cup of tea ...and draw a figure down my cheek ...Come, come ...Do get up ...The servants are coming to take the beds out for the night, and, really, it is much pleasanter outside. Wipe your face, and we’ll go out, Maya (11).

Her heart soared with that ecstatic pain of all-consuming love.
Cry, the Peacock is the maiden novel and it presents an incompatible marriage of Desai’s protagonist Maya. H.M. Williams says: “‘Cry the Peacock’ is a disturbing novel mostly takes the form of interior monologue delineating the tragic mental breakdown of a young Indian woman Maya” (Indo-Anglian Literature, A Survey, 87).

The novel tells the story of a young sensitive girl obsessed by a childhood prophecy of disaster whose extreme sensitivity is rendered in terms of immeasurable alienation. The very beginning of the novel highlights the theme of husband-wife alienation.

Maya wants to perpetuate the fairy tale atmosphere and at the same time she is aware of the demands of a grown-up, mature world of a married woman. She has an urge to grapple with the realities of life, to understand her in-laws, to charm Gautama not with child-like demands but by her feminine charm. She says: “Here one did not speak of love, for loss of affection” (Cry, the Peacock, 46).

The revitalising love received in childhood separates Maya’s consciousness from physical reality around and within her which finally destabilises her real self. Maya is a composite of all lovable qualities; she is helpless, suffering, humble, loving and hence lovable.

Maya has always admired Gautama for his superiority and is clear when she decides not to admire him and she says: “…this superior plane he always managed to elevate himself onto when I tried to involve him in my matters my wants and cares (113).

Through Gautama Maya obtains the supreme confirmation of her ‘self’. Gautama wants to change Maya as he thinks she ought to be instead of understanding her as she actually is. In moments of irritation he vomits all his spite casting derogatory remarks not
only on her but on her father too. Maya cannot understand the intricacies of his psyche. They live in separate worlds and did not even agree on which points, on what grounds this closeness of mind was necessary.

A woman attains salvation and resurrection only from whatever perdition love has to offer her. That is the lot meted out as largess for having born as a woman. What Maya thinks of as love is not love in the true sense of the word. It is a means to relieve her anxiety. It has no motivating force and is symptomatic of her insecurities. Love signifies full faith. It is a commitment without any guarantee. It means a readiness to give oneself up completely. Maya cannot commit herself to others selflessly because she takes faith in herself. While one is consciously afraid of not being loved, the real though unconscious fear is that of loving. To love is to commit oneself. Since faith in others entails an awareness of the existence of the "self" conviction of one's identity is an essential factor. Maya is the prisoner of her own defence mechanism where safety and security are of primary importance. Love as she sees it, not as it really means, is the only answer. She chides Gautama, "You know nothing of me- and of how I can love. I want to love. How it is important to me" (112).

Here is a love that says, "I love you because I need you" (113). The love that Maya has for Gautama does not give the sense of sharing and of oneness, rather it produces a feeling of dependence.

Perfect love and ideal love as Maya visualises belongs to the realm of the fantastic. For Gautama love cannot remain an ideal in real life. It boils down to paying bills, rearing children and worrying for them. Gautama agrees that: "...it is rather
shocking to reduce one’s ideals to mundane superfluities and equally shocking to realise that these superfluities are the ideals themselves” (21).

But that is the reality of existence and has to be faced. On the contrary Maya conceives of love as an ecstatic feeling perhaps as depicted on Keats’ Grecian Urn. When it is not fulfilled she is enfeebled by her self-alienating forces within. She cannot integrate the power of her vital self. Fear of death preoccupies her. Maya cannot express her rage openly. That could not be commensurate with her self image of a loving and selfless individual. So she hides her aggressive traits behind her self-effacing and self-minimising processes. She projects herself as a helpless suffering martyr, a childless woman gripped by the misfortune of her pet’s death.

The turbulent and emotional world of the protagonist who smarts under an acute alienation stemming from marital discord is landscaped dexterously by Anita Desai. Maya denotes a collective neurosis which tries to shatter the very identity of women in the contemporary society dominated by man in which woman longing for love is driven mad or compelled to commit suicide.

Maya reflects upon her unsuccessful marriage:

It was discouraging to reflect on how much in our marriage was based upon a nobility forced upon us from outside, and therefore neither true nor lasting. It was broken repeatedly, and repeatedly the pieces were picked up and put together again as of a sacred icon with which, out of the pettiest superstition, we could not bear to part (112).

The clash between the irreconcilably different temperaments of Maya and Gautaama is highly significant throughout the novel which teems with many episodes
denoting the lack of communication between them. A trifling thing as Gautama's inability to distinguish the smell of petunias surprises Maya indicating that they do not share common sensibility or understanding. Maya feels:

The blossoms of the lemon tree were different quite different: of much stronger, crisper character, they seem cut out of moon shells, by a sharp knife of mother-of-pearl, into curving, scimitar petals that guarded the heart of fragrance. Their scent, too, was more vivid-a sour, astringent scent, refreshing as that of ground lemon peel, a crushed lemon leaf. I tried to explain this to Gautama, stammering with anxiety, for now, when his companionship was a necessity; I required his closest understanding. (21)

Another episode denoting the impossibility of any communication between Maya and Gautama is one in which she expresses her desire to Gautama to go south to see the Kathakali dance. She says to him:

I want ...I want to see the Kathakali dances. I have heard of the ballets they have in their villages. They say they go on for days and days! And the dancers are all men, and they wear such fantastic masks. And the drums ...the masks they wear- you must have seen them? And their costumes. And the special kind of music. And it is all out in the open, at night, by starlight and perhaps they have torches. Yes, I suppose they dance by torch light. (48)

Gautama dismisses her desire in a matter-of-fact way without caring for the intensity of her desire. He remarks: "I suggest wait till a Kathakali troupe comes to give a
performance in Delhi, as it is bound to some time-perhaps in winter. It will be less expensive” (49).

Walking along with Maya Gautama quotes a beautiful Urdu couplet; but he remains altogether impervious to the tender feeling inherent in it: In agony Maya feels: “Even if each star in the sky were a heart, what of it? Give me one heart that is capable of sorrow” (25). But Maya at once feels the inherent tenderness in the couplet. She finds the couplet: “Weighted with a rare comparison, a tender understanding” (25).

Rapturously, Maya experiences her epiphany. Desai beautifully depicts this moment of Maya’s epiphany:

And my heart stretched, stretched painfully, agonisingly, expanding and swelling with the vastness of a single moment of absolute happiness, and my body followed its long, sweet curve, arching with the searing, annihilating torture of it. Ultimate. A word dropped down the tunnel of memory- it had been used that evening- ultimate. Ah this was it, the Ultimate, absolute joy. Here lay perfection, suspended bearing all that it could bear, so full was it. ‘Ere one more flower to unfurl that night, one small bird to cry, if one bright star were to be shattered and filled, filled to the point of destruction. God, God I gasped- enough, enough, no more. Let it remain, so let it remain” (26)

The emotional alienation and the temperamental gulf between Maya and Gautama is well summed up. While she stands near Gautama in the moonlight Maya thinks she is far away from him: “Nothing was hidden. All was revealed and it was not
what I hunted for. He was not on my side at all, but across a river, across a mountain and
would always remain so” (131).

Maya’s obsessive love of the beautiful, the colourful, the sensuous and the
picturesque in life standing in sharp contrast with Gautama’s philosophical detachment in
life serves an immensely significant purpose in the novel. The whole novel is replete with
numerous highly poetic descriptions of the outer world which serve as important
objective correlative of Maya’s moods and changing psycho states creating an unusual
textual density.

Maya’s world is “full”. Her appetite for the real, the close and the living is
insatiable. But Gautama is unable to appreciate the pulsating richness of life. She knows
him inside out. She remarks:

Poor Gautama. Not to be able to notice the odour of limes, not to hear the
melancholy voice singing somewhere behind the plantains, not to have
time to count the stars as they came out one by one- poor Gautama, my
poor, poor husband,(237).

Maya has a feeling that Gautama had never lived and never would.

She also remarks that murders are committed: “...only for the sake of money or property-
or anything solid and dirty. Not for love or life or basic things” (240).

It is these basic things – her love of life and her love of freedom- that prompt her
to kill her husband. Her quest for these basic things is basically existentialist in nature. In
the novel she feels stifled by the loss of her freedom. She feels lonely but not free. She
wants to regain the freedom she has lost at the altar of marriage. Her existential quest for
freedom gets a fillip as she receives a letter from her brother Arjuna who has revolted
against his father and the social tradition that had attempted to thwart the growth of his individuality. She tries to recapture her lost freedom which is possible only by ridding herself completely of Gautama.

Unable to establish rapport with her husband and to find a meaning in her arid existence Maya remains throughout an utterly lonely creature writhing helplessly in an indifferent world. The loneliness corroding her heart and deteriorating her psyche is undeniably existentialist and it makes her aware of the loneliness of time and impossible vastness of space.

She muses over this awareness:

For there never was a doubt in my mind, now that I remember, as to the definite truth that I did indeed have a place in it. Not only I but my small dog, whose sad journey I followed with my mind, even as my eye traced pattern after majestic pattern amidst the proud constellation. (29-30)

Maya’s neurosis stems from her love-wish which she transfers from her father to her husband and which remains unfulfilled in both the cases. Maya’s remark: “Torture, guilt, dread, imprisonment—these were four walls of my private hell, one that no one can survive in long. Death was certain” (117). This makes a very significant reading in this context.

Maya admits:

Yes, I am going insane. I am moving further and further from all wisdom, all calm, and I shall soon be mad if I am not that already. Perhaps it is my madness that leads me to imagine that horoscope that encounter with the
albino, his prediction, my fate? Perhaps it is only a phenomenon of insanity,(124).

Maya's obsession with death coupled with her insanity leads her to think that:
“It was now to be either Gautama or I” (125).

Finally Maya opts for Gautama who when killed will not miss life as he is admittedly detached and indifferent to life. Maya observes:

This is not natural, told myself, this cannot be natural. There is something weird about me now, wherever I go, whatever I see, whatever I listen to has this unnaturalness to it. This is insanity. But who, what is insane? I myself? Or the world around me (167).

The image of the albino astrologer surfaces in Maya's consciousness at certain critical moments and helps a lot in developing the central theme: Maya feels:

Upon this bed of hot, itching sand, I summoned up again the vision of the tenebrific 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 shallow 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 caught up, and now the final, the decisive one held me in its perspiring clasp from which release served impossible. (109)
The dance of the peacocks portrayed in chapter three and later on referred to in chapter six of part two is the most poignant of all the images used in the novel. Maya feels in pain:

Pia pia, they cry lover, lover. Moi, mio- I die, I die. How they love the rain- these peacocks. They spread out their splendid tails and begin to dance of death, and they dance, knowing that they and their lovers are all to die, perhaps even before the monsoons came to an end. It is not agony for them? Here they stamp their feet, and beat their beaks against the rocks! They will even grasp the snakes that live on the sands there, and break their bodies to bits against the stones, to ease their own pain- before they mate, they fight. They will rip each others' breasts 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 know them to be one. Living, they are aware of death. Dying, they are in love with life, (140).

The image of peacock dance bearing a sinister significance is remarkably relevant to the very theme of the novel. Gautama though a father-substitute for Maya is also her lover who miserably fails not only to feel the intensity of her innermost cravings but also to listen to the pathetic cry of her anguished soul and thus when she commits suicide in the end she in a way symbolically substantiates this very agonised cry of the peacocks.

The image of the dust-storms - an important extension of the dance image - is depicted very elaborately in the novel. It denotes not only the fierce storm raging in
Maya’s subconscious mind but also her desire for release from bondage, fate, death and dreariness.

In the novel Maya welcomes the storm with the pleasure of a dancer and notices in it the sources of both agony and ecstasy.

Maya has been deprived of love, admiration and sympathy. She reacts violently to rejection because it indicates her personal worthlessness. She longs for moments that give her closeness and security. She feels that Gautama is callous to her physical and psychological needs.

The second character whose role as a wife has been analysed is Monisha who falls a prey for lack of understanding by parents, siblings, in-laws and husband. There never was an endeavour for the reformation or reparation from the wretched plight she was pushed into. She takes her life when she finds no alternative for life. The role she plays in the novel to integrate and hold life despite its relentless struggles goes futile into oblivion with superficial comprehension. She had to live with people who were hard to please. She is a loveable wife - submissive, god-fearing, tolerant and timid.

Monisha is condemned to a life of lack of opportunities for self-expression, of living securely and safely with her parents-in-law her large secure keepers. This alienation and withdrawal have been the part and parcel of life, the self-destructive part of a process of minimal self-preservation in a home where roles are confined and well-defined, where Monisha’s duties include:

… serving fresh chappatis to the uncles, as they eat, of listening to my mother-in-law as she tells me the remarkably many ways of cooking fish, of being Jiban’s wife. Why are lives such as these lived? At their
conclusion, what solution, what truth falls into the waiting palm of one's hand, the still pit of one's heart? (Voices in the City, 121).

The fire which burns Monisha to death acts like a cathartic agent where Nirode is concerned.

Monisha wants to be free. She finds it difficult to free herself of her appurtenances and duties. She longs for privacy and solitude and the inviolability that these may bring but that is not to be. Life follows a subdued pattern of monotonous activity without acquiring any meaning. Jiban’s posting to Calcutta and Monisha’s childlessness further detract her of privacy.

Monisha finds her answer in the bleeding doves that carry their suffering with them but her own options are limited. For her the choice, she says, is: “…between death and mean existence, and that surely not a difficult choice” (122).

Monisha like Gautama in Cry, the Peacock turns to the Gita for the Gita does not offer a purely religious solution but the wisdom of Gita recommends detachment and control.

The self-subjugated attains peace and moves among objects with the senses under control free from any longing or aversion. But the detachment Monisha achieves is not born out of experience but out of fear and attachment. They are both afraid of the inroads that love may make into their lives. She says:

I see that both Nirode and I shy from love, fear it as attachment, for from attachment arises longing …If only love existed that is not binding, that is free of rules, obligations, complicity and all stirrings of mind or conscience, then but there is no such love,(135-36).
But the kind of love Monisha wants is not available to her. Jiban destroys whatever meaning their relationship might have had. When she is accused of being a thief Jiban instead of accepting her right to the money questions her right. Monisha feels: “He did not say: Why you did not tell them at once? He said: Why didn’t you tell me before you took it?” (138).

Monisha withdraws from the material concerns of the family and retreats behind the barred windows. From behind these barred windows she advises Amla to act always in the opposite way. It is an advice to rebel. Amla notices her stillness and death-like submission and thinks of her as a lifeless statue. But Monisha’s stillness is not steadiness or detachment, it is not even feeling or suffering - it is a death-like stillness.

While watching the dancer in the street- Monisha feels curiously untouched. She alone stood apart “…unnaturally cool, too perfectly aloof, too inviolably whole and alone and apart” (238).

Monisha is suddenly conscious of having lost all right to exist of having given up the quest too soon. Her victory over her mind has less value than the instinctive surrender of the other women to their feelings of sorrow and sympathy. Monisha’s fear of touch and intimacy, her withdrawal from passion confine her to her own private prison. She says:

I am different from them all. They put me away in a steel container, a thick glass cubicle, and I have lived in all my life, without a touch of love or hate or warmth on me. I am locked apart from all of them, they cannot touch me …What a waste, what a waste it has been. This life enclosed in a locked container, merely as an observer, and so imperfect, so handicapped
an observer at that ...I have not given birth. I have not attended death. All the intervening drama has gone by, unwound itself like a silent, blurred film that has neither entertained nor horrified me.

Monisha’s suicide is an attempt to rebel against this meaningless death-like isolation. It is an attempt to give meaning to her death for her life has been devoid of any meaning. Her suicide is preceded by self-knowledge and it asserts her freedom. It is an exercise of her choice.

For Monisha 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 a predator and swallows up the present.

Monisha cherishes her privacy for she feels she can be herself and feel more whole. But later she rejects this wholeness which is unnatural and she wants to make to great leap towards emotion and the fire she lights envelops her.

Monisha’s innate creativity and sensitivity which could have been an asset to any man have a constricting influence on her buoyancy as the traditional society wants its woman to lead a life in accordance with rules codified for men’s convenience. Transgression of these unsaid rules is treated as sacrilegious and women are used as pawns and tools to continue the social tyranny in the community-oriented nature of Indian family.

Women are manifestly hostile to other women because their inability to grow outside the home denied all opportunities to them to escape the traditional tyranny.
The social stereotypes put undue emphasis on women's honour and any attempt on their side to have any relationship without the family's sanction invariably draws a macho response.

The cultural conditioning also keeps the girl ignorant of the natural beauty of the relationship between man-woman and generates guilt in her. The social taboos are basically gender-discriminatory.

The social code is more important than the happiness of the individuals in the family. A woman is not tolerated especially if her individuality has a role outside the socially defined relationships. The traditional Indian concept of wife easily translates into a willing tolerance of a life of sacrifice, suffering and exploitation. Traditions encourage wives to sublimate a whole series of natural urges or at least believing that she should endeavour to do so. The wife is expected to possess archetypal fortitude and follow an intensively rigid moral pattern of life. The possibility of individual choice is not discussed even theoretically.

Hence a woman's independent thinking and her decision to nurture friendship outside the defined domains of familial ties had remained an anathema. The stigma to the liberated lifestyle of a woman resulted from a vision blurred by traditional gender bias and centuries of indoctrination about relating to women within pre-decided relationships only.

Mankind has to overcome this blinkered mindset, negate the prejudices about womanhood and perceive the independent status of a wife as a person in general and as an individual in particular. Only then can there be a positive mode in life for a woman as a wife.
Monisha is deprived of any confidants and increasingly alienated from her philistine, impressive husband. She turns to keeping a diary communicating only with herself in Kafkaesque ruminations of darkness, enclosure and madness suffering as well from the larger absence of that vital element of love.

Monisha’s failure to adjust with her in-laws, the marital discord with Jiban and her quest for meaning in human relationships obscure her from deciphering her emotional needs. Her intellectual self with her world of ideas is hardly gratified. Her contempt for average middle class values and lifestyle is an outcome of this.

Monisha identifies her self image among works of great writers. In order to salvage her from domestic exigencies she had to assume roles in accordance with the situation. She feels:

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 empty darkness has not so much as a fantasy dream. It is one unlit waste, a desert to which my heart truly belongs,(138).

Monisha’s inner struggle against loneliness and frustration and her fears of reality of life are reflected through such thoughts.

The need for self-preservation and companionship exist in Monisha’s mind. Monisha considers herself superior to others in her social group. This feeling does not let her interact with other people in a positive reciprocal manner. Her search for an authentic self forces her to sail in the opposite direction as she herself wants to rebel against everything around. Gripped by neurotic fears and inner uncertainties she traverses the whole range of anxiety, self-despair, self-condemnation and self-destructive impulses.
A man’s dominant passions of love and destructiveness depend largely on social circumstances. Environmental theory assumes these circumstances, however, to operate with reference to man’s biological existential situation and the needs springing from such a situation and not to an infinitely malleable undifferentiated psyche.

Monisha’s suicide and rebellion constitute an effort made to attain wholeness. Emotionally crippled and unable to develop any affinity with others Monisha turns aggressive. Her identity is threatened in the down-to-earth environment of Jiban’s family. In her case biological, psychological and social factors all combine to bring to surface her sense of destructiveness.

Monisha’s marriage is an act of revenge on the part of their parents and an act of atonement for their own sensuality. Monisha had been married to a boring entity. Her husband was so unquestionably safe, sound and so utterly predictable. It is a way of showing contempt by a father at his daughters who are not available to them. Monisha gets entangled in a net of unfulfilled desires. The solidity and roundedness of Monisha’s life are based in coarse material things where there is an endless stream of faces and tiered balconies shutting out light and enclosing shadows like stagnant well waters and windows with bars in them.

Monisha’s suppression of all emotions lead her to a sense of barrenness, of futility and alienation. Her prolonged isolation and lack of touch with human contact hastens her death.

Monisha, a woman without will and helpless and passive stands in direct contrast to Maya. Maya’s troubles lie in her sensuality whereas Monisha’s troubles arise due to her passivity. Married into a placid, middle-class family and to a prosaically dull husband
she is unable to adjust to her environment. She stoically refuses to identify herself with her in-laws’ family. She is charged of theft and commits suicide. Monisha suppresses her emotions and makes no attempt to analyse herself. She yearns for no will power. Monisha adopts the strategy of resignation.

Monisha’s character revolves around two main constituents: silence and a touch of malice inherited from her father and a morbid temperament hinted at by aunt Lila. Parental indifference and familial disorder characterise her childhood and the remoteness of home puzzles Monisha. There is an element of unknown. As a result she withdraws into a world of her own, remains aloof and retains it in her relationship later. Her incapacity to relate herself to her family creates basic anxiety. She glorifies herself as a lonely, cold and stoic woman different from the mass of woman she sees around her.

Between her mother’s epicurean temperament and father’s stoicism Monisha prefers the latter because her father is a suffering martyr. Glorification of his traits in herself gives her heroic dimensions. Her aloofness becomes her wisdom. Her passivity acquires the colour of an independent personality. Monisha observes: “I am too silent for them I know: they all distrust silence” (130).

She satisfies all her inner needs by substituting self-idealisation for the pain of inferiority and anxiety. Monisha feels elevated in her silence because Jiban’s family abhors it. It helps her to be on an imperious plane. There are scattered references to it throughout her diary. She says: “My silence I find has powers over others” (130).

During Monisha’s girlhood her parents interpret her silence and aloofness as an inclination towards morbidity. As a precautionary measure to curb her unhealthy tendencies they force her into a marriage with a man unsuitable to her taste and
temperament thinking that it would be a good thing for her to be settled into such a stolid, unimaginative family as that just sufficiently educated to accept her with tolerance.

Socially the joint-family with so many traditional bindings is impossible to live with. It is detrimental to individual growth and freedom. Psychologically it is more of a shattering experience for Monisha than it socially is. She gets the first blow at the reception. She is made to touch the feet of a large number of aunts and uncles. Later on, life is reduced to cooking and washing which hurts her pride further. She feels life as nothing better than: "...To sort this husk from rice, to wash and iron and to talk and sleep, when this is not what one believes in" (121).

What she wants is to live the clean, husked irreducible life. Monisha's problem is more personal than existential. She cannot get over her neurotic despair. It is incorrect to judge the magnitude of her problems by the intensity of her feelings. In fact, all her efforts are directed towards alleviating her personal crisis. Existential problems, on the other hand, arise out of a disparity between man's natural desires for life, choice and freedom and the unchangeable cosmic conditions of existence. They are irredeemable and common to all humanity. Monisha does not suffer existential angst but only neurotic anxiety.

Monisha's suffering is also due to her being childless. Traditional Indian society looks down upon a childless woman. A woman gains status only as a mother. But in Monisha's case the awareness of her low profile in family and in society is punched so unceremoniously daily into her that it becomes one of the reasons for her inferiority complex. Every time she hears them talk of blocked tubes the urge on her part is to look down upon them from a superior height of her silent defiance.
All the female members of Monisha's husband's family as also other Bengali women traditional and patient are the target of her contempt. She broods over their lot, 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. (120).

These poignant thoughts contain a rhythm of superiority particularly when she thinks of the glory, pride and dignity of the death of the aged tiger in the zoo. Symbolically, the words are meant to be a premonition that she is not the one to sit round waiting for a meaningless death. For her the choice is between a meaningless life and non-existence and she chooses the latter. She would prefer an end with the dignity of the tiger. In the cage of her in-laws' house, she feels, it certainly would not be: "...melancholy as in the settling of a puff of dust upon the earth" (121).

It is not enough for Monisha to feel superior to others. She must perfect her self-image of a detached person. The ideal before her is that of the Gita wherein she reads the qualities of a man of steady wisdom. She calls it her book. But notwithstanding her attempts to read it religiously and follow its philosophy to the last word Monisha misses the vital essence of detachment. Non-attachment of the Gita is a healthy attribute. It does not advocate running away from the field of action. Rather it emphasises forgetting the self in the action. To Monisha this resignation leads to peace and wisdom. This resignation also implies shutting all the doors to life and living. Wrongly does she think that she has achieved peace. Since she has not developed a healthy self-esteem she reaches for a false glory based on neurotic pride.
Monisha cuts herself from family life and lives in an ivory tower of her pride safe in the belief of her own significance. In the Gita her attraction is drawn by the lines which say that a man of wisdom is satisfied in the Self by the Self alone, he has no desires. Erroneously she substitutes the real Self by her actualised self-image and feels assured of her non-involvement. The concept of ‘the self’ as mentioned in the Gita and referred to above is deeper than what Monisha has taken it to be. The Atman, the Brahman, in Hindu thought is the supreme principle, the supreme oneness of being. What Monisha has achieved is the fragmented, self-centered concern for her. She seeks just an escape from conflict inner as well as outer by actualising her image of a silent sufferer, the martyr. She builds around her a wall of fantasy. As an inhabitant of her walled, secret world she loses the ability to live in the moment. Her obsession is to: “...keep it all to yourself, a secret, quite private, all your own, to keep and gloat over. It will hurt so much to show” (114-15). The supreme privacy of the self falsifies all reality for her.

Monisha’s failure to maintain the equilibrium heightens her willlessness which in turn implies a rejection of life. What she achieves is just a sealing up of aspirations. By negating healthy aspirations Monisha has lost the will to accept challenges of life. Her consciousness is withered and dead. She disdains anything that may draw her into the ring. The urge to feel whole is not wholesome but an outcome of a desire to shut all doors. The two selves of Monisha are represented by the city offering life to some while extinguishing life for others.

Monisha’s need to be always right cannot allow her to be doubted. All the while she has strived to feel superior to her in-laws. Now, under the pressure of the accusation
her glorified self-image crumbles down. It is unbearable for Monisha: "...to be regarded so low by men and women themselves so low" (136).

This thought speaks of Monisha's disdain. She gets yet another shock at the realisation that she does not belong to the household. This works at the unconscious level although at the conscious level she has never belonged to Jiban's family. She was hurt deeper at his words: "Why didn't you tell me before you took it?" (138).

Being a withdrawn type Monisha's first automatic impulse is to save her face by exile into her shell. As solitude suits her temperament she willingly accepts to live a little beyond and below everyone else in exile.

This is a way to restore her pride. What she considers freedom is just a flight from conflict. Real freedom implies cessation of all conflict and liberation from all fear. Monisha has not achieved it. She fears the aggressiveness of her in-laws. She undergoes a tremendous amount of psychological tussle. She does not get freedom because she does not acquire self knowledge.

Monisha does not understand that lack of communication and the loss of relationship only create an emotional and spiritual wasteland. Monisha has something higher in her. When she goes to the music conference all the dance and festivity going on there only puts her in a state of delirious daze. But the music of the sitar player transports her to a higher region of experience and communion than those of the common man. She says: "I wander in this labyrinth at will and, blessedly, we never touch, merely remain in mystic communion with each other. I am willing to follow till I die" (123).

Monisha moves with the ecstasy produced by the musician because she too is endowed with a higher sensibility.
Monisha leads a miserably empty married life. Her relationship with Jiban is marked only by loneliness and incommunication. This recurring theme of husband–wife alienation and incommunication is prevalent in most of Desai’s novels. Although Monisha frantically tries to search for a real meaning of her life she ultimately feels utterly frustrated for there is nothing in her life to sustain her. The nothingness in her life makes her muse like an existentialist.

Monisha’s mental agony keeps mounting day by day and she feels more and more tormented. She says: “Is this what then, my life? Only a conundrum that I shall brood over forever with passion and pain never to arrive at a solution? Only a conundrum- is that, then life?” (124-25).

In her existentialist search Monisha ultimately discovers that it is the absence of the element of love that has made both brother and sister such abject rebels, such craven tragedians.

The insufferable cacophony of overcrowded, apathetic Calcutta, Monisha’s claustrophobia and oppressive lack of privacy, her incapacity to bear a child, her total incommunication with her nonchalant husband, the absence of love in her life and the resultant tormenting loneliness within and the suspicion of her in-laws who look upon her as a thief- all this terribly torture her mentally and she shrinks in agony. There is no escape from it and makes her feel the futility of her hollow existence and ultimately drives her to suicide.

The life bestowed to Maya and Monisha as wives in the novels taken for study is also extended to Sita the principal protagonist in Where Shall We Go This Summer? Sita too has her share of trials and tribulations in her life as the wife of Raman. While Raman
embodies sense Sita stands for sensibility. The life portrayed in the novel is unraveled through a few anecdotes where the main events move around Sita the protagonist. As a wife Sita finds hard to cope with the life bestowed on her. As a highly sensitive woman she finds it very difficult to take for granted the violence prevalent in the modern urban life. Even ordinary events seem pent up with imminent violence looming large to magnified proportions. There is hardly any togetherness between Sita and her husband. Raman is a down-to-earth, commonplace, prosaic practical man. To him understanding has been always an unaesthetically distanced endeavour.

Sita is foresighted and has higher notions about life than the average woman. She is over-sensitive, keen-eyed, poetic and imaginative, having more than ordinary sense. She feels existence is not possible in an insulated state of being rather existence implies being with others. She has no mother to look after her. She is denied the regular life of a normal child. She lives a strange and unusual life. She was required to spend days on and away from home at different places. There was no schooling to discipline her. Her sense of belonging was extremely tenuous. Sita loses her grip on life and develops in her an uncertain and unrealistic attitude towards life.

Sita recoils from materialism, commercialism, violence and ugliness. When her expectations of protection and security from these vices are not fulfilled she feels disappointed in marriage.

Sita in Where Shall We Go This Summer? feels that she has to stay whole. She says: “I had to stay whole, I had to” (148).
But when Sita is offered freedom she is unable to take it. When Raman is resigned to her withdrawal she finds she is not ready to be resigned. Her reluctance for resignation is observed thus:

...she felt him release her then – give her up. She felt it as surely as if his hand, till now clutching her hand, had let it drop, let her go. He did it not out of passion, but out of pure weariness with her, weariness with her muddle, her dark muddled drama ... he released her and at last she was free. She stood still ... and felt herself released and freed. Immensely tired now, all emptied out, the drama drained, the passion crumpled, she felt so light that she could have raised and floated out to sea, a black seabird. But she did not. (49-50).

For Sita the couple in the Hanging Garden in Bombay revealed that only love can lend meaning to life. She explains to her husband, Raman, the inadequacy of her own life without mincing words. “In those days- I thought I could live with you and travel alone- mentally and emotionally. But after that day that wasn’t enough. I had to stay whole. I had to” (107-8).

The desire for wholeness grips her. She almost seems to be saying that her life has been far removed from such divine love. Purity and oneness evoke in her the desire for a mythic experience to feel a part of a larger pattern. The scene gives her the missing instruction for her voyage – a rediscovery of faith.

Sita’s husband Raman is a businessman with good public relations. He is busy with his vocational affairs and can spare little time for her. He represents pragmatism and an acceptance of the materialistic values of the society. He finds his activities more
fulfilling than his relations with his wife. He wants to exercise his full authority over her. His wife Sita finds her life dull and monotonous. She anticipates Raman to be the life lover making him realise how valuable she is to him. Raman, however, does not fulfill her wishes. Raman focuses his energies on his business and becomes an escapist. By nature he is a perfectionist. He has his own morals and standards. As a consequence the temperaments of Sita and her husband remain poles apart. They suffer from marital disharmony. As a result Sita hypersensitive as she is feels marital dissatisfaction with her husband. Sita strongly feels that marriage is a farce and all human relationships are false in the absence of love. Unfortunately she feels very unhappy even in the company of her in-laws.

Raman's sadistic delight in Sita's failure to protect the eagle intensifies Sita's agony. Her husband and the children do not understand her problem due to the communication gap between them. They are quite indifferent to her predicament. This trivial incident creates a gulf separating Sita from her husband and the children. Sita feels as if she were living in the wilds. Sita feels that there is no security for anyone in this violent society. Menaka's spoiling the potted plants talking with her mother about a party hurts Sita at the sight of her daughter's insensitivity and callousness. Sita also feels otherwise at her husband's indifference towards the newspaper picture of Vietnam War, the photo of a woman weeping over a grave and a crowd outside the Rhodesian Jail. She is shocked at Menaka's tearing Sunday water colour into long strips of meaningless colour. Karan's demolishing his toys with karate blows perturbs Sita that children at tender age are acquainted with frightening violence.
Sita seems to accept the ultimate intangibility of life and reality in her submission. Her acceptance is free from rancour, guilt or protest. She recognises the sea of dark unconscious forces within as a necessary condition of all existence. She feels like a liberated soul-purged and purified in the fire of passion.

Sita identifies her quest for undifferentiated life in the jellyfish and with this identification she realises that all reality is existence that there is no reality beyond the one that one lives. She knew it was because of ordinary life the day-to-day world had grown so insufferable to her that she could think of the magic island again as a means of release. If reality cannot be borne then illusion was the only alternative. Sita saw that island illusion as a refuge, a protection.

Sita’s unwillingness to deliver the baby is symbolic of her desire to prevent the very cycle of experience that makes suffering and violence possible. She is against all happenings. Anita Desai seeks to universalise Sita’s tragic awareness that calls us to sympathise with her sorrow.

The sorrow of Sita at the loom in violence cannot be logically reasoned out. It is a kind of feeling a oversensitive woman experiences during her pregnancy. This is not the kind of analogy a doctor arrives at in his clinic after dissecting limbs and bones. Desai has shown a way to understand her heroines in her earlier novels.

Sita is appalled by the pervasive phenomenon of violence that she observes in nature, in society and in domestic life. The violence is reflected not only in acts and incidents which are explicit but also in acts and incidents which are reflective of a violence that is operative within and finds expression in subtler forms of cruelty. Sita unable to reconcile herself to this violence takes the extraordinary step of going to the
island of Manori where her father had created magic out of nothingness. Sita’s flight from experience originates implicitly from her reverence for life, her unwillingness to accept violence that seems to be inseparable from all existence. Sita’s flight to the island and her retreat constitute the moral core of the novel. For Sita it is a pilgrimage. Anita Desai has successfully projected the pervasive sense of violence through the eyes of a woman in terms of domestic relationships. Desai has attempted a profound plunge into the source of Sita’s alienation. The violence pervasive in the domestic sphere is not tangible to grasp the texture at a superficial level. Violence is communicated in the form of experience. It is far from incomprehension when everyone in Sita’s family fails to understand her nerves.

Towards the end of the novel Sita is found tired, dishevelled and vacant like a player at the end of the performance clearing the stage, packing the costumes, saddened and relieved at one same time. The novel does not end on a sad and pessimistic note. Sita appears to make a sort of compromise when she feels along with Raman that life must be continued and all its businesses. This anguished and agonised compromise is not easy to make. It is perhaps only the feeling of genuine love and consideration for each other like that she had witnessed in the Hanging Gardens which can invest life if not with a meaning at least with a divine secret. Sita’s understands life as:

She seemed pleased to have been able to explain it to herself, even if not to him (Raman). But then she added it all became harder than ever before, for me. Very hard- this making of compromise when one didn’t want to compromise, when one wanted to…(148)
It is, however, difficult to disagree to say that married life is a perpetual compromise or 
sacrifice for a greater good vindicates one’s victory not defeat. The basic perspective that 
finally emerges is that life a sensitive living of life with its attendant mysteries and muddles 
defies strict codification and definition. Individual identity can be maintained only through 
deliberate efforts to explore the meaning of its mysterious and enigmatic nature.

Sita’s pilgrimage acquires a ritual significance. The island represents that part of 
herself which she had failed to realise earlier. She struggles to discover in her own self 
the magic that she had half-perceived in the life of her father. She knows she has an 
affinity with the island but she is also aware that the island alienates her from something 
equally vital and fundamental. This relationship between identity and alienation keeps 
disturbing Sita till she discovers that undifferentiated life is like a jelly fish, live and 
odejective but formless.

Sita identifies her quest for undifferentiated life in the jellyfish and with this 
identification she realises that all reality is existence that there is no reality beyond the one that 
one lives. This discovery, however, does not resolve her anxiety. It brings her knowledge; it 
does not bring any resolution. Resolution comes only when she learns to say ‘yes’.

However, Sita commiserates with Raman for his problems in the factory and she 
feels fully adjusted. Her emotional maturity guides her to be a co-sharer of her husband’s 
misfortunes and discomfitsures. In a mood of self introspection she ruminates:

His (Raman’s) boy’s at home must have worried him, while he was 
at work in the factory which was not without its problems either.
He looked worn, much older than his years. Nor could he stay 
here, resting, as she was doing. (140).
Sita, Desai’s protagonist in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* is greatly confused not finding a fit society where she can breathe calmly and where she can give birth to her child. Sita’s life is a crisis of conscience and values. A significant question closely related to the crisis of conscience and values is the question of human survival. Noble existence and dignified adjustment in the society, in the married life with total submission and surrender to what exists cannot be equated to one’s fate dictating one to endure or whether one should devise one’s own future. Sita’s survival, her existence, her adjustment are symbolical of the entire humanity. Her rebellious mood is indicative of thousands of sensitive souls who do not find peace in environs of distrust and corruption spawned by material advancements of all sorts. Her problem of maladjustment is symptomatic of hundreds of thousands of Sitas. Sita clearly specifies for herself that life is a constant struggle. She also realises that existence and survival are more relevant to one’s life than one’s struggle.

Sita has been playing a role to guard herself from the crushing circumstances. The need for affection suppressed so far raises its head. Sita is a helpless, lonely young woman, in need of support and Raman can fulfill the need. With this unconscious desire in the background Sita makes a bargain with fate. If she is helpless, good and humble she will be loveable and Raman will love her she believes. As a self-effacing person she is good without pride and hopes that she will be treated well by fate and by others. The first inkling of Sita’s bargain is seen when she submits to the marriage proposal of Raman who marries her: “...out of pity, out of lust, out of a sudden will for adventure, and because it was inevitable” (99).
Sita admits that she bore four children: "...with pride, with pleasure, sensual, emotional, Freudian, every kind of pleasure" (31).

Sita builds up a relationship in her mind with her husband based on the deal. She will be an obliging wife and Raman will honour her self-image for her lovable qualities. For her love is an engulfing passion like the vision of the Muslim couple she sees in the Hanging Gardens. She says:

They were like a work of art- so apart from the rest of us. They were not like us- they were inhuman, divine. So strong that love, that sadness, not like that I have seen or known. They were so white, so radiant, they made me see my own life like a shadow, absolutely flat, uncoloured,(146-47)

Sita’s vision of life transcends the limits of the self and human finitude. Suno in Anita Desai’a short story Studies in the Park sees the same vision of divine love. The Muslim couple are real human beings belonging to this world but the intensity of their tenderness is beyond human limitations. Suno affirms, “...no one else in my life had been real and alive” (Games at Twilight, 31).

After these moments of empathy both Sita and Suno find ordinary life unbearably dull and drab. To Suno everything appears purposeless and lifeless compared to this scene. Sita tells Raman that it was the happiest moment of her life. The confession enrages him though Sita means no offence. As her defence mechanism is evaluated the working of her glorified image is discovered. She is like the helpless Muslim woman needing all attention and tenderness. She expects Raman to be like the lover making her realise how valuable she is to him. Raman, however, does not honour the claims of her bargain and the dream is never realised.
Raman's failure to recognise Sita's self-effacing drives and honour her capacity for surrender and love injures her self image. Her hopes of being loved are frustrated. She tells him once: "I thought I could live with you and travel alone- mentally, emotionally. But after that day, that wasn't enough. I had to stay whole, I had to" (Where Shall We Go This Summer?, 148).

The concept of staying whole requires a little elaboration. Raman's inability to honour her claims of love impinges upon her pseudo-self. Her neurotic pride is hurt and she turns vindictive. She must restore her damaged self esteem. She rebels against the vegetable existence lived by the women of Raman's family.

Denying herself joy, enthusiasm, anger and fear-the whole range of human sentiments -Sita loves the urge to assert and affirm herself. Devoid of these natural feelings she becomes a melancholic, depressed woman, bored with life. Nothing can instil zeal in her. She presents a gloomy picture to her children and a quizzical one to her husband- sitting on the balcony, smoking endlessly and staring blankly at the sea as if she were waiting for something. Her entire life acquires the tinge of waiting.

In Sita there is a temporary blockage of consciousness but she shows steady signs of a dynamism for constructiveness. There is no breakdown of her power to wish and will. It helps her in self-direction. The latent urge in her is to be creative. She tells Menaka that if she had the talent to paint or to sing she would have nursed the talent to its full potential. Creativity would have lent meaning to her life.

The problems and the unhappiness in the life of Sita spring from her inability to accept the values and the attitudes of society. She finds that the majority of society has many unfortunate people cursed with lives of dullness, boredom and devoid of any life.
Sita finds the company of men and women of her husband’s family intolerable. According to her these men are incapable of introspection and lack the capacity for self-examination which are the signs of an authentic existence. She regards their colourless, soulless existence as a provocation and even a threat to her own existence. To challenge them, to shatter their complacency and to shock them into recognition of the reality Sita behaves provocatively. She starts smoking and begins to speak in sudden rushes of emotion as though flinging darts at their smooth, unscarred faces.

According to Sita her husband Raman is unable to understand the violence and the passion with which Sita reacts against every incident. Her husband’s reaction to her frequent emotional outbursts as a mixture of puzzlement, weariness, fear and his final resigned acceptance of her abnormality runs her mad. The path of honour and conviction is not the way for Sita. She refuses to meekly accept the authority of society. Sita’s world is a world of innocent dream. Her dream is a life full of rich promises and mysteries based upon her recollections from childhood. A foreigner waiting for lift to Ajanta on the wrong side of the road represents an innocence uncorrupted by experience and a courage of not knowing anything but going on nevertheless. Sita identifies herself with him like him she is also turned to the colour of waiting, was turned a living monument of waiting. When she thinks where she should go that summer she looks for a place where her memory and desire, romance and reality, the beautiful and the sinister are inextricably mixed together.

Sita makes a second self-conscious attempt to re-live and re-create the past. She makes a quest for a lost beauty and innocence which she thinks would bring her a change; but such a beauty never existed in her childhood.
Sita flees from a soggy and indifferent married life—where she has been reduced to a generating machine. As Sita’s vital interests are threatened she flees from life. An obedient, meek and individualistic woman Sita feels threatened when she is reduced to be a submissive and passive partner. Sita wanted to be loved. She wanted only some human consideration which was not that terrible and not so impossible.

After living for twenty years with her husband it becomes clear to Sita that she cannot take life as it is: “…she could not inwardly accept that this was all there was to life, that life would continue thus inside this small, enclosed area, with these few characters churning around and past her, leaving her always in this grey, dull-lit empty shell” (36).

An escape was essential for Sita. It comes to Sita when she has outgrown that stage of life when indifference, violence and passivity could only make her restless. This initial restlessness turns into a quest for the answer—the ‘why’ and ‘how’ of life. It is essential for her to find the answer that her escape was not from the duties and responsibilities, from order and routine, from life and the city?

It is essential to understand the details that make Sita flee to Manori. Raman had married Sita out of pity, out of lust, out of a sudden will for adventure and not out of an overwhelming desire or love. Living with her husband and family she revolts against their subhuman placidity and sluggishness.

They were people who reacted to anything and their forte was cooking and eating. There was no place for sentiments or sensitiveness in their lives. Sita finds it strange and feels threatened by their sub humanity. She fears that their stolid nature and stillness might swamp her. To jolt them out of their calmness and to be reassured that they are
human enough she reacts in a most provocative manner - she smokes like a chimney in a house where even the men dared smoke in front of elders. She speaks passionately and eloquently in a family which opened its mouth only to put something into it. Sita was not passive enough to take life between naps and burps.

Raman is calm, indifferent and passive. He never gets flustered about anything irrespective of the magnitude of the situation which irks Sita. She protests against his calmness and wears the drabbest of sarees to provoke. But it fails to affect Raman who takes every gesture of Sita as theatrical and uncalled for. There is nothing that would shake him out of his placid behaviour. To all the incidents no matter how painful or traumatic they are to Sita he reacted with a terse: "Don't make too much of it ... He closed his mouth, closed the incident. Whereas to Sita it is not possible to forget and be distracted by a book ... ripped open, the wound remained opened" (29). It festered and added to the pain as she continued to think about the inhuman behaviour of life around her.

As their marriage continues to add on years Sita continues her painful existence. She cannot get adjusted to too much of violence outside and perfect passivity and indifference inside the house. Sita feels unhappy. Even the comforts around irritated her sometimes. She feels that artificial and pompous luxuries without love, understanding and feeling of empathy are of no use. To the outside world her marriage would seem perfect but there is no co-ordination at all between Sita and her husband.

Sita continues to accept her husband’s indifference in spite of his lack of comprehension of her desires and yearnings till the moment when revulsion throws her off balance. Her revulsion takes the form of flight - as her resentment, disappointments,
fears and rages were brimming within her and these could no longer be contained. For Sita the alternative is more attractive – an escape from the pervading madness. She longs to be back in her protective chrysalis of her childhood home - an island which promised of magical transformations, of solutions of some credible answers to her ever increasing problems.

Sita could be amused to see the total grey transformation in her self and yet not be blessed with some kind of enlightenment.

Sita becomes aware that in life opposing principles always rush and merge into each other. This process of comprehension makes her realise that there is no magical solution to keep the various shades of life apart. She feels that neither sea nor sky was separate or contained; they rushed into each other in a rush of light and shade impossible to disentangle.

Sita had tried to disentangle them, keep them apart and was disappointed and distraught at her failure. She had to retreat to evolve, to incubate and had to come to terms with life. She admires Raman’s stance of life despite all his other flaws: Sita says of Raman: “There is courage, she admitted to herself in shame, in getting on with such matters from which she herself squirmed away, dodged and ran” (101).

Sita decides to face life along with Raman. She is also aware that Raman would never be able to understand her sensitiveness. He was the type who would always think her to be theatrical and mad. She is probably both for she could never fit into the norms laid down by the society for a wife.

Sita realises that despite his being unable to understand her she loved him or else why would she feel such a tumult of life and welcome at the thought of him and yet
would not be meek and docile. Her face was so grey such sharp grooves ran from her nostrils to the corners of her mouth. It was the face of a woman unloved and rejected.

Sita knows that her sojourn as a wanderer in search of her quest is over. She now knows that there are no miracles to save the world or her life from its traumatic experiences and she must face them. Her exile in this sense was an exploration and an enquiry and not a blind escape into nothingness.

In India a woman is conditioned to be always dependent and made to feel that she is not capable of looking after herself she being weak and submissive. So when Sita defies the norm of a docile and quiet woman by giving an outlet to her feelings she is taken to be ‘mad’ and ‘theatrical.’ A woman is not expected to walk out on her husband. A woman in India is taught to be happy within the cloistered shell of home. She is not supposed to find the shell cumbersome and break it or to be shocked and angry at the outside world. She is expected to be happy in compliance and in accepting her condition as a way of life.

Sita comes to terms with her own life out of her speculative stance towards life. There was no escape for her from the troubles of her life. She negates her expectations in miracles and solutions and comes out of her retreat as a mature and wiser person to face life.

If a woman is threatened with indifference and coldness and not taught to confront her problems she is bound to flee. Sita is not happy with giving in. Sita’s failure is not an individual failure but a social failure. She is not content to take her lot as karma and she does not believe in shedding a few self-pitying tears in a dark corner. She constantly and persistently struggles with her situations.
Anita Desai says:

I am interested in characters who are not average but have retreated or been driven into some extremity of despair and so turned against, or made to stand against the general current. It is easy to flow with the current, it makes no demands, it costs no efforts. But those who cannot follow it, whose heart cries out, the great ‘no’, who fight the current and struggle against it, they know what the demands are and what it costs to meet them (Anita Desai: The Indian Writers’ Problems, 220).

Sita is one such character who takes a stand against the general current and constantly questions the values of life. Her struggle continues. A woman cannot live for long in an atmosphere of overflowing expectations. A woman unfolds herself to be everything without getting anything in return. When a woman finds no alternative to continue with her life she flees. A woman also perceives the futility of it and decides to come back and synthesise the various nuances of her personality. She would not lead the life of a hypocrite. Sita feels, “...what I am doing is trying to escape to a place where it might be possible to be sane again” (Where Shall We Go This Summer?, 35). There is always an impossibility of talk between Sita and her father.

Unlike the legendary Rama and Sita, Raman and Sita in this novel do not represent an ideal husband-wife relationship but they are an ill-assorted couple having no harmony in their lives. Raman is practical, busy and nonchalant to his wife. He represents the prosaic life while Sita nurtures concepts of poetic life. Raman a middling kind of man represents sanity, rationality and conformity to the established norms of society and fails to comprehend her violent or passionate reactions. Whatever shocks or disgusts Sita is
natural and acceptable to Raman and vice versa. In fact Sita’s alienation from her husband was inherent in her relationship with her mysterious father.

Temperamentally they are like two poles wide apart. This temperamental schism between them is in fact nowhere more effectively communicated than in the little scene where they talk about the stranger they encountered on their way back from Ajanta and Ellora. When Raman asked her why she had once more brought up the subject of the hitch-hiking foreigner months later she blurted: “He seemed so brave” (35).

Sita’s unconscious recognition of the irrationality of the stranger is illustrative of her own longing for a life of primitive reality and also her alienation from her husband. Sita says: “Perhaps there was only innocence and it made him seem brave not knowing anything but going on nevertheless” (35).

Wherever she is Sita finds her wary existence threatened with tedium and boredom— a terrible existential problem that besets the sensitive individual. Her husband engrossed in his business and her children growing independent she feels struggling in the grip of the monster of boredom. But tragically enough her husband fails to comprehend how or why or how she gets bored. Desai writes about the boredom of Sita beautifully: “…she herself looking on it saw it stretched out so vast, so flat, so deep, that in fright she scrambled about it, searching for a few of these moments that proclaimed her still alive, not quite drowned and dead” (33-34).

Sita’s life tormented by loneliness and boredom represents modern married woman’s existentialist predicament to which Anita Desai does offer a positive solution in this novel. The agony and unhappiness in Sita’s soul spring from her inability to flow with the general current of society. She uncompromisingly makes a strong stand and
refuses to accept the cruel dictates of society to which the average people submit to with no complaints. Her anguished soul cries out: "...the great No ...He who refuses does not repent, should he be asked again, he would say No again. And yet that No—that right No—crushes him for the rest of his life" (24).

Sita braces herself up to face the ferocious assaults of existence although she knows that her rebellious attitude towards society and her ‘No’ would shatter her and crush her. She, however, wants to have a bewitched life for herself and for her unborn child whose birth she wants to stop by stopping the very flux of time on Manori.

B.Ramachandra Rao very aptly writes about this aspect of the novel:

The novel may, thus, be seen as a possibility on the inability of human beings to relate the inner with the outer, the individual with society. It is a story of illusions melting away in the cold light of the everyday and the commonplace. While it is clear that the author’s sympathies are with those who say No to society, if not in thunder, at least with a quiet passion and defiance, it is also evident that the author does not project a one-sided view of the human problem. A life of complete inwardness, of a neurotic subjective indulgence is not the solution to the problems of life. Nor is the other extreme of complete conformity and total draining out of the individuality and of the imagination of the human being the proper way out of the dilemma (The Novel of Mrs.Anita Desai, 59)

In the third chapter the role of a woman as a wife has been analysed. The characters in the novels exemplify this through the roles they play. The following chapter is about the role of woman as a mother in the novels taken for study.