Chapter IX

Embodying the Thought or Vision
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All order is gone out of my life, all formality. There is no plan, no peace, nothing to keep me within the patterns of familiar, everyday living and doing that becomes those whom God means to live on earth (CP 179).

Anita Desai depicts the futility of existence and man’s vain attempts to survive in the face of all calamities through an exploration not of the social man but of the lone individual. Desai’s vision of life is one of ambivalence that encompasses defeat and disillusionment as well as acceptance and affirmation. Her fictional world is a world of chaos and confusion. It is an ambivalent world where we find the co-existence of incompatibilities and contradiction such as involvement and indifference, emotion and intellect, love and hatred, conformity and rejection, life and death. The characters of her novels are basically tragic, for even as they accept their destiny, they refuse to surrender: “Come now, we must not fret. If it must be so, we must learn to accept” (CP 54). A strong sense of individuality and their hypersensitive nature make them alienated and solitary. They suffer from a spiritual dilemma. The novelist portrays this by quoting a few lines from Cavafy:

To certain people there comes a day when they must say the great. Yes or the great No. He who has the Yes ready within him reveals himself at once, and saying it he crosses over to the path of honour and his own conviction. He who refuses does not repent should he be asked, he would say No again! And yet that No-the right No-crushes him for the rest of his life (WSGS 179).
It is the “great No” which these characters say to the society. They spend a secluded and withdrawn life, immersed in their own selves. A part from their temperamental aloofness, the outside forces, such as the city, nature and family play major roles in making them morbid and tragic. The sordid and hollow life of the metropolis, the city’s indifference and apathy to human emotions and feelings lead to a regressive tendency in the characters. Dissatisfied with their present, they turn back to the sweet days of the childhood. For some of the protagonists such as Maya, Sita, Monisha and Amla, the childhood is really beautiful but there are other characters who create an illusory world of childhood happiness like Nanda Kaul and try to get solace out of it. The impact of nature on the characters through her several agents such as moon, stars, seasons, flowers and trees is also remarkable which make the protagonists conscious of the reality around them. The physical, moral and spiritual misery of urban life results in alienation, loneliness and loss of human values and the protagonists fall victims to them. It eventually results in the attitude of defeat and disillusionment leading to preoccupation with the idea of death and dying.

Desai perhaps agrees with Dostoevski that reason is inadequate. In Notes from the Underground, Dostoevski says: “Where did all the sages get the idea that a man’s desire must be normal and virtuous? ...that independently may cost and wherever it may lead.” He further says: “What does reason know? Reason knows only what it has succeeded in finding out... but man’s nature acts as one whole” (34). The men in Desai’s novels Raman, Gautama, Nirode and Jiban are “all reason” and the women Maya, Sita, Monisha and Nanda are “all emotion.” They represent respectively the prose and passion of life. Desai has attempted to strike a balance between intellect and emotion which can solve existential problems of the protagonists. Anita Desai’s chief
concern is human relationship. Her central theme is the existential predicament of the individuals projected through the problems of the self in an emotionally disturbed milieu. Delicately conscious of the reality around them, her protagonists carry with them a sense of loneliness, alienation and pessimism. Desai adds a new dimension to the genre of Indian fiction in English by probing the unquestionable existentialist concerns of her protagonists. Anita Desai is obsessively occupied with the individual’s quest for meaning and value, freedom and truth that provide spiritual nourishment to the estranged self in a seemingly chaotic and meaningless world. Existentialism is a term applied to the work of a number of philosophers since the 19th century who, despite large differences in their positions, generally focused on the condition of human existence, and an individual’s emotions, actions, responsibilities, and thoughts, or the meaning or purpose of life. Existential philosophers often focused more on what they believed was subjective, such as beliefs and religion, or human states, feelings, and emotions, such as freedom, pain, guilt, and regret, as opposed to analyzing objective knowledge, language, or science.

Human life has been a complex and a multifaceted reality defying conceptual formulation and hence the contemporary mind has been permanently engaged in pursuit of knowledge seeking to impose meaning on the chaos of experience, shape an orderly picture of life and evolve coherent patterns of thought from overabundance of ardent observation to comprehend man’s existence.

Existence has never been an easy deal for man, for it correlates with his struggle for survival in the universe materialistically, physically and spiritually. The formidable tasks he has faced in life, especially during World War II has stimulated
despair and frustration, set forth much difficult questions in his life about freedom and choice of freedom, incited a penchant to die and finally led to the making of a philosophy in the name of Existentialism that attained tremendous popularity in Europe, particularly in France. It is essentially associated with the condition of man, his act of living, his state of being free and the directions he takes to use his freedom in reciprocation to his wider experiences and enormous challenges he encounters in the universe that is drastically undergoing changes.

Existentialism, a sophisticated philosophy that deals with the definite attitude of looking at life, recently has been simplified and applied to all sorts of people and activities that are temously connected with existentialism. It is because there is no common body of doctrine to which all existentialists subscribe. For this reason existentialism has been described by John Macquarrie, “not as a philosophy but as a style of philosophizing” (14). It is a style that allows those who follow it to hold different convictions about the world and man’s life in it. At the same time we find a unity in their diverse thinking. They all in common belong to the family of existentialists, concentrating on some themes, commonly occurring in most of the works of art and literature. Such themes as freedom, choice, decision and responsibility are prominent in all existentialist philosophers.

The philosophy begins from man and his existence as a subject and not an object. The existentialists think passionately about man’s existence and treat him not only as a thinking subject but an initiator of action and a centre of feeling. Miguel de Unamuno’s definition to philosophy and philosophers justifies the passionate behaviour of the existentialists:
Philosophy is a product of humanity of each philosopher, and each philosopher is a man of flesh and bone who addresses himself to other men of flesh and bone like himself. And, let him do what he will, he philosophizes not with reason only, but with the will, with the whole soul and with the whole body. It is the man who philosophizes (28).

The main philosophical ideal of Existentialism is to emphasize that existence precedes essence. It also stresses that each human being is thrown into the world in which pain, frustration, sickness, contempt, malaise and death prominently exist. In other words, he is thrown into an absurd world where he cannot find any purpose in his life. Absurd is a term used by modern existential writers to describe what they consider to be the meaninglessness of life in today’s world: an absurd world in which one is without absolute values such as virtue and justice, and which confers no dignity to the state of being human.

Existentialism is a philosophy exclusively meant for viewing human beings and their existence in the universe not as a mass but as a collection of individuals. The early 19th century philosopher Soren Kierkgaard is regarded as the father of existentialism. He maintained that the individual is solely responsible for going her or his own life meaning and for living that life passionately and sincerely, in spite of many existential obstacles and distractions including despair, angst, absurdity, alienation and boredom. Another existentialist Sartre defines subjectivism in two senses, “Subjectivism means, on the one hand, the freedom of the individual subject and on the other, that man cannot pass beyond human subjectivity. It is latter which is the deeper meaning of existentialism” (16-17).

The existentialist lays emphasis on man’s free will in a universe he sees as without meaning or values, but he insists on man’s responsibility to make his own
meaning and to assert his own values. Even though man is seen as morally responsible, his position as a moral being is absurd, because his commitment is without any ultimate reward. The existentialist intends to make his own choice because he disbelieves the conventional and established ways of discerning right from erroneous social, moral, philosophical and religious structures. According to him they are petrified forms which make an extremely complicated real world. The existentialist concludes that human choice is subjective because individuals finally must make their own choices, without help from such external standards as laws, ethical rules or traditions. Because individuals make their own choices, they are free; but because they freely choose, they are completely responsible for their choices. The existentialist emphasizes that freedom is necessarily accompanied by responsibility. Furthermore, since individuals are forced to choose for themselves, they have their freedom and therefore their responsibility-thrust upon them. They are condemned to be free. Existentialists believe that man is born in a hollowness and leads a passive existence. But when he becomes conscious of his state he comes out of it by his act of will. He also exerts his anguish, and revolts against it to make his existence meaningful in the meaningless absurd world. Erich Fromm analyses these concepts in the concept of man’s psychic needs:

Man’s existential conflict produces certain psychic needs common to all men. He is forced to overcome the horror of separateness, of powerlessness and of lostness and find new forms of relating himself to the world to enable him to feel at home. I have called these psychic needs of existential because they are rooted in the very conditions of human existence. They are shared by all men and their fulfillment is as necessary for man’s remaining same as the fulfillment of organic drive is necessary for his remaining alive (304).
To sum up, we can say that as a modern philosophical movement, Existentialism deals with man’s disillusionment and despair. Originating in the philosophical and literary writings of Jean-Paul Sartre, it was more an attitude to life, a vision, or what Kaufmann call a “timeless sensibility that can be discerned here and there in the past” (314). A philosophical idealism, existentialism, in due course of time developed into a powerful revolt against reason, rationality, positivism and the traditional ways in which early philosophers portrayed man. Man’s autonomy, assertion of his subjective self, his flouting of reason and rationality, his denial of traditional values, institutions and philosophy, his exercise of will and freedom and his experience of the absurdity and the nothingness of life are some of the existential themes which are reflected in the writings of the exponents of existentialism.

Anita Desai, with her writings, shows a departure from current modes of fiction writing in India and makes an earnest effort to break new grounds—a shift from the external world to the inner world of an individual. We find Desai’s characters are complete opposites like the protagonists of Camus as they live like strangers and not able to communicate. The crisis in her fiction is born out of marital discord. The search for identity on the part of the existential self in Desai assumes a socio-psychic dimension. The Desai protagonists do not shy away from the assaults of existence. Existential heroes, they face the problems of life single-handedly with courage and determination. Experiencing disgusting absurdity of the world, they discover meaning in self-immolation or self-affirmation in “a world irremediably absurd where one is a stranger to oneself as well as to other people” (Cruikshant 52).
In a long career spanning over a couple of decades, Anita Desai like all the writers throughout the globe, is not far behind in her endeavour to unravel the imbroglio in which human beings are caught. In her pursuit to find out the true meaning of existence she makes her characters her mouthpiece. Her characters are beset by the existential dread to such an extent that all of them directly plunge into this abyss to get at least an inkling of the affairs of life. The question ‘What does it mean to exist?’ sets them at fire with the varying intensity. The uneasiness of how comes much later and remains in the background. Like Robert Browning, she gets deep into the psyche of her characters and unscrambles their true nature lacerated by the forces of self, family, as well as society. She continues oscillating between two extremes, that is, her fascination for life and her infatuation for death. Her concerns with the issue of life and death put her in the tributary of those writers who show the existential anxiety and are on their way to trace the meaning of existence. Anita confesses, “Writing is my way of plunging to the depths and exploiting the underlying truth. All my writing is an effort to discover, and to underline and convey the true significance of things” (TOI 4).

She attempts to portray in her works the complexity of themes-Indian sensibility, the quest of self-assertion, and the status of women in this patriarchal setup. Her theme is the existential predicament embedded in the social milieu where males and females are shown in contrastive terms—males being the ruler, females being ruled over. Her protagonists get swayed by problems of loneliness, alienation, and pessimism. But existential concerns are quite different in Anita Desai; she weaves her web which includes only, “the mad or bad, the shocking, the sordid or the
obscene" (Genre 1). Her chief concern is human relationship. In her works existential conflict sprouts from self's craving for fulfillment. Moreover, her female characters are beleaguered by males as well as the norms of society finalised by them. The struggle of her characters gets a distorted shape because of this shift in focus. In her very first novel, *Cry, the Peacock* Anita Desai astounds the readers by the neurotic behaviour of her heroine Maya whose integrity is fast dissolving under the pressure of so many things, especially because of her marriage with a person of not emotional but intellectual sensitivity. Crumbles of the dilapidated relationship are brought to the fore with incident of the death of her dog, Toto:

And I thought of the long journey of the dead from birth into another, the brave traversing of mute darkness, the blind search for another realm of lucidity in the midst of chaos. And I looked down again, and fingered one soft-petalled flower, a white one. Small white Toto, small white corpse into the blaze of the sun abandoned. 'I shall miss him so- Gautama!' I cried then, the confession tearing out of me in a stormy rush and even as I wiped away my quick tears, and wept more, I cried to myself, what is the use? I am alone (CP 24-25).

After the death of Maya's mother her father has brought her up as a toy princess in a toy world. The novelist attempts to establish the queer psyche of her protagonist by showing her over sensitiveness. Married to Gautama, she gets no satisfaction or fulfillment in her relationship because she thinks her husband is emotionally indifferent to her. She feels sexually starved, emotionally enervated, and intellectually over-fed; she expects emotional and physical satisfaction in her married life but gets cold intellectuality and insensitivity from her husband. She wishes her husband to make her the centre of attention and think only about her:
But then he knew nothing that concerned me. Giving me an opal ring to wear on my finger, he did not notice the translucent skin beneath, the blue flashing veins that ran under and out of the bridge of gold and jolted me into smiling with pleasure each time I saw it. Telling me to go to sleep while he worked at his papers, he did not give another thought to me, to either the soft, willing body or the lonely. Wanting mind that awaited near his bed (CP 9).

The institution of marriage is considered the root cause of all the dilemmas, which may sound plausible but lacks conviction when only marriage is held responsible for the vacuum prevalent in the lives of woman. Desai tries to study the inner life of her characters but she never allows them to forget about their social and familial ties. Similarly Maya suffers because she is supposedly bound to lead her life with a person who seems to her ignorant of the fine feelings so common to women.

The same type of stream is evident in the life of Sita, the heroine of Where Shall We Go This Summer? She is fed up the way she leads her life; along with other innumerable forces she finds her husband and the institution of marriage the root cause of all her problems. The inability on the part of her husband to understand her and her stance of life disturbs her to such an extent that she plans to move away from her husband to lead life independent to him. The island has been portrayed by the novelist as a heaven for Sita which wonderfully holds the master key to her final liberation from the existential anxiety, hopelessness and suffering. She feels, on the island, all of her problems will be magically solved and she will be calm and comfortable being relieved of her physical and mental anxiety. She wants to exercise her full freedom in the bosom of nature. So she decides to go to Manori in search of the aspired world. She wants to keep herself aloof from "duties and responsibilities,
from order and routine, from life and the city... She had refused to give birth to a child in a world not fit to receive the child” (WSGS 139).

Now she wants to live in her small heaven of fantasy on the island, totally cut off from social responsibilities, mental tortures and physical problems. In this state of mind desires to take refuges on the island knowing that it lacks in even the basic amenities. She seeks relief, freedom and peace in life. “Ordinary life, the everyday world had grown so insufferable to her” (WSGS 72).

Her philosophy of life is punctured by her over sensitivity and ill-judgement. She has brought her children, Karan and Menaka to the island to feel happy and secure but she gets the whips of forlornness, boredom and helplessness. She does not feel fully secured here. Everyone around her winces at her harshness and wildness. Many a times she becomes vexed and perturbed with her own judgement. The betrayal of her husband, his family, her children, friends and acquaintances violently tears her apart. When Raman comes to the island she thinks he has come for her while he has come there at his daughter Menaka’s instance, to take her away to the mainland and to get her admitted to the Medical College. Raman stares at Sita with distaste, neglect and indifference when he meets her on the island.

Thus Where Shall We Go this Summer? is an answer to temperamental incompatibility and the resultant alienation. Sita’s hope for consolation from the island is but a frantic and desperate bid to relieve the boredom and hypocrisy of her bourgeois existence. All she gets from the island is a cold welcome and, thus, remains an island on the island. In the words of Madhusudan Prasad, “It is a memorable piece of fiction which provides us proudly with a panacea for an endemic existentialist predicament
threatening to assume epidemic proportions in our country” (77). It is a testament of psychic turbulence, the very image of poetry which Ezra Pound could have called “an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time” (qtd. in Chatterjee 17-30). Existentialism as a philosophy is historically and culturally of European origin. Ever since it was recognised as the dominating philosophy of the West in the mid twentieth century, it has left “its impact on literature has both been substantial and significant” (Ahmad 10). Existentialism does not offer a set of doctrines or a single philosophy system. It has been diversely defined and interpreted by various thinkers over the years. As a result, “as a philosophy, existentialism by its very nature defies and abhors systematisation” (Das 423). Nevertheless, it is possible to identify certain traits of this school of thought. All the existentialists “emphasise the importance of the individual as well as his freedom and responsibility for being what he is” (Prasad 139).

As a novelist, Anita Desai exhibits a strong inclination towards the existentialist interpretation of the human predicament. In particular, she voices “the mute miseries and helplessness of married women tormented by existentialist problems and predicament” (Gupta 185). A woman novelist, Desai has won a niche by exploring the emotional world of women, bringing to light the various deeper forces at work in feminine sensibility as well as psychology. This predilection leads her to examine the psyche of her women protagonists when they are confronted with the absurdity of life. This draws her attention to the darker side of life. She projects a tragic vision in her novels by placing her female protagonists in hostile situations. Desai further examines her women protagonists as individuals who find themselves forced into uncongenial environments, fighting against the odds. This problem of the tragic tension between the individual and their unfavourable environment acquires the dimensions of existential angst.
Anita Desai’s characters are self-conscious of the reality around them and they carry a sense of loneliness, alienation and pessimism. She adds a new dimension turning inward into the realities of life and plunges into the deep depths of the human psyche to score out its mysteries and chaos in the minds of characters. Her novel Fire on the Mountain has been identified as “the lyrical fictionalisation of the quintessence of existentialism” (Choudhary 177). A close study of the texture and theme of the novel in relation to the tenets of existentialism justifies the above observation. It has been noted that “Fire on the Mountain displays skillful dramatisation of experiences of certain women embroiled by the cross way of life” (Indira 96). This novel deals with the existential angst experienced by the female protagonist Nanda Kaul, an old lady living in isolation. It also projects the inner turmoil of a small girl, Raka, who is haunted by a sense of futility. Thirdly, it presents the plight of a helpless woman, Ila Das who is in conflict with forces that are too powerful to be encountered, resulting in her tragic death. Thus, the existential themes of solitude, alienation, the futility of human existence and struggle for survival form the major themes of the novel. In this novel, the story element is very thin and there is practically no action except for the tragic end. Nanda Kaul, Raka and to some extent Ila Das, are embodiments of the existential predicament experienced by the individual in an understanding and even hostile universe. A detailed examination of the characters of these protagonists brings to light how Anita Desai has succeeded in giving expression to her existentialist world-view through these characters and by a subtle use of imagery and symbols.

When the novel begins, Nanda Kaul is presented as a recluse. Living all alone except for the company of servants who dare not disturb her privacy, she brooks no human presence. “She wanted no one and nothing else. Whatever else came, or happened
here, would be unwelcome intrusion and distraction” (FM 3). She spends her days in isolation musing about her past and experiencing the existential ennui. “From the musings of her agitated mint it appears that as the wife of the Vice-Chancellor for the Punjab University and the mother of several children, she has lived a very busy and tiring life” (Raizada 44). Anita Desai unfurls her past in the form of long interior monologues punctuated by authorial interruptions, Nanda Kaul had witnessed only betrayals and demands in life before her retirement to Kasauli. She has lived a monotonous life receiving and treating the endless stream of visitors who used to call on her vice-chancellor husband. Her husband had carried on a life-long affair with a mathematics mistress Miss David, whom he would have married, had she not been a Christian. Again, the memories of her children make Nanda Kaul shudder at the very thought of her past. As a mother of several children, all demanding and unaccommodative, she had been given too many anxious moments. Now all alone in Carignano, a house associated with many weird stories, Nanda Kaul feels that loneliness is the only essential condition of human life. Whenever she looks at the tall pine trees that stand out from among the underwood, she is reminded of her own alienation. Not exactly conscious of what she is waiting for, nonetheless, she is awaiting the inevitable end to all human existence: death. She is haunted by the existential angst which has led her to conclude that human life is basically a lonely struggle against the odds of life. In her case the odds have manifested themselves in the form of an adulterous husband and cantankerous children. Strongly convinced that life had dealt a raw deal to her, she has resolved to find the meaning, if any, of her existence in isolation. “She treasures her freedom, her privacy, glad her responsibilities towards her family are over, glad she needs nobody and nobody now needs her” (Krishnaswamy 260).
By making use of the images of insects and animals like mosquitoes, lizards and jackals, Desai hints at how her female protagonists despise the absurdity of their existence. They either withdraw into a shell like Nanda Kaul or like Raka, long for something new or is made miserable by the environment as in the case of Ila Das. Similarly, by making Kasauli the location of her novel, Desai has endowed it with a wider appeal where the boundaries of region, religion and time cease to exist. This novel contains the core of the novelist’s existential world view in that all the three characters are nothing but the manifestations of her alter ego that gives expression to her outlook on life.

In *Voices in the City*, another novel by Anita Desai, characters like Nirode, Monisha and Amla are tortured by their meaningless and hollow existence. Nirode is a typical Bengali youth who has gone bitter against the entire well off people. He, in his heart of hearts, nurses a cynical grouse against the whole world. He is obsessed with failures in life. Like a true existentialist, he keeps on experimenting with failures in search of an abiding meaning in life. Although he achieves nothing, except for a couple of realisations in the end. This existential search of Nirode shows his intellectual inevitability engineered by emptiness. Nirode’s married sister Monisha is another existential character. Her shattered married life to Jiban is marked by loneliness and lack of communication. Although she frantically tries to search for real meaning in her life, she ultimately fails. There is nothing in her life to sustain her. The nothingness in her makes her an existential character: “To pretend to have forgotten, to pretend to believe in these trivialities, these pettiness of our mean existence is that right” (VC 40). *Voices in the City* sketches the spiritual odyssey of a world-weary, lean and hungry looking journalist named Nirode, doomed to reside in Calcutta, the
‘city of death’. The novel is, in fact, a tragic exploration of personal suffering which arises out of the feverish sensitivity of this young intellectual who has lost his way in contemporary India. It delves deep into the inner climate of youthful despair and is permeated by the existential angst.

The novel is a wonderful demonstration of what Anita Desai called, “the terror of facing single handed, the ferocious assaults of existence” (TOI 13). *Voices in the City*, presents a panoramic graph of individual’s crusade against the self and the consequent defeat of the individual. This is performed primarily through the portrayal of the characters Nirode and Monisha. Monisha diagnoses the hamartia in her philosophy only too late and Nirode discovers it at the cost of a very great suffering. Amla, the third chief character happens to be their younger sister. ‘Calcutta’ where the three young people reside is also depicted as a very dominating but disastrous character affecting and influencing their respective moods and manners. Nirode even as a protagonist is incapable of human emotions and passions. He is detached even from his mother whom he calls, “that old cannibal.” He becomes a case for a psycho-analytical study when he gives up using a family name. In addition to this, he quotes Camus again and introduces himself as “an outlawed hermit crab” (VC 10). Anita Desai creates a galaxy of characters who feel excruciating pain in the isolation in the suffocating darkness of their life in which no healthy communication is possible. There is a dreadful glamour in the eternal suffering the characters undergo. In the form and fashion of Kafkaesque characters, Desai’s characters too suffer the oppressive and depressive walls of sounds and smells from which there is no release. The novelist presents Monisha’s pain and plight more comprehensively and closely relating it to the women who are like the female birds in the cages. As a matter fact,
she loves to realise herself as an unfettered individual and not to become at any stage a complacent, purring, tame wife who adjusts herself to a gilded cage.

In Calcutta, Amla plunges into a world of parties and gaiety trying to escape the suffering realities of life that have overwhelmed Nirode and Monisha. Amla encounters Dharma a couple of days after her arrival in Calcutta. For Amla, this maiden meeting becomes a miraculous force, within no time she discovers herself in the image of a love-lorn maiden. She is prudent enough to know that this kind of intimacy is unrewarding and unhealthy. Dharma’s paintings, “modelled on and inspired by Amla represent in a surrealist style the psychological pulls and pressures of human life itself” (Rao 173).

*Voices in the City* perpetuates the theme of maladjusted marriage with a wider aspect. Not only the husband and wife but their children, relations and friends also come under the purview of existential predicament. In the novel, black becomes the predominant colour which symbolises the darkness and desolation that engulfs the city of Calcutta and which adversely affects the three central characters in the novel. Philosophically, Anita Desai’s novels remind the reader of the three words that Sartre emphasises while discussing the human condition—“anguish, abandonment and despair” (350). Sartre in his existential framework rightly pin points: “Man is nothing else but what he proposes, he exists only in so far as he realises himself, he is therefore, nothing else but the sum of his actions, nothing else but what his life is” (358).

For Anita Desai, freedom implies liberty in Toto, such as the nexus of ideas that make up the background of her conception of human life. There is, perhaps, nothing really new in these ideas but Anita Desai continues to work in her novels with
a significant difference. In her novels there is the recognition that liberty is at one with creativity and that only freedom can make the world happy. Yet no theory of human nature is new. Anita Desai stresses on responsibility for an action that appears even trivial. Our highest purposes fail miserably without positive action and then comes to our mind some chance, purposelessness or cross purpose. The madness of Anita Desai’s heroines echoes the same. Their voices terminate in madness, and again, in action that appears half-accidental and half-willed. In larger part of her novels she has philosophic formulation, but not the age old philosophic problems. She merely, but adequately, describes some phenomena of human life, such as, the problem of taste, the question of nature and origin of values. She projects the situation and creates such individuals without any recourse to the ideas of beauty. Rather they have integral relation to what the individual essentially is or becoming. In this connection we have her characters based on existential psychoanalysis. The most magnificent part of her novels is the dialogues or the monologues. Her characters frequently quote Camus about the facts of life: “In default of inexhaustible happiness, eternal suffering, at least, would give us a destiny. But we do not have even that consolation and our worst agonies come to an end one day” (VC 2).

In an interview with Atma Ram, replying to a question regarding, *Bye-Bye Blackbird* Anita Desai observes: “…of all my novels it is most rooted in experience and the least literary in derivation” (WLWE 14).

In this novel we have her deep existential concern exploring adjustment, belonging and ultimate decision in the lives of three major characters Dev, Adit and Sarah. Desai captures this conflict in fictional terms through Dev, “one of those
eternal immigrants who can never accept their new homes and continue to walk the street like the strangers in enemy-territory, frozen, listless, but dutifully trying to be busy, unobtrusive and, however, superficially to belong" (BBB 15). At each step Dev’s reconciliation suggests a psychic situation that involves cross-cultural contacts and the impact they have individual responsibility. Dev has come to study at the London School of Economics. His contact begins right from the house of Adit who has settled in London with an English wife, Sarah. The cultural differences there expand, and Dev moves out looking for a job. He undergoes various experiences and cultural shocks. His tensions are not due to the fact that he finds himself in an unfamiliar situation, but he was familiar to what was around him:

...yet it was known, familiar, easy to touch, enjoy and accept because he was so well prepared to enter it so well prepared by fifteen years of reading the books that had been his meat and drink, the English that had formed at least one half of his of his conscious existence (BBB 20).

He recognizes the people, their faces. It is rather the gap between the expected and the immediately known that disturbs him. He is self-conscious of his identity which he does not find there. This crisis of identity is not only for him, but it seems to have a larger dimension. Its dimension expands to Dev, Adit and Sarah. The self-awareness of the educated Indian immigrant and their wavering between acceptance and rejection makes many of them to be either stranger or to be hostile. In Bye-Bye Blackbird Dev’s dilemmas are also seen emanating from his emotional and instinctive responses to the London scene. He wanders on its streets in search of his new identity. London thus reflects various psychic stages that he goes through before he discovers his affinity with the countryside. In this vast human island he finds himself alienated
and suffers spiritual agony through his hellish experiences in the London tube. Like Sindi Oberoi of Arun Joshi’s novel The Foreigner Dev seems to be rootless. Getting education in London, Dev feels himself an outsider, a foreigner and an immigrant. In the following lines we find his real position:

He descends, deeper and deeper, into the white titled bowels of Clapham tube station. Down into the stark caverns, artificially lit, by way of long, ringing staircases where draughts sweep illy up and down and yet live the underground airless, suffocating. The menacing slighter of exalators strike panic into a speechless Dev as he swept down with an awful sensation of being taken where he does not want to go. Down, down and further down-like Alice falling, falling down the rabbit hole, like a Kafka stranger wandering through the dark labyrinth of a prison. On the platform, with black lights glaring at the cold, white tiles all around, he stands fearfully with his fellow travellers and darts horrified glances at the strange looks of these people, who had seemed natural enough in the sunlight of High street, have acquired in these subterranean depths (BBB 35).

Desai’s protagonists are placed in comparatively free positions. They are aliens or orphans either factually or emotionally. They come from incomplete families where either one or both the parents are dead or absent. The protagonists either disown themselves or are disowned by their families. Maya’s, in Cry, the Peacock, has only memory of her mother through the photo on her father’s desk. Sita’s mother in Where Shall We Go This Summer? had run away from home leaving her children to the care of their father. A similar withdrawal from her parents is there on the part of Sarah in Bye-Bye Blackbird. She has, at one stroke, placed herself outside the family and cultural situation by marrying an Indian. In Clear Light of the Day the children resent
the long absences of their parents and they are aware only of their exists and entrances.

Nature is not merely a matter of heredity; rather it is a matter of inclination and tendency. It is a combination of instinct, feelings and thoughts, unconscious or sub-conscious. It moves towards wholeness to reach a position of being self-critical. The division of self has its own functions. It leads to self-knowledge and self-understanding. A similar sense of unreality haunts Sarah in *Bye-Bye Blackbird*. She worries and wonders about her identity and the two sides of her character. The two roles do not seem to match or meet. She feels like an imposter if she plays the role of English Secretary when she is the Indian wife:

They were roles and when she is not playing them she was nobody, her face was only a mask, her body only a costume... She wondered... if she would ever be allowed to step-off the stage, leave the theatre and enter the real world (BBB 44).

In Anita Desai's novels, the novel is not a sociological phenomenon. In her it is psychic. She seriously gets herself to voice the mute miseries and helplessness of millions of married women. They are tormented by existentialist problems and predicaments. Desai explores the emotional world of women. She reveals a rare imaginative awareness of various deeper forces at work and finds a profound understanding of women sensibility and their psychology as well. She unravels the subconscious of her highly sensitive protagonists. She discovers only those aspects of life she has minutely observed and deeply experienced. She writes about helplessness, agony, anger, struggle and surrender. She knows her limitation and does not go beyond. Essentially, Desai is a novelist of psychic concerns. She deals with
maladjustment, alienation, absurdity of human existence, quest for ultimate meaning in life, decision, detachment, isolation etc. She focuses her concern on how women in contemporary urban society are bravely struggling against, or helplessly submitting to, the forces of absurd life. This she admits to Yasodhara Dalmia in her interview “the terror of facing single handed, the ferocious assaults of existence” (TOI 13). Anita Desai beautifully records the emotional turbulence and chaos of her oppressed protagonists. She is involved in the intimate presentation of the inner self of her characters. The readers are compelled to conceive that Maya, Monisha, Nireode, Amla, Sita, Nanda Kaual, Tara and Bim reflect various shades of life, as if Desai has already experienced by way of wish fulfillment. In her interview with Yasodhara Dalmia she tries to speak out on this aspect of her novel:

In countless, small ways, the scenes and settings certainly belong to my life. But the major characters and the major events are either entirely imaginary or an amalgamation of several characters and happenings. One can use the raw material of life only very selectively. It is common among writers to pick out something from real life and develop their situations around that, while there are others who start from some real experience which continuously grows in their imagination. You use it as a base but do not confine yourself to it (TOI 13).

Anita Desai is a subjective novelist who writes intimately and sincerely about the inner emotional world of her women characters. She thinks almost alike about them and also reacts against the absurdity of life grappling with existentialist problems. Desai has created no common characters. She has her individual man and woman-her solitary beings who are not average, but have retreated or have been driven into some extremity of despair. In Anita Desai, the deliberation of inner crisis occupies the
major part of her fiction. Most of her characters feel alienated and exiled even if they stay in crowd. Yet they never feel the lack of culture around them. Their psyche is affected by their culture and this works as a life force which dictates them to shape the outlook of their life and living. Each culture possesses a quality of affecting the mass which lives in its contact—be it Asian, European, African or American. In an article, Dr. M. Prased agrees as follows:

The experience of exile has assumed mythic proportions in commonwealth literature. It begins as a condition of living and intensifies itself as a condition of mind. Its broad sources are cultural displacement and cultural shock. Cultural displacement implies a co-presence of more than one culture, biculturalism or multi-culturalism. Multi-culturalism is now a world phenomenon, bi-culturalism, a shaping commonwealth reality (140).

*In Custody* unfolds the story of credulous and disingenuous Deven Sharma, who is swayed by an idea of creating a work of his lifetime, but is, unfortunately, defeated by his own helplessness. A temporary lecturer in Hindi in a private college in Mirpore, a suburb of Delhi, Deven is interested in Urdu literature. As the novel opens, we see his friend Murad, now editor of an Urdu magazine, requesting Deven to interview Nur Shahjahanbadi, for a special number of his forthcoming issue. “Deven’s hand fluttered on to his knees as he melted at the suggestion and felt a glow creep through him at the thought of writing something in the language which had been his first language... The glow was also caused by pride at being asked to contribute a piece by the editor of what he took to be a leading Urdu journal” (IC 16). The rest of the narrative shifts between Deven’s success and failure, his enthusiasm and hesitancy, and the final disaster he lands into. Various forces work to deter and to help him
alternately till finally he stands at a cross-road, not knowing where to turn to. In the end he finds strength in his inner self and resolves to face life as it comes to him.

The prime characteristics of Deven that attract our attention are his helplessness, humility, suffering and nobility. Socio-economic factors colour his personality and mould his psyche. The son of a debilitated, asthmatic school-teacher, Deven belongs to a lower middle class family. As a child, he has watched closely the bitter disappointments of his mother and the ‘apologetic smile’ of his father for his failure in measuring up to her expectations. Obviously, these familial and social factors generate into him powerful compliant tendencies. On the familial front, Deven finds himself as an angry self. The repressive atmosphere of a lower middle class ethos offer him no suitable avenues of recognition. He is a gifted young man whose imagination has been fired by the glories of the Urdu poetry. The harsh realities of life produces in him intense feelings of frustration and resentment and force him to adopt different solutions to cope with his difficulties. Deven is aware of his personal incompetency, that, he is incapable of fulfilling his wife’s desires and dreams on the material level. Like his father he feels apologetic because he cannot do better. This helplessness prevails in his attitude towards his life in general and towards his family in particular. He lives with a sense of defeat and failure:

He understood because, like her, he had been defeated too; like her, he was a victim. Although each understood the secret truth about the other, it did not bring about any closeness of spirit, any comradeship, because they also sensed that two victims; ought to avoid each other, not yoke together their joint disappointments. A victim does not look to help from another victim; he looks for a redeemer. At least Deven had his poetry; she had nothing, and so there was an added accusation and bitterness in her look (IC 68).
Anita Desai is a great analyst of the human mind, a creator of brilliant characters, and an accurate interpreter of life. She presents a gallery of vivid and realistic portraits. The motivational system of her personages works in the peculiar manner suited to their environment and their basic needs. When we grasp her character’s psychology, we begin to see them as human with their weaknesses and potentialities. They are, indeed, caught in the web of their own compulsion, but cannot be regarded as ‘haunted protagonists’ who do not come to grips with life. When understood psychologically, we begin to visualise their ambitions, disappointments and loneliness as real. They react to their troubles with tragic intensity. By her fictional rendering of neurotic behaviour, interaction and solution, the novelist not only plumbs human nature but also helps us to grasp their inner reality intuitively. In studying the works of literature in the light of Horneyan and Maslovian taxonomy, we do not detach characters from their aesthetic and thematic patterns. A novel “is not simply mimesis; it is a story told from a certain moral and intellectual point of view and from a certain emotional distance” (Paris 40). Anita Desai’s characters are not case studies of neurosis, nor are they evolutionary histories of psychological phenomenon. They are living individuals, interested in life with its hopes, dejections and chaotic flow. They are moved by the aesthetics of existence, whatever is beautiful and good, whatever has glory and power, is only a portion of the divine radiance. Nevertheless the trouble with some of them is that they, at times, take a wrong path and perpetuate their neurosis.

In order to reveal the beauty and ugliness of life, Anita Desai deploys characters having acute sensitivity to its grandeur as well as sordidness. She is not a visionary or a mystic, but an artist who shows, in Hardy’s words, the “sordidness underlying the grandest things and the grandeur underlying the sorriest things” (qtd. in Allott 132).
Their anguish and dilemmas impinge upon their selves. Since she analyses the inner workings of the mind of her characters, she does not overload her works with details of physical traits of personalities. Her primary occupation in all her works, is not how one gets along with others, but with oneself. The basic problem, she says, is how to exist in society, and yet maintain one’s individuality... She presents action through the minds of these people shifting their mental time backward and forward. This is the stream of consciousness method of delineating a character. This method of characterisation achieves by depth what traditional method achieves by extension. It provides a method of presenting character outside time and place; in the double sense that, first, it separates the presentation of consciousness from the chronological sequence of events, and second, it enables the quality of a given state of mind to be investigated so completely, by means of pursuing to their end the remote mental association and suggestions, that we do not need to wait for time to make the potential actual before we can see the whole.
Chapter IX: Embodying the Thought or Vision

Works Cited


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