CHAPTER – 2

A brief study of Anita Desai’s vision of life revealed through the characters in her fiction
CHAPTER 2.1

Problems of Solitude and Existential conflicts

Anita Desai is one of the major writers who have been concerned with some of the psychological stresses, anxieties and sufferings undergone by sensitive persons caught in a world of uncertain values of society and culture. She is among the first Indian-English novelists, who view life primarily from an existentialist point of view. Existentialist thinkers, from Soren Kierkegaard down to Jean Paul Sartre and Karl Jasper, have provided various views and insights on the enduring human situation. When one interprets Anita Desai’s writing in the context of their theories they seem to offer a new dimension to her work. Meinemann explains her philosophical stance quiet clearly when he says “The problems of existentialism.......are in a narrower sense, expressive of the present crisis of man and, in a broader sense, of the enduring human condition”¹ Viewed in the light of her major themes Anita Desai is an existentialist in Indian-English Fiction².

Each of Anita Desai’s novels tries to tackle the central aesthetic problem of the modern writer- the problem of rendering “complete human personality....in an age of lost values, lost men and lost Gods”³. The Twentieth century has been rightly called “The Age of Alienation”⁴. The modern man is doomed to suffer the corrosive impact of alienation, which manifests itself variously in the form of generation gap, the credibility loss or gap, the compartmentalization of life, the stunning of personal development and the conspicuous absence of a sense of meaningfulness of life, and so on.
The pervasive sense of alienation has corroded human life from various quarters. The modern man has shrunk in spirit languishing in confusion, frustration, disintegration, disillusionment and alienation. His very motion of reality has profoundly changed on account of Bergson’s theory Duree, Freud’s postulates about the subconscious, Einstein’s concept of relativity and Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle. Consequently, he suffers from an acute sense of rootlessness, which may manifest itself as “The alienation from one self, from one’s follow men and from nature: the awareness that life runs out of one’s hand like sand”\textsuperscript{5}. The hiatus between what the individual aspires for and the harsh reality of what he achieves, what he professes and what he practices, what he really is and what he would like to be taken for, has crumpled his life leaving an insidious effect on his inner being. The injuries inflicted and the scars left on his psyche make him realize only of his helplessness. Angst-ridden and utterly hopeless, he finds life “indeinitely vast” without any proper “linkage” to hold it together from falling apart \textsuperscript{6} Painfully aware of his precarious position man experiences to lay severe limitations arising out of randomness and alienation.

The plight of modern man has been discussed by Melvin Seeman under a set of five interrelated operational conditions viz. powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, isolation and self-estrangement, which are nothing but different manifestation of alienation. These alternative meanings of alienation, says he “can be profitably applied in conjunction with one another in the analysis of a given state of affairs”\textsuperscript{7}. The most obvious repercussion of alienation can be seen in a person's fractured consciousness and his “fractionated functions”\textsuperscript{8}.

There can be several layers and kinds of alienation. Traviss mentions two different kinds of alienation, i.e. “social alienation” and “self alienation”.
Social alienation results from the sense of estrangement brought out by the sudden discovery that the social system is either oppressive or incomplete or incompatible with their desires and ideals. Self alienation, however, means the loss of contact of the individual selves with any inclinations or desires that are not in agreement with the prevailing social patterns as a result of which the individuals are forced to manipulate in accordance with the social demands or feel incapable of controlling their actions. To be self-alienated thus means to be something less than one might ideally be if circumstances in society were conducive, self-alienation seems to have worse effects on an individual than social alienation. The former is the more basic from of rootlessness, and can thwart an individual's mental and psychic development in an alarming manner. It forms the subject of many psychological and philosophical studies. And it is this human problem that has occupied Anita Desai's primary interest. In her novels, most of which are incidentally, full of autobiographical elements, she has presented the dilemma of the modern man effectively.

A study of Anita Desai's novels reveals her persistent concern with the themes of anxiety, anguish and psychological adaptation necessitated by the threats to the individuals identity, and relation to reality. Many of her characters find the real world too harsh, difficult unpleasant and also too complex. They withdraw from reality into their inner world and search there for ways and means of living through this hostile unknowable world. In an interview with Yashodhara Dalmia, Desai refers to this human condition.

She observes:

There are other elements which remain basic to our lives. I mean the human condition itself.
It is only superficially affected by the day to day changes. We continue to live in the same way as we have in the past centuries with the same tragedies and the same comedies. And this is why it interests me.\textsuperscript{10}

Anita Desai’s characters are burdened by their uniqueness. They want to exercise their freedom, make a choice and refuse to conform or compromise. Their persistent search is for an authentic existence\textsuperscript{11} by bearing the role responsibility for their decisions rather than by appealing to the authority of custom or even their own past patterns of thought. The general problem in the novel is of self-consciousness of the characters and the recurring theme is self awareness and self identity. There is intense questioning and the protagonists are torn between their search for authentic existence and the limitations of the human situation that prevent them from such realisations. All of them find the ordinary routine of life boring and disgusting; full of whirlpools and long stretches of dreadful marshes. To accept life as it comes in routine is inauthentic existence and a sign of awareness for Anita Desai’s protagonists who are peculiar and eccentric, and Anita Desai refuses to see her creations in the light of mediocrity. They are individuals with the force of personality to say “Yes” or “No”. The novelist affirms an interview:

I am interested in characters who are not average but have retreated or been driven into 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 demand are and what it costs to meet them\(^2\).

That is why her protagonists have defiant individuality. They fight against the common place conformity and stick to their own vision of life. Those who manage to say the “Great No” and yet grow independent of their environment are saved from a total disaster. Others who say “No” but do not find the positive way to unburden their “self”, are entangled in their own introspection, falling, thus, to revivify their strength.

It is generally believed that all Desai’s protagonist: hypersensitive Maya; lonely Monisha; rebellious Nirode; bored sita; discarded Nanda; peculiar Raka; sensitive but balanced Bim; and simple Deven-all suffer a nagging sense of alienation, rootlessness, ungratifying interpersonal relationships anxiety and despair. In their pursuit for an authentic existence they seek to withdraw from the world of action and involvement\(^3\). They feel tormented by a sense of non-belongingness and find isolation inherent in all human relationships their isolation, infact, is due to the awareness of their individuality and freedom\(^4\). They wish to exercise their personal choice and decision-making in a bid to be, in words of Rene Lafarge, “free for everything, free to accomplish, free to refuse, free to hesitate in the presence of a freedom restricted by neither value nor reason”\(^5\). However, emphasis on non-conformity, a search for authenticity rejection of common values are more pronounced in her earlier novels like Cry, The peacock, Voices in the City, Where Shall We Go This Summer? The search for freedom from social value structure, a desire for an existentialist in conflict with their immediate human context. As the society rejects their individuality
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conflict and tension are generated. Conflict arises from the lack of understanding with regard to their relationship either with things, or with people, or, with ideas. It gives rise to anxiety and anguish overwhelming them all over. They do not follow the abiding values in social life, and this inability on their part sometimes generate schizophrenia and social disintegration. Talking about such a persons Sorokin observes: “The experiences of these characters lead to the destruction of the network of socio-cultural relationships, resulting in the demoralization of the individual or an increase in his psycho-social isolation.”

Anita Desai’s characters often pass through a state of psychological crisis that damages their value system and psychic equilibrium. With the exception of Hari in Village by the Sea and Hugo in Baumgartner’s Bombay they all belong to the upper middle class, are well educated and fairly well placed in society. However, they are prone to fears, anxieties and tensions which push them towards despair. In their search for identity, authenticity and ideal love relationship, they move to a state of alienation where “aloneness alone is the sole natural condition, aloneness alone the treasure worth treasuring”17. All this makes a mental wreck of most of them, thereby, rendering them incapable of finding a meaning and rationale behind human existence and human relationships. Some of them like Maya, Monisha, Nanda Kaul and Hugo Baumgartner are ruined for ever. For others, like Sita, Adit, Bim, Deven and Hari, there is a hope of deliverance through a movement towards community and affirmation of the common life.

Anita Desai’s first novel, Cry the Peacock, depicted Maya, a sensitive young woman suffering from neurotic fears and anxieties caused by her pet’s death. It reminds her of the albino astrologer’s prediction about the possible demise of Gautama or herself. In voices In the city (1965), the
novelist presents a fascinating account of the turbulent psyche of three siblings Nirode, Monisha and Amla. These young, sensitive people are the victims of a pernicious home environment where the parents are altogether indifferent to each other and oblivious of the emotional needs of their children. In *Bye-Bye Blackbird*, Adit and Sarah face an acute sense of loss of identity, alienation and humiliation. Sarah loses her identity as an English woman by marrying an Indian. Their life in England is quite insipid and tedious. They are a but of ridicule over there. Gradually, Adit is tired of living the artificial life in England and yearns for the Indian scene. In where shall *We Go This Summer*? Sita, a middle aged mother of four children and the fifth on the way, experiences an extreme form of psychosis known as Paranoia. She is disgusted with the prevailing violence in the world of man and nature. The dissonance in her marital relationship with Raman fills her with nausea, boredom and frustration. She decides to retire to the magic island of Manori, in the hope that there she will be cured of her despair. *In Fire On the Mountain* (1972), Nanda Kaul values a “Pared existence” above everything else. She, therefore, comes to the lonely secluded Carignano in order to escape the world of messages, letters and demands. *Clear Light of Day* (1980) is the story of Bim, again an inhibited personality who, in the company of her mentally retarded brother Baba, makes a futile attempt to continue living in the old, dilapidated house in Old Delhi. She wishes to live in the past, discarding her prosperous landlord brother, Raja. Needless to say, he is frustrated, angry and irritable. *In Custody* (1984) is woven around an unfulfilled desire: The failure of Deven Sharma to get an interview with Nur Shajehanbadi, deceived and trapped, he fails to separate art from life. He suffers from an acute inferiority complex and overplays his love for Urdu poetry to compensate for the frustration caused by his adhoc status as a lecture in a private college. He is an obsessive neurotic who, many a time realizes the futility of his desire to become a custodian of Nur’s poetry, but
returns to it again. No matter how much he despises the obsessive thought, he cannot abandon it or keep it out of his consciousness.

Indeed, a scrutiny of Ania Desai’s novels reveals her persistent concern with forms of anxiety, anguish and psychological adaptation necessitated by the threats to the individual’s identity and relation to reality. Almost all her characters experience psychoneurosis, feelings of isolation, frustration and insecurity. The psychic tensions of these individuals are expressed in the crumbling of familial bonds, leading to the annihilation of the feeling of self esteem. Psychologist believe that such development constitute a serious threat to meaningful human existence, and if left unresolved, they may grow out of proportion so as to become dangerous to human happiness and survival. Bernard Bergonzi rightly points out: “The changes arising from the decline of religious and metaphysical certainties, the influence of modern psychology, and the public crimes and traumas of the twentieth century are responsible for the appearance of fragmented personalities”

Through her depiction of human predicament, Anita Desai maintains that the path of happiness taken by most human beings is not an easy one. Her characters are persistently in search for a viable alternative. For them the intrinsic reality of life is “The terror of facing, single handed the ferocious assaults of existence”. For majority of them the real world is unduly harsh, unpleasant and complex. In moments of crisis they find the burden of human existence too heavy for them and face an overpowering sense of nothingness in a Sartrean way. They develop aversion to all social contracts and attempt to seek peace, fulfillment and satisfaction in a lonely and detached existence. These anxious, unhappy, bewildered people are terrified by the emptiness of modern life.
What Bellow expresses through his character, Joseph in his *Dangling Man* is meaningful here: “the world was crude and dangerous, if no measures were taken, existence could indeed become...... in Hobbe's phrase which had long lodged in Joseph's mind, nasty, brutish and short.”

Despite sincere endeavours to be happy and healthy, many people become victims of psychic disequilibrium. This creates a personality impairment which falls into two categories, broadly referred to as the neurosis and the psychosis when one feels lost, becomes a dangling man and encounters an unseen monster of certainty, the stress creates neurosis. Persons having neurotic disorders are distinguished from others as they express their unresolved tension and unacceptable emotional expectations in their interpersonal relationships. They act out their neurotic impulses and feel inhibited, blocked and repressed. In the condition known as psychosis, the normal ability to perceive and interpret stimuli correctly is affected. A psychotic person lives in an imaginary world, which is more or less a distorted version of the real world.

In his explanation of neurosis a clash between an individual's attempt to adjust to some situation and his constitutional inability to meet the challenge.” There are several specific instances in Desai's work where her characters turn neurotic. Psychological researches have shown that psycho neurotics are generally intelligent people and Anita Desai's men and women are certainly bright. Anita Desai conceptualizes the existential problems of her characters; with the help of psycho analysis we can diagnose them. “Basic anxiety” and “Basic needs” are the principle motifs of her works and the main, unfulfilled requirement of her personages. Maya, for example, is always under the pressure of overcoming her insecurity and isolation, by
surrendering herself to love. Freud gives prime importance to sexual frustration for causing great anxiety. According to him, repression is the mechanism of neurotic anxiety. Alfred Adler establishes that anxiety is caused not only because of the non gratification of sexual urges but because of the thwarting of a mastery drive. C.G. Jung thinks that the only motive that embraces all others is the prime desire to belong. In Anita Desai's fictional world frustration of all three urges causes neurotic disturbances. Maya and Monisha's husbands hardly pay any attention to their emotional and physical needs in the Freudian sense. Nirode's needs for love and belonging are not fulfilled resulting in his chaotic mental state. Even Nanda Kaul, Sita and Bim suffer from a nagging sense of non-Belongingness. All of them, therefore, have turned neurotic or psychotic. Adit, Sarah and Hugo Baumgartner are also examples of unfulfilled individuals of their being "nowhere men."

The people whose personalities are so severely disturbed that they are totally out of touch with reality are generally regarded as psychotics. All of them behaves in ways that, most people agree, are inappropriate to their situation, Several of Anita Desai's characters are in the danger of falling in to this group as they are maladjusted at all levels of personality. Maya, (Cry, The Peacock) Sita (Where Shall We Go This Summer?) Raka (Fire on the Mountain) belong to this category.

There are three major ways of being so unrealistic that behaviour becomes profoundly maladjusted. A psychotic personality can have imaginary perceptions called hallucinations 'unjustified conceptions called delusions' and many other inappropriate emotional states which result in deep melancholia or an uncontrolled euphoria. Hallucinations
are sensory experience for which no adequate stimulus can be discovered. Both Maya and Sita experience hallucinations. They are so deeply wrapped up in their psychic conflicts that they hardly make an effort to distinguish between the real and the imaginary. The material of hallucinations, including dreams, is formed from the individual's memories, both conscious and repressed, both recent and long past. Hallucination reflect the motives, the interests the pre-occupations, and the experience of the individual. Since psychosis is a way of responding to great stress, it is not surprising that most psychotic hallucinations are unpleasant. Typically, a psychotic sees enemies threatening him, hears voices cursing him, smells foul odours, tastes putrid flavours and feels disgusting touch-sensations, such as being bitten or crawled upon.

Delusions are beliefs or convictions held firmly despite objective evidence to the contrary. Delusions usually go beyond neurotic obsessions extend beyond prejudices. Normal person can eradicate a prejudice. A neurotic cannot eradicate an obsession, but he is critical of it. A psychotic accepts his delusions whole-heartedly.

Abrahim Sperling discusses three general classes of delusions: the expansive, the derogatory and the persecutory. Expansive delusions are direct compensations for feelings of inadequacy. These are beliefs in the possession of immense abilities or property.

Derogatory delusions include convictions of worthlessness, nothingness, depravity or sickness. Persecutory delusions are unjustified beliefs in the existence of enemies dedicated to the injury of the individual or his loved ones²⁴. Anita Desai's character largely suffer from expansive
delusions than the other two types. Nirode, Monisha, Sita, Deven - all face delusion of grandeur as they consider themselves to be more gifted than their friends and relatives.

Anita Desai’s characters embody another form of psychosis known as schizophrenia. In schizophrenia, there is an inconsistency between the behaviour and emotion of the person concerned. They are no longer motivated by real goals or facts, but by the whims of shifting fantasies. The Schizophrenic reacts strongly to the hallucinations which are exciting to him. He is often apathetic. The feelings he shows have nothing to do with his surroundings; he expresses reaction to his imaginary experiences. Primarily, the symptoms of schizophrenia indicate the condition of withdrawal from reality into fantasy. The Schizophrenic is emotionally detached from his environment. He does not care whether or not he communicates with the people around him. If he does talk, it is not to converse but to express his fantasies. In acute schizophrenia, the person has a sudden severe psychosis that runs a stormy course. One may notice different shades of schizophrenic disturbances in Anita Desai’s characters. Their behaviour reflects a virtual break with the usual human concepts of reality. They live almost entirely in a fantasy world of their own. It helps them to dissociate their anxiety from its true source. Maya, Raka, Sita, Bim, Deven - all create an alternate reality.

Neurosis, psychosis and Schizophrenia occur when one is on the forms of dilemma, is being pulled in opposite directions and is unable to judge which way his happiness lies. As J.A.L. Brown observes, “Neurosis occurs when on the path of life one comes to a fork in the road and is unable to decide which way to go thus causing a stalemate.” The Freudian theory
with emphasis on Sex as the primary energizing force and his assumption that neurosis is a result of unfulfilled sexual drives are not wholly endorsed by the modern psychologists Karen Horney and Abraham Maslow, known as the Neo - Freudians of Third Force Psychologist's maintain that social and cultural conditions contribute a lot towards generating neurotic trends. According to Maslow, every individual has certain basic needs. Their non fulfillment leads one to self contempt, self hate and finally to alienation. Alienation acquires a broad significance and range of meaning in Desai’s novel. In sociological terms. It means loneliness, the absence of relationships, the feeling of social values and forms. Existential categories, on the other hand, indicate alienation from the self, the failure to experience oneself which may come from excess of conformity or a lack of individuality and spontaneity."

In the new ways of psycho-analysis Karen Horney emphasize the role of unhealthy interaction and unwholesome childhood environment in causing psychic imbalance. She echoes the existentialists when she observes: “In all neurotic phenomenon we find at the basis disturbances in the relationships to others, disturbances acquired in childhood through the environmental influences”. This phenomenon of psychic disturbances works at deep level in Anita Desai's protagonists. Almost all of them experience ungratifying interaction with their parents all of them experience ungratifying interaction. It shatters their faith in life as also in the goodness of the world. For one reason or the other, their peculiar childhood denies them the freedom require to develop their individuality.

Carl jung puts forward the concept of psychological equilibrium and says that neurosis result whom there is a clash between an individual's
attempt to adjust. To some situation and his constitutional inability to meet the challenge. In Anita Desai's fictional world each character faces a unique pattern of adjustment demands. Each individual's psychological attributes, social pressures and expectations from self and society place him in unique circumstances to fight against which he or she finds himself or herself ill-equipped. They feel as if their self worth were under attack, and consequently face a threat to their existence.

Due to temperamental polarities, Maya cannot find satisfaction and happiness with Gautama. She cannot adjust to his way of life and thinking. Nirode and Monisha feel that everybody is hostile, bent upon humiliating them. Love and belongingness repel them and they feel unaccommodated. Sarah and Adit are victims of racial prejudices in an alien land and feelings of loss of identity and non-belongingness disturb their psychic equilibrium, Raka and Nanda Kaul live amongst selfish, inconsiderate and insensitive relations. They feel discarded and disowned and find the world of human beings, charm less and insipid. Sita's neighbours are callous, violent, hungry like pariahs in the street. She cannot live with those, who cannot understand her emotional needs. Bim (In Clear Light of Day) is angry and disillusioned because she thinks that her brother and sister has betrayed her. Deven Sharma in (In Custody) is unhappy as he has notions of a grandiose self and deserves, ir: his own opinion, a better deal in life. In Baumgartner's Bombay, the protagonist, Hugo Baumgartner, is a twice disowned individual, first in Germany because of his being jew and then in India where he is looked at as a ‘phirangi’. His life in India is also a tale of suffering. Despite, different food, a hot climate, bewildering variety of unknown languages and having no family, he some how manages to go along. Thus, these characters find themselves trapped in a sad predicament.
Like the tragic protagonist of Shakespeare, they find themselves exactly in those circumstances they cannot deal with.

More over, in the work of Anita Desai most human relations are seen to suffer from acute breakdown of communication. Marital, parental, social and communal relations are locked in a kind of meaninglessness, empty rituals observed for the sake of convention, not leading the characters to any personal fulfillment or development. In communication experienced with great anguish by the women protagonists leads Maya, Monisha, Sita, Nanda Kaul and Bim, to the serious questioning of the validity of social relations, the purpose of life itself. An awareness of a void in which she is fixed. The women protagonists are pursued by “this sense of hollowness and futility” 28

Desai’s characters find an abysmal barrier between themselves and the world consisting of others, the natural environment and its life. They are unable to relate to the space around them. ‘Space’ in existential context does not mean the physical area but “the human environment, and every other that provides the setting in which human life is to be lived” 29. Man does not create the world, but the outer world of trees, rocks etc. becomes meaningful and imbibes human connotations. Man has to organize his world, i.e. the environment that he inhabits falls into a pattern and design created by his psychological response to it. When a person continues to be haunted by the feeling of severance of connection with his environment and natural setup, his anguish and loneliness deepen, leading him to a deep rooted despair. Desail’s characters are constantly under the pressure of a growing inner feeling of vacuity and meaninglessness. Their awareness of the dimensions of the time and space as basic constituents of their existence creates greater conflict within them, as they feel unable to dimensions according to their ontological perceptions.
The female protagonists of Desai are further burdened with the awareness of their femininity. They wish to know, along with the other ontological issues, the psycho-biological significance of their being female persons. Heirs of a culture where women have always been subjected to male dominate normative structures, these women struggle to attain freedom from this rigid mould. The women in Desai’s fiction seek freedom through actions that are generally considered to be male prerogatives; Monisha is more fond of books than of new clothes or jewellery; Amla seeks expression and realization of her hidden potentiality through paintings; Bim asserts her intellectual independence and ability by taking up these occupations, these women transgress the fundamental social taboos against woman’s pursuit of self-identity and independence. They find greater tension and conflict with the people close to them. But Desai emphasizes the significance of these occupations, pursuits and tastes, as a part of women’s search for identity. As a woman writer Desai is more sensitive to the quest and tensions faced by women and their delicate nervous responses to these situations. These women characters struggle desperately to arrive at some image of fulfilled self but their struggle for survival is wrought with great tension.

Anita Desai’s treatment of the themes of alienation, maladjustment, isolation, the absurdity of human existence, the quest for ultimate meaning, and time as fourth dimension, have an existential leaning. In one of her interviews she admits of having been influenced consciously by Proust, Dostoevsky, Lawrence, Chekhov and Kawabata. We need not work out a parallelism here, but like some of the above writers, her works are also a quest for order and meaning in life. Her protagonists undergo a struggle to find their real self and because of the cramping pressures of anxieties, they lose it. They experience a disparity between the higher needs of the
individual inner nature and the unalterable cosmic conditions of existence.

Their personal and historical problems play a significant role in exaggerating their existential troubles and in perpetuating their neurosis. Those who are able to comprehend and surmount their personal difficulties gain a healthy vision of life. Preoccupation with the psyche of her men, women and children diverts Desai’s attention to the nausea of existence. The complexities of her writing emanate from her existential roots and impart it a tangible form. But fortunately, for her characters existence is not wholly irredeemable. The panacea, for most of them, lies in the aesthetics of life.
NOTES

11. Mary Warnock, *Existentialism* London. Oxford University Press, 1977. 55. Discussing Martin Heidegger's concept of an authentic existence Mary Warnock observes : Authentic existence can begin only when we have realised and thoroughly understood what we are. Once we have grasped that human reality is characterised by the fact that each human being is, uniquely, himself and no one else, and that each of us has his own possibilities to fulfil.
13. Mary Warnock. 115. Heidegger sees human beings as seeking in
some sense to disengage themselves from society in order to pursue authentic existence.

14. Mary Warnock. 1. Broadly speaking, we can say that the common theme which unites Existentialist philosophers is the interest in human freedom. They try to show people that they are free, to open their eyes to something, which has always been true, but which for one reason or another may not always have been recognised, namely that men are free to choose, not only what to do on a specific occasion, but what to value and how to live.


19. Yashodhara Dalmia. “Interview with Anita Desai”.

20. Jean Paul Sartre. Being and Nothingness. New York. Citadel Press. 1966. 158. The idea of Nothingness is central to Sartre’s Existentialism. He uses the word ‘Nothingness’ in two senses of the word. In the first sense, Nothingness was a kind of gap or separation which lay between a man and the world, or rather between a man’s consciousness and the world of objects of which he was conscious. The second sense of ‘Nothingness’ was that of ‘Futility’, of the vanishing and evaporating of objects in the world. Without an awareness of Nothingness in the sense, a man could not begin to move from inauthentic to authentic existence.

Sperling. 230. Talking about the difference between these two psychic states Abraham Sperling observes that Neurosis certainly interferes with the enjoyment and control of reality. However, there is nothing seriously wrong with the neurotics perception and conceptions of reality. Outside the area of the symptoms he is in normal touch with his environment. Turning to the more serious maladjustments, we find a different situation. The psychotic person is quite out of touch with his environment. He is either unable or unwilling to check the truth of his conceptions against the facts of his perceptions. Therefore he cannot distinguish between fantasy and reality. To fit his ideas of himself and the world he distorts reality sometimes up to the point of denying its true nature completely. The neurotics acknowledge that there is something vitally wrong with themselves - not so the psychotics. They are unaware of reality in the throes of their distortions.

24. Ibid., 232.


2.2

The Consequent compromises
and other panacea.

Anita Desai is a great analyst of the human mind, a creator of brilliants characters, and an astute 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 characters 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 visualize 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. What psychologists and social scientists treat objectively, by abstract analysis, Anita Desai provides subjectively by her aesthetic portrayal.

Many readers appreciate Anita Desai’s achievement in creating characters independent of social or political issues, but they concentrate mainly on the thematic aspects her works. The psychological intricacies of the behavior of her protagonists, their struggle to find a meaning in life symbolize the concern of a modern man with the eternal human situation which speaks of the changed perspective of writers in depicting characters. Anita Desai’s art is not traditional her personages are engaged in contemplation, not action. Not withstanding this limitation, she has been successful in
capturing and holding the attention of her readers by her narrative skill. Her freshness and spontaneity indicate her rich creative faculty. She creates a character in order to tell a tale and embody her vision of life.

In studying the works of literature in the light of Hornyan 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”. 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 (The Gita, X 41). Nevertheless, the trouble with some of them is that they, at times take a wrong path and perpetuate their neurosis.

From this point of view, as majority of her characters - Maya, Monisha, Nirode, Raka, Nanda - live either in illusions by retreating into fabrication and fantasy, or show their reluctance to face reality: they live in self-imposed solitary confinement. Then there are characters who compromise with life-Sita, Sarah, Amla, Bim and Deven. Although, they have their conflicts, they manage to transcend their personal problems. Amla suffers existential crisis but soon decides that she will not allow herself to be lost like her sister. This affirmation is spontaneous. Bim accepts her present, and linking it with her past. Marches ahead towards a bright future. In Sita and Bim, there is, at least a resolution to affirm life. Deven incorporates a more dynamic and integrated approach. After a sleepless night, he is able to segregate lived reality from art. The salvation for him lies in the aesthetics
of life. His everyday life is sufficiently alive to liberate his drive for self realization. The growing urge for self discovery in Desai's character thus exhibits the growth potential of her protagonists as also the ever-developing vision of their creator.

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 "sorriness underlying the grandest things and the grandeur underlying the sorriest things." Their anguish and dilemmas impinge upon themselves. 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 problems, 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. Virginia Woolf calls it her tunneling process by which she tells the past by installments. This is the stream of consciousness method of delineating a character. This mode of characterization "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.  

A scrutiny of Anita Desai’s art shows that the novelist is growth oriented. The study of her novels is highly rewarding as they record not only the growth of Anita Desai as a literary artist but also as a person moving slowly from self alienation to self actualization, from darkness to light. The helpless ‘Cry’ and bewildered protest of *Cry, the Peacock* and *Voices in the City* pave way for an intense search for authenticity and the resultant revelation of the poverty of romantic vision in *Where Shall We Go This Summer? Fire on the Mountain, Clear Light of Day* and *In Custody*. The protagonists in each of these novels is “learning to live with oneself, with one’s conscience, one’s own illusions and despairs”  

Anita Desai projects their reconciliation with self and environment through an artistic way by presenting their epiphamic experiences. The novelist believes:

I don’t think anybody’s exile from society can
solve any problem. I think basically the problem
is how to exist in society and yet maintain one’s
individuality rather than suffering from a lack of
society and a lack of belonging. 

Thus the reconciliation of the protagonists in her later novels is not an acceptance of defeat, but a movement towards self-actualization bringing in a harmony of inner and outer selves, in short, the achievement of wholeness. One also discovers this expanding vision of authenticity in her short stories too where her characters show an ability to integrate their disintegrated personalities in moments of epiphany. Her artist - protagonists or those with an artistic inclination, manage to see beauty and harmony through
the sordidness of life. In Anita Desai the urge for self expression is in itself a powerful drive towards self actualization.

Perhaps her own urge for self-realization, bequeathed to some of her protagonists in the shape of their artistic visions, is responsible for the fullness of compassion in her fiction. There is a rich vitality in an ordinary life, even some of her characters are free of spirits, who, dissatisfied with routine of ordinary world, break away from their existing life patterns, only to realize that family and social ties cannot be substituted. The apparently stoic Nirode, recluse by choice Nanda Kaul, seeking some kind of fulfillment in their lonely existence, are drawn to their environment again and again. For some of Desai's characters the realization comes sooner or later that individual freedom must create some kind of new relationship. After all, apathy, inertia and un inventive ness are not the answers to life. The fact is obvious in George Eliot too, where the movement towards individual freedom is reversed to find a relationship with society. If Desai's Maya, Monisha, Nirode are the denizens of a social void, her Amla, Sarah, Bim and Deven move towards a reconnection with other people.

Keeping in view the seriousness of their self-alienation and possibility of self actualization Anita Desai's characters may be studied in four groups. In the first category we place Maya and Monisha, who are sensitive and are pitted against incentive spouses. Their defence strategies are, however, not alike. Maya is a case of severe psychosis; she is morbidly dependent person who values love and sex beyond everything else in the world. When Gautama does not stand up to her expectations, she turns violent. Herself hate comes to the surface turning self destructive. She first kills him and then commits suicide. Monisha, on the contrary, is a withdrawn
creature. She waves a glorified picture of herself as a superior being. much above her in laws. When charged with theft, her self image suffers a shattering below, her neurotic pride is hurt and self-contempt overpowers her, under its impact she sets fire to herself. The two solutions adopted by Maya and Monisha morbid dependency and resignation are the outcome of detrimental home conditions. Through these moves the protagonists try to defend themselves from their pathogenic environment. We feel that their alienation and consequent trouble are not due to marital disharmony, but their marital discord emanates from their own inner conflicts.

Then, there are cases of neurosis: Nirode, Nanda and Raka. None of the three commits suicide; though each is on the brink of it. Nirode’s troubles start with his conflicting demands and their defensive solutions. He is intrinsically aggressive-vindictive. When he cannot hold on to his idealized image, he turns to resignation. Monisha’s death hurts his neurotic pride; further, his mothers rejection works havoc on his psyche. The fear of losing her affection disturbs him. The image of mother Kali, the destructive as well as creative forces converge in his mind and he sees his mother as kali. This is an archetypal image since mother Kali remains in the collective unconscious of Indians as a race. Nanda’s death wish moves to the failure of her self-effacing solutions. She hankers after love. All her life she makes sacrifices to get attention and love, and is ready to engage once again in a period of dedication when Raka comes she is torn by conflicts when her detachment clashes with her self effacement. Nanda dies as her real self struggles to over power her glorified self. The knowledge that her life has been one of lies and make believers shatters her self image. Our contention is that Nirode is not a case of Oedipus complex and Nanda is not an aloof person: they are both victims of their self-alienation.
The destructive effect of self alienation is much less discernible in Sita and Sarah. In the beginning Sita has compulsive drives as she is almost a neurotic. However, later she compromises with life. For her the answer to life’s problems does not lie in running away from it, but in facing it bravely. The revelation helps her to integrate herself. Sarah faces social and psychological alienation, though she looks forward to a fruitful period in India. These are not fully self actualizing individuals. Their brief moments of self-discovery and affirmation gives us a hope that they can gain more spontaneity of feelings in later life provided they do not shift from one neurotic solution to the other. We find greater clarity of perception in Bim, Amla and Deven. Bim’s rage in the early part of the novel is almost neurotic but her vision soon acquires authenticity. She finds her lost self and achieves self realization. Amla also has an affirming faith in life. Deven is trapped in his self-created mess socially, he is in precarious position and suffers humiliation but, indications of an acceptance of life on mental level, are there.

Her characters may not be fully healthy, self-actualized individuals, but all of them are not out rightly sickly, insane or morbid. Some of them have vitality and aliveness. In the process of individuation they reveal self strength and a tendency to emerge out of their isolation, in security and anxiety, and gain a kind of closeness and solidarity.

Swami Vivekanand, in one of his moments of self analysis, categorized two types of people: the sensitive and the strong nerded. Whereas the former are always given to fight and take a stand, the latter accept the life as it is, the former are unhappy, the latter are often happy :

There are two sorts of persons in world
the one strong-nerved, quiet, yielding
to nature, not given to much imagination, yet good, kind, swelt etc..... There are others, again, with high string nerves, tremendously imaginative, with intense feelings--always going high and coming down the next moment. For them there is no happiness. The first class will have Almost an even tenor of happiness. The Second will have run between ecstasy and misery. 7

This statement comes nearer to Desai's ideas about her characters who "clear the decks for battle" accept to fight. In her Sarah, Sita, Amla even the compromise with life' implies a reconciliation after recognizing the self. There is a harmony between their reason and experience. Bim and Deven too cannot dodge their problems completely. They undergo conflicts and after much agony recover themselves. The presentation of struggle of the "sensitive" ones, running between agony and ecstasy, is Desai's forte.

In the process, she enables us to see those recesses of the human psyche which generally elude interpretation and comprehension. Hers is a "serious problematic representation" of life. Socially, her field is limited to the class she comprehends adequately. Except for Deven and Nirode, her protagonists are women for she understands her mental, moral, and social struggles. Within this field, she manages to lend complexities to her people and portray them in the "context of human struggle" they possess traits of personality which probably they themselves do not comprehend. The conspicuous outward change in their behaviour is the outcome of an unobservable inward process.
Out of the mundane day to day happenings, Anita Desai creates a world in which the inner and the outer selves aspire for a harmony. Where this state is realized, the ending marks is happy synthesis of reason and unreason, reality and unreality. The reward is: achievement of wholeness. The deeper dimensions, of which the characters are themselves not wholly aware, come to the fore from the totality of human experience imparts a meta physical perspective to her fiction. Her writings are largely reflective and mirror, by implication, the social condition affecting the male and female (as well as child) characters in traditional as also in modern Indian society.

It would be unfair to read these novels as melodramas and the characters as bundles of neurosis. They are individuals in their own right. They have their own artistic inclinations, their reading cultures. What they read and what tickles their consciousness even after they have stopped reading, is significant to know them. There are Gautama and Monisha, both influenced by the Gita. Both interpret the chapter on detachment: each according to his requirement. Commensurate with her sensuous bent of mind, Maya is moved to the core by Urdu Verses. Apart from the Gita, Monisha’s wardrobe is staked with Dostoevsky, Kafka and Hopkins. Sita is tickled again and again by D.H. Lawrence’s verse. Probably his “pristine consciousness” akin to Maslow’s “real self” is an indication of his characters search for fulfillment, because it is a fact that his fiction has “offered a new source of energy and inspiration to humanists” Bim’s reading is vast and covers a wide range from bc:y’s adventure books to Gibbon’s volumes on history. Mere, facts and fiction, reason and unreason merge into her. A lover of history and a teacher of history, Bim is able to muse on the lot of humans and carve a path for herself. Lines from Eliot’s Four Quartets signify “time” the fourth dimension. The obsession of Nanda Kaul for emptiness is
matched by the book she loves, The Pillow book of Sei Shonagan. Sita's urge to go to Manori is like Margaret Atwood's surfacing. Wherein the protagonist leave the city in search of her father. Both Sita and Atwood's heroine are questers. Although these novels deal with psychological transformation, the resemblance ends here.

The aesthetic value of Anita Desai's work is projected through a pattern and rhythm lending harmony to her writing. The novelist attaches importance to "pattern and rhythm". Her patterns are based on her assertion that the "human condition" does not change. Her profound feelings spring from her art of creating human beings caught in the terror of facing existence with all its sickening reality. Lost in the labyrinth of their personal psychological problems, her characters are seen labouring to come to grips with life. Their troubles are not superficial, but ingrained in them since childhood. As children most of them are allowed to stay in an atmosphere of magic and superstition. A denizen of the world of myth, magic and fantasy, the child projects his own feelings into an objective external world. Every day realities disappear and take the colour of the child's affective state. If this "primary process" of perception persists in adult life, the individual continues to show an "infantile" mode of behaviour. Maya's father a fatalist lets her daughter live in a world of superstitions. Likewise, Sita is surrounded by magic Maya fails to assimilate the inner and outer realities, because she deals with the everyday reality by her primary process. Nanda and Raka too are inclined towards the fantastic. The supremacy of primary processes lead these characters to the distorted view of outside reality, create in them an impaired ability to grasp the real meaning of external relationship.

Through an artistic way of projecting life as it is - chequered emotionally as well as spiritually-Anita Desai shows the ability of her narrative art to maintain contact with life. Her treatment of modern themes
like alienation, isolation, quest for wholeness is authentic. She reworks the psychological material in a variety of contexts. The conflict in here characters, their defence mechanism and their psychic life are objectified in the novels in a disguised form. The psychic configuration expressed through her characters, their memories dreams, hopes and fears interwoven with the themes and structural patterns provide multiple dimensions to her work. Her sensitivity is shaped by her creative vision which is not limited to the surface comprehension of the everyday reality. The artistic apprehension of the life marks the essential aesthetics of her art. If it is “the immense richness of material which the life provides” she draws from this source, fames these experiences in a pattern and puts it in the timeless completeness of art. The fictional central conciousness works in association with the rich sensitivity and sensations of her own individual vision and thus unifies ac-
tion. It is the art- painting-that helps Dharma and Amla to restore their faith in life. It is life, itself, seen in the light of art - poetry - which intensifies Sita’s wish to explore and confront the inner and outer worlds. Likewise, Birn reconciles the emotional, social and familial wholeness by experiencing a living personal relationship. Anita Desai’s vision displays a kind of formal unity as her later works reach donouement. her central characters are continually engaged in a quest. There is a final affirmation of life’s resilience. She employs the psychological time to achieve an ideal of artistic wholeness.

Anita Desai’s men and women are not heroes or heroines, absolute in their strength or devoid of human weakness. They are ordinary beings with normal human limitations. Indeed, Desai’s world is not an “artistic Utopia”. The great illuminative power of her fiction lies in its mimetic presentation of experience. These rebel-victims are not the outcome of an eccentric vision of the author but they are indicative of the emergencies of this disquieting stance which modern literature stands to project. Highly distinctive in their motivations, manners and methods, her personages constitute a significant contribution to the Indian novel in English.
5. Ketaki Seth. “It’s Fatal to Write with an Audience in Mind:” An interview with Anita Desai. 58