INTRODUCTION

Anita Desai appeared on the Indian literary horizon in the year 1963 when she made her debut as a novelist with *Cry, the Peacock*. To date, she has published eleven more novels, and added a new dimension to Indo-Anglian fiction by concentrating on the exploration of the troubled sensitivity of her characters. Desai has been exclusively considered as the forerunner of contemporary woman’s fiction as she has produced novels which have evoked an enthusiastic response from critics inside and outside India. The greatest achievement of Anita Desai as a novelist lies in making each work of hers a haunting exploration of psychic self.

Of German Indian parentage, Anita Desai was born and grew up in India. Her mixed parentage might have rendered her substantial opulence of ideas and diversity of vision to extend her concern to the exploration of human existence. She is the one who enjoyed *Wuthering Heights* at the age of nine and got influenced by D.H. Lawrence, Virginia Woolf, Henry James, Emily Dickenson, and Japanese Kavabata in her twenties. In an interview, Desai uncovers her enthrallment with the outsider in her early reading:

I remember the first time I read Camus’ *The Stranger*, what a tremendous impression it made on me. There was a time when I read that book over and over again. I think everything one reads tends to linger on in one’s writing, even after one’s forgotten the book one’s read. Dostoevski was the other writer I think who interested me so much when I was young. And again it was the other-worldliness of his characters. (Demas, 2008:28)

The exposure to the western novelists deeply influenced Anita Desai’s novels. Like them, she has made use of flashbacks and stream-of-consciousness technique in her fiction. She is furnished with poetic charm, rhythm and creative vitality which reflect in her profound lyrical novels. She imbibed the depth of the fiction-writers of the west from her early days and effectively imparted that insightful association into her fictional works.
Anita Desai has evoked mixed responses from her readers. The critical attention drawn by Desai is ample to claim her, a distinctive novelist among the foremost Indian English writers of fiction. Meena Belliappa, who made the first full length critical study of Anita Desai, found in her novels “an evidence of a departure from current modes of fiction writing in India and of an earnest effort to break new grounds” (Belliappa, 1971:1). Usha Bande acclaimed her as a great artist and comments:

Anita Desai’s novels unravel the mystery of the inner life of her characters. Her works are different from those of other Indian women writers in English: Nayantara Sahgal, Kamala Markandaya, Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, who mainly concern themselves with politics, East-West encounter and social themes respectively. (Bande, 1988:11)

Some critics have declaimed her as a writer who is “somehow unable to invent events and episodes that may bring out the dramatic potential in her donees. There are, therefore, no great scenes in her, but moments of lyric, beauty and intensity. So long as her moral vision remains subservient to the poetic and metaphysical urges of her imagination there cannot be much hope for her development” (Maini, 1984:136).

Some of these negative sentiments can be glimpsed in F.A. Inamdar’s review who has taken a note of Anita Desai’s prose style. He observes:

Anita Desai as a novelist is morbid. She does not have a sense of humour and irony, and as a result of these things, her style which began with rhetorical flourish ends in stereotyped cliches. But her early novels have a good flavour of the soil in the description of flora of India. A few of the earlier novels have good images and metaphorical expressions. In them, she has artistically used Indian terms. As there are no deep emotions arising out of the characters, the prose style also degenerates from the rhetoric of sentimentality and romantic cliches into “the banality of the narrative.” About the use of Desai’s English prose style in her novels one may sadly remark that she found it marble but left it stone. (Inamdar, 2008:272)

There are divergent conflicting opinions existing about Anita Desai, and it’s quite obvious for a distinct novelist like her. N.R. Gopal’s comment about her achievement is justifying and worth quoting here:
Anita’s achievement would appear sufficiently significant if we remain mindful of her problems of devising the proper metaphor to express the workings of the inner mind. Though she has had the model of the Brontes, she had few Indian models to follow and thus it is on her own that she succeeds in evolving a technique and suitable style to communicate the critical ordeal in which the individual is placed in her novels. (Gopal, 1999:4)

Anita Desai’s novels are apt illustration of the existentialist view of life. Existentialism is a term applied to the work of a number of philosophers since 19th century, who 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 human states, feelings, and emotions, such as freedom, pain, guilt, and regret, as opposed to analyzing objective knowledge, language, or science. As a creative artist, Anita Desai’s preoccupation is also with the exploration of the subjective reality. Her exploration of the subjective reality involves her interest in the existential dilemma of the individual. Desai emphasizes estrangement of man from society and his exposure of the world as negative and hollow. “This particular phase of existentialism —“the one alone,” the man who has no record, — seems to be a favourite subject of Desai” (Gopal, 1999: 5).

Anita Desai’s protagonists are socio-psychic rebels who find it difficult to compromise with their milieu. Her characters reflect the mythic reality of life through their complex interaction with society. Her predominant concern is not with society or social forces only, rather she is more concerned with the individual psyche and its interaction with social values. In this context, Anita Desai shares her views in an interview with Jasbir Jain thus:

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, that is why exile has never been my theme. (Jain, 1987:15)

The modern man seems to be caught in the contradiction of asserting himself as an individual in society. In promoting his individuality, man indulges in
relentless pursuit of existence and automatically divorced from the world around him. Consequently, unable to communicate with those around him, the individual derives separation and feels unrelated from society. The dilemma of the individual who experiences emotional and spiritual separation from society forms the core of Anita Desai’s fictional works and this is the justification for undertaking the present study “Society and Individual in the Novels of Anita Desai”. While dealing with the theme of society-individual relationship in her fictional works, the present study has not left untouched varied complex aspects of society such as fragmented individual psyche in the face of ruthless social conditions, social consciousness, man-woman relationship, and the problem of alienation. Anita Desai seems to have opted for portraying all these various themes in her different novels. Hence, this research is a modest attempt to study all these key aspects of society under certain major titles in the novels of Anita Desai.

From the viewpoint of the present study, meaning of two terms “Society” and “Individual” should be made clear before moving deeper into the finer details of Anita Desai’s fiction for correct understanding and appraisal. These terms “Society” and “Individual” belong to the disciplines of Sociology and Political Science. The reference could also be traced in History. First we would take up the term ‘Society’. The term society came from Latin word societas, meaning ‘companionship’ and societas in turn derived from Latin word socius (noun) meaning companion, friend or associate. Thus, Society can be termed as a collection of the individuals who share a pattern of relationships through distinctive culture and institutions.

There are several ways to envisage society. It may be a machine or a person or an organism. The image of society as an organism or as an entity can be traced back to the early formalization of sociology and social sciences in 19th and 20th century. Society can be explained as mechanism which has its own identity. Marx defines society thus: “Society does not consist of individuals; it expresses the sum of connections and relationships in which individuals find themselves” (Marx, 1971:77).
A major German sociologist, Georg Simmel views that society is a structure that transcends the individual. It is not abstract but concretely alive. Simmel puts it as:

Society merely is the name for a number of individuals, connected by interaction….society certainly is not a ‘substance,’ nothing concrete, but and event, it is the function of receiving and affecting the fate and development of one individual by the other. (Simmel, 1950:10-11)

What Simmel means to convey is that society is nothing but lived experience. Human can replicate the lived experience mechanically, nevertheless, it would be incorrect for the sociologist to assume that social forces are external to, or necessarily constraining for, the individuals who must reproduce society in every living moment.

Raymond Williams has pointed out that society is “body of institution and relationship within which a relatively large group of people live” (Williams, 1976:291). From the different quotes cited above in reference of society, it is deduced that society is not an abstract concept but it is supra-individual entity imposing itself on its members. After elucidating the term ‘Society’, it is pertinent to explicate the meaning and connotation of the term ‘Individual’.

The term ‘Individual’ is originated from Latin word *Individuum*, meaning that which is ‘indivisible’ or cannot be broken further. Every human being, who occupies a distinct and self-enclosed body, is an individual and yet it is defined by the term indivisible means inseparable which is a logical problem and paradox. Raymond Williams has given a comprehensive definition of the term:

*Individual originally meant indivisible. That now sounds like paradox. 'Individual’ stresses a distinction from others; ‘indivisible’ a necessary connection. The development of the modern meaning from the original meaning is a record in language of an extra-ordinary and political history. (Williams, 1976:133)*

He further says:

*Until 18th century individual was rarely used without explicit relation to the group of which it was, so to say, the ultimate indivisible division… (ibid: 135)*
The modern sense of the individual is then a result of the development of a certain phase of scientific thought and of a phase of political and economic thought. But early from 19th century a distinction began to be made within this. It can be summed up in the development of two derived words: individuality and individualism. (ibid: 136)

After examining the above definition, it is inferred that the individual is someone distinct and unique. The uniqueness of the individual lies in his peculiarities and idiosyncrasies which distinct him from others but certainly not disconnected him from the group. In the 17th century and earlier individual means inseparable from the larger group. It is startling that the separable entity is being defined by a word meaning inseparable. So from 18th century on, modern description enable us to think of ‘individual’ as a kind of absolute entity, indicating separateness, as an individualism and individuality. The semantic changes in this term are interesting and probably accurate which explored individual as an individual identity within society. The modern notion of individualism makes the individual its focus and so it starts with fundamental premise that the individual is of primary importance. Individualists promote the exercise of one’s goals and desires and so independence and self-reliance in society while opposing most external interference upon one’s own interest whether by society, family or other group of institutions. Different thinkers elucidate the term ‘individual’ but each in different way. Some have found the individual creative, maker of society while others recognize as a selfish being. But everyone acknowledges that the relationship exist between society and the individual. For Jiddu Krishnamurti, the individual is of prime importance but exists only in relationship. He describes the individual in these words:

The individual is the maker of the very environment to which he becomes slave; but he has also the power to break away from it and create an environment that will not dull his spirit…. The individual exists only in relationship, otherwise he is not; and it is the lack of understanding of this relationship that is breeding conflict and confusion. (Krishnamurti, 1967:97)

J. Krishnamurti believes that the individual and society are interrelated. They are inseparable. The individual builds the structure of society, and society shapes the individual. Though society conditions the individual, he can always free himself,
break away from his background. J. Krishnamurti has conferred a constructive relation between society and the individual.

For Marx, the individual is not just an individual but a product of collective social conditions. He believes that production by an isolated individual outside society — a rare event, because Man is a social animal in the most literal sense, not only a social animal, but an animal that can be individuated only within society. Marxian concept of individual is described by V.I. Dobrenkov in these words:

Unlike from, who in his abstract psychological analysis of the dynamics of History looses sight of the subject of historical action absorbing him into his abstract concept of human nature, Marx spotlights the subject in his analysis of class relations. He presents us with man as a totality of social relations, and in so far as these relations are contradictory in character, there can naturally be no such things as man in general, the individual is always seen as the representative of a specific social group. It is not man as such who steps forward on the stage of History but men representing the interest of this or that specific class. (Dobrenkov, 1976: 79)

Marx believes that a complete harmonious relationship between the individual and society is possible because an individual acquires his consciousness specifically in society and develops as an individual in society itself.

Unlike Marx, Hobbes presents quite contrary view of the individual. For Hobbes, the individual is thoroughly selfish who at once becomes instigator of order because of his radical individualism. Observing society as a rational construction, he gives prime importance to the individual as his destructive elements are to be restrained by society to enforce cooperation between the two. Hobbes’s basic proposition of the individual is elucidated by Preston T. King in the following words:

The individual is the basic unit of all social structure; that he is not part of a larger organism but is biologically self-sufficient; that although his ideas may be borrowed, they are inevitably sifted through the prism of a unique locus of understanding; that he is self-contained and largely egotistical; yet that he is rarely alone, impinging upon others… (King, 1999:197)
Hobbes’s essential belief about the individual places each individual in conflict with society as the individual is free to express his individuality.

Simmel has emphasized the interconnectedness of all social relation in modern society; however, he does not describe the individual as a social entity. Nigel Dodd gives details of Simmel’s view of the individual in the quoted text below:

There is a reciprocal relationship between society and the individual whereby the individual is both incorporated into society while simultaneously confronting it as something external… the individual is both a product and member of society. As product, the individual is confronted with social forms that derive from the past. As member, the individual is woven into society as it exists now. (Dodd, 1999:34)

It is clear from the foregoing analysis that the individual is an inseparable part of society. The individual does not live in a vacuum. He lives in society. He is not only a basic unit of society but his personality is also shaped and determined by this larger 'organism' i.e. society. Hegel has also argued that the individual is in immediate unity with society. He is united primarily by natural bond of family and kinship. The individual is submerged in society. Whenever we think of the individual, we automatically assume that he must have an existence in a larger framework or group. It is society which imparts culture and civilization to the individual. The development of his ‘I’ or ego which makes him an ‘individual’ happens within society. Society has its own system by which it controls the individual. Nevertheless, it is also true that in the absence of ‘individuals’, society cannot have an existence. Society and individual seem two independent ‘realms’ but in fact the relationship between the two is inalienable. Neither individual can leave society nor can society exist without the individual.

But in spite of this inalienable relationship between society and the individual, at times some individuals do not go well with society. There may be conflicts between society and the individual. These conflicts arise when the needs and interests of the individual are significantly different from that of society. And the resolution of these conflicts often requires compromises from the individual, which he abhors. Society as a ruling authority makes demands upon the individual which the individual feels unfair or unjust, and impossible to live up
to. Therefore, there is generally always a rift between the individual and society to some degree in general, and yet there will be some areas in which there is some agreement. The degree of agreement and disagreement with society is that which is determining factor as to whether an individual is considered conformist or nonconformist or rebel. The mass of the people do conform to society by following its norms, morals and customs. These individuals emerge as conformists in social set-up. But there is always a group of people in society who do not conform for a number of reasons and runs head-on confronting social customs and values remaining either marginalized or condemned from the group. They are nonconformists and rebels known for their anti-established views. Different factors are responsible to make the individual defiant and rebellious subsequently rebellion may be of different types. On the extreme rebels might be ascetics, who exclusively renounce society and withdraw from the world. Other than that they may be religious leaders, monks, social reformers who rebel against perverted social values. Creative artists, iconoclast writers also fit in the category of nonconformist whose writing and characters do not conform to the social values. They might be withdrawn like hippies of 1960’s movement who rebelled against the order and rejected the established culture for extreme liberalism. The rebels are strong-willed individuals who confront society by going against its norms, values and morals. As Simmel noted that in modern society:

We are confronted by countless objectifications of the mind: work of art, social forms, institutions, knowledge. They are like kingdoms administered according to their own laws, but they demand that we should make them the content and norm of our own individual lives, even though we do not really know what to do with them, indeed often feel them to be a burden and impediment. (Simmel, 1976:254)

The conflict and contradiction between society and the individual is not necessarily harmful either to society or for the individual. Competition and conflict between the two not only help to provide the meaning to life but can also promote a social unity. The living and dynamic existence of society is related with the nonconformists who bring about a change in society by saying great ‘No’. The disagreement between society and the individual is unavoidable. Each
individual is partly autonomous-centre and must be so if the conception of selfhood is to remain meaningful. The individual may be a sufferer in society or he may be an independent individual but the relationship between the two is inseparable. The individual may hate or criticize society, but he will remain a part of it. He may fight with society, but there is no escape from it.

After making an analysis of the society-individual relationship as viewed by different thinkers, it is abundantly clear that there is generally always a rift between the two. The dichotomy that exists between society and the individual propels many writers to take interest and display the fervor of their craftsmanship in this realm of literature. Anita Desai is one such writer who has extended her horizon of human concern and tried to apprehend intimately the dilemma of the individual in gigantic arena of society. “What distinguishes Anita Desai from the rest of Indo-Anglian writers is her preoccupation with the individual and inner life of sensibility and the resultant chaos inside the mind” (Asnani, 1984:5). Not only does she portrays the dilemma of the individual in society but accepts it as her favourite subject. In this connection Dr. S.P. Swain writes:

Her fictional world witnesses the chaotic strife between the self and the society. Society here is a conscious entity, perpetually administering its gravitating influence and grip over the despairing self, which is enmeshed in the bewildering texture of the social gossamer and struggles unsuccessfully for an escape. The self struggles and falters, falters and struggles again. In almost all her works…. this bold and chaotic tussle of the self for a release from the stranglehold of a pandemonic and hollow society is conspicuous. (Swain, 2008:107)

Thus, the novelist has brought out a complete unmarked vista of society-individual relationship before the reader. In her novels, the focus is more on the study of the individual against the backdrop of society and its wide and variegated aspects have been brought into much sharper focus in addition to their impact on the individual psyche. She has fully exposed the conflicts and tensions generated by the disagreement between society and the individual. The disagreement between the two stems from a number of reasons — it may be because of the difference between the values of society and the individual or it may be due to the temperamental incompatibility of the individual or may be due
to the oppressive imposition of social forces upon the individual and its resultant impact on his finely tuned psyche. The individuals in Desai’s novels have been entrusted with a Herculean task to work for their identity in society to which they belong. They meet failures and disappointments while wagging a war against the negative and social cruel forces; but the failures and disappointments do not deter them from the persuasiveness of their objectives. They defeat, failure and disappointment make them suffer but they suffer with tragic dignity. In novel after novel, Desai has presented the characters who find it difficult to adjust in society. They are nonconformist, who do not get attuned to the social values and relations, and thus caught in the dilemma of their desires and pulls of society. Desai herself has said that many of her characters are not able to stand the stress of life and circumstances. To quote her:

There are those who can handle situations and those who can’t. And my stories are generally about those who can’t. They find themselves trapped in situations over which they have no control. (Roy, Madhushree, 1992)

Anita Desai’s novels are not meant to explain the theories of philosophy and psychology; but they reveal her investment in the deep feelings of her characters who are seen as the worst sufferers highly suppressed by social tantalization or marital discord. Such preoccupation seems quite natural on her part, for she like her characters, is very sensitive that gives her an insight to make successful in-depth study of her characters vis-à-vis society. She herself says in an interview:

I don’t think I could ever write about the mainstream. I would find that extremely boring – everyone who flows along with the current, along with all the others. It seems to lack originality. The ones who interest me really are the ones who go against the current. (Demas, 2008:28)

Anita Desai does not create dump characters, whose problems are concerned with food, clothes, and shelter rather she appears more interested in creating the characters who are ‘Nay-Sayers’. To accept life is a sign of averageness, and she refuses to see her creation in the light of mediocrity. Her characters are the individuals with the force of personality to say “Yes” or “No”. They seem to be crushed under the obligation of demands laid down by society; still they are
aware of the value, of the sense of security and well-being, of harmony and fulfilment. They do not die without struggling for meaningful interaction with society. They display a genuine concern for life and struggle to establish bonds of meaningful human relationships within the orbit of society. The novelist affirms in an interview with Yashodhara Dalmia:

I am interested in characters who are not average but have retreated, or been driven into some extremity of despair and so turn against, or made a stand against, the general current. It is easy to flow with the current, it makes no demands, it costs no effort but those who cannot follow it, whose heart cries out ‘the great No’, who fight the current and struggle against it, know what the demands are and what it costs to meet them. (Dalmia, 1979:13)

From the above quote, it is clear that the novelist is mainly interested in the Nay-Sayers who don’t want to flow with current. These characters are not average and have a defiant individuality. They fight against the commonplace conformity to stick to their own vision of life and such characters suffer terribly at the hands of society. Desai’s nonconformist characters who say “No” to the milieu around them sometimes do not find the positive way to unburden their “self,” and are entangled in their own introspection, failing thus, to revivify their strength. Maya in Cry the Peacock is such character who is not able to observe the standards of society made for women. As an individual, she incessantly seeks her identity in the social institution of marriage. Her quest for meaning and value in life does not let her comply with the standards of society, but she is too sensitive to stand the stress, hence meets with a tragic end. Then there is Monisha in Voices in the City, a sensitive and intellectual woman who feels suffocated in an un congenial atmosphere of her husband’s family. Marriage proves the most excruciating of all social institutions for Monisha that clutches her sensitive psyche. She tries her best to find her niche in the joint family but her position is so squat that she reduces to nonentity in her struggle and ultimately commits suicide. Then the classic case is that of Sarah in Bye-Bye, Blackbird, who loses her identity and becomes alienated in her own country by marrying an Indian, going against the norms of society. Uma, the protagonist, in Fasting, Feasting falls victim to the tendency of society that conditions a girl to surrender to the customs of male-
chauvinistic society. She is incapable of making any resistance against the norms of society and thus befalls to put up with the circumstances against which she can make no confrontation. These female characters of Desai represent those individuals who deep-down hate any obligation from society but do not have audacity to make a stand against the social order. As a result, sometimes they lose their own vision or perished inside and other times meet with the catastrophic end.

Sometimes an individual’s highly individualistic psyche propels him not to comply with the social obligations. In his quest to attain something sublime, he is entrapped in his own introspection or self-made labyrinth. The rebel Nirode of *Voices in the City* is such individualistic character who comes to our mind in this category. Discontented with the world around him, Nirode asserts that his whole life is a process of preserving his conscience:

> …The only thing I wanted to protect, what any sane man needs to protect, is his conscience. Oh, individuality you might call it or conscience, as I do, or anything — but there must be this essence inside you, and you must keep it secret in order to keep it bearable. Mixing, diluting, muddying it — that’s the disease. (Desai, VITC, 2009: 182)

At times the clash between society and the individual happens to be so intense that the individual himself does not know how to react to the customs and rules of society and how to accept the ways of life laid down by society itself. Hugo Baumgartner of *Baumgartner’s Bombay* is the best example in this context who suffers terribly at the hands of society. He undergoes the crisis of alienation not in one but many societies. In his native Germany, he is a victim of racial prejudice simply because he is a Jew. In India, his plight is the non-acceptance by society even though he has lived in this country for several decades. Despite his assays of adjustment, he is not accepted by society. If these characters (Maya, Monisha, Anamika and Hugo Baumgartner) wither away in their confrontation against society, we also find the characters who try hard to exist in society maintaining their individuality and come out as a mature and perceptive individual. Basically, Desai is interested in the Nay-Sayers rather than
nonconformist. Desai’s protagonists simply antagonize society going against the set values and criteria. They are questers and their delight and glory lie not in absolute triumph over their mystifying situations but in the struggle they make against the prophets of doom and despair. Their struggle finally brings them into new vistas of understanding, which they had formerly ignored and rejected. The novelist has extraordinarily portrayed the dilemma of such characters who preserve their individuality against the muddling backdrop of society and are saved from the ultimate catastrophe.

The best example is that of Sita in *Where Shall We Go This Summer* who is a lonely married woman. The lack of understanding on the part of her husband increases her agony. She feels bore in her domestic as well as social milieu but the feeling of emptiness aggravates her plight when she becomes pregnant fifth time. She rebels against the ‘vegetables existence’ and moves on to the island of Manori in order to preserve her individuality, her poetic sensibilities and wholeness, which she feels are fast receding in disharmonious surroundings of her home with Raman. Sita's psychic plight is similar to that of Maya and Monisha, but the only difference is that being perturbed by her intense isolation, Sita resolves to go to Manori in search of her identity, which Maya and Monisha could not opt. Leading a life of serenity on the island, Sita realizes the difference between illusion and reality. She embraces the fact that life must be continued. After overcoming her dilemma, Sita sees the things in circular form making the moment's experience something permanent. Bim, the central female figure in *Clear Light of Day*, also belongs to this group. She suffers acute mental trauma being alienated from her own ‘self’ and society. Bim is someone who is quite quixotic and wants to pursue her own individualism in society. She persistently oscillates between alienation and affirmation, almost losing herself in the struggle, but preserves her identity, her own consciousness and keeps intact her impervious spirit of saying ‘Great No’ to the life around her. Then, Deven of *In Custody* comes to our mind in this context. Deven is an individual who suffers from an existential dilemma and seeks frequently a genuine relationship from society. His trials and travails to discover the meaning of his existence in the world of Urdu poetry put him into messy and painful circumstances. His
dilemma is caused by his inability to adjust with the changed social realities. Deven is in custody of social realities that he is placed in, and from which there is no escape. But by the end of the novel, Deven realizes true nature of his predicament and accepts life with all its burdens and responsibilities. He realizes that the journey of life would continue along with concomitant suffering and misery. This realization indicates Deven’s growth as a social human being. Then the classic case is that of Eric in _The Zigzag Way_ who grows as an individual in the intricate vicissitudes of life. He struggles against the settled current of life and successfully discovers a legacy that transforms the meaning of his life and changes his definition of himself. His metaphorical “motion” into the past and into his ancestor’s lives helps him to identify his place in the chain of history. Eric gets solution to his dilemma in the lines of Elizabeth Bishop that appear as the epigraph of the novel:

> Oh, tourist, is this how this country is going to answer you and your immodest demands for a different world, and a better life, and complete comprehension of both at last, and immediately. (Desai, TZW, 2009: PartI)

Thus, the characters Sita, Bim, Deven, Eric — all refuse to be archetypal and rebel against the set criteria of society to preserve their individuality. They refuse to conform to society by saying “Great No” and grow independent of their environment. Their assertiveness saves them from a total disaster.

To highlight the peculiarities of the Nay-Sayers, Anita Desai has also portrayed a rich galaxy of the characters who are just their opposite in her fictional works. These characters are the Aye-Sayers who accept the social standards and settle down in the slot of life carved out for them by society. Perhaps she has portrayed such characters in order to render stark contrast to the Nay-Sayers. To give some examples of such characters one may begin with Desai’s maiden novel _Cry the Peacock_. Maya’s husband and in-laws belong to this category. Gautama is one who “…neither rejoices on receiving good, nor is vexed on receiving evil, his wisdom is well established” (Desai, CTP, 2010:95). He accepts life and its affairs as it is without any clash, and this is the reason that what matters for Maya is not at all important for him. For Maya’s in-laws, emotional needs of the
individual, his individuality and personal affairs is not a matter of concern. They fit in comfortably in their social roles embracing all social values and norms without any confrontation. Professor Bose, in *Voices in the City*, belongs to this category. He is a middle-aged person who is happy and satisfied. Unlike the rebel Nirode, he accepts life with all its dullness and calamity. He says something very important to Nirode which seems a solution to the conflict between society and the individual. He softly utters, “My dear Nirode….one must make concessions — how else can one survive” (Desai, VITC, 2009:19). Monisha’s husband Jiban is also worth mentioning in this category. He is a middle-class person, happy with his job and completely adjusted in his joint family. He never bothers about the sensitivities and sensibilities of his wife. He is well-settled in his role of a traditional husband, son and government servant which society has set for him. In *In Custody* Deven’s wife Sarla also comes in this group. As a young girl of her age, Sarla also had the usual aspiration to possess household goods like car, phone and refrigerator but her marriage with a man of academic profession leaves all these dreams unfulfilled. Deven’s preoccupation with his literary pursuits aggravates her; however, she never revolts against his obsession. Anita Desai realistically describes Sarla in age-old traditional slot of society:

Sarla never lifted her voice in his presence – countless generations of Hindu womanhood behind her stood in her way, preventing her from displaying open rebellion. Deven knew she would scream and abuse only when she was safely out of the way, preferably in the kitchen, her own domain. Her other method of defence was to go into the bedroom and snivel, refusing to speak at all, inciting their child to wail in sympathy. (Desai, IC, 1994:145-46)

Sarla undergoes acute fermentation by her husband’s attitude but remains with him submissively as she has no other way. It shows that Sarla is fully consciousness of her position in society. Aruna, in *Fasting, Feasting*, is the best example who belongs to this group. Though she is only thirteen yet she has developed the guile and the maturity of a grown-up woman through conscious coquettishness. She is bright, active and pretty but in her own way, she is also disabled. She has to exist in society of the prejudices about woman. Like Uma,
she also has no choice in selection of her life partner, and has arranged marriage. But she wholeheartedly accepts her marriage and her social role of married woman. Her show-off of beauty and social delicacies to impress others is simply an end result of her exposure to a patriarchal society. It is her unique way to flaunt her superiority in male-chauvinistic society. This attitude of hers may merely be calling her self-declaration.

Mira-masi is another character who also belongs to this category. She is a minor character with no particular influence or power in *Fasting, Feasting*. She comes to Uma’s house between the pilgrimages for halt. She is the universal type of Hindu widow, most unwelcome in her father’s and father-in-law’s home. She has no personality at all and is treated like a useless thing. She represents the typical widowhood in Hindu society. She does not have any dilemma as such because she is not in conflict with society. Nevertheless, her despondency is very much there because of her alienation from society. She puts on widow’s white garments. She takes a single vegetarian meal in a day like all widows. She does not use the pots in Mama’s kitchen nor does she eat food prepared by the cook. She is quite fit in her socially assigned role and place. She may be nonentity with neither any influence nor authority but she has no grudges against society and its norms. Emily, in *The Zigzag Way*, deserves mention here in this category. Unlike Eric, Em is quite focused, certain, and immersed in her work and never approves his languishing. Em is quite aware of the significance of her research on her relationship with Eric, but even then she chooses to work in an alien land. Like a modern woman, Em embraces life with all its challenges and takes the issues head-on. She believes in her instincts and has no complaints as such against society.

The characters, who have been discussed in the category of Aye-sayers, do not have any conflict against society as such because there is no difference between their ideology and demands of society. Instead of going against the current, they flow with the current unconditionally; hence, they have no disagreement. They are not as intuitive as other characters of Anita Desai, especially those who confront against the norms of society.
Having seen the individual in relation to society in different novels of Anita Desai, we find two types of characters in her fictional world — first those who are the Nay-Sayers and come in confrontation with society as they find it difficult to get fit in the allotted slot of society. They are palpable and hypersensitive. These characters face severe dilemma in their social set-up because social forces remain an enigma for such characters. However, oscillating between hope and despair in their struggle against society, they try their best to discover the answer to their dilemma and preserve their individuality and sensibility. The second category is that of the Aye-Sayers, who offer contrast to the nonconformist. They are those individuals who don’t go against the social standards and thus compromise. They are assertive and meet out their responsibilities without any grudges. To sum up, society may causes dilemma to the individual but one cannot escape from it. There is no existence of individual without society and society cannot manifest itself without its individuals. One may reduce to nonentity due to the imposition of social norms or can grow mature and independent of social set-up but one cannot deny the organism of society.

When we look at different novels of Anita Desai, we find that she has portrayed all the important issues of society such as the unconscious motifs of individual psyche and his social consciousness, the plight of individuals intertwined in man-woman relationship and the problem of alienation in her fiction. Hence, bringing together all these themes of Desai’s novels, the tapestry of this thesis is interlaced. In succeeding chapters the themes of Anita Desai’s different novels under certain major headings in perspective of society-individual relationship would be undertaken for thorough examination.
Works Cited


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