INDIVIDUAL PSYCHE AND SOCIAL CONSCIOUSNESS

In the preceding chapter, the meaning and connotation of the term ‘society’ and ‘individual’ have been elucidated. The depiction of the underlying dilemma of the individual in an increasingly complex society is a perennial interest of Anita Desai. Her chief concern is not with society only rather she is more concerned with the individual psyche and its interaction with the social values. She simply records the inner psychic oscillations and tensions of her characters who find it difficult to adjust in society for a number of reasons and do not conform to the social norms. This chapter would discuss the psychic confrontation and protestation of Anita Desai’s protagonists who are against the commonplace conformity to protect and preserve their individuality, dignity and self-identity within the orbit of society.

*Voices in the City*, the second novel of Anita Desai, is a brilliant exposition of the dilemma suffered by certain dislocated individuals trapped in the claustrophobic life of metropolis. Defining the novel Lionel Trilling aptly suggests that:

> The novel is a perpetual quest for reality, the field of its research being always the social world, and the material of its analysis being always manners as the indication of the direction of man’s soul. (Trilling, 1961:212)

In this sense, it can be said that this novel is a quest for inner as well as outer reality. Apparently, the novel is a very realistic depiction of the plight of a Bengali family in a state of disintegration in the metropolis of Calcutta. But on the symbolic level, the novel deals meticulously with the existential dilemma of its characters who try to come to terms with various vicissitudes of life as the infertile and dreary atmosphere of the ‘monster’ city of Calcutta encroaches harshly on their sensibilities. Here Desai explores convincingly the inner weather of youthful despair permeated by the existential angst. The novel is a wonderful demonstration of what Anita Desai called in an interview with Yashodhara Dalmia “the terror of facing single-handed the ferocious assaults of existence” (Dalmia, 1979:13).
The novel may be regarded as an epic on Calcutta as it illustrates the miserable condition of three characters in the city of Calcutta, the city of Kali. It has acclaimed adequate critical responses. The title of the novel has made critics to discuss and debate on the point whether Nirode or the city of Calcutta may be called the hero of the novel. A. V. Krishna Rao feels that it is Calcutta who is the hero of the novel and not Nirode:

Thus although one may be tempted to consider Nirode as the hero of the novel, the city of Calcutta indeed the invisible protagonist of the novel. Calcutta, conceived as a force of creation, preservation and destruction is ultimately identified as a symbol for the Goddess Kali. (Rao, 1984:175)

There is no doubt that the city of Calcutta is the backdrop for most of the actions of the novel and impinges relentlessly on the sensibilities of the major characters but the novel itself is mainly a family drama around which the story revolves. The novel is made up of four unequal parts: Part I, Nirode; Part II, Monisha; Part III, Amla; Part IV, Mother. The other non-living and most important one is Calcutta, which plays an important role influencing the other characters. From the section division also, it is realized that the role played by the city of Calcutta is vital though the narrative is more concerned with the characters. The section division of the novel refers to four characters but our primary concern will be with Nirode, though others characters would also be taken into account.

The blurb on the novel says that “based on the life of middle-class intellectuals in Calcutta, Voices in the City is an unforgettable story of a bohemian brother and his two sisters caught in the cross-currents of changing social values. But in spite of the predominant role of Nirode in the city, social elements are not altogether absent, rather in many ways the story reflects a vivid picture of India’s social transition — a phase in which the older elements are not dead, and the emergent one not fully evolved.” The story moves around a feudal family of Kalimpong dominated by the mother with an inferior father who is most of the time drunk; there are four children, two sons and two daughters — Arun, Nirode, Monisha and Amla. The novel begins with the departure of Arun to England for higher studies. Nirode works in a newspaper’s office as a simple clerk. His sister
Monisha is married to Jiban, a middle-rung officer in a Government Department with a large joint family. The younger sister Amla has received training as a commercial artist in Bombay and has come to Calcutta to join an advertisement firm. In the present of the novel, the father is no more and the mother leads a lonely life because all the children are outside Kalimpong; she gets company of her neighbour, retired major Chaddha, with whom seemingly she is also having an affair, which is most resented by Nirode. Nirode’s life as presented in the novel is a succession of failures, form bringing out a magazine called *voice* to writing of a play, opening a book stall and even selling spurious antique art pieces. Amla has a passing affair with married artist Dharma and through her we are shown the world of the upper class society. Monisha’s ill-matched marriage, her loneliness, sterility and the strain of living in a joint family with an insensitive husband shove her to the breaking points and she commits suicide by self-immolation. The novel ends with the funeral of Monisha on arrival of her mother from Kalimpong.

Various critics viewed *Voices in the City* form different point of view and in different dimensions. A. V. Krishna Rao makes the study and analyses the theme of the novel in various dimension. He, thus, rightly remarks:

> Anita Desai eminently succeeds in dramatizing not only the individual human relationships against the backdrop of a cosmopolitan consciousness but also the growth of individual consciousness from a cynical sense of a loss of identity to the mystical realisation of the meaning of existence as well as of his own destiny. (Rao, 1984:178)

R.K. Srivastava approaches the novel from the viewpoint of the artists’ predicament and aptly comments:

> In her novel *Voices in the City*, Anita Desai writes about the predicament of various artists groping for a vision, and aim, a path conducive to the development of healthy art in a city which destroys as it creates. Since no metalled highway exists for the artist’s journey, Desai has shown different meandering ways and torturous lanes the artists of various shades and temperaments take and what relationship they have with society. (Srivastava, 1989: 88)
Harveen Sachdeva Mann studies the novel as a significant discourse on modern Indian feminism:

*Voices in the City* is particularly concerned with the articulation of women’s stories. Set primarily in post-independence Calcutta, the novel narrates the initiation into adulthood of three siblings, Monisha, Amla, and Nirode Ray. Behind them looms the figure of their mother, Otima, and beyond the human mother lies the vengeful city-mother, Calcutta. Whereas Nirode grapples with existential questions regarding the meaninglessness of life, the nature of rebellion, and the value of suffering in the face of deadening bourgeois respectability in an ostensibly gender-neutral world, the female characters in *Voices in the City* are actively, and sometimes tragically engaged in a search for self-fulfilment as women (and human beings) in an India still governed by a dominant patriarchal ideology. (Mann, 2008:105)

The first critic who wrote a monograph on Anita Desai’s fiction is Meena Belliappa. She has also taken note of the influence of the city on the individual psyche: Through the impress of the city on these individuals and their associates, and the interplay of their particular emotional disturbances, is evolved a complex of experiences that is Calcutta. (Belliappa, 1971:28)

Praising Desai’s favourite domain, the psychological probing of her character, Madhusudan Prasad precisely says: Mrs. Desai delves deep into human psyche and tries to explore very adroitly the dim domains of the conscious and the subconscious of the major characters in this novel. (Prasad, 1981:22)

Nirode, around whom the tapestry of the novel is woven, is a twenty four years old angry young man, who is brilliant and sensitive. He is highly individualistic, captious of confirmation and freedom loving. He wants to do something on his own evading every help form the family but not sure what to do. Deep-down, he seems to have inferiority also to his supple and academically superior brother Arun, who has gone London for higher studies. He is “the anonymous and shabby clerk on a newspaper, calling himself a journalist…. But the dismal truth was that all he did was cut out long strips of newspaper and paste and file them, occasionally venturing out to verify a dull fact in some airless office room” (Desai, VITC, 2009:10). He is a rootless nihilist, a psychic outlaw who want to live in “shadows, silence, stillness”, that is what exactly “he would always be left
with” (10). However, he reckons himself different form others in terms of intellectuality and agility. Nirode’s belief in popular philosophy of existentialism is sufficiently deep and he quotes Camus to prove the rightness of his belief:

I have been reading Camus, you know. He says, “In default of inexhaustible happiness, eternal suffering at least would give us a destiny. But we do not have even consolation and our worst agonies come to an end one day. (40-41)

Nirode’s non-conformism, his bohemian life make him prompt to existential writers like Camus, Kafka. He considers himself “an outlawed hermit crab” (188). Nirode is conscious of the fact that the values of contemporary society are hollow. He is dissatisfied with his life, although he calls himself a journalist to keep up his self-esteem. But his job offers him no opportunity to put across any creativity. The artist in Nirode makes him despise his present job of a clerk. Because of this reason, he leaves the petty clerkship in a newspaper and plans to edit a magazine to bring scattered intellectuals of the country together. He tells his friend Jit Nair:

The newspaper carries the writer further and further into the impersonal, it only follows the You. The You is everything in news. There is never an I. It is the I that interests me now. (33)

In order to work in a free atmosphere, he starts his magazine, Voice. The magazine, however, does not provide Nirode the desired freedom. He fears that his friends want to take away his freedom by thrusting the burden of success on his shoulders. Nirode recognizes a lack of individuality and commitment to some higher purpose in life in all those who come and flatter him on the success of his magazine. Nirode abandons it because he is irritated and intrigued by the expectations of others. He feels proud in his non-involvement, stoicism and emptiness. He just doesn’t want to tread the regular course which an average human being does. He refuses to make even the most necessary compromises that life demands. Nirode resents and jealous all those who follow system. His repulsion for everything that is well-off is evident in the novel. Since Nirode is sensitive to coercion, it is difficult for him to work for a boss or under rules and regulations. His resentment is shown in this statement:
You know, Bose…I’ve reached a point now—I always knew I would arrive at it one day — when it would be impossible, physically impossible to work under any man, by his orders, at a given time, at a meaningless job. I loathe those automatons at the top — I loathe their superciliousness, their arrogance, their blindness. How dare they be arrogant when working at such senseless jobs? Spend their lives, their entire energy and intelligence on something that does not matter? How can one?...Better to leap out of the window and end it all instead of smearing this endless sticky glue of senselessness over the world. Better not to live. (19)

There is an obsessive recurring quality in Nirode’s existential anguish. He is conscious of the fact that the values of the contemporary society are hollow. He is observed with the desire to meet failure after failure in life:

Then I want to see if I have the spirit to start moving again towards my next failure. I want to move from failure to failure to failure, step by step to rock bottom. I want to explore that depth. When you climb a ladder, all you find at the top is space, all you can do is leap off —fall to the bottom. I want to descend, quickly. (40)

We also sense idealistic traces and an element of masochism in Nirode’s rebellion, disenchantment and in his consciously aggravating miseries. The plight of Nirode’s personality is that he is discontented from the society, he lives in. Society as a ruling authority demands certain liabilities from the individuals, but there are those who don’t know how to conform or refuse to conform and such people besides suffering at the hands of society are also terrible loner. Nirode is such character in this novel. His highly individualistic psyche propels him not to comply with the social obligations. He asserts that his whole life is a process of preserving his conscience:

...I realized that 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. (182)

Nirode is a lonely being who has opted for a life of silence. Loneliness and silence give us time fore self communication which can lead to sublimity or spiritual pursuits in life. Nirode by temperament is a loner but he has created for him a dead silence. It does not vibrate with the voice of spirit. His silence does
not lead to any spiritual vision or attainment. Had he enjoyed his loneliness and silence with its beauty and wholeness, he would have been independent in true sense and no doubt a different man. Nirode resents contact with other human being. He wants to disown his family background as he is ashamed of belonging to the feudal background. He is alienated even form his mother whom he calls “she-cannibal” (101). Nirode’s individualism, his hate for his family has various expressions in the novel. One such expression comes before us when Amla suggest him to ask for money from the mother, and he burst out:

Mother, … When do little girls get over their mother complexes? That’s the worst of having a family …… I’ve given up using a family name, Amla, and I want no more of family life…. I’ll tell you my ambition, Amla — or rather what all my ambitions have come down to: to earn only as much as I need immediately, never so much as to spill into a bank. (155-56)

His individuality reaches at that point where it is considered as vanity, egotism and cynicism. His isolation makes him unsocial that causes him a great turmoil. Though he starves yet never asks for money form his mother or from any other source. He refuses to annihilate his individuality even in the face of destitution. As the novelist tells us:

The habit of withdrawal had become too strong, the history behind it grown too illustrious to discard…. Nirode grew more and more wary of contact…The intricacies of relationship – approach, recompense, obligation — these aroused in him violent distaste and kept him hovering on the fringe of the world that invited and spurned by turns, and for which he daily cared less. (61-62)

Nirode’s intentions may be good but lack of clear objective blurs his vision and makes him discontented, angry and bitter. In absence of clear vision, his all energy is ultimately gone waste. The only problem with Nirode is that he is not sure of himself. “He is caught in a kind of intellectual vice…. There is something hollow something phoney, about his protestations and diatribes” (Maini, 1984:24). Nirode does not strive for freedom in the manner of a healthy individual but tries to adopt the strategy of withdrawal so as to escape conflicts. He is confused, directionless which is clearly revealed in the comment of the novelist:
He was wearied by his own unsureness in which he swept back and forth like a long weed undulating under water, a weed that could live only in aqueous gloom, would never rise and sprout into clear daylight. He was proud to the point of being a fanatic, he was intense enough to be capable of whole-hearted dedication — yet he drifted, a shadowy cipher and his life consisted of one rejection following another. He loathed the world that could offer him no crusade, no pilgrimage and he loathed himself for not having the true, unwavering spirit of either within him. There was only this endless waiting, hollowed out by an intrinsic knowledge that there was nothing to wait for. (63)

Nirode is against the world for he feels that the world has wronged him. He is engaged in an unequal fight against the social and commercial values of life. Marriage is an important social institution in society that gives shape to the basic instincts of the individual and disciplines him. But for Nirode, marriage is not a desirable institution. He disapproves it completely and his condemnation of marriage is expressed in one of the authorial comments: “Marriage, bodies, touch and torture … he shuddered and, walking swiftly, was almost afraid of the dark of Calcutta… marriage was destructive, negative, decadent. He would waste no time on it…” (35). A close evaluation of Nirode’s character stores the fact that he is a representative of the sickness of contemporary society which fails to give a confined sense of experience to the artist. It seems that he is trapped in an existential predicament and there is no rational solution to his problems. David Mc Reynolds’ remark is appropriate for Nirode’s condition:

> The individual is never able to feel that he is an important part of some meaningful whole. Our hearts ache with loneliness but we do not know how to talk to one another. (Reynolds, 1960: 204)

This way, it is observed that Nirode’s insurgence, world-weariness and intentional enticement of melancholy have a dreamy tinge. There is also an element of masochism in his character.

The next significant character in the novel is Monisha. Desai portrays the psyche of a sensitive and intellectual woman through her. She appears to be a fragile character with all her sensitivity and intellect. She is married to Jiban who is monetarily well off and highly diplomatic. She is an introvert and feels quite suffocated in an uncongenial and congested milieu of her husband’s family. She
wishes to have few moments of privacy but it is not really possible in an overcrowded, middle class family. Her habit of writing dairy aptly puts forth the fact of her introversion. In Jiban’s family, the most important works for a woman are cutting vegetables, cooking, brushing young girl’s hair and child-bearing. This doesn’t traumatize her so much as the need for privacy. No matter how qualified or well read the daughter-in-law may be as Monisha is but she has to fit into the slot of respectable daughter-in-law. Monisha feels frustrated and this feeling of nothinglessness makes her more like an existentialist:

To pretend to have forgotten, to pretend to believe in these trivialities, these pettinesses of our mean existence — is that right?... If I had religious faith. I could easily enough renounce all this. But I have no faith, no alternative to my confused despair, there is nothing I can give myself to and so I must stay. The family here and their surroundings tell me such a life cannot be lived — a life dedicated to nothing — that this husk is a protection form death. Ah yes, yes, then it is a choice between death and mean existence and that, surely, is not a difficult choice. (121)

She is sensitive, childless, and victim of ill matched marriage. Monisha’s ill matched marriage, reminds us of Maya in *Cry, the Peacock*, whose predicament is also cause by marital disharmony. Monisha’s relation with her husband is marked only by loneliness and lack of communication. The major cause of Monisha’s distress in her marriage is the temperamental difference between the couple. Her plight is further exacerbated by her childlessness because sterility is considered a stigma for a married woman. The final blow to this fragile marital relationship of Monisha comes when the accusation of theft is brought against her. She takes money from Jiban’s pocket to spend on Nirode’s treatment but is accused of stealing money from her husband’s wardrobe. She cannot even think of such distrust from those people who themselves have a mean existence. Monisha’s agony keeps mounting from page to page as the story progresses; she feels tormented and often questions herself:

Is this what life is then, my life? Only a conundrum that I shall brood over forever with passion and pain, never to arrive at a solution? Only a conundrum — then is that life? (124)
When she fails to bear the pain of being misunderstood, she puts an end to her life by committing suicide. Monisha’s plight represents miseries of many daughters-in-law in society. The destiny of a woman is shaped by society and its social norms. Monisha’s plight represents an archetypal condition of many young married women in society who unable to endure the never-ending torture and pinching behaviour of the husband and his family members, end up as cases of immolation. Monisha is unable to stand the stress of life. She finds it hard to comply with the social norms, hence remains a misfit in the role which society has set for her. To sum up, Monisha’s tragedy is her ill-matched marriage, her sterility, her loneliness, lack of communication and the stress of living in a joint family. She appears to have been transplanted on to the soil and milieu completely different from where she was born.

Amla the last important character in the novel is buoyant and lively career girl with balanced mind. Her attitude towards life is marked with a youthful excitement and wonders which is completely different from the negative attitude of Monisha and Nirode. Amla comes to Calcutta in search of joy, independence and a new job as a commercial artist but her search for a career transformed into an existentialist search for love and joy unmixed with pain and suffering. She decides to lead a happy life but her illusion is short lived and she begins to suffer from a sense of loneliness:

Despite all the stimulation of new experiences, new occupations, new acquaintances and the mild sweet winter air this sense of hollowness and futility persisted. Daily it pursued her to the office, hid quietly under the black mouthpiece of her telephone, shook — ever so slightly — the tip of her pencil as she traced the severe lines of a well-draped sari, then engulfed her in the evenings when she attended parties at which she still knew no one well and at night when she tried to compose her unsteady thoughts for sleep. (157)

Nirode takes Amla to meet his artist friend Dharma who is a painter. Like Nirode, he also leads a life of anonymity at the outskirts of Calcutta. Before meeting Amla, Dharma’s paintings dedicated to landscape or scenes of nature. But as soon as she starts visiting him, Dharma’s attention is diverted to portrait painting. He requests Amla to sit for portrait and she readily agrees to it.
Dharma’s art and love influence her. Relationship with Dharma is instrumental in giving a renewed vision to Amla but it is not well-defined for either. It is just an adjustment between truth and mirage, which envisages precarious stage for both of them. Amla is fully aware of the inadequacy of this relation and therefore she withdraws herself from it. Her disengagement from this uncertain relationship shows the strength and assertiveness of her personality. It seems that Monisha’s sudden death has a moving impact on Alma’s psyche and gives her insight. As the novelist narrates:

… Monisha’s death had pointed the way for her and would never allow her to lose herself. She knew she would go through life with her feet primly shod, involving herself with her drawings and safe people like Bose, precisely because Monisha had given her a glimpse of what lay on the other side of this stark, uncompromising margin. (245)

This is her sane sense that she neither kills herself like Monisha nor lost like Nirode. Her rationality is something that makes her distinct from her brother and sister. Amla struggles to overcome all fears and anxieties of life. She feels lonely and helpless in Calcutta, but she does not seek solution by compulsive activities. She is well aware that her despair and uneasiness is nothing but unconscious quest to protect her inner life from deception. Creativity is at the root of her search but her vocation is a blend of commerce and art, and defeats the very sense of creativity and beauty. Her profession is the routine, normal, pedestrian activity that does not afford any enthusiasm and inventiveness. Nauseated by it, Amla turns to painting trees, insects, birds and flowers to transmute her conflict into art. Amla’s diversion from commercial art to pure art is due to her aesthetic inclination. She enjoys these moments of serenity. During these moments of tranquility, Amla finds her authentic ‘self’, her real identity. She plumbs the underlying psychic conflict by moving away from the relentless pressure of the world around her. It is her refusal to be depersonalized by the dehumanizing effects of contemporary life.

Among the minor characters in the novel, there is Dharma, the married painter. Dharma’s mundane suffering and discomfort are rooted in the tragic incident of the elopement of his 15-years old daughter with her first cousin. Dharma is, after
all, committed to his wife and society. He is a conformist and his existentialist subjectivity makes him feel responsible towards his wife who is not able to bear the loss of her daughter. In order to prevent his wife from insanity and to avoid humiliation from society, Dharma leaves Calcutta and settles in the outskirts of the city.

Thus, it is concluded that the novel portrays the dilemma of the individual as shown in the characters described above in relation to society. All three characters are trapped in the coils of monster city Calcutta. They fight back for their survival against certain social norms and traditions of society and this is the main theme of the novel.

*The Village by the Sea* is another important novel where the struggle of the individual is shown within the orbit society, but the only difference is that here the individual is not in conflict with society rather he accepts it wholeheartedly embracing the role prescribed by it. Unlike other novels of Anita Desai where money is not a problem; emotional and psychological factors dominate, this novel chiefly deals with the lower strata of society for the first time. The novel has been awarded with ‘Guardian Children’s Fiction Award’ in 1982. Hari, the protagonist of the novel, fights back with the circumstances to subsist in the social order instead of escaping from it feeling alienated and powerless.

Based on true events, this novel discusses the story of an Indian family disintegrating under the pressure of poverty. The novel is set in a small coastal village Thul near Bombay. The two central characters of the novel are a brother and sister duo, 12-year-old Hari and 13-year-old Lila who remain undaunted by the life of want and misery. The struggle of Hari and Lila for survival is economic in nature, and their hard work raises the family from dreadful poverty to subsistence level. The teenage brother and sister undergo Herculean efforts to keep their family unit intact in harsh conditions. The narrative vibrantly unravels the perseverance and hope of Hari and his sister Lila under uneven hardships and challenges. Accepting the philosophy of change and adaptation, they learn, grow and change and try hard to exist in society to which they belong. They turn up as
Aye-Sayers rather than Nay-Sayers. *The Village by the Sea* is the only novel of Anita Desai which ends in total harmony.

J.P. Tripathi studies the novel as an authentic study of humanistic and classic bond between the individual and society:

Anita Desai’s attitude to society and human beings in this novel is neither socialist, communist nor sociological but it is humanistic and classic. All mankind is seen as one group including rich and poor, higher and lower. Her mirror to society is not doctrinaire or existentialist, it is loving and sympathetic and hence mankind is not bifurcated by class distinctions of hatred. (Tripathi, 1986:121)

Jasbir Jain concentrates on Desai’s concerns in this novel and finds the novel continuation of thematic and narrative approach of her earlier work. In her opinion:

The novel has a deceptive simplicity but at a deeper level it continues the concerns of Desai’s earlier novels. The thematic concerns and the narrative approach remain in large measure the ones she has used before, and these are juxtaposition of value structures, the charm of the remote, the ability on part of time to crystallize issues and exploration of relationships. (Jain, 1987:112)

M. Chakranarayan has viewed the novel as the story of the individual in society and writes: “In the story it is not the individual, but the individual in society which is important, rather, it is a study of a particular economic group” (Chakranarayan, 2000:75)

Anita Desai unravels most of the story from the viewpoint of Hari as he occupies central position in the novel. The entire story is linked with the fortunes and otherwise of Hari in his efforts to save his family from the brink of poverty, sickness and drunkenness. His father’s failure to perform his social role of a caring father and husband forces Hari and his sister Lila to take up the responsibility of the family. They have two young school-going sisters, Bela and Kamal, a drunkard father and a chronically ill mother to look after. The poor economic condition of the family makes Hari and Lila discontinue their studies. A picture of Hari’s house reflects scarcity and poverty of the worst type:
The hut should have been re-thatched years ago – the old palm leaves were dry and tattered and slipping off the beams. The earthen walls were crumbling. The windows gaped, without any shutters. There was no smoke to be seen curling up from under a cooking pot on a fire, as in the other huts…. (Desai, TVBTS, 1984:5)

The family has little to eat. Lila is very concerned about the distressing condition of the family. She wants Hari to do something to alleviate the troubles of the family. Hari feels heavily burdened with the responsibilities, but he is determined to earn more money to relieve his family from extreme poverty. The news that soon a fertilizer company is coming up in the village instills hope in Hari to get a job, but soon this hope shrouded in doubts as he feels that he is not well-qualified for a job in the company. Hari’s psychology is one of the resented children secretly reprimanding his father for his callousness and irresponsible behaviour. The father goes every night with the neighboring three brothers to the toddy shop to drink and returns his way to home groping in the dark making chaos and clamour. This makes Lila cry but Hari becomes indignant at such time. The tedium of father’s idle presence is always heavy on both the elder children. Hari’s concern for the welfare of the family makes him eager to earn more money. He thinks of getting job on Biju’s new modernized boat but Lila dislikes the idea because she is afraid that he would turn Hari into a smuggler. While lying awake on bed at night, Hari dreams of the boats that sail to Bombay, to Africa on the sea. Hari wishes that he could sail in one of them to Bombay. His feelings are beautifully captured by the novelist thus: “Bombay! .... It was a rich city: if he could get there, he might be able to make money, bring home riches, pieces of gold and silver with which to dazzle his sisters” (45). But soon he realizes that he cannot afford dreams, so he must be practical.

The arrival of the de Silva family of Bombay to their beach house ‘Mon Repos’ at Thul creates a sense of excitement and expectation in Hari and Lila as their occasional visits provide them some means of earning money by doing bits of service for them. Mr. de Silva also offers a job of caretaker of ‘Mon Repos’ to Hari’s father during their absence, but the drunken babbling of Hari’s father changes Mr. de Silva’s mind. He says his wife: “Useless, drunken villagers — dead drunk in the morning. What can you do for them? They’re hopeless” (56).
Listening to Mr. de Silva’s insulting words about his father, Hari feels terribly angry. He tries to whistle away his disappointment by walking up the hill to the temple on the top, but an unknown worry of the future makes him restless. When he thinks of all his troubles, he wishes to soar up into the sky. The novelist herself writes:

He too could soar up into the sky and disappear instead of being tied to the earth here, trudging round the temple which was not even a pretty one…Everything belonged here, everything blended together – except for himself. With his discontent, his worries and his restlessness, he could not settle down to belonging. (59)

This is for the first time that Hari is seen subdued with existential dilemma. But soon he gets over this damaging state of his mind. He decides to do something in order to find his fortune and save his family from starving.

The young children have to face life in the village amidst cruelty and insecurity and not to talk poverty. They go through much insult and humility due to their drunkard father. The Khanekar brothers, whom their father fails to pay debt for buying toddy, come to threat the children. They demand their money but when Lila apologises that they have no money, one of them shouts:

No money … very nice answer. Did he teach you to tell me that — that rouge, your father? Like father, like daughter. A family of liars, no-goods. No money, no good — all of you. But wait till I catch him. I’ll break his neck and find the money all right. (85)

Here Desai has stressed the social evil of drunkenness and nagging debts incurred by the village folk which not only ruin their life but also endanger the life of other individuals of the family. Seeing his family amidst the crisis, Hari is convinced that his village Thul will not hold him for long. Though he is too young to solve the prying problems of his family yet he emerges as a willing sharer of the adversity. He realizes that his sisters expect some solid actions from him to protect them and their parents. Like a faithful brother, he understands his social role of settling his sisters. He feels sorry even to see them hampering in the poverty stricken life. Hari’s concern for his sisters is conspicuously depicted in the quoted text below:
What were they waiting for? What were they hoping for? ...

They would have to marry, one day, and he would have to see to it since his father would not. He would have to find them husbands, and buy them their wedding finery – silk saris and gold jewellery – and arrange their weddings to which the whole village would have to be invited. The bridegrooms might demand a dowry. (67)

Hari’s mind is full of niggling doubts and Desai recapture this for us through the stream-of-consciousness technique. Crushed by poverty, he examines the various options. First of all, he thinks of seeking a job with Biju’s boat named Jal Pari but the words of the shack watchman from Bombay makes him defer his idea. Then, he decides to take up a job in the factory. But after hearing Adarkar’s spirited speech, he feels disheartened. By force of circumstances, he chooses to go to Bombay to try his luck. Hari leaves Thul without informing his sisters and parents and joins the procession of the villagers to Bombay. When left out of the procession in Bombay, he feels himself lonely. The novelist recounts his feeling of non belongingness thus:

Hari stood watching the crowd fade away down the road. He felt deserted and friendless. None of his friends from the village had come – they were the ones who were sitting happily at home waiting for the fertilizer factory to come up and employ them. He had left them to join the march in order to get away from Thul and get to Bombay, and he knew he did not really belong to the march, he had no fields or fishing boats to fight for, nor did he know any of the marchers who were mainly farmers and fishermen, not the sort of people who would know his landless, boatless, jobless father. He felt now that he belonged neither to one group nor the other. He belonged to no one, nowhere. The others had left him behind. He was alone in Bombay. (126-27)

In Bombay Hari happens to meet Billu, a coconut seller, who gives him valuable advice. He teaches Hari to be self-reliant and independent. Hari is exhorted by him not to look for help from others, not to beg but be a man, be independent:

“That is the best way to be, boy – free and independent. Don’t say please and don’t say thank you – take what you want. Be a man, be independent” (133).

Billu is no mere a preacher; he practices what he talks about:

I tell you my father and my mother threw me out when I was six years old to go and earn my own living. I don’t need them – I fend for myself – I’m a man and depend on myself. (133)
Hari wanders day-long in search of Mr. de Silva’s address as he has promised Hari a job in Bombay. But he reaches at Mr. de Silva’s residence only to know that he has left for Thul. Seeing Hari disappointed, the watchman of the building sympathizes with him. He takes Hari to Jagu’s hotel, where he gets meal and sleeps satisfactorily. The real struggle of Hari for existence starts from then on.

Hari is offered a job in Jagu’s restaurant on the wages of one rupee per day. There is so much work in the hotel that it provides Hari no opportunity to talk to anyone. He feels shocked at times to see the beggar-type customers in the hotel and wishes to run back to Thul. He is not able to sleep at night in eating house with its fiery heat, stale smell and stuffy air. Adjacent to the restaurant is Panwallah’s watch-mending shop. Hari would have had to remain silent during all day in Bombay if Panwallah had not proved familiar to him. His company gives him needed solace and makes him learn valuable lessons of life to exist. Mr. Panwallah advises Hari to sleep in the park in order to prevent from the heat. He takes pains to teach Hari the art of watch-mending and also pays him a little amount. Jagu’s humanity and Panwallah’s benevolence help Hari to subside his feeling of alienation and he continues to put up with the harsh conditions. Hari keeps toiling hard for earning money, but he misses his home quite a bit. The Monsoon makes his life more miserable as he falls critically ill on being exposed to the rains. Jagu gets him medicine from the doctor. Mr. Panwallah shows his concern over Hari’s defeated health. Panwallah advises Hari to adapt himself to the changing circumstances. He makes Hari understand that he can find work anywhere provided he is ready to work according to the need of hour. In the advice of Panwallah, Desai presents the solution to Hari’s dilemma:

‘You can find work anywhere,’ piped Mr. Panwallah, sitting up very straight and fixing his bird like eyes on Hari. ‘As long as you can use your hands,’…. ‘You can find work for them. And you have to be willing to learn – and to change – and to grow.’ (208-09)

Hari expresses his desire to be expert in watch-mending. Therefore, Mr. Panwallah teaches him more skills in watch repair. Jagu allows Hari to spend more time at the watch-mending shop. Being very generous to Hari, Mr.
Panwallah helps him in buying presents for his sisters. Seeing the smartness of Hari on the Coconut Day, Panwallah laughs in amazement:

‘So, you’ve become a real city boy at last, have you? You’ve learnt to push and fight your way with the city boys… ‘Yes, you can manage now,’… ‘You will manage all right – I can see I don’t have to worry about you any more.’ (217-18)

The celebration of Coconut Day marks the happy ending of the Monsoon season and revival of the normal routine in Bombay. Mr. Panwallah, a Parsee, by participating in the celebration with Hari symbolizes the universal love and oneness of humanity. The celebration also indicates maturity of Hari. As a mature individual, now Hari can fight his way through to lead his life boldly. He is no longer the frightened, confused boy but can make choices and decisions. He does not wish to live in Bombay anymore and decides to return to his village.

On Hari’s departure to Thul, Jagu and Mr. Panwallah accord him a farewell with tearful eyes. They together buy a bus ticket for Hari. Mr. Panwallah has proved to be a friend, philosopher, and guide to Hari. Jagu, though a man of few words, has treated Hari very kindly. At Hari’s departure, he feels as if he is giving a send off to his own son going to a distant land. The love and affection Hari earned from his master Jagu and mentor Mr. Panwallah speaks volume of Hari’s unsophisticated goodness, his hard work and regard for people with whom he is associated.

The next important character in the novel is Lila, the elder sister of Hari, who plays an equally important role in the upliftment of family. She is one of few Desai’s heroines who takes challenges of life and performs the male role as the head of the family. She reminds us of Bim in Clear Light of Day. Lila is introduced to the reader as a very pious and god-fearing girl who set out to the beach every morning to offer worship to the sacred rock there:

…the sun lifted up over the coconut palms in a line along the beach and sent long slanting rays over the silvery sand to touch her on the back of her head. Enjoying their warmth, she stayed bowed for a little while, her feet still in the cold, whispering waves. The sun lit up the pink and mauve waves with sparkles. (2)
As a responsible girl, she shares the responsibilities of her family with Hari. Lila looks after her two younger sisters, Bela and Kamal, ministers to her ailing mother and bears the ire of her drunken father in absence of Hari. She steers the family amidst ups and downs with stubborn patience and perseverance. She faces very bravely the reality during his mother’s illness. She works hard and with that money admits her mother in the hospital. Seeing his wife in the hospital, the father also gives up drinking and seems repentant for his omissions and commissions.

Lila has a premonition that Hari will join them for Diwali even though he has not written them about it. Happily for Lila, her anticipation proves true. Hari returns to Thul on the eve of Diwali to the delight of his sisters. This indicates the deep bond of love that exists between Hari and his sisters. Hari’s feeling of delight of returning home is described as:

Hari could not speak for delight. He ran on to the wet sand, feeling it under his bare feet with joy. Bela and Kamal chased him. He dodged them. Lila Laughed. Hari threw back his head and whooped so that the gulls rose from the sea’s edge and wheeled about in the sky, mewing. He felt like a new person, like someone who had emerged from a tightly shut box and now saw the light and felt the breeze for the first time. He could have been newly born – a butterfly emerged from a cocoon. (230)

Hari is happy to learn that her sister has managed things so well in his absence. When he comes to know that his mother has recovered and in hospital, he set off for Alibagh to bring his mother back to home. On the way, he reckons on the possibility of starting a poultry farm in his fields itself, which will keep his family going till the factory come up. At this point, we find a new person in Hari. He tries to give a concrete shape to his constructive thoughts. The words of Mr. Panwallah to adjust himself to the changes are taking roots.

Anita Desai dramatically describes Hari’s meeting with his father. Looking him Hari’s father put his trembling hand on Hari’s elbow and mutters, “Hari, is it you?” (241) Hari is very happy to see that the tender care of nurses has given his mother a new life. He is not able to believe his eyes seeing his mother sitting
healthy and talking to him. The festival of Diwali brings hope, joy and togetherness to the family of Hari. The celebration of Diwali coincides with his return from Bombay and the discharge of his mother from the hospital to be united together on the happy occasion. Desai gives a colorful description of the celebration and religious rituals of Diwali.

Hari goes to thank Sayyid Ali Sahib, an ornithologist in ‘Mon Repos’, for all the help he has done to his family. Hari learns from him that the villagers have lost the fight with government against setting up the fertilizers factory. Hari shares with him his future plans of opening poultry farm and watch-mending shop. Sayyid Ali Sahib’s love for birds develops a curiosity in him. When Hari makes an effort to know the reason of his love and care for birds, he utters:

The birds are the last free creatures on earth. Everything else has been captured and tamed and enslaved – tigers behind the bars of the zoos…men and women in houses like matchboxes working in factories that are like prisons. Only the birds are free and can take off and fly away into space when they like…I suppose that is why I love them—for their freedom, which we don’t have. Perhaps I would also like to leave all – all this ugliness we’ve made on earth and fly with them. (255)

But Hari presents his realistic view that men are not birds nor do they have wings. Hari tells him practically, “But we can’t fly… We are here on earth, we cannot leave it. We must live here, somehow” (255). There must be a way out if one has to live on this earth and the answer is to adapt and adjust. The bird watcher makes clear:

Adapt – that is what you are going to do. Just as birds and animals must do if they are going to survive. Just like the sparrows and pigeons that have adapted themselves to city life…instead of searching for grain and insects in the fields…so you will have to adapt to your new environment…you are going to give up your traditional way of living and learn a new way to suit the new environment that the factory will create at Thul so as to survive. Yes, you will survive. (257)

Thus, the bird watcher presents a beautiful analogy from birds which emerges as a solution to the problems of life to adjust and adapt with changing more often
than not changing social realties. Listening to the words of Sayyid Ali Sahib, Hari is reminded of Mr. Panwallah’s words:

   Learn, learn, learn – so that you can grow and change. Things change all the time, boy – nothing remains the same. …And if you want to survive, you will have to change too…. The wheel turns and turns and turns: it never stops and stands still. (210)

Hari is now able to comprehend how birds and men are united in the great turning of wheels. He is filled with confidence. This idea of universal growth leaves him optimistic.

To conclude, Anita Desai presents a harmonious relationship between society and the individual. The inevitability of change and the need for adaptation and adjustment to the changing ways of society are also stressed in the novel through the words of Mr. Panwallah and Sayyid sahib. The novel ends on a note of hope and optimism with Hari ready to face the future with courage and confidence in the face of changes coming in the offing.

Another important novel that is very much concerned with the latent dimensions of individual psyche in the face of ruthless social forces is In Custody. The novel was shortlisted for the 1984 Booker prize. Here, the novelist unravels the miasma of society's expectation from the individual who is crushed between desires and denies. She delineates the protagonist of this novel outside the circumscriptions of familial ties and diverts her attention on his social consciousness.

The novel unfolds primarily the story of an individual, Deven Sharma, who is a temporary lecturer in Hindi in a college of Mirpore, a small town near Delhi. He is characterized as a sober, ineffectual but growth oriented individual, who suffers from existential dilemma and seeks frequently a genuine relationship from society. The whole story revolves around his weaknesses, sensitive apprehensions and dilemma to discover the meaning of his existence in the world of Urdu poetry. He is a passionate lover of Urdu poetry who longs for distinction. He is quite infatuated towards the world of harmony away from the maddening world of gains and losses, joys and sorrows. He is very conscious of his
aimless life and wants to break monotony by doing some concrete work in the field of Urdu poetry. His school days friend Murad is an Editor of an Urdu Magazine, *Awaz*. When he comes to Mirpore and gives Deven an offer of writing an article on renowned Urdu poet Nur Shahjahanabadi for his Magazine, he feels as if God has leaned over a cloud and opened for him door to heaven. For Deven, Nur was a poet of God like magnitude and this occasion was long awaited one. The financial condition of Deven does not permit him to take a trip to Delhi. Even though observed with commitment, frenzied Deven leaves for Delhi to accomplish his interview assignment. He cannot even imagine of loosing this opportunity. The interview itself becomes the focal point in the remaining part of the novel which brings about a series of comic and pathetic ordeals in protagonist’s life. The moment Deven enters Nur’s home, he finds himself in an alien and suffocating atmosphere. Contrary to his expectation, Deven finds his 'hero' presiding over a dilapidated courtyard full of the louts and lafangas of the bazar world who enjoyed nightly gazal, biriyani and Kababs at the poet's cost. His poetic self gets hurt with the surroundings of Nur. Nur’s health, the psychopaths, the admirers who praise him in exaggerated way, and the incessant friction between his wives, are some of the insurmountable obstacles which Deven has to overcome for making his dream of interviewing a legendary poet come true. The interview which should have been a matter of some hours procrastinates for months, leading him from one mess to another. Poverty-stricken Deven asks his colleague Mr. Siddiqui in Urdu Department to persuade college authorities to sanction him funds to buy audio-visual equipment. With the help of Mr. Siddiqui and the Registrar, he is sanctioned a grant to purchase a tape recorder to tape the interview and submit the tape to the college library. Meanwhile Deven is clearly told by Nur’s younger wife Safiya Begum that the interview will be possible only in return for money. The conflict between Nur's two wives Safiya Begum and Imtiaz Begum creates great problems for him. Somehow with the help of a technician, Deven wages to record the voice of Nur after three weeks’ hard labour. But when at long last the interview takes place, the boy, who is deputed to handle tape recorder, dozes off during the interview.
and misses out the relevant portions of the interview. Deven comes in wretched state when he learns that the cassette has recorded merely Nur's filthy abuses and irrelevant babblings about food and his glorious past and not the recital of poetry. When he comes back to the college, all those who helped him, demands return from him. Some of Deven’s students agree to help him in editing the tape but with their self-vested interest of getting extra marks. The money procured from his college hangs like the sword of Damocles over Deven. He feels himself cheated by each relation in life. He is utterly entrapped in circumstances since the tape gave much cry and little wool. The interview turns out to be a fiasco leaving Deven’s literary aspirations crushed. However, these humiliating experiences bring about a sudden change in Deven and he begins to look within to find his own strength. Thus, it is the story of innocence caught up in a giant machinery of dubiousness and duplicity. Deven is a sober man, unable to estimate other's crude schemes. It is circumstances that push him to the wall. The title of the novel, along with other things, implies that the individual is in the custody of different values, falsities and circumstances, social and individual.

The individual and individual’s concerns occupy central position in the novel. Observing the same theme in the novel, R.S. Pathak says that this novel reveals:

Individual human nature, the relationship between people and the relationship of the individual to society. Apparently, the novel is an exemplification of the idea of mutuality, of interdependence between the creator and the receptor of poetry and art. (Pathak, 1989:45)

A.N. Dwivedi makes a study of the novel and rightly sums up:

_In Custody_ is a novel abounding in failure and frustration, bitterness and restlessness, and that the protagonist in it constantly leads a life of mental and physical tortures and financial hardships... Deven's fanaticism exceeds all bounds of decency and decorum, and he must continue to life in his self–created Inferno. (Dwivedi, 1990: 118)

K. Ratna Shiela Mani makes a study of the character and setting of the novel finding the novel a complete departure from Anita Desai’s earlier works. The critic points out:
In Custody marks a departure from Anita Desai’s earlier novels where the concentration was on the internal consciousness of the individual. In Custody depicts a world beyond the individual. This novel has a male protagonist who comes from lower middle-class family and who seeks to reach out into a wider world in the hope of self-fulfilment … The conflict between fantasy and reality is one of the themes in the novel. (Mani, 2008: 64)

Deven is an individual who is caught in the crisis of a changing society and does not know how to conduct himself. He is basically an honest man but lacks self-confidence and therefore falls prey to everyone. However, Deven’s childhood has its own share in making her timid and hesitant. He by and large has had a strange childhood. As a child, he had watched closely the bitter disappointment of his mother and the apologetic smile of his father as a consequence of his failure to measure up to her expectations. It seems as if Deven has also inherited insecurity, timidity and nervousness of his father’s personality. He had developed a negative self image since childhood. Deven’s mediocrity is suggested by the novelist in these words:

The inherent weakness in his father that had made him an ineffectual, if harmless, teacher and householder, had been passed on to him. He felt it inside him like an empty hole, one he had been staring at all his years, intimidated by its blackness and blankness. (Desai, IC, 1994:128)

Because of innate limitation and dreariness, Deven could never bloom in a balanced, assertive personality capable of coping with the challenges of life. Obviously, these familial and social factors generated into him powerful compliant tendencies. He had known no other way to deal with life except to remain low profile and imperceptible. This is the only reason that he is bullied and frightened by every relation in life be it his only friend Murad or his Head of the Department Mr. Trivedi or Mr. Jain who sells him a second hand tape recorder or even some of his students whom he cannot face with confidence. The lack of practical wisdom and cleverness of purpose have always eluded Deven. His dissatisfaction is evident in his professional as well as personal life. He is a boring 'teacher'; he is a grumbling husband, he is an unrecognized poet. He not only lacks self-confidence but he is deficient in taking initiative too. Anita Desai narrates:
...if that had not been his error – to search always for solace when there was other game to hunt in the forest. Had he had more spirit, more nerve, more desire and ambition, then perhaps he would have instead hunted for success, distinction magic. Perhaps he would have followed in pursuit of an art, published a book of poetry, earned a name for himself, a little fame, even gold bangles for Sarla… (128)

Blinded by his passion for Urdu poetry, he ignores his responsibility as a teacher. His students look at him with utter disregard. It is really ironical that Deven, the poet, is unable to command the attention of his students. He is not able to satisfy their curiosity not because he lacks knowledge but because he lacks the confidence to face them, to understand them. He feels bore with his students and tries to avoid eye contact with them. Inside the class while teaching, Deven's nervousness and reluctance can be felt in the following lines:

He became aware of their curious waiting faces at last and squared his shoulders to meet their looks. The expression he saw – of boredom, amusement, insolence and defiance – made him look away quickly and focus his eyes upon the door at the far end of the room, the door that opened on to the passage, freedom and release. He had for years been practising this trick of ignoring his class and speaking to himself, or someone outside, invisible. (12)

Deven’s impulsiveness always places him in adverse situation and he is not ignorant about it. His love for Urdu and devotion to it, instead of giving any return to him, antagonises his Head of Department, Mr. Trivedi. He doesn’t appreciate Deven’s attachment for Urdu literature as he finds it an act of infidelity. In his opinion, being a teacher of Hindi Deven must work for the upliftment of this language only. Deven’s frequent absence from the department irritates him. His request for one week’s leave only provokes Trivedi’s ire:

One week? It would be a relief to me if it were one year,’ bawled Trivedi, ‘and I did not need to see your stupid mug again. I'll have you demoted, Sharma — I’ll see to it you don't get your confirmation. I'll get you transferred to your beloved Urdu department. I won't have Muslim toadies in my department, you'll ruin my boys with your Muslim ideas, your Urdu language. I'll complain to the Principal, I'll warn the RSS, You are a traitor — (145)

There is nothing wrong in Deven’s love for Urdu. Being a teacher of literature, he is very genuinely entitled to take interest in another literature, but because of
perverted socio-political values he has to face humiliation and insult at the hands of Trivedi. Deven ignores his position and shows no interest in College Board meetings. He depends on his colleagues even for petty matters. Worried most of the time because of his job, Deven’s remains docile and maintains a low profile. In many respect, Deven’s character reminds us of Hugo Baumgartner. Both are victims of strained relationship with society and family and have no control over the things happen to them. Because of his lack of pragmatism, Deven is cheated, humiliated bullied by everyone. His only friend Murad since childhood pays him nothing for the reviews he had written for his magazine, Awaz. Instead of paying rightful remuneration to Deven, Murad uses him for his self-vested interest. The purchase of second hand tape recorder and the appointment of an untrained boy for operation are the tricks played by Murad. Behind the mask of friendship, Murad exploits Deven's weakness for Urdu poetry. Murad is hypocrite, who talks about upliftment of Urdu language, but does not even pay to Deven for his work. Besides Murad, he is cheated and exploited by Nur and even by his two wives too. Whatever effort he has made in life has ended in defeat.

Deven has an ambition of being popular by doing some substantial work in the world of Urdu literature but he lacks the tactics to fulfill it. The problem is that he places his passion high over other diurnals. He is so fascinated by Nur that he is never able to walk away from his shadow. His efforts to escape from the private life of frustration take him to a world of Urdu poetry and intellectual fame. But this wider world itself is a kind of zoo in which Deven finds the poet attracting public attention. He has faced great pains in order to interview the poet, Nur. And finally when the much anticipated interview takes place, it turns out to be a fiasco. Nur's exploitation of Deven takes the form of squeezing money, drinks and food. Even up to the end of the novel, Nur keeps sending letter to Deven asking for money, medical allowances and endowment for his child. Reaching at the point of absurdity, Nur makes Deven's life prosaic by his orgiastic demands. What sprinkles salt to Deven's injury is Nur's last letter, an entreaty for the arrangement of his pilgrimage to Mecca. The poet puts Deven in a panicky situation considering him all time serendipity. Deven's failure to provide something memorable to Urdu lovers tears him beyond repairs. Deven
realizes that even the famous poet, whom he had imagined to be presiding over his ethereal kingdom, is trapped in the mundane reality of life with its innumerable cares and worries. Although Deven has nothing to do with Nur's family yet he is reluctantly caught in the sordid matters, even once, asked by Nur's younger wife to clean Nur's vomit. Nur's two wives put as many obstacles as possible in Deven's way. He finds himself completely clutched in the troubles one after another. He is trapped in his self-created labyrinth. His mind is so muddled that he even dreams Nur’s funeral. He doesn’t know if there is any end of his problems even after the death of Nur. His predicament is perceptively revealed by the novelist:

Where was the end? Was there one? He had a vision of Nur's bier, white, heaped with flowers, rose and marigold, bright blazing flowers on the white sheet. He saw the women in the family weeping and wailing around it. He heard the funeral music play. He saw the shroud, the grave – open. When Nur was laid in it, would this connection break, this relation end? No, never – the bills would come to him, he would have to pay for the funeral, support the widows, raise his son... (203-04)

On the family front, Deven is an angry and alienated individual who finds the harsh realities of everyday life too much to be faced boldly. Deven's wife Sarla is equally frustrated, and the misery they share never unites them. Here Anita Desai gives a slight stroke to her favorite theme of marital disharmony between husband and wife relationship through discordant conjugal life of Deven and Sarla. The distance between husband and wife is presented suggestively when Deven recollects that she was not his choice but, that of his mother and aunts’ who were crafty and virtuous. Sarla is neither beautiful nor has any redeeming quality in her nature to make his life any better. Desai reveals incongruity of Deven and Sarla’s marital life in quoted text below:

He understood because, like her, he had been defeated too; like her, he was a victim. Although each understood the secret truth about the other, it did not bring about any closeness of spirit, any comradeship, because they also sensed that two victims ought to avoid each other, not yoke together their joint disappointments. A victim does not look to help from another victim; he looks for a redeemer. At least Deven had his poetry; she had nothing, and so there was an added accusation and bitterness in her look. (68)
Deven’s marriage is spoilt because of the temperamental incompatibility between the couple. Deven feels inferior and contemptible not only due to Sarla's attitude but also because of his diffused sense of failure. He lives with a sense of defeat. Deven, a poet-teacher, believes in the sublimity of literature while Sarla is devoid of any literary taste. Deven's preoccupation with his literary pursuits and overbearing tendency towards his wife make things worse. Besides, Deven's frequent dissipating trips to Delhi irritate her and make her feel neglected, but she never revolts against his obsession. Anita Desai realistically described Sarla’s predicament 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 defense was to go into the bedroom and snivel, refusing to speak at all, inciting their child to wail in sympathy. (145-46)

Sarla's confinement to her own world provides a camouflage to her argumentative ability. The dismal marriage of Deven is not wholly because of Sarla's faults but Deven is equally responsible for it because he never cares for her. Engrossed wholly in his pursuits, he forgets to open Sarla's letter that comes during summer vacation informing him about her arrival in Mirpore from Delhi. Their dreams of progressive life have had a premature death and they seem to accept what fate had in store for them. This way, Sarla undergoes acute fermentation by her husband's attitude but remain with him submissively as she has no other way. It shows that like other women who suffer mutely and let their miseries unvoiced, Sarla is also fully consciousness of her predicament and position in society but keeps mum.

Before coming in contact of Nur and the fiasco of the interview, the poet and his work provided a sense of exhilaration and intellectual sustenance to Deven. For him, the world of literature was exalted one much superior to the sordid realities of life. He could not see life as separate from art; the two in his mind was inextricably linked. In fact his dilemma lies in his inability to comprehend the complexity of the nature of art. As the novel recounts:
He had never found a way to reconcile the meanness of his physical existence with the purity and immensity of his literary yearnings. The latter were constantly assaulted and wrecked by the former. (25-26)

But all unfortunate events and humiliating experiences in Deven's desperate struggle to make life meaningful teach him a great deal about human nature and educate him in expansion of his limited self for the first time in his life. Deven begins to comprehend the relationship between art and life, between illusion and reality. He eventually realizes:

If art, if poetry, could be made to submit their answers, not merely to contain them within perfect, unblemished shapes but to release them and make them available... But then the bubble would be breeched and burst, and it would no longer be perfect. And if it were not perfect, and constant, then it would all have been for nothing, it would be nothing. (192)

The realization of this truth enables Deven to face reality. A transformed Deven takes stock of his empirical existence and decides to commit to his responsibilities. Commitment in life cannot be evaded, according to Bhagvad Gita and the philosophical wisdom of the Gita offers the incentive to Deven to return to his duties and responsibilities. With the noble clarification “Deven had accepted the gift of Nur's poetry and that meant he was custodian of Nur's very soul and spirit. It was a great distinction. He could not deny or abandon that under any pressure” (204). The central vision of the title is that in taking somebody into custody, one has also to surrender oneself to the other's custody. In making his life meaningful not only Deven has taken custody of Nur's poetry but he himself is in custody of Nur. At one place the curatorial comment says:

He had imagined he was taking Nur’s poetry into safe custody, and not realized that if he was to be custodian of Nur’s genius, then Nur would become his custodian and place him in custody too. This alliance could be considered an unendurable burden – or else a shining honour. Both demanded an equal strength. (203)

During his wandering early in the morning, he seeks solace on an empty bench from where he could see dome and the eastern wall of mosque. It seems that blazing sun in the sky is mitigating darkness of night and instilling hope in
Deven. With this dawn of knowledge, he emerges as a realist at last. The closing lines of the text resonate with the sense of hope:

He walked up the path. Soon the sun would be up and blazing. The day would begin, with its calamities. They would flash out of the sky and cut him down like swords. He would run to meet them. He ran, stopping only to pull a branch of thorns from under his foot. (204)

Deven learns at last that the journey of life would continue along with concomitant suffering and misery. He realizes that life has to be accepted as a whole – the creative intertwined utterly with the uncreative.

To sum up, Deven’s dilemma is caused by his inability to adjust with 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, Deven realizes this true nature of his predicament. This realization is indicative of his growth as a social human being.

The next novel, *Fasting, Feasting*, nominated for the 1999 Booker prize, adds yet another laurel to the already long-established multisided luminosity of Anita Desai. The novel too has for its theme some of society’s most uncomfortable and pathological aspects, and it refuses to redeem them with aesthetic flourish. It brings out the panorama of two different societies, parents’ extravagant authority on children and their consequent distress and anguish. The grown-up children feel oppressed and clutched in their domestic as well as social milieu but unable to put any resistance against deplorable circumstances, and thus suffer silently enduring pangs of loneliness, silence and abandonment.

Like most of Desai’s novel, the story moves around a family that exists in society like thousands of such families with hope and fear, happiness and sorrow, gain and loss, which are integral part of life on this earth. The narrative attempts to interconnect its two parts in one work. The first part is told as perceived by Uma, the female protagonist. This segment deals with the life of MamaPapa dwelling in a quiet house with their three children – Uma, Aruna, and Arun. Uma, the eldest daughter, suffers from mediocrity in physical and mental traits. She churns
out to be the dullest of all with a good deal of inanity and idiosyncrasy that devise her disappointment in every walk of life. She is denied to continue education because of her successive failures in school. She barely gets flash of delight in her life. Even her marriage proves utter catastrophe leaving devastating effect on Uma’s psyche and much hue and cry in the family. Being considered an ‘idiot’ and a ‘hysteric’, Uma is reconciled to breathe in the house like a dumb and mute drudge toothless to give vent to her feelings. Uma is a victim of patriarchal society. Aruna, the second daughter, comes into view as a fine-looking, talented and infatuated girl from her early days. She repulses Uma’s passivity and slavish nature. Absolutely conscious of her yearnings, Aruna knows how to get them fulfilled. Unlike Uma, she gets a good husband whom she can dictate. Aruna’s brazenness brings to light Uma’s miserable and depressed nature.

Arun, the hero of the second part, connects Indian and American plot of the narrative. This section depicts utterly dysfunctional middle-class American life through the Pattons, with whom Arun spends the summer. While living with this American family, Arun has had unusual experiences of American ways of life, which left him quite bewildered and outlandish. For Arun, the distance from home means the freedom of total anonymity and therefore he abstains from any sort of social engagement in America which entails obligation. This is because he has been brought up in an overprotective way by MamaPapa being too domineering. He has always been guided by his parents and thus never been given freedom to take decision and enjoy life. The novel ends while he leaves the Pattons to join his semester after presenting a box of tea and an Indian shawl. Weaving the main fabric of the plot around female characters, the novelist extricates liberal prospect for signifying a rich comparison between conventionally bound lifestyle of India and abstemious, crucial and materialistic set-up of the west.
The novel has been variously interpreted by different critics with different point of view. Elaine Yee Lin Ho studies the novel as a depiction of dysfunctional family, where parents seem devoid of parental nurture:

The novel focuses on the children’s shared experience of neglect which both bonds them and divides them. Neglect – and rejection – as the condition of everyday experience and the frame of life-long existence, is the burden of *Fasting, Feasting*... [It] is a novel unsparing in its detail of parental abuse, and the children’s self-abuse which is the tragic consequence. (Ho, 2006:84)

M.Q. Khan notices *Fasting, Feasting* as an immensely successful creation of new images completely different from Desai’s earlier work:

*Fasting, Feasting*, Desai’s novel marks a departure from all her earlier major works. Perhaps she intends to make it altogether a different work from all her earlier novels. Most of the elements like the deep psychological insight into her characters, the neuro-psychic analysis and the serious reactions of her woman characters against the unacceptable situations are completely missing. (Khan, 2004:375)

J.P. Tripathi makes a general study of the novel taking into account all important elements and notices that the thematic range of the novel is broad and almost cosmopolitan. He adds: “As a novel the book is commendable and covers a wide range of life spectacles and themes in two countries and continents. A lack of proper proportion and sense of responsibility among parents is an eternal theme…” (Tripathi, 2004: 115-16).

The first and foremost character from our study viewpoint is Uma, who however, does not dominate the action but frequently comes up for description during the action of the novel. Uma is the eldest of three siblings. As a child, she is quite normal despite her father’s domineering stance. She is very fond of her convent school and teachers there; however, Mama doesn’t support her daughter’s education in a public school. Despite her eagerness to go to school, Uma never proves to be an intelligent student. The busy routine at home, apathy of her father and innate limitation do not let her bloom in a balanced personality capable of coping with the challenges of life. But the very course of Uma’s destiny changes when Mama announces her third pregnancy. Mama is frantic to
have it terminated out of shame as she has two quite grown-up daughters but Papa is single-minded to have son to perpetuate his race, and Mama has to accept the pregnancy. With the birth of Arun, Mama’s union again becomes intact with Papa. The long-awaited son emerges out to be the glue that sticks husband-wife together still more firmly:

He had not only made her his wife, he had made her the mother of his son. What honour, what status. Mama’s chin lifted a little into the air, she looked around her to make sure everyone saw and noticed. She might have been wearing a medal….she had matched papa’s achievement, you could say, and they were now more equal than ever. Was this love? Uma wondered disgustedly, was this romance? (Deasi, FF, 2008:31)

Papa celebrates the birth of Arun as he had never done at the birth of Uma and Aruna. Forgetting all twinges of pregnancy, Mama also joins her husband in his elation at the birth of a son. “Papa, in his elation, leaping over three chairs in the hall, one after the other, like a boy playing leap-frog, his arms flung up in the air and his hair flying. ‘A boy!’ he screamed, ‘a bo-oy! Arun, Arun at last!’ ” (17). Uma is deeply hurt by her parents’ evident ecstasy at Arun’s arrival in the family as she feels herself deserted. She notices how her parents look upon Arun with identical expression. Prenatal indifference has left deep scars on her psyche. Moreover, the birth of Arun sounds the death knell for Uma’s academic pursuits. Now Uma is burdened with the responsibility of Arun. Uma has been trained to sacrifice her personal being at the altar of familial responsibilities ever since her baby brother born. Mama decides housekeeping as the best option for Uma and says: “You will be happier at home. You won’t need to do any lessons. You are a big girl now. We are trying to arrange a marriage for you… till then, you can help me look after Arun. And learn to run the house” (22). Mama has a sigh of relief because now the baby can be left to his elder sister and she can happily go to her kitty parties. When Uma protest that Ayah can also look after the baby as they (Uma and Aruna) were also brought up the same way, Mama sternly says: “You know we can’t leave the baby to the servant. He needs proper attention” (30). Mama’s expression makes it clear that it is quite a different matter now. Anita Desai convincingly presents the obsession of getting son in Indian society.
This situation of MamaPapa takes us back to *Cry, the Peacock* where the obsession for son is described through two characters. First in the case of Pom who goes to temple to offer Prasad to the deity in the hope of getting a son. The second example is that of Mrs. Lal who has four daughters and is pregnant again in the hope of getting son.

As a young girl Uma has her own desires and dreams but they remain mostly unfulfilled. Her parents never think of giving her a career and bring her up so as to marry at right age. But Uma has to face a terrible humiliation in sphere of her marriage too. The tragedy of a girl rejected by many parties in marriage is pathetically drawn in the case of Uma. The arranged marriages produce their own painful comedies when Uma proves difficult to pair off:

Mama worked hard at trying to dispose of Uma, sent her photograph around to everyone who advertised in the matrimonial columns of the Sunday papers, but it was always returned with the comment ‘we are looking for someone taller/fairer/more educated, for Sanju/Pinku/Dimpu…(88)

In fact, the first suitor who comes to see her prefers her younger sister Aruna than Uma. Immense hullabaloo is made at home about this. Uma too feels upset, though she does not give vent to her feelings. The second one goes through with an engagement, but breaks it off after that. The father of the boy asks for the advance dowry in cash at the pretext of building a home for his daughter-in-law. But when Mama Papa goes to settle for marriage, they are informed that the boy has decided to go for higher education and is not interested in marriage as yet. At third attempt, Uma is married only to find out later, that the boy (Harish) is already married in another city and has four children. Thus, Uma returns home in permanent disgrace with another dowry lost, and hereafter her existence is confined to the verandah, bedroom and kitchen of her parents’ home. Papa always keeps regretting two dowries, which he had to provide for Uma’s marriage, and yet she is staying with them without any home of her. Though she never rebels but it does not mean that
she is an unfeeling creature. She suffers silently only to prove her great sense of endurance, like a true traditional Indian woman. Here the novelist exposes the undignified and exploitative nature of the institution of marriage in society. Parents never realize that the hastily arranged marriages of girls often lead to a fatal end, which happens in case of Uma also.

Uma is not given any privacy to go out or enjoy some private moments by herself. When Mama Papa go off for any social gathering, she finds few moments to herself but even these are interrupted by unwanted access of others in room. Whenever she finds her present aimless existence too dull to bear, she tries to find safe haven in her early days’ memories. She takes pleasure in her collection of greeting cards, and Christmas cards which she has carefully preserved. She relishes the collection of her bangles, jewellery, and rich clothes of her wedding days. The contact of these things thrills her with ecstasy:

She runs her finger along the gilt crosses and embossed poinsettias, she plays with fragments of ribbon and lace, and reads through the merry little jingles that make her smile: they are so loving and bright with goodwill and friendship. She binds them all up again with string and stows them away like treasure — to her they are treasure. If anyone were to touch diem, their magic would be somehow defaced: that is how she feels about them (100).

But Mama Papa goes on interfering upon her privacy. They do not like if Uma shuts herself in the room. She has fervor to read the romantic poetry but as she sits in her room holding book, Mama starts slapping at the door:

Why have you locked the door, Uma? Open it—at once!’… Uma thrusts the book in her face: Ella Wheeler Wilcox’s Poems of Pleasure… Mama bats it away like a fly after a quick, short-sighted glance. ‘Reading, reading — didn’t you say your eyes were hurting? So now why are you reading? Put it away and fetch a cup of coffee for Papa. (139)

Uma’s all efforts to get a little joy are overpowered by Mama Papa. When Uma is invited by her favourite teacher Mrs. O’ Henry for a cup of coffee, a great deal of hue and cry is raised at home:
'Coffee? Why coffee?' asks Mama. Uma jerks her head back. ...'Why? What is wrong?'... Uma is defiant. She rubs her nose with the flat of her hand and makes it gleam with defiance. 'Isn't that what you do with your friends – go to their homes for dinner, then invite them to ours?... ‘It is not good to go running around. Stay home and do your work — that is best’ (115-17)

Uma is filled with anger but her timid ever-servile soul does not support her to rebel. She enjoys no independence of thought and action. Even at the age of forty, she still requires permission to take up a job, or to go to party. She is deprived of the bliss of usual living. If she once enjoys cheerful evening with Ramu, one of her cousin, she has to bear her mother’s curse: “Quiet, you hussy! Not another word from you, you idiot child! .... ‘You, you disgrace to the family—nothing but disgrace, ever!”(53). When Dr. Dutt comes up to MamaPapa with a job for Uma in her medical institution; it is greatly welcomed by Uma. But MamaPapa does not approve the very idea of being breadwinner of a girl and with the refusal this chapter is finally closed. Even Uma’s effort to call Dr. Dutt surreptitiously incites the anger of Papa: “Costs money! Costs money!... Never earned anything in her life, made me spend and spend, on her dowry and her wedding. Oh, yes, spend till I’m ruined, till I am a pauper” (149)

Anita Desai is known for her delineation of women characters who are victims of society, the dejected lot, who either react to their situation or fall prey to the circumstances. But, Desai does not make Uma appear a neurotic or depressed girl rather she comes into view as a victim of her circumstances, a victim of her fate and as such she accepts her lot silently, ungrudgingly. However, that does not imply that she is totally lacking feeling and unthinkable. The dreams of a free existence are not unknown to Uma. She has her own wishes and desires, imagination and expectation, which she deliberately hides in order to remain true to her nature. This should be mainly perceived in her dream that Desai has exceptionally traced:

But in spite of her, in spite of them, it was a day to remember. It was a day as all days ought to be, not just a single one in the whole year, a single one in a whole lifetime. If Uma was asked to paint a picture of heaven, then heaven would have paper lanterns hanging from the trees along the drive and around the school courtyard, pots of white and yellow chrysanthemums like great boiled eggs in freshly painted flowerpots on the veranda stairs. (130-31)
Uma is neither a psychic case nor a violent rebellion but a thinking individual in society. Unlike her sister Aruna, she puts up with the circumstances against which she can make no confrontation. She turns out to be the conventional archetypical woman who is born to live and suffer. She becomes a victim to the tendency of society to condition a girl-child to surrender to the customs of male-chauvinistic society. She has gone astray in the cruel world of responsibilities – sometimes to her Mama Papa, at other times to her brother Arun and still other times to her sister Aruna. Her existence has reduced to nonentity having lots of duties however no right. Unlike her other female protagonists, here, Anita Desai has portrayed Uma as a girl who has to live in society accepting all the humiliation, injustices, sufferings and miseries without raising any voice or making resistance. She turns out to be the most passive rather crushed individual in society.

Aruna, the younger sister of Uma, offers a striking contrast to her. She is a self-assertive, obsessive and arrogant girl from the early childhood. She spurns Uma’s obedience and unquestioning nature and unlike her, she makes no effort whatsoever to conceal her rebelliousness. As a child, Aruna has been exposed to Papa’s joviality at the birth of her baby brother Arun and Mama’s social visits leaving baby to sisters and Ayah. The unabashed flaunt of elation of MamaPapa had altogether different effect on Aruna’s psyche contradictory to Uma. The hurt left on her heart since childhood, pushes her towards the quest for an ideal world. The novelist herself writes:

Clearly Aruna had a vision of a perfect world in which all of them — her own family as well as Arvind’s — were flaws she was constantly uncovering and correcting in her quest for perfection.(112)

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 prejudices about woman. Like Uma, she also has no choice in selection of her life partner, and has an arranged marriage. 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 her may merely be calling her self-
declaration. This superiority complex becomes extra strong when she brings off the marriage that Uma has dismally failed to make. The novelist herself writes:

As was to be expected, she took her time, showed a reluctance to decide, played choosy, but soon enough made the wisest, most expedient choice — the handsomest, the richest, the most exciting of the suitors who presented themselves. (102)

True to her expectation, her marriage is fabulous one reverse to Uma’s wedding. Soon after marriage, Aruna is whisked away to a life that is full of pleasure and like a dream. Not only she dictates her parents and sister but after her marriage she gives order to her husband also. Even the seemingly prosperous and happily-married Aruna, who enjoys dazzling pleasures of life, is discontented. She is irritated by her husband’s shirt not matching with the trousers and such petty things, which upset her not only once but almost all through the day. Aruna’s “vision of a perfect world” (112) is always disturbed by petty things. Seeing Aruna upset to the point of tears over trivial issues, Uma feels pity over the hollowness of her life:

…..was this the realm of ease and comfort for which Aruna had always pined and that some might say she had attained? Certainly it brought her no pleasure; there was always a crease of discontent between her eyebrows and an agitation that made her eyelids flutter, disturbing Uma who noticed it. (112)

Thus, from contentment point of view Uma’s fasting and Aruna’s feasting more or less same, confirming the implication of the title.

Another significant character from our study viewpoint is Anamika, who with all her sensitivity and studiousness, appears to be a fragile character. We may shed tears on her death but we feel that she never fought for her existence. She is the most obvious victim of a patriarchal society. Although the pathetic episode of Anamika’s account runs parallel to Uma’s narrative is just an adjunct yet it has left an ineradicable mark on the reader’s psyche. Anamika is “simply lovely as a flower is lovely, soft, petal skinned, bumblebee-eyed, pink-lipped, always on the verge of bubbling dove like laughter, loving smiles…” (68). Besides physical beauty, Anamika’s mental sharpness is exemplary. Her mental agility makes her
win a British scholarship. The letter of acceptance from Oxford is like a trump card which is used to search a husband for her. She has not been sent abroad just because she is of an age to marry. Her marriage to an indifferent and apathetic man, who is much older than herself with higher degree, has tarnished her life. She has been regularly beaten by her mother-in-law which is not even denied by her husband. As a result, her pregnancy ends in miscarriage, and unfortunately, she cannot bear children anymore. The agony of a woman who is trapped in a wrong marriage is not realized by the members of her own race. Though Anamika experiences hell in her husband’s family but her parents never interfere to save her in time. They are apathetic to her pains and only care for false values of Society: “How can she be happy if she is sent home? What will people say? What will they think?” (72). It is the fear of society and reluctance to act that leads Anamika to commit suicide. As the novel recounts:

She filled a can with Kerosene oil. She unlocked the kitchen door and went out on the veranda. Then she removed her cotton clothing. She wrapped a nylon sari about her. She knotted it at the neck and knees. Then she poured the kerosene over herself. Then she struck a match. She set herself alight. (153)

The plight of Anamika throws light on the predicament of women in society because life of married women is shaped by society, to be more particular by social standards. Howsoever qualified or well-read the daughter-in-law may be as Anamika is, but she has to mould herself into the personality of a respectable daughter-in-law coming up to the expectation of society.

In part II, Arun is shown trying to come to terms with life in U.S. Arun, the third child, has made his entry quite late into the family. The birth of Arun makes MamaPapa more dignified and elevated. Arun is no ordinary child; he is a precious only son of the family who needs special attention. Therefore, papa has decided everything what is to be given must be the best for Arun — the best food, the best education, the best life. The parents grow over-possessive of the boy. What would he eat, what would he wear, what subject would he study, what school would he go, are all decided by Papa only. The words freedom,
choice and selection have no significance for Arun as every decision on his part is made by Papa.

He is an introvert child and shows his reluctance against Papa’s dictatorship by not eating non-vegetarian meal, which is most insisted upon. He has a very strong sympathy for his elder sister Uma and feels stricken by her premature ‘stoop’. Papa has a dream of foreign education for his son. Arun remains all the time busy with Papa’s dream at the centre, living a mechanical existence. When the dream of foreign education is fulfilled by Arun, Papa’s celebration out of joy knows no end. Arun measure up to his father’s expectations, but even then he is drained of all feelings. Uma as an observer shows full impression:

She watched and searched for an expression, of relief, of joy, doubt, fear, anything at all. But there was none. All the years of scholarly toil had worn down any distinguishing features Arun’s face might once have had. They had left the essentials: a nose, eyes, mouth, ears…There was nothing else — not the hint of a smile, frown, laugh or anything: these had all been ground down till they had disappeared. (124-25)

Arun’s character is at the centre of East-West encounter – puzzled and hesitant in an alien land. He has never seen so much freedom and so much stress in his own land. In America, he has every intention of remaining aloof, alone and anonymous. Being away from the muddle of familial ties, the life of inaccessibility gives him relief. However, his sense of relief is short-lived, and his real trouble starts when he goes to live with the Pattons during the summer. It is again Papa who finalizes this place for him as it is a kind offer by Mrs. Patton:

Immediately Arun was overcome by the sensation of his family laying its hand upon him, pushing him down into a chair at his desk, shoving a text book under his nose, catching that nose and making him swallow cod liver oil, spooning food into him, telling him; Arun, this, Arun, that, Arun, nothing but…(179)

Once again, he feels suffocated by the kindness, concern and attention. Mr. and Mrs. Patton welcome ‘Ahroon’ to their home. They try their best to make him feel comfortable but Arun feels very much awkward. Mrs. Patton’s over-caring and over-friendly behaviour makes him resentful. In his sensibility, Arun is
revolted by Mrs. Patton basking almost naked: “The very idea appals Arun, if it means the baring of flesh in Public. He has never seen so much female flesh before” (218).

Arun’s independence is suppressed by his Papa which causes massive chaos in his life. Parental over-cautiousness, over-protection and over-possessiveness make Arun so privileged that he feels himself caught in the demands and burden of expectations. He is a victim of society, its obsolete social values; the values which separate him and make him realize that he is the only son of the family. By being overtly protective MamaPapa do not let him grow into a confident and independent child. Because of this reason, he loses his individuality and becomes simply a source of satisfaction to his parents. The irony lies in the fact that the parents instead of protecting the interests, dreams and desires of their children, cares for false social values. Parents should be caring of their children’s concerns but instead of it they become instrumental in torturing them. Arun also falls flat to the expectations of family particularly and to the falsities of society in general.

Two other significant characters who deserve mention here are Mrs. Patton and her daughter Melanie. Mrs. Patton shows same servile mind-set in Massachusetts as any woman in India. In a nation of apparently independence, she compromises over every tiny matter. She is not free even in her choice of food. All her life, she craves for vegetarian food but because of panic of upsetting the harmony of her home, she keeps mum. Though she repulses meat but to keep up the balance in the family, she pretends as if she enjoys it. Discovering a food companion in Arun as he is vegetarian, her happiness knows no bound. In different countries, the socio-familial values may be different, but the reaction of patriarch is everywhere same. Mr. Patton’s reaction to his wife’s vegetarianism is quite pathetic and indifferent as if he has not understood. Arun notices that Mr. Patton’s reaction is pretty similar to his father’s expression. It seems that the status of women is same everywhere whether it is patriarchal Indian society or liberated Western society.
The bulimic daughter, Melanie, is like Uma in the sense that she is also a victim of parental indifference. Her need and hunger for love is as intense as that of Uma, but unluckily, it is as much worthless as that of her Indian counterpart. Both suffer from lack of nourishment and not having it. Uma for instance knows she is hungry but is not quite aware what she is hungry for. She is quite voracious to read poetry, without knowing it is bad poetry but go on and on. And it is same with this American girl who eats and eats, still she is sick, she is hungry. Because it is not food what she wants, it is something else which she cannot articulate even to her self. On the Indian sight starved of love, Uma becomes patient of hysteria and on the western side unsatisfied need of affection makes Melanie a sufferer of anorexia and bulimia. Seeing Melanie, Arun remembers her sister Uma at home and finds a similarity between them:

Then Arun does see a resemblance to something he knows: a resemblance to the contorted face of an enraged sister who, failing to express her outrage against neglect, against misunderstanding, against inattention to her unique and singular being and its hungers, merely spits and froths in ineffectual protest. How strange to encounter it here, Arun thinks, where so much is given, where there is both license and plenty. (217)

Melanie’s estrangement from her family points out the essential hollowness of society in the so-called developed world. Thus, Melanie remains starving biologically and emotionally, despite all her mother’s effort.

The title of the novel Fasting, Feasting has a philosophical connotation of Bhagavad-Gita, no pleasure from pleasure and no pain from pain. Uma’s fasting never gives her a satisfaction as Aruna’s feasting fails to give her good taste. Arun’s feasting also fetches gloominess amid all pleasures. Melanie is hungry even in so much prosperity. Thus, the title of the novel shows fasting and feasting is equally meaningful and meaningless; they are just same. The joy of fasting is as insignificant as the depression and sorrow of feasting. So it’s really a book more about fasting than feasting.

To sum up, the novel depicts the plight of the individual as exposed in the characters depicted above with reference to society. Parents’ over-indulgence in
personal life of children renders a shocking blow on their psyche. And this amazing fact of familial domination over offspring (especially over girls) is vividly painted by Desai in this novel. Uma, Anamika, Arun, Aruna Melanie — all suffer under their parents’ authority. They feel oppressed and clutched in their social set-up but instead of putting any resistance against deplorable circumstances, they endure pangs of loneliness, silence and abandonment which conversely distort their psyche. Their endurance does not imply that they are in harmony with society. They do have grudges against their social milieu but prefer to accept their destiny quietly and try to fit snugly in their allotted slot in society, however, perpetually crave for something which they themselves don’t know.

All the four novels discussed above bring forth the dilemma of the individuals in their social milieu. The characters (Nirode, Monisha, Deven, Uma, Arun) described above are victims of strained relationship with society and family. Anita Desai has simply portrayed turbulent psyche of her characters who feel themselves caged in society for a number of reasons. Her characters are, in general, unhappy with society they live in. Society’s ups and downs have an outstanding and astonishing impact on the individual psyche – which they try to confront to their level best. Thus, we can say that a study of individual psyche and social consciousness in her novels yields the much needed vantage point to assess and appreciate her greatness as a novelist.
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