MAN – WOMAN RELATIONSHIP

In discussing different aspects of society-individual relationship in Anita Desai’s novels, it’s not viable to depart from the man-woman relationship as it is considered a fundamental human relationship for society. The most significant social issue that Anita Desai focuses on is the man-woman relationship — particularly in the novels where woman is the protagonist. The relationship between man and woman that exists in society is an exclusive commitment of two individuals to each other, which nurtures love and mutual support and brings stability in society. It is a relation where the individual looks for compatibility, respect and trust. Any clash in this relationship not only causes the dilemma to the individuals who involve in this union but upsets the tender chords or threads of human bonds ensuing commotion of social order. In contemporary society this man-woman relationship has become increasingly complicated, fragmented and union of incompatibility. Keeping in view the theme of man-woman relationship, the four novels of Anita Desai have been analysed with reference to the plight of the individuals intertwined in such relationship in this chapter.

Anita Desai, who is solely concerned with the inner ambiance of her protagonists, has revealed her skill and dexterity in delineating the complexity of human-relationships particularly the man-woman relationship. She is constantly concerned with the problem of interaction between man and woman in domestic as well as social milieu. Perhaps Desai agrees with D.H. Lawrence, who points out:

The great relationship for humanity will always be the relationship between man and woman. The relation between man and man, woman and woman, parent and child will always be subsidiary. (Lawrence, 1972:130)

In her portrayal of man-woman relationship, Desai mostly broods over the predicament of modern women in male-dominated society. Her female protagonists are woman of deep emotions and fine sensivities who are suffering under their insensitive, inconsiderate and rational husbands. They are hyper-sensitive and highly-stung; any deprivation of love and attachment has a fatal
effect on their finely tuned psyche. In an interview with Jasbir Jain, Anita Desai deliberates her views about man-woman relationship thus:

I think all human relationships are inadequate… Basically everyone is solitary. I think involvement in human relationships in this world invariably leads to disaster. (Jain, 1987:11)

In her novels, Anita Desai has presented marital disharmonies as they exist in Indian male-dominated traditional families. In society where women have resigned role, which does not allow any room for individualism, identity and assertion, she talks of women who question the age old traditions and seek their individual growth. Her female protagonists try to find out meaningfulness in life by revolting against the existing patterns of life. In her forte of handling maladjusted man-woman relationship, Desai delineates her female protagonists victims of marital disharmony. They are entrapped in their marriages with men. They feel traditional social role threat to their identity and therefore incessantly seek their individuality in their milieu.

Cry, the Peacock, Anita Desai’s first novel, unravels the vagueness of man-woman relationship remarkably. The novel is a saga of marital incongruity between Maya and Gautama. The discord in marital life of the couple stems from a variety of factors including Maya’s longing for love and security, her compulsive fears and quest for identity and mainly from the insensitivity and dispassionate objectivity of Gautama.

R.S. Sharma finds Cry, the peacock, the first Indian exemplary novel of psychological fiction in English:

Cry, the Peacock, Anita Desai’s first novel is also perhaps the first step in the direction of psychological fiction in Indian writing in English. Initially the novel shocks us with its neurotic and near morbid obsession with death, but on a closer study, we admire the writer’s skill in capturing the psychic states of a woman haunted by an awareness of death. (Sharma, 1981:24)

K.R.S. Iyengar finds the novel about the impact of prophecy upon hypersensitive Maya. He remarks:
Over the whole narrative in *Cry, the Peacock*, which is really Maya’s effort to tell her story to herself, to discover some meaning in her life, and even to justify herself, there hovers an uncanningly oppressive sense of fatality. (Iyengar, 1984:456)

Madhusudhan Prasad studies the novel as an exploration of Maya’s neurosis based on marital discord:

In *Cry, the Peacock*, Desai explores the turbulent emotional world of the neurotic protagonist, Maya, who smarts under an acute alienation, stemming from marital discord, and verges on a curious insanity. (Prasad, 1981:3)

Usha Pathania has concentrated on the discordant man-woman relationship between Maya and Gautama in the novel. She finds:

Marital relationships are established with the explicit purpose of providing companionship to each other. However, the element of companionship is sadly missing in the relationship between Maya and Gautama. (Pathania, 1992:14)

Maya, the protagonist of the novel, is a delicate and oversensitive married woman, who is incapable to cope with the apathy of her husband and in-laws. Maya’s struggle in the drama of life and death is the representation of contemporary woman’s yearning for love in which man is responsible for driving her insane and compelling her to commit suicide. From the beginning of the novel, we come across the traces of dissonance between Maya and Gautama. The ‘princess of the toy world’ Maya is married at an early age to a friend of his father Gautama, an imaginatively starved, emotionally barren and cool headed, middle aged man. Maya’s marriage seems to be the marriage of convenience rather than of her choice, hence neither true nor lasting. In Maya’s opinion their marriage was “grounded upon the friendship of the two men, and the mutual respect in which they held each other, rather than upon anything else” (Desai, CTP, 2010: 39). Maya, reflecting on her discordant marriage, observes:

It was discouraging to reflect on how much in our marriage was based upon a nobility forced upon us from outside, and therefore neither true nor lasting. It was broken repeatedly, and repeatedly the pieces were picked up and put together again, as of a sacred icon with which, out of the pettiest superstition, we could not bear to part. (38)
Dissimilarity in age, temperament and attitude, works as a big gap in their lives. While Maya is feminine, young, romantic and sensitive, Gautama is realistic, ambitious, systematic and cold. The opening incident of the death of Maya’s pet dog Toto brings to the surface the emotional incompatibility between the husband and wife. Both of them react to this incident in a different way — Maya sensitively and Gautama logically. Toto’s death shatters Maya beyond measure, perhaps because Maya is a childless woman, and Toto was no less than a child substitute for her. She wants dear Toto to be buried in a befitting manner but her husband is incapable of realising the worth of emotional attachment. Instead of consoling and calming Maya in her grief over the death of her surrogate child, Gautama is concerned with a cup of tea. Toto may be insignificant for Gautama but it was everything for Maya. For her, this incident is cataclysmic and initial remark of another massive blow. It is not the only incident but there are several events in the novel, which bring out the widening emotional gulf between the partners. Maya is very much in love with life; she wants to love, live and be loved. It is not for the lack of love for Gautama she suffers, but too much of love for him. Maya’s deep longing to be with Gautama is clearly revealed in the quoted text:

> It was not only for his presence, his love that I longed, but mainly for the life that would permit me to touch him, feel his flesh and hair, hold and then tighten my hold on him. And not on Gautama alone, but on all the pulsating world around him… (88)

Maya needs the warmth of Gautama’s company to alleviate her sufferings, but he is completely oblivious to her needs. As a matter of fact, they do not share anything between them, not even the sensibility that can recognize others’ implicit longings. The blossoms of the lemon tree, half-sad scent of the flowers, astringent smell of the lemons and the stars in the sky are all important for Maya but Gautama neither notices nor shows any interest in these things. She feels exasperated at Gautama’s remoteness from her physical and emotional world. The distance between the couple is the result of their polar temperament. Maya’s discontentment born of Gautama's unpardonable negligence is perceptible in her utterance:
...How little he knew of my misery, or of how to comfort me....Telling me to go to sleep while he worked at his papers, he did not give another thought to me, to either the soft, willing body or the lonely, wanting mind that waited near his bed. (14)

Maya is a motherless child but is brought up by her father like a 'princess'. Her father showers all his love on her as she is the centre of his attention. His excessive love and affection has made her wayward and high-strung child. Maya speaks of her childhood days as her happiest days:

As a child, I enjoyed, princess–like, a sumptuous fare of the fantasies of the Arabian Nights, the glories and bravado of Indian mythology, long and astounding tales of princess and regal queens, jackals and tigers, and, being my father’s daughter, of the lovely English and Irish fairy tales as well, that were read out to me by him… (41)

Maya’s nostalgic jaunts into her past are her attempts to seek harmony in her distorted and unhinged ‘present world’. The world she is living in with Gautama is contrary to the world she was living in until then. She is drawn away in a world where there is no love, no caress, no calm assurance, no communion but only negligence, containment, remoteness and incessant callous discussions. The squalor and murkiness of Gautama’s household deepens her loneliness and enhances her sorrow. Gautama’s mother and sister Nila are insensitive and indifferent to human relationships. They both have a great faith in activity. Emotional needs of the individual are seen nowhere in their world. It is a family devoid of love and cohesion that only “work for fame, name and money.” Gautama himself asserts, “We do have our work – our vocations – each one of us, and so far, I must say, it appears to have brought us a certain amount of serenity” (99). Anita Desai has portrayed meticulously the milieu of Gautama’s family:

In Gautama’s family one did not speak of love, far less of affection. One spoke – they spoke – of discussions in parliament, of cases of bribery and corruption revealed in government, of newspaper editors accused of libel, and the trials that followed … They had innumerable subjects to speak on, and they spoke incessantly. Sometimes, in order to relax, they played games of cards, so swiftly, so nervously, so intently, that they found they had to release the mounting pressure by conversing, and would begin to talk again, of political scandal and intellectual dissent. (43-44)
Maya isolates herself in her morbid isolation finding such an unconcerned and uncongenial ambiance of Gautama’s household. She feels utterly alone in the house and hopelessly craves for company, especially maternal company of a woman since she is a motherless child. But Maya’s mother-in-law instead of giving motherly love to her sensitive daughter-in-law cares for society and is extremely busy in the social work. She only asks her, “When will your father send me another cheque, Maya? Tell him I need it urgently — the nurses in the creche have not been paid this month” (44).

Maya is full of feminine emotions who cannot put up with the refutation of her demands for love, affection and sympathy from her husband. Her emotional intensity, imaginings and sensibilities are higher than a normal being, which are misunderstood by Gautama as superficial tantrums. He generalizes the individuality of Maya by accusing her “tiresome child” with “third rate poetess’s mind...” (96). Having lived a carefree life under the indulgent attention of her loving father, Maya desires to have a similar attention from her husband. But Gautama, a busy, prosperous and serious-minded lawyer, is too engrossed in his own affairs to meet the demands of her wife. Because of this reason, she feels neglected and miserable. Her dissatisfaction with marriage makes her depressive. Gautama’s treatment of Maya as a child pains her much because she wants to liberate herself from the ages of old guardian-child chain.

In Gautama’s opinion Maya’s deteriorating tendency is deep-rooted in ‘father-fixation’, and that is why, she had married Gautama who is fairly twice of her age. Loosing his impulsive syrupiness, Gautama flares-up harshly: “You have a very obvious father- obsession — which is also the reason why you married me, a man so much older than yourself” (122). For Gautama, Maya’s psychic trouble is too strong to be handled. He blames Maya’s father for her immaturity and inability to cope with the realities of life:

He is the one responsible for this — for making you believe that all that is important in the world is to possess, possess riches, comforts, posies, dollies, loyal retainers — all the luxuries of the fairy tales you were brought up on. Life is a fairy tale to you still. What have you learnt of the realities? The realities of common human existence, not
love and romance, but living and dying and working, all that constitutes life for the ordinary man. You won’t find it in your picture-books. And that was all you were ever shown — picture-books... And here you are, capable of seeing nothing but delusions, imagining them to be real. How prettily you stroll in your garden, dreaming of the fairies that sleep in the buds... (98)

The reason for Maya’s obsession is, however, not only ‘father-fixation’ factor, though it intensifies her tragedy. Four years of marriage without children or vocation is the other factor which leads Maya to insanity. But Gautama is not able to see the things beyond surface. Maya’s behaviour might have superficial in Gautama’s mature and experienced view, but she has a tender heart that always cry for his love. However, it is a different matter that Gautama has taught many valuable things that heart. Maya agonizingly reflects:

It was Gautama who found many more things to teach that heart, new, strange and painful things. He taught it pain, for there were countless nights when I had been tortured by a humiliating sense of neglect, of loneliness, of desperation that would not have existed had I not loved him so, had he not meant so much (167)

Gautama’s discouraging response to Maya’s requests and suggestions including the desire to go to the hill station and see Kathakali dances point to the temperamental differences between the two. There is no place for Maya in the world of Gautama. He neither understands her nor wishes her to enter his world and therefore his world is totally strange to her. Maya’s wish for contact and companionship with Gautama remains a need unfulfilled:

Was it so unforgivable to wish to share in human friendliness? In companionship? To Gautama it was — for a woman, for a light-headed woman, a childish one, like myself. In his world there were vast areas in which he would never permit me, and he could not understand that I could even wish to enter them, foreign as they were to me. (89)

In addition to this, Gautama’s constant harping on detachment as preached in The Bhagvad Gita makes the situation worse. He never tries to realize Maya's state of mind and pacify her with love and tenderness. Only he preaches her: “From attachment arises longing and from longing anger is born. From anger arises delusion; from delusion, loss of memory is caused. From loss of memory the discriminative faculty is ruined and from the ruin of discrimination, he (man)
perishes” (95). “But Maya wants love to satisfy love, she wants expression of emotions and affections to drench her thirsty heart, her mind, the pores of her body and womanhood” (Tripathi, 1986:12). His talk of non-involvement and detachment baffles Maya and flickers embers of bitterness in her. She retorts:

‘How it suits you to quote those lines of a dry stick — an inhuman dry stick. Oh, you know nothing, understand nothing.’… Nor will you ever understand. You know nothing of me — and of how I can love. How I want to love. How it is important to me…you’ve never loved. And you don’t love me…’ (96)

The macabre experience of being ignored by Gautama and his family thrust her to memorise the albino’s prophecy, which was made during Maya’s childhood. According to the prophecy she or her husband would die during the forth year of her marriage. This long forgotten but now newly remembered prophecy acts upon Maya with the same force of inevitability as the prophecy of the witches acts upon Macbeth. Gautama dismisses the possibility of stars influencing human lives but the terror persists deep in Maya’s consciousness and paralyses more and more the normal motions of her mind and heart. She feels as if her fate has been pursuing her all the time, and “the final, the decisive” year has her in its grip. The wisdom to surrender to a stronger personality is inherent in a morbidly dependent character like Maya. She is helpless, humble, loving and hence lovable. Her expansive traits remain suppressed in her unconsciousness because she does not want to master her life. Before marriage, the father was there on whom she externalised, and felt strong in his strength; now there is Gautama. For Maya, both father and husband are “magic helpers” to protect her from a feeling of inadequacy. She looks for security but doesn’t know whom to turn for assurance. Being morbidly dependent, she discovers kinship and cries out in agony:

Father! Brother! Husband! Who is my saviour? I am in need of one. I am dying, and I am in love with living. I am in love and I am dying. God, let me sleep, forget, rest. But no, I’ll never sleep again. There is no rest any more — only death and waiting. (84)

It’s not merely morbidity but psychosis of Maya which she is unable to escape from. Had Gautama not been a prisoner of his own conviction he would have rescued her wife from insanity in time. But Maya is left alone to drift in her own
elusive world. The silence and solitude of the house prey upon her. Besides, the terrifying words – unnatural death four years after her marriage to either husband or wife – prophesied by the astrologer ring in her ear and unnerve her like the drumbeats of the mad demon of Kathakali ballets. She feels as if she is haunted by a ‘black and evil shadow’ of her fate. She is weirdly cognizant of her state of mind as she herself observes:

Yes, I am going insane. I am moving further and further from all wisdom, all calm and I shall soon be mad, if I am not that already. Perhaps it is my madness that leads me to imagine that horoscope, that encounter with the albino, his predictions, my fate? Perhaps it is only a phenomenon of insanity? (92)

Maya not only suffers from emotional starvation but sexual dissatisfaction also contributes to her frustration. Her psychic reverberations born of sexual unfulfilment are depicted with great subtlty by Desai. There are several suggestive references in the novel which give a picture of Maya’s craving for sexual pleasure. Maya’s desire of sexual union is clearly perceptible in her contemplation on seeing the male and female papaya trees in the garden:

...I contemplated that, smiling with pleasure at the thought of those long streamers of bridal flowers that flow out of the core of the female papaya tree and twine about her slim trunk, and the firm, wax-petalled blossoms that leap directly out of the solid trunk of the male.... Besides, If I could pleasures in contemplation of the male papaya, how much more food for delight in this male companion, surely. (80)

The unforgettable thematic dance image of the peacocks and its anguished shriek for mating “Pia, pia ... Lover, lover. Mio, mio, – I die, I die” (82) symbolizes Maya’s agonized cry for love mating and union with Gautama. Maya identifies her love agony with that of peacocks, “Now that I understood their call, I wept for them, and wept for myself, knowing their words to be mine” (84). Gautama has no sexual urge and thus remains listless to the cry. Maya is vocal about it:

The man had no contact with the world, or with me. What would it matter to him if he died and lost even the possibility of contact? What would it matter to him? It was I, I who screamed with the peacocks, screamed at the sight of the rainclouds, screamed at their disappearance, screamed in mute horror. (146)
Maya thinks of her married life with Gautama as a deadly struggle in which one is destined to kill the other. She fails to extricate her thoughts from the fears of death and the sensuous love for life. She is perturbed by the thought of death but does not know who is to die. She is almost certain that death is to devour one of them either Gautama or she: “Who knows which one is to perish? Perish one must. The desert is waiting, the rats and the lizard. They will claim the flesh, the winds will carry the bones away” (108). Like Som Bhaskar in Arun Joshi’s *The Last Labyrinth*, Maya is perpetually haunted by the death-neurosis.

Maya’s deep and intense absorption in her own sensuous world and overall ignorance of her husband to it, amplifies Maya’s assorted problems. The inner vicious revulsion of Maya for Gautama mounts up and makes her antagonist against him. Her pain becomes more acute when Gautama calls her mad and her behaviour ‘madness’. She squeals at such demeaning acknowledgement of her feeling from that person whom he considers her saviour and unconsciously has surrendered her whole being. She cries hysterically finding this earth an uninhabitable place for her:

All order is gone out of my life, all formality. There is no plan, no peace, nothing to keep me within the pattern of familiar, everyday living and doing that becomes those whom God means to live on earth. Thoughts come, incidents occur, then they are scattered, and disappear. Past, present, future. Truth and Untruth. They shuttle back and forth, a shifting chiaroscuro of light and shade; of blood and ashes. And I am tired of it. (149)

Maya reveals her neurotic mind through the appropriate use of words, “Wild horse, white horse, galloping up paths of tone, flying away into the distance, the wild hills. The heights, the dizzying heights of my mountains, towering, tapering, edged with cliff-edges, founded on rock... Danger! Danger!”(150). Maya’s experiences accompanied by nightmares, hallucinations and terrifying images torment her tender psyche. But she never finds consolation from Gautama who remains quite oblivious to Maya’s fast deteriorating mental state. Gautama begins to appear her as an adversary, only a ‘figure of granite’, ‘a body without a heart, and a ‘heart without a body’. In her opinion:
He was a tired man, worn out by a day's hard, concentrated work. Age surrounded him, weariness steeped his limps. Grey, grey, all was grey for Gautama, who lived so narrowly, so shallowly, and I felt sorry, infinitely sorry for him, for this slow, harmless, guileless being who walked the fresh grass and did not know he touched it. (163)

Gautama’s detached angle for life makes her vindictive. Her frustration in the paucity of love and attachment grows, so much so that it makes her destructive. She believes for herself that “there is still so much left, I have hardly lived yet” (148). She does not feel prepared for the death because her dreams of enjoying life are yet unfulfilled, and considers her husband only an impediment as far as her fulfilment of her dreams and desires are concerned. Thus, her desire for life makes her almost convinced that it’s not she but Gautama who might die as he is already detached and indifferent to life and will not miss it when gone. Ultimately, her accumulated revulsion and frustration find its outlet when in a vindictive fury, she hurls Gautama down to the very bottom from the rooftop and that is the end of Gautama. Her attempt to save her own world takes her to lunatic asylum as she suffers from mental torture to the extent of nervous breakdown. Though her life comes to an end yet her journey remains incomplete.

To sum up, Maya persistently cries for love, attachment and companionship but her feelings remain unresponded, more often than not, misunderstood. The interpersonal maladjustment in marriage culminates in the tragic end of both Maya and Gautama. Maya’s quest for meaning and value in life proves futile in this male-dominated society, where women’s cravings for love and security are merely superficial. As an individual, Maya does not conform to social norms and incessantly seeks her identity in the social institution of marriage but she is too weak to stand the stress, hence withers away.

Anita Desai’s fourth novel, Where Shall We Go This Summer, is a deeply engrossing and disturbing novel with an inner fury of the protagonist. The novel reflects the dichotomy of man-woman relationship in modern society through the edgy marital relationship of Sita and Raman. Here, Anita Desai presents the dilemma of a lonely married woman and uncovers her subterranean agony and intense crisis for identity in her domestic realm particularly and encircled social
milieu in general. Sita, the protagonist, is a mother of four children and the fifth yet to be born. Being fed up with her dreary married life, this pregnancy seems her merely an ordeal. She does not want to bring her child in a world where there is callousness, hostility and annihilation. She completely fails to find joy and happiness in her conjugal life and finds it hard to put up with her husband’s practical wisdom and children’s destructiveness. Consequently, faced with an unwanted fifth pregnancy, Sita goes away from the mundane milieu of Bombay to the island of Manori in order to preserve her inner being and to refurbish her damaged self wishing the moments of serenity. Her prolonged intra-psychic conflict and recognition of reality on the island form the core of the novel. The conflict between two polarized temperaments and two discordant viewpoints represented by Sita and Raman, sets up the theme of conjugal discord as the leit-motif of the novel.

The portrayal of Sita’s character confirms Desai’s vision of creating the kind of characters who struggle to preserve their individuality by saying great ‘No’. She herself says:

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

Desai has reinforced the above viewpoint in this novel by quoting Cavafy’s poem, which reflects her philosophy:

To certain people there comes a day
When they must say the great Yes or the great No.
(Desai, WSWGTS, 2005:127)

In Sita’s life, such day comes when she becomes pregnant for the fifth time and not been able to adjust with the commonplace sordidness. She makes a stand against the general current to preserve her individuality, her poetic sensibilities and wholeness, which she feels are fast receding in disharmonious environment of her home with Raman. She escapes from the callous dominion of her husband
to the island of Manori to be with herself. Finally, her journey ends up with ‘Yes’ as she accepts life with its concomitant challenges and duties. Anita Desai has beautifully dealt with the distress and tenderness of hypersensitive Sita in the light of conjugal disharmony by screening the emotional and temperamental abyss between the husband and wife in the novel. As B. Ramchandra Rao Suggests:

Sita and Raman represent the external opposition between the passion and the prose of life. Raman, the husband, says the ‘great yes’ and follows the path of honour and social success. Sita says ‘No,’ and although she is not destroyed by life, she is compelled to arrive at some kind of a compromise with life. (Rao, 1984:87)

Writing about incongruity between the couple, Seema Jena says: “Raman accepts the norms and values of society while Sita refuses to accept the authority of society. Raman is a typical conformist…Sita’s escapade is rather her retreat from life” (Jena, 1989:48). R.K. Gupta makes a study of the theme of the novel and finds that “the central theme of the novel is Sita’s effort to say ‘No’ to her life with her husband Raman and the demands it makes on her”(Gupta, 2002:108). The critic further comments on the relationship of the couple:

The man-women relationship between Raman and Sita is based on the class values, of principles, of confidence even, or between normal, double social standards and the iconoclastic attitude of inflexible honesty. It is an encounter between the adjustment with disappointment, as Raman puts it and the ability to say the great No if and when needed, as trusted by Sita. This is not solely a case of an emancipated woman revolting against the slavish bonds of marriage. It is much more than that, it is a question of the basic truth that is better and naked and can neither be hidden, nor be halved to suit individual. (ibid.164)

Sita is disgruntled with her husband Raman, who has no association with her personal world. The estrangement arises between the husband and wife primarily due to their different temperament. Raman is a flourishing businessman, who embraces pragmatic vision of life, and entirely believes in instantaneous present. In contrast, Sita is full of feelings with higher aesthetic sensibility and imagination. If Sita is introvert, reserve and have profound conception of existence, Raman is shallow, social, and does not give much thought to his
commonplace dealings. Sita’s dream of getting love and affection from her husband shatters terribly. Raman, “a middling kind of man”, is unable to gratify the poignant yearnings of his wife Sita. He is more or less like Gautama in *Cry, the Peacock*, who is insensitive to his wife Maya’s feelings. Sita’s introversion does not let her divulge all her latent, heart core impressions to Raman because of his casual stance. She keeps suppressing her spontaneity which implants a permanent seed of dissonance between the couple developing steadily into an immense incongruity. The temperamental differences cause recurrent clashes between the two, but it seems to reach at its climax when Sita repugnantly dispose of the very notion of delivery of her fifth child and comes to a decision of revisiting her father’s island Manori leaving Raman behind.

Sita never get used to the ways of Raman and his family. In early years of their marriage, Sita lives in an age-rotted flat with his family. She finds herself in disgusting surroundings and revolts against “their subhuman placidity, calmness and sluggishness….with fear that their subhumanity might swamp her” (43). The vegetarian complacency and stolidity of women-folk of her husband’s family appall her. All the members of the family are absorbed in their life and their own views about her. To show her defiance, Sita begins to smoke in Raman’s household and talks to the family members impulsively looking at them with provocative gestures. She does not like the business-mindedness of Raman and his friends. Raman’s guests were his business associates who according to Raman are pleasant and tolerable. But Sita considers them no better than animals who are neither pet nor wild animals but “like pariah… in the streets, hanging about drains and dustbins, waiting to pounce and kill and eat.” She shouts repulsively: “They are nothing — nothing but appetite and sex. Only food, sex and money matter. Animals” (43). Sita’s habitation in Raman’s family gives him inexplicable backaches so he moves with her to his own small flat. Though she lives alone with her husband and children yet she is not happy. She feels as if her personal world is encroached by the practical world of her husband. She is left alone in the chasm of loneliness as Raman never tries to understand her. He considers Sita’s boredom customary. Sita admits ‘out of a passion of boredom’

The temperamental disaffinity of the couple fetches frequent disagreements between them, which are reflected in their divergent responses to life. Sita always accuses Raman for his lack of understanding for he is not able to comprehend the sensibilities of Sita. He considers her deeds as immature and foolish. Sita’s oversensitiveness and Raman’s imperviousness is easily perceptible in several suggestive occurrences in the novel. The incident in which a number of crows assault and kill an eagle fills Sita’s heart with pain and distress. But Raman utters in sadistic delight: “They’ve a made good job of your eagle…. ‘Look at the feathers sticking out of that crow’s beak’…” (37). This incident reflects the inner turmoil of Sita. The helpless and shattered condition of Sita is represented by the wounded eagle and the crows epitomize oppressive life around her in which her tender self is clutched. The weird and overtly insensitive nature of Raman causes serious commotion to the vitality and indulgence of Sita.

When they were coming back from Ajanta and Ellora caves, the sight of the strange foreign tourist, who wants to go Ajanta, without knowing which direction he has to go, attracts Sita’s attention to the annoyance of Raman. Sita admires the courage of this tourist while Raman dismisses him as a fool who even doesn’t know which side of the road is to wait on. But Sita falters and comments: “It made him seem more brave not knowing anything but going on nevertheless… I would like to travel like that myself” (47). Raman regards her admiration as an act of infidelity. Then there is an incident in which she has a vision of the divine love of a couple in the Hanging Gardens. She is so deeply touched by the sight that she claims it the only happy moment of her life. She comments:

I have never seen such tender, such gentle movements….they looked at each other with such, such a strange, strange expression – I can’t forget it. I can’t explain it. Tender, loving, yes — but inhumanly so. I mean, one doesn’t see such an expression on human faces ever. So intense. Quite divine... They were like a work of art — so apart from the rest of us. (133)
But in Rama’s opinion, Sita’s view is inhuman and devoid of feminine feelings. He cries out like a large, grey bird in despair: “You have four children. You have lived comfortably, always, in my house. You’ve not had worries. Yet your happiest memory is not of your children or your home but of strangers, seen for a moment, some lovers in a park. Not even of your own children” (134). Their value system, beliefs and attitude to life are mutually opposed; and therefore there is only desolation and tormentation.

Sita’s underprivileged childhood also has its share in making her sensitive, insecure and imaginative. She is a motherless child and brought up by her father in a haphazard way. She believes that her mother is died until her brother Jivan told her, “She didn’t die — she ran away, to Benares.”(76) Initially she is shocked but then preferred to accept. She had an unusual childhood amid crowd:

She belonged, if to anyone, to this whole society that existed at that particular point in history — like a lamb does to its flock — and saw no reason why she should belong to one family alone. As she was not sent to school, she only came in contact with other families like her own and life seemed normal. She could not remember wanting or waiting for her mother. (77)

She had accepted her mother’s fact but her father’s negligence impaired her psyche. He neglected her completely and never showed love and affection. There was always an “impossibility of talk between her and her father... Perhaps because she never found him alone” (72). He was always in the company of Rekha, silent at his side, or in the centre of a ring of young, fanatic, brilliant-eyed chelas, who adored him. Sita was not cherished by her father, but she enjoyed full freedom and serenity on the island. She used to play with her brother Jivan and feel exhilarated and surprised at the miracles of the island.

Sita’s father was a god like figure for the islanders during his life and even after his death. He was portrait of Gandhi for them. His protective figure, experiments and miracle cures on the island seemed to have magic and mystery in them. The magical healing of the villagers’ disease by drinking sweet water of the well that Sita’s father had dug up, the pregnancy of barren Phoolmaya, treatment of a village boy when he was bitten by one of the scorpions and several other
references have an element of fantasy in them. But there were other aspects also of his personality, which highlighted the darker side of this shimmering and glorious man. While still on the island as a young girl, Sita could never able to comprehend the ambiguous figure of her father. She suspected his illicit relation with Phoolmaya. Her father’s intimacy with Rekha also created doubts in her mind. Sita didn’t like the water of well for it was not sweet. She used to reflect why her mother left her father, whom everyone called, ‘the Second Gandhi’. When Sita had listen his father’s talk in the attic above, she grew more perplex. Like the mystery of her mother’s disappearance, the enigma of her father’s personality and relations remained unresolved for Sita. The atmosphere in which Sita lived and grew up is that of neglect, hypocrisy and partiality. It did not provide Sita congenial environment to flourish and grow as an individual. Sita was deprived of needed emotional security, belongingness, love and affection from her childhood. After the death of her father, her siblings took their decided course of life without any difficulty but it was Sita who had nowhere to go, nothing to do. She needed desperately someone to belong to. And then to take her out of deplorable seclusion, “Deedar’s son came to cremate her father … and fetch her away, send her to college, install her in a college hostel and finally — out of pity, out of lust, out of sudden will for adventure, and because it was inevitable married her”(89). She left the island with some relief exhausted by the drama of island, craving for the sane life. Raman seemed to Sita exactly like:

…a tired manager drawing the curtains together, locking up the empty theatre with its cigarette stubs and stale odours and dust, and stepping out on to the street. It was as though he had been expressly sent by providence to close the theatrical era of her life, her strange career, and lead her out of the ruined theatre into the thin sunlight of the ordinary, the everyday, the empty and the meaningless. (90)

Life was not easy even after marriage for Sita. In Bombay, she feels herself trapped finding Raman highly expansive who just wants to outshine every sphere of life. He is punctilious, stern and disciplinarian with greater capacity of accommodation. He has no time to realize Sita’s emotional need. Her dream of secure, accomplished and sane life is never realized by him. She loses all her charm and interest in the life around her, particularly in her sapless marriage and
grows ‘tremendously uncertain one’. The unconcerned behaviour of Raman makes her feel miserable and seared. On sharing news of her fifth pregnancy with Raman, she is attributed as “a woman now in her forties, greying, aging, to behave with such a total lack of control” (29). It is not only Raman’s apathy that hurts Sita but children’s insensitivity and practicality equally dishearten her. Sita, who takes anything and everything seriously, is besieged by the destruction and inhumanity around her. She feels that the outside world is filled with cruelty and destructions. In Sita’s view, city is nothing but a place of madness where children enact scenes from movies, fight with each other. She is shocked at the quarrelsome behavior of ayahs who rudely indulge in cheap quarrels in the streets. The destructive element in her children’s behaviour equally upsets her. Karan kicks the tower of blocks and enjoys it. Her sons fight hurling their bodies at each other. She watches her daughter Menaka crumbling new buds and destroying her paintings, which she has drawn with great care. She is surprised to think how naturally destruction has come to life. The violence and destruction of the outside world overpower her. As the novelist narrates:

They all hammered at her with cruel fists — the fallen blocks, the torn watercolours, the headlines about the war in Vietnam the photograph of a woman weeping over a small grave, another of a crowd outside a Rhodesian jail; articles about the perfidy of Pakistan... They were hand-grenades all, hurled at her frail goldfish-bowl belly and instinctively she laid her hands over it, feeling the child there play like some soft-fleshed fish in a bowl of warm sea-water. She folded her hands over it, frightened, certain now that civilization had been created by the godlike efforts of the few, in the face of a constant, timeless war of destruction that had begun with time and was now roaring around her, battering her and her fish-foetus so that survival seemed hopeless. (49-50)

Sita wishes to “escape from the madness” of mainland to a place “where it might be possible to be sane again” (32). The world of horror and destruction fears her and her thought veer around her baby’s survival amid violence, bloodshed and depravity. She admits: “…destruction may be the true element in which life survives; and creation merely a freak, temporary, and doomed event” (50). Sita does not want to give birth to her unborn child in a civilization that threatens to destroy the world. It seems that Sita’s rebellion is against modern civilization,
which her husband is unable to comprehend due to his excessive worldliness. Sita grows muddled and loses all feminine and maternal belief in childbirth. She begins to panic it as ‘yet one more act of violence and murder’ in a world that already has so much. She doesn’t want to add more to it by this act. She has four children “with pride, with pleasure –sensual, emotional, Freudian, every kind of pleasure,” (29) but now her patience seems to be on the verge of exhaustion.

Many critics find Sita’s repulsion for child birth as an unwomanly act and have seen it as against maternity belief. But if we observe Sita’s character meticulously, such criticism does not hold any ground. Sita’s motherly love is quite obviously reflects in the ways she has brought up her four children. Her worries, concerns and sensibilities are higher than common mothers and therefore she is so apprehensive for her ‘fish-foetus’. Her children’s pain, cries, and screams affect her more than Raman. As at one place authorial comment says:

He had been listening to such cries for years now, it was not to him that new, raw sound it was still to her ears. She had had so many children but never grown used to the alarm in that cry. Each time it tore a fresh gash in her. It made her wild, it made her run. Then to have another child, and hear it launch itself upon another scream. (129)

Besides, Sita does not want to go under an abortive surgery but to keep the child safe inside her. This also shows her profound concern for her unborn child as a mother. It is Sita’s deep resentment and rage for Raman that propel her to move on to Manori ignoring her advance stage of pregnancy against the sane advice of her husband. Perhaps she considers that the magic of island would somehow stop the biological process of delivery. Her notion of denying child-birth is nothing but a mother’s attention and effort to save her baby from doomed effects of the world. Her higher sensibility and sensitivity check her to go further, and in this light to certain extent, it seems justified. Sita's decision of escape and freedom to attain miracle has twofold inferences. First, her decision indicates as if she wants to soar to the island because she feels disgusted with her married life and reluctant to continue the bond that existed between her and Raman. It seems that she feels this bond (fifth pregnancy) has come to represent the life tied down to
liabilities and duties with a person who does not in the least understand her. Secondly, Manori seems to her as a kind of self-exile in search for identity in silence. It signifies her desire to be herself only, to protect her ‘fish-foetus’ and to give meaning to her relation. Sita does not revisit island under any false impression with past as while still on island as a young girl, Sita begun to suspect the magic spell of her father. But the life of mainland with Raman fails to give her desirable love and security. For that reason, Island acts only as a refuge for her as she has no other alternative.

Sita is, however, shocked to see the miserable condition of the island, which had been a golden place for her before marriage. She detects a great change on the island as if it has lost all its magic and charm. The island seems toneless, flat and muddy which fills her with disappointment and dejection. Though Sita is uneasy and knows that island has no reality, no essence yet observes certain natural beauty on the island. However, this beauty does not give that security and potency to her ‘self’, which she has estimated. Even her father’s house has gone to ruins. The surroundings of the island only worsen her isolation. Sita has come to the island in order to attain sanity and to reassert her identity, but the island gives a brutal jerk to her ideas. She finds despair and desolation in the surroundings of island which symbolize Sita’s inner turmoil and dreariness. She knows that life cannot go on this ramshackle island as life on the island no longer guards her. The children also get annoyed and fed up with the primitive life on the island. She feels rather guilty to children Menaka and Karan who accuse her silently. She senses their repulsion and boredom and powerless.ly tries her best to comfort them. But when Sita herself feels disillusioned coming to the island what more she can give her children. As soon as Sita gets the news of Raman’s arrival on the island, she feels relieved and unexpectedly driven by the thought of Raman’s coming. She feels “one violent pulsation of grief like a white bird flying up with one strident scream, then plummeting down, thinking, ‘it’s all over —’ and then a warm expansion of relief, of pleasure, of surprise” (118). She remembers it’s the second time he has come to save her from the island. In her present state of defeat when she looks at Raman, the desire for security, tenderness and gentleness grows all more. She feels so weak that she wants to lay
down her head and weep: “My father’s dead – look after me…” (120). But Raman is man of different world where all these emotions don’t exist. Sita aches inside for not being given what she wants. Instead of comfort, she receives a jolt of relentless betrayal from him and her children. She comes across the fact that Raman has not come to see her, to take her as she presumes but Menaka has called him up. He has come to fetch Menaka for her admission. Sita fills with repugnance and disappointment and again the violence begins to flow within her. But despite all betrayals and treacheries, she cannot help to feel Raman’s worry for her and children. The authorial comment illumines Raman’s realistic temperament:

He never hesitated — everything was so clear to him, and simple: life must be continued, and all its business — Menaka’s admission to medical college gained, wife led to hospital, new child safely brought forth, the children reared, the factory seen to, a salary earned, a salary spent… That was why the children turned to him, sensing him to be the superior in courage, in leadership. (127)

Sita recognizes her husband’s disposition and courage at heart. In an immense state of dilemma, she finds two strands of her life — one with Raman and other on the island. She is confused — which half of her life is true and which illusory? But towards the end, an ingenious growth takes place in Sita’s character. She recognizes her innermost self with ‘the right No’. Sita requests Raman to see the things in correct perspective: “I was saying No — but positively, positively saying No. There must be some who say No, Raman.” She avows: “Perhaps I am only like the jellyfish washed up by the waves, stranded there on the sand bar. I was just stranded here by the sea, that’s all” (135). She sees the absurdity of her plan to come to the island. The novelist here writes:

She had escaped from duties and responsibilities, from order and routine, from life and the city, to the unlivable island. She had refused to give birth to a child in a world not fit to receive the child. She had the imagination to offer it an alternative — a life unlived, a life bewitched. She had cried out her great ‘No’ but now the time had come for her epitaph to be written —… (128)

She is perturbed by this intense realization that she is getting averse to her responsibilities. She gets answer to her dilemma in D.H. Lawrence’s poem,
which she has been trying to recall for so long. The last three lines of this verse are highly suggestive:

Nay, even the slumbrous egg as it labours
Under the shell
Patiently to divide and sub-divide,
Asks to be hidden, and wishes nothing to tell. (137)

Everything is clear to her now. She is hopeful that the great gap between her and her husband would be newly and securely bridged. She is resolved to embrace the life of duties and responsibilities with Raman. She searches the footprints of Raman to follow her path. The following lines explicate the point:

She lowered her head and searched out his footprints so that she could place her feet in them, as a kind of game to make walking back easier, and so her footprints, mingled with his, sometimes accurately and sometimes not, made a chain of links, wet and muddy hollows, across the washed and brushed sand. Seeing one footprint follow another so precisely, so logically, words, too, sorted themselves out, formed lines… (136)

Sita’s life on the island comes as a revelation to her. She is ready to accept the commonplace life which runs through complicated human situations in different ways. Her acceptance shows growth and maturity of her character. Sita realizes the difference between the necessity and the wish, between what man wants and what he is compelled to do. Her arrival with Raman to the mainland and desire to put up with the child yet to be born suggest her return to life and society, despite all its drudgery and dullness. In her interview with Jasbir Jain, Anita Desai says about the change in Sita:

Sita has had an unusual childhood. She is let to expect life to continue to be an extremely unusual, full of large, meaningful happenings, whereas life comes to her as very trivial, full of disappointments; it comes as a tremendous depression to her. Really her entire will is not to give birth to a child in such a world. There is no sense of contentment at all, it in rebellion right through the last moment. When she realizes what she has to live to, she has to compromise. (Jain, 1987:11)

Thus, *Where Shall We Go This Summer* offers a positive solution to the temperamental incompatibility and resultant alienation in man-woman
relationship in present scenario, although after a long period of acute suffering and desperation. Bidulata Chowdhary comments: “Between two uncompromising attitudes of Maya’s madness and Monisha’s suicide, Sita is the only heroine of Mrs. Desai to understand and succumb to the word ‘only connect’, the only compromising link between the prose and passion of her life” (Chowdhary, 1995:77).

Another important novel from the point of view of man-woman relationship is *Fire on the Mountain*, which has established her reputation as one of the best Indo-Anglian novelists with its publication in 1977. It is for this novel that she was awarded Sahitya Akademi Award and Royal Society Award in 1978. Anita Desai has perceptively delineated the theme of disharmony between man-woman relationships in the novel. The extra-marital affair of husband is at the root of incongruous nuptial relationship that exists between Nanda Kaul and Mr. Kaul. The novel centres around the protagonist, Nanda Kaul, who does not get love, affection and security from her husband throughout her life. The life-long frustration of Nanda Kaul is caused by the infidelity of her husband. She is an elderly widow – a great-grandmother, but has not overcome the shock caused to her by her husband who was a Vice-Chancellor. After her husband’s death, Nanda retreats to the house in the village of Kasauli away from the disturbances of family and society. Desai makes use of flashback technique in describing the central theme of marital incongruity in the novel.

The novel has provoked varied critical responses. Rama Kundu studies the novel as a brilliant manifestation of woman’s dream of space of her own:

In Anita Desai’s *Fire on the Mountain* one finds a superb expression of the woman’s dream of a space of her own. Here the author allows her protagonist the expanse of a mountain. From the very start the most noticeable aspect of the novel is its sense of geographical space. The hillstation resort of Kasauli, to which Nanda Kaul, the elegant widow of the Vice-Chancellor, retires in her old age is a real empirical space and at the same time it is apparently emblematic of Nanda’s protest and assertion, the penultimate act of assertion that she has made at the fag-end of her life, regarding her need of a room of one’s own.’ (Kundu, 2004:150)

R.K. Gupta observes that the novel divulges anguish of its women characters who suffers for their decorousness. He affirms:
*Fire on the Mountain* unfolds the Desai’s tragic view of life, in which innocents are bound to suffer and pay a heavy penny for this. The fire on the mountain becomes the emblem of destruction and purgation, the destruction of an unkind world of many Nanda Kauls and Ila Dases, of an unequal situation in which women suffer from the slings of misfortune, social inequities and injustices committed on them by a cruel man-dominated society. (Gupta, 2002:123)

Vasant A Shahane has taken a note of Anita Desai’s demonstration of basic technique of fiction as montage in the novel. He observes:

*Fire on the Mountain* is a distinctive novel primarily because it is a mosaic of many patterns, a texture of many images drawn from botanical and zoological sources. In no other novel of Desai’s has this mosaic of the human and the natural, the past and the present, the individual and the social, the inner and the outer, the movable and the immovable, the transient and the eternal been portrayed with such great power and poignancy almost bordering on a tragic sense of life. Thus, technique becomes discovery through contrasted conditions of human consciousness pitted against an apathetic social reality, and the unfolding of barriers in man’s quest for the realization of ideal harmony. (Shahane, 2008: 120-21)

G.S. Balram Gupta studies the novel as “the story of agonized cry of Nanda Kaul, an old woman who had too much of the world with her and so longs for a quiet, retired life” (Gupta, 1984:185).

When the novel opens, Nanda Kaul is found thoroughly disillusioned with the human bonds whether matrimonial or filial. Having been rejected and discarded all her life by her husband and children, she decides to live in the Shimla hills of the distant Himalayas at Carignano, in Kasauli – a hill resort, ignoring all contacts and relations. In the twilight years of her life, she achieves that privacy at Carignano which she had longed for all her life. Anita Desai has beautifully created an artistic image of this place:

Everything she wanted was here, at Carignano, in Kasauli. Here, on the ridge of the mountain, in this quiet house. It was the place, and the time of life, that she had wanted and prepared for all her life…..and at last she had it. She wanted no one and nothing else. Whatever else came, or happened here, would be an unwelcome intrusion and distraction. (Desai, FOTM, 2008: 3)
Nanda Kaul put up with the life-long betrayal of her husband maintaining calm exterior until her husband’s death. She played her role of Vice-Chancellor’s wife with such a grace and dignity that almost everybody envied her. All those years, she had survived and endured in her husband’s home appear Nanda “like the gorge, cluttered, choked and blackened with the heads of children and grandchildren, servants and guests, all restlessly surging, clamouring about her” (19). She clearly remembers the veranda of their house where she sat in her cane chair, instructing the servants, surrounded by the wives and daughters of lecturers and professors of the university. They whispered:

Isn’t she splendid? Isn’t she like a queen? Really, Vice-Chancellor is lucky to have a wife who can run everything as she does, and her eyes had flashed when she heard, like a pair of black blades, wanting to cut them, despising them, crawling grey bugs about her fastidious feet. (19)

Despite all pleasures, she could never consider her husband’s house as her own. Now at Carignano, she is reminded of the house that never really belonged to her. “Mentally she stalked through the rooms of that house — his house, never hers…” (20). Her life as the Vice Chancellor’s wife though crowded and full of social activity but was essentially meaningless and unsatisfying. There had been too many guests coming and going all the time, leaving little privacy for her. Mr. Kaul wanted her always in the dining room for entertaining his guests. Despite Nanda Kaul’s busy schedule, her married life lacked warmth and understanding. But she carried on because of her obligations to her husband. In spite of having a large number of children and grand children, she suffered from a terrible sense of loneliness. She led her life as her husband wanted her to live, out of sense of duty. She performed the duties of her married life very well, but her husband and children never bothered about her sentiments. She recalls how she had felt alone among children and various relations. Her suffering and tribulation from the disorder and unpredictable excess is described by the novelist in this passage:

There had been too many guests coming and going… Too many trays of tea would have to be made and carried to her husband’s study, to her mother-in-law’s bedroom, to the veranda that was the gathering-place for all, at all times of the day. Too many meals, too many dishes on the table, too much to wash up after. They had had so many children, they
had gone to so many different schools and colleges at different times of the day, and had so many tutors—one for mathematics who was harsh and slapped the unruly boys, one for drawing who was lazy and smiled and did nothing, and others equally incompetent and irritating. Then there had been their friends, all of different ages and sizes and families. (32)

Despite fulfilling so many liabilities, Nanda Kaul never felt any association with her husband. Emotional deprivation is at the root of her disillusionment with human bonds. Mr. Kaul did not love Nanda as a wife but treated her like some decorative yet some useful mechanical appliances needed for the efficient running of his household. Nanda Kaul’s relationship with her husband was never pleasant one as seen through her own reminiscences. This wedding was quite based on physical passion and circumstantial convenience of male. She played the gracious hostess all the time and enjoyed the comfort and social status of the wife of a dignitary. But she was lonely and neglected and she knew it. Above all, her husband’s life long affair with Miss David, the Mathematics mistress had been a perpetual source of her agony. Mr. Kaul appointed his beloved Miss David as a teaching staff. He used to invite her for the badminton parties, drop her at her home in night and come back secretly to his bedroom. Nanda did not get genuine love from her husband and this is aptly suggested by her not sharing a bedroom with her husband. She only kept the frozen smile on her face. She looked after the family, his children, servants and his house with commanding confidence. Besides marital discord, the relationship between Nanda Kaul and her children was also intriguing and ungratifying. In hubbub of her home, if she had something of her own so it was an hour of tranquility every afternoon:

She had practised this stillness, this composure, for years, for an hour every afternoon: it was an art, not easily acquired. The most difficult had been those years in that busy house where doors were never shut, and feet flew, or tramped, without ceasing. She remembered how she had tried to shut out sound by shutting out light, how she had spent the sleepless hour making out the direction from which a shout came….. Everyone in the house knew it was her hour of rest, that she was not to be disturbed. (25)

After this temporary retreat, Nanda Kaul’s “life would swirl on again, in an eddy, a whirlpool of which she was the still, fixed eye in the centre” (26). She was
deeply wounded as a wife and as a mother. Because of this reason, she felt the need of privacy to calm down her pain-filled psyche. She wanted to stick together the bits and pieces of her identity. After the death of her husband, she had been so glad when it was over. When she gets the long-waited liberty from her burdened life, she decides to spend the remaining days of her life in the deserted house in Kasauli. Nanda vacates the Vice-Chancellor's house and comes over to Kasauli. She wants to be alone, to possess ‘Carignano’ exclusively to herself in this period of her life. She is happy to “leave it all behind, in the plains, like a great, heavy, difficult book that she had read through and was not required to read again” (32). Her love for privacy is not something inherent in her but the indifferent attitude of her husband and children makes her pine for privacy. As the novel recounts:

Nor had her husband loved and cherished her and kept her like a queen — he had only done enough to keep her quiet while he carried on a lifelong affair with Miss David, the mathematics mistress, whom he had not married because she was a Christian but whom he had loved, all his life loved. And her children — the children were all alien to her nature. She neither understood nor loved them. She did not live here alone by choice — she lived here alone because that was what she was forced to do, reduced to doing. (158)

Nanda Kaul’s agony shows the hollowness of her married life. Her desire to be unseen and unknown is the result of her unhappy and cumbersome relationship that she has had with her husband and children. As a mother of several children, all demanding and unaccommodative, she had been given too many anxious moments. Now all alone in Carignano, a house associated with many weird stories, Nanda Kaul feels that loneliness is the only essential condition of human life. Whenever she looks at the tall pine trees that stand out from the Underwood, she is reminded of her own alienation. The symbol of eagle is repeatedly used in the course of the novel to highlight the quest of Nanda:

An eagle swept over it, far below her, a thousand feet below, its wings outspread, gliding on currents of air without once moving its great muscuar wings which remained in repose, in control. She had wished, it occurred to her, to imitate the eagle — gliding, with eyes closed. (21)
The eagle is a symbol of aloofness and liberated soul free from all worldly affairs and sufferings. Therefore, it fascinates Nanda who is bored with too much earthly affairs and seeking detachment now.

Nanda Kaul is haunted by the existential angst which has led her to conclude that human life is basically a lonely struggle against the odds of life. In her case, the odds have manifested themselves in the form of an adulterous husband and cantankerous children. She strongly believes that life and its dealing is a raw deal to her. She resolves to find the meaning, if any, of her existence in isolation. In this isolation even the sight of the postman is frowned upon by her. She tries to hide herself from him in the garden wishing “she could merge with the pine trees and be mistaken for one. To be a tree, no more and no less, was all she was prepared to undertake” (4). The letter from her daughter, Asha about the Raka’s arrival at Carignano disturbs her as she wants “to be alone, to have her Carignano to herself” (18). Raka is an invalid great granddaughter of Nanda Kaul who arrives at Carignano to convalesce after her typhoid attack. Raka’s intrusion in her privacy makes her very uncomfortable. When Nanda doesn’t want to add even a single tree to the group of apricots or pine, in her absolutely perfect life of Carignano, the thought of a new additional child appalls her as “a box of sweets might sicken” (34). She now considers every attachment to be the preface of new betrayal and all socialization as fake. Nanda’s reaction to the arrival of the postman and Raka makes it appear that she has become a misanthrope. But the truth is that she is sensitive and preoccupied with the real nature of her existence as opposed to the illusory life of her past as a Vice-Chancellor’s wife.

The old woman and the young girl live in double singleness. But as the days pass by, Nanda Kaul finds herself drawn towards Raka something which she has not expected herself. But the little girl refuses to be befriended and escapes into the hills looking for company in solitude. Raka is an unusual child unlike other child of her age. Her interest, activities and games are strange. She eschews all tenderness and affection spitefully. She wants only one thing, “to be left alone and pursue her own secret life amongst the rocks and pines of Kasauli” (52). According to Desai, Raka is born recluse. She compares her with Nanda Kaul:
If Nanda Kaul was a recluse out of vengeance for a long life of duty and obligation, her great-granddaughter was a recluse by nature, by instinct. She had not arrived at this condition by a long route of rejection and sacrifice [like Nanda Kaul], she was born to it, simply. (52-53)

But if we go in details of Raka’s background, the point that Raka is a born recluse doesn’t hold much logic as it is her circumstances which made her so. As a daughter of an ill-matched couple, Raka had been witness to the brutality and futility of human existence. She continues to suffer from the echoes of her tortured childhood. She is haunted by the recollections of the nightmarish nights, which have made her almost a child-stoic. The endless quarrels of her parents left scars on her tender mind. She had seen only bitterness, distrust, and violence in her domestic milieu. She recalls in Carignano her father’s wild behaviour towards her mother at home:

Somewhere behind them, behind it all, was her father, home from a party, stumbling and crashing through the curtains of night, his mouth opening to let out a flood of rotten stench, beating at her mother with hammers and fists of abuse — harsh, filthy abuse that made Raka cower under her bedclothes and wet the mattress in fright…. and her mother lay down on the floor and shut her eyes and wept. Under her feet, in the dark, Raka felt that flat, wet jelly of her mother’s being squelching and quivering, so that she didn’t know where to put her feet and wept as she tried to get free of it. Ahead of her, no longer on the ground but at some distance now, her mother was crying. (78-79)

Besides Nanda Kaul’s strained conjugal relationship, Desai brings out another incongruous man-woman relationship through Raka’s parents’ disharmonious matrimony. Like Monisha in Voices in the City, Tara had been forced into wedding with Rakesh who was a diplomat and rich man. Tara was reduced to nonentity as a result of her husband’s ill-treatment to her, the affairs he had, his drinking and brutality. She suffers from chronic nervous breakdown as a result of her maladjusted marital life, but even then Tara’s mother polishes the vices of Rakesh as virtue in her letter to Nanda Kaul. Asha writes about Tara’s husband Rakesh:
...he is not really so bad as Tara might make you believe, she simply doesn't understand him, doesn’t understand men, and she really is the wrong type of wife for a man like him so I can’t blame him entirely although it is true that he does drink. (16)

Tara’s Mother represents the biased viewpoint of society that blames only woman for marital discord and expects a compromise from woman’s side only. The strained marital life of Tara and Rakesh affects Raka’s psyche depressingly. Her unhappy childhood makes her an introvert and unusual child. She has no happy memory of her childhood to cherish. Her father’s brutality has dehumanized her. She abhors attachment from human being and develops an interest in rugged and deserted aspect of nature. She takes pride in saying: “I’m shipwrecked…I’m shipwrecked and alone” (68). The very idea of school, routine, order and discipline is absolutely rejected by Raka. Nanda Kaul’s fabricated tales do not appeal her. She wants to release herself from her grandmother’s disagreeable intimacy. She resents to be confined to the old lady’s fantasy world when the reality outside appeals so strongly. Nanda Kaul is surprised to see that solitude never disturbs Raka. She loves to wander amongst rocks and ravines. She never wants to be loved and centre of attention.

Ila Das is another intruder in Carignano who perturbs Nanda’s tranquility and privacy. Anita Desai has projected yet another aspect of misery and meaninglessness of woman’s existence in male-dominated society through Ila Das. She is first introduced to the reader when she calls Nanda Kaul on phone regarding her intended visit to Kasauli to meet Raka. Through a long interior monologue in Nanda Kaul’s mind, the reader is informed the past of Ila Das. She is a childhood friend of Nanda Kaul. She had also served in the university as a lecturer, but soon after the death of Mr. Kaul she had been ousted. Before finding the present employment as a social welfare officer, she struggled a lot. The news of her coming reminds Nanda Kaul the bitterness of old days, when she was Vice-chancellor’s wife. Ila’s arrival creates additional complication in Nanda’s life. Ila recollects the past fascinatingly being tired of the present but Nanda eschews the past so as to repose her smoldering inner self. When Ila talks of the past days, Nanda is frightfully upset. Sustaining herself on a meagre pay and putting up with the inevitable condition of loneliness, Ila involves herself in
social welfare. Her extremely busy life in social welfare comes before us in stark contrast of Nanda’s lonely secluded life at Carignano. However, both suppress their inner turmoil and depressed psyche — Nanda by fantasizing her seclusion and tranquility being away from maddening crowd in Kasauli and Ila by falsifying her insecurity and loneliness being involved in social work. Ila Das and Nanda Kaul represent involvement and detachment from emptiness and meaningfulness of life.

Ila Das alone wage a battle against the mindless multitude to stop malpractice of child marriage in the village. She remains steadfast in her conviction and refuses to make any compromise. Though she is aware of the dire consequences of her mission yet she remains faithful to her purpose. She succeeds in stopping several child-marriages; the prominent one is of the marriage of Preet Singh’s seven years old daughter. But she pays a dear price for her conviction. She is raped and murdered by Preet Singh who has been dying for revenge. The news of Ila Das’s tragic death leaves Nanda shocked and stunned. She gasps: “No no, it is a lie! No it cannot be. It was a lie! Ila was not raped, not dead. It was all a lie, all” (158). The illusory world which Nanda has created as an emotional shelter completely breaks down. It is clearly stated by the novelist:

All those graces and glories with which she had tried to captivate Raka were only a fabrication: they helped her to sleep at night, they were tranquilizers, pills. She had lied to Raka. And Ila had lied, too. Ila, too, had lied, had tried. (158)

The tragedy of Ila Das in the third part of the novel represents the tragic life of a woman in male-oriented society. She is a thinking individual who dares to exercise her free will and act according to her own choice rather than submit meekly to the odds of life. Ila Das loses her chastity and life in the process of her struggle with the brute forces, but her life has nonetheless become meaningful by virtue of the fact that she chooses a cause and fights for it.

The novel ends, when Raka sets the forest on fire. “Look, Nani, I have set the forest on fire. Look. Nani — Look — the forest is on fire” (159). Raka’s predilection for the forest fires elaborately analyzed by critics for it has symbolic overtones. Ever since her arrival at Carignano, Raka evinces a keen interest in
wild fire. The fire is symbolic of the empirical manifestation of her inner conflict – whether to continue with her mediocre, painful and aimless existence imposed upon her like her grandmother by heredity and environment, or to revolt against their dictates to create her own values. The fire created by her is the result and manifestation of her existential angst to destroy the old and meaningless to make room for the new and significant. It is an affirmation of her search for values in an otherwise futile existence.

To conclude, the novel unfolds the tragic and dismal view of the man-woman relationship in a phoney world through its female characters. Nanda Kaul, Raka, Tara, Ila Das — all suffer in one way or other in male-dominated society.

*Journey to Ithaca* is a novel that brings to the surface a shift in Anita Desai’s structural and visionary perspective as she has turned to Vedanta and Upanishads here. The novel brilliantly divulges the theme of the conjugal cacophony between husband and wife upholding the quest motif as a nucleus of the scheme. This time, Anita Desai has brought to fore the dissonance in the relationship of a European couple Matteo and Sophie. The basic discord between the couple stems from their spiritual incompatibility. The voyage to India with different purpose in mind ignites the differences between diametrically opposed couple. While Matteo is an absolute idealist, carrying Hesse’s *The Journey to the East* in his pocket, Sophie is hard-bitten German journalist with pragmatic and blunt materialistic views. The difference in attitude and opinion creates a gulf between the couple.

Anticipating the dynamic growth in upcoming novels of Anita Desai, J.P. Tripathi has made a valuable comment which seems justified in context of her transcendental novel *Journey to Ithaca*. He has rightly pointed out that:

> Her dynamic search of change in theme and spectacle may temp her to explore newer regions of human experience. If per chance, her artistic sensibility and resourcefulness were devoted to a spiritual, or still another ethical or rural region her miracle work of art may be the result. (Tripathi, 1986:158)
Observing the novel, an eminent critic Meenakshi Mukherjee suggests that ‘in all likelihood the novel is not intended for the Indian reader’. She further adds:

*Journey to Ithaca* intertwines two such voyages of pilgrims from different parts of the world who seek a mirage called India. Those of us who have to daily confront the concrete dimensions of the Indian reality may not, after all, be so beguiled by its elusive aura. (Mukherjee, 1996:52)

Asha Susan Jacob has observed the novel as the saga of multiple quests. Writing about the theme of the novel, she rightly comments:

The central preoccupation of the novel is not alienated individuals, but the quest motif and the journey undertaken to reach the goal, though in the process they get alienated from the world. The story is told from different angles using recollection and dairy. (Jacob, 2004: 178)

The voyage of the itinerant characters for the illumination of spirit is the leitmotif of *Journey to Ithaca*, which C.P. Cavafy’s poem *Ithaca* as the epigraph to the novel helps us to understand:

> Always keep Ithaca fixed in your mind.  
> To arrive there is our ultimate goal.  
> But do not hurry the voyage at all.  
> It is better to let it last for long years;  
> ..................  
> not expecting that Ithaca will offer you riches  
> Ithaca has given you a beautiful voyage  
> ..................  
> And if you have found her poor, Ithaca has not defrauded you.  
> With such great wisdom you have gained, with so much experience  
> You must surely have understood by then what Ithacas mean. (JTI)

The epigraph of the novel ascertains that the value is not what you find at the journey’s end, but the significance lies in one’s undertaking the journey, the journey being more important than the destination. Three journeys are introduced in the novel by Anita Desai — the journey of Matteo and Sophie from Italy to India, Mother’s journey across three continents and Sophie’s voyage to reveal the Mother’s past all by herself all over world. All the incidents and actions in the novel are related with the soul’s journey to enlightenment itself.
Two restless souls Matteo and Sophie, who yearn for momentous life, tie the knot after a brief period of courtship and set off on their voyage to India. But the course of journey brings a depressing effect on the communion of Matteo and Sophie, perhaps because both have undertaken this journey without feeling it a mutual venture. Matteo, the seeker of truth, comes to India in search of truth, wisdom and mystic delight. His aim is fixed in his mind and he pursues it resolutely. But Sophie accompanies her husband with no such sanctimonious intention of attaining truth rather she comes to India like any other voyager to enjoy the freedom and adventure. She wants to explore the exquisite landscape and exotic enchantment of India. She values her marriage and relationship with Matteo and wishes to realise their unique and essential love through this adventurous journey. But all her dreams of getting love from her husband shatter after their arrival in India. As a young wife, Sophie has many feminine desires to fulfill while Matteo has his own purpose of attaining mystic delight. They come across bitter and traumatic phases soon after their marriage because of their opposed attitude to life. According to O.P. Budholia, “Matteo represents all that comes from heart while Sophie represents all that comes from mind” (Budholia, 2010:187). The dichotomy of Matteo and Sophie’s relationship is clearly highlighted from the beginning of the novel. For Matteo, there are two paths before everyone — the path of Joy and the path of pleasure. He tells Sophie what he has read in the Katha-Upnishad:

There is the path of Joy and the path of pleasure. The two paths lie in front of one. Pondering on them, the wise one chooses the path of Joy; the fool takes the path of pleasure (Desai, JTI, 2009:38)

But Sophie is unable to understand the meaning of Matteo’s words because for her, both are same — the path of pleasure and the path of joy. There is no difference between the two. Her western-oriented approach towards life propels her not to have blind faith in spiritual pursuits and saints. She feels that this whole country is “populated with devotees; the gods could not have enough: now they recruited them from abroad as well” (49).
Matteo and Sophie have to stay in a cheap hotel when they arrive in India. Despite the filthy condition of the hotel, these might be called few blessed days of Sophie’s life with her husband. They enjoy rain on the roof at night after the heat of long summer day in the hotel. It is for the first time Matteo makes love with his wife since they have come to hotel. However, the rain makes damp patches in the room and roof starts dripping. Seeing filthy condition of hotel, Mr. Pandey advises them to move to the ashram in Bihar. Sophie feels it sinister while for Matteo, it is a divine sign. From this moment on, Matteo’s obsession for his spiritual mission keeps increasing day by day and so is Sophie’s estrangement from him. Sophie wants to go to Goa, lie in the sun and eat shrimp and omelettes all day, but Matteo’s fascination with truth and mystic India disheartens her. As a result, Sophie leaves him within the short period of their arrival and moves to Goa in a frantic fury. Despite enjoying company of good friends there, she feels as if she has caught in the trap of fiends and monsters. Stumbling through the dust, she cries for Matteo. Thoroughly fed up with this life, traumatized Sophie comes back to her husband who takes her to a prison-like ashram in Bihar. In this ashram, Sophie feels like a beast in the cage — constrained, helpless and unhappy. She feels quite exasperated observing the lack of facilities in the ashram. Sophie, who once used to write articles for German magazine, now has engaged in tedious and commonplace affairs of the ashram just because of her husband. She does not feel at ease in taking communal bath in the ashram nor is she habitual of bathing with bucket under the tap. The loudspeakers early in the morning make her sick. The crowd, clamour and accusations of ashramites shake her to the bottom. She feels quite suffocated in the stifling and unruly environment of the ashram. The life of ashram has rendered Sophie thoroughly miserable. When Matteo comes to her in night, she fights him off fiercely. “I can’t — I can’t here, in this Zoo. I want to go away. I want us to be by ourselves.” But Matteo withdraws in distress, “By ourselves we’ll never come to know India” (53). She finds Matteo wrong and shouts: “I suppose you think the ashram is India — the loudspeakers at dawn and the crows and everyone eating off the floor” (54).
While still Sophie is unable to cope with the surroundings of the ashram, Matteo gives another blow to her disheveled psyche by undertaking pilgrimage to the shrine outside the city. They walk through open fields under blazing sun following a slippery track which requires their full attention. Sophie feels completely exhausted and disgusted too. On the way, she is shaken to have an unkind scene of a mother who is carrying her eighth (seven were already dead) sick child to the shrine in order to have his life. Sophie traces it as erroneous belief and severe risk to fetch such a child to the shrine marching through so tough way instead of providing him medical check-up. Then, she observes that the pilgrims are taking bath and food according to their cast and creed. She is unable to swallow this fallacy of the pilgrims who are coming to holy place with holy feelings. She finds it hard to put up with the national and superstitious behaviours of Indian devotees. After a great turmoil when they reaches shrine, Sophie feels rather disappointed as the temple seems her too insignificant and small to be the goal of such a long journey. They have reached the shrine, pilgrimage is ended and what remains is the dead child. Sophie fails to sleep or even lie down after seeing this horrific image. She shouts at Matteo: “I want to know why we are here? Matteo sneers “I told you — to find India, to understand India, and the mystery that is at the heart of India” (65). Sophie impudently remarks:

I have found it. At its heart is a dead child. A dead child, Matteo! .... Because at the end of that journey is a dead child… She breathed, lowering her knees and coming close to him, ‘couldn’t we stay in our own country? To die there?’ …Don’t I need you? Don’t you need me? (65)

Matteo is fully adjusted to the environment of the ashram because his sole purpose in life is to attain truth, but Sophie finds it hard to get used to the ways of the ashram. She is determined to take no part in Matteo’s life. Other ashramites seem to be aware of Sophie’s angry resistance. They look at her with utter animosity. Sophie notices that foreign contingent in this ashram work sternly at their lessons to prove themselves equal to or perhaps superior to the Indian disciples, who assume that the ashram only belongs to them. Both groups are equally contemptuous for Sophie though they show it differently. She
smokes in order to relax herself but apparently it is an attempt to disobey the rules of the ashram. She resents discrimination in the food arrangement of the ashram on the basis of caste and religion. Food is not served to foreign disciples in dining room with Indian disciples but on the verandah outside in the leaf plates. Hindu disciples follow this arrangement as they fear of being polluted. The novelist writes:

When Sophie understood this arrangement, she refused to eat in the Veranda and went to sit on the steps behind the kitchen where a pack of stray dogs lived by licking the discarded leaf plates clean. She ate a bag of peanuts instead, cracking the shells between her teeth and spitting them out on the steps. (87)

Sophie's restlessness in the ashram disturbs Matteo. After receiving loud complaints about Sophie’s behaviour, he sneers at her, “Sophie, please, do you mind! If you don't like it here, please remember I have to stay in order to study, Can’t you behave? (87). Sophie no longer has the strength to fight with Matteo as the summer and unhealthy environment of the ashram has drained her potency. Sophie feels rather nostalgic that they had come to India together, to share an adventure. Instead they face a fake face of the truth that is India. She had married to Matteo against the wishes of her family and come to India unwillingly submitting to her husband’s whims. Even she leads a life of poverty, depression, sickness and estrangement in India to fulfill Matteo's quest for spirituality. But now the realization of an unfathomable abyss between her and her husband makes Sophie perplexed. Anita Desai reveals Sophie’s inner turmoil in the quoted text:

Sophie was baffled by what it had all come to, and the dark inexplicable gulf that now existed between them. Then she shook her head fiercely, her hair whipping around her face in angry denial of that gulf. They had come to India together, to share an adventure: they would go through it together, stay together, recover their unique and essential love. She pushed out her underlip and scowled to persuade herself of that, but the flies bothered her, the heat of the sun made her wilt and soon she was wondering if her strength had not already run out. Then she was ready to cry. (88)

Matteo comes seldom to the room in the ashram as he wants to be away from anyone or everyone. Even he barely recognizes Sophie’s presence in the public
areas, especially when he keeps the company of his teachers. He comes late at night in the room after listening swami’s discourses downstairs. Although that does not dissuade him from coming near his wife at night no matter how contemptuously he carries out the act of ostensible love. The following lines explicate the points:

Occasionally at this hour he would make love to her and this he did with a new contempt, and a violence that was so unlike him, it shocked her......... When she cried out in pain or fear, he would let out a small laugh, exultant, as if he had achieved his end. Sometimes, if she felt strong enough, she struck at him and fought him but this made him more violent. Then he would leave her to go and sit against the wall, his face twisted with revulsion, or he would grab his roll of matting or a sheet and fling out of the room to go and sleep on the veranda. (91)

Sophie suffers after getting Matteo's disgusting love and shows signs of nervousness and insecurity. She comes to despise her self, scratching at the skin and boils on her body in repulsion. She feels queasiness in her esophagus and often writhes on the floor in unease until she is exhausted. One day she falls down on the stairs due to extreme sickness. After thorough check-up by the ashram’s doctor, Sophie is found pregnant. The news of Sophie's pregnancy has made everyone even more jealous in the ashram. One of the woman disciples is heard saying, “What do they think, that they can come here and live like animals in our ashram?” (93) Sophie finds nothing but hostility and unacceptance in the Ashram. She wants to walk out from the ashram, but she has to stay on due to her pregnancy. In the meantime, a tremendous shock comes to every ashramite with the news that the head swami employed a band of hooligans to throw out the people from some building, which could have been the ashram’s property. Now Matteo has to leave the ashram as Sophie threatens him to complaint in the police station about all this. He tries to pacify Sophie’s antagonism and promises: “We’ll leave, we’ll leave. Just be quite. Stop screaming, Sophie.” When Sophie learns that it is again an ashram in the hills where her husband wants to go, she irritably shouts: “Another Ashram!” (97). Thus, Matteo leaves this ashram for another ashram in north, much to the bitterness of Sophie.
Sophie fails to understand the very reason of Matteo’s obsession for gurus and his wandering from one ashram to another. She had never wanted the life of a drifter but a normal and decent life of a western couple. Sophie becomes terribly ill due to the long journey of train from Bihar to north in the scorching heat of summer. Due to this, she has to be taken to the hospital instead of the ashram. Leaving Sophie in Dr. Bishop’s care in the hospital, Matteo goes to the ashram alone. The hospital with poor medical facility, the unruly mob of so many ladies inside it and insanitation has made Sophie utterly restless and sad. In the ashram, Matteo meets his spiritual guru, the ‘Mother’, who is a radiant young woman. He feels so divine, so blissful in her company that she forgets everything, even to his wife. Matteo attends the discourses of the Mother, which he really feels complex in comprehending the heart of the matter but certainly finds himself taking them in. She remarks about the futility of all religion thus:

When you sit here with me, you remember why you have come to live here, you feel again the purpose of your lives: to experience bliss… It is not like going to church… not like going to the temple…. This is no church, my friends, this is no temple or mosque or vihara. We have no religion… we do not listen to the black scolding voices of religion here. Religion makes one ashamed, makes one guilty, makes one fearful.

(110)

Anita Desai seems to unravel the real essence of spirituality apart from the Truth through this revealing statement of the Mother. Matteo strongly believes that the Mother is the master on the earth in whose divine presence he will attain ‘Light’ and the mystery of life can be unraveled. Matteo goes to the hospital and tells Sophie about his divine experience, which he had in the ashram. He is least bother about his wife’s well being, what matters in his life is only the Mother and her divine presence. For Matteo, “Any time spent away from the Mother, without her, was wasted time, empty time, dead time” (122). He assures Sophie that if she joins the company of Mother, she and baby both will be well. Being a wife full of feminine emotions, Sophie suspects the spiritual authority of Mother over her husband. Despite Sophie’s reluctance, Matteo wants to bring her in the ashram. He tells mother about Sophie’s condition, which he has not discussed earlier. The idea of Sophie’s stay with Matteo is not easily digestible to Mother yet adjusting with the idea very smoothly; she allots them a cottage.
Sophie can think of resolving the differences with her husband Matteo but she cannot support the authority of Mother whom she considers “a monster spider” who has spun the web “to catch these silly flies” (144) like Matteo. Sophie's rational mind and her logical outlook demand scientific answers from her husband. She questions: “And what is she, this Mother – a hypnotist, a magician?.... Are you afraid my question will expose her?” (122). At this juncture, when her pregnancy is at advanced stage and she needs her husband with her, Matteo is occupied in kitchen work given by Mother. Sophie bitterly asks Matteo: “Would you work like this for your father if he asked you to join his business? No, you wouldn’t, you’d refuse outright. So why do you do it for her? What do you get out of it?” (142). In Matteo’s opinion, it is mother who has taught him to work without desiring the fruit from that work while his father always wanted him to be self supporting. She teaches him higher values of life. All this seems absurd to Sophie as she believes, “Higher, lower — who cares? Work is work and should bear fruit. If work doesn’t bear fruit, it doesn’t serve its purpose” (142). Sophie is very suspicious in mind as a wife regarding the growing intimacy of her husband with Mother. She does not wish to enter in Mother’s world but Matteo’s desertion is so profound that it increases her uneasiness. So, she decides to bring to light the mother’s past and reality. With such intention, she begins to participate in the ashram’s activities and meets the ashramites seeking clues about her. Matteo feels exhilarated seeing Sophie mingling with the ashramites. Sophie secretly goes out for evening darshan to observe mother but feels disappointed to learn that the Mother is only a little emaciated creature, who makes dramatic gestures. Her suspicion deepens more about the Mother’s mythical figure in another encounter when the Mother summons peacock out of the wilds showing grains and displaying her glories with preening expression of vanity. In Sophie’s opinion, Mother as a mythical figure implements the same tricks to call devotees from the world over as she performs to gather peacocks from the wild. Sophie pieces together all the fragments of the Mother’s past as she gets the information from the people of the ashram. She shares this information with Matteo but he doesn’t pay much heed to Sophie’s words as he believes that the sadhus bury their past and are reborn when they take initiation. Sophie mocks at this: “Ah, so — she was born, or re-born, the Mother of the ashram...What if I tell you she was once a dancer, that
she first came to India with a dance troupe” (149). Just when Sophie feels that her search is now moving in an interesting direction, it comes to an abrupt end by the child birth. She doesn’t mock at her husband any longer. She has focused her attention to the liabilities of motherhood instead of Matteo. If she has any interest in him, it is to see him as a father. Matteo is equally insensitive to the child as to Sophie. He is completely observed in the publication work. He has no time left for family. Sophie writes to her mother for the things needed for the child. Things arrive through parcels but these objects are absurd for Matteo. Sophie isolates herself and doesn’t intrude into her husband’s privacy. The only concern what she has is her child’s protection. Therefore, Sophie is “like a lioness wholly involved with her cub, guarding it even against its father” (158). Matteo wants to name his child according to Mother’s suggestion but Sophie says tersely, “Tell the Mother I’ve already chosen the name. It is Giacomo” (156). As a mother she is worried about her kid's future and as a wife tormented with the idea of Matteo’s stay with the Mother in the ashram. She wants to get her child’s education in Europe instead of ashram’s kindergarten. She says calmly, “We must leave now, Matteo. The time has come to go back” (160). But nothing goes to Matteo’s heart as he is desperate to protect what he believes to be right. He professes before Sophie that his love with the Mother is sacred and the very reason of staying in the ashram:

My love for her isn’t the love one feels for a beautiful or glamorous or intriguing woman, a legend, as you say. You must see that! There is a difference between sacred and profane love. Listen, in her presence I feel I am more alive than I am in the presence of any other living creature. Her presence heightens and illuminates the experience of living as no one else’s does...when I leave her, I feel I am falling, down, down into darkness.... The love that you and I share, that is mortal love. It exists but it won’t exist forever. The love I have for the Mother, that others have here for her, that is immortal. (160-61)

However, his sacred love could not help him to divert his desires to profane love time to time. This spiritual love could not deter him from begetting children in quick succession as Sophie finds herself second time pregnant. In her excessive involvement with Giacomo, she fails to protect herself and let this accident happen to her. The first baby is soon followed by a second one and Sophie remains preoccupied with them. Sophie becomes very weak and dispirited after
the birth of her second baby, Isabel. Desai expresses pathetic state of Sophie as a mother and estranged wife thus:

The baby sucked at her breast day and night, screaming if separated from her, and Sophie felt not only her strength but her resolution draining away from her. She often wept with anger when alone but not when Matteo was there because then she saw herself through his eyes: strident, selfish. (165)

Matteo is fully aware of his wife’s pain but says nothing to indicate. It seems he is devoid of those feelings and sentiments which keep husband-wife bond intact and melodic. Sophie’s longing for love and security is merely an obstruction in Matteo’s path, which he really wants to remove. When Sophie is not able to bear India any more, she packs her bags for her home. Sophie expects that Matteo will say something but what he says is: “Sophie, she’s ill. The Mother’s very ill.” Sophie outbursts with anger and cries, “Now find out — what is mortal and what is immortal, what is scared and what is profane… Not the stone, not the shrine, Matteo, it is a woman who keeps you here. Call her what you like — the Cosmic, the Absolute — but she’s a woman. Don't you see?” (166-67)

Sophie’s irritation and weakness is quite obvious as she is tearing between her role of a mother and of a wife. She prefers her responsibility for her children. Once she leaves the ashram to seek her identity and independence, she feels the real outer world thrusting “itself at her like blows from its fists” (169). The outer world appears ‘real’ one to Sophie with all its menacing demonstration. The sights for which she has developed immunity on her earlier travels in India, now strike her as being more brutal than she can bear. She has a very shocking experience of real world that sees her as a sex object. She experiences bitter sense of loss and betrayal. She cries bitterly, “Matteo! What about this, Matteo? What are you going to do?”(170).

After a great deal of troubles, Sophie reaches her parents home in Frankfurt but feels uprooted. She feels alienation amidst her own familiar surroundings. She finds it very difficult to cope with her mother’s excessive concern with everything best for her children. But absolute rage of Sophie appears when her
mother suggests that the children should be baptized. Sophie protests: “No, I did not leave India and all its superstitions and rituals to come here and submit to the tribal rites of Europe” (173). Quite soon, she leaves her home and goes over to Italy to Matteo’s home with children. Though the larger and warmer atmosphere in Italian countryside is more relaxing yet she is consumed by the restlessness. The images of the Mother, Matteo and ashram surge back in her mind to haunt her. The thought that she has left Matteo behind with Mother torments her. As the novel recounts:

The thought of him made her turn her face to the grass and burrow into it to stop herself from moaning aloud, it hurt so shockingly. He had been the cause of pain all the years in India, and she believed to remove him would be to remove the pain. Now it seemed one half was ripped from her side, and she pressed her hand where it hurt so fiercely that it felt like a wound, a flow of blood. (174)

She thinks that Matteo’s absence, the void created by him in her life must be filled and it certainly demands some efforts on her part. Then at one of the parties given by Matteo’s sister, Sophie meets Paolo, who too, seems to show interest in Sophie and India. She is not particularly interested in him but takes him as he is. But soon, she finds his company very boring and his queries about India tiresome. She finds herself hating him. Her life with Matteo has spoilt her for the life with man like Paolo. Through Sophie, the novelist shows the sanctity of husband-wife relationship. Sophie has adjusted with this fact that this is her life now — the villa, the lake and the children. She involves herself with the children — arranges school for them, teaches them lessons, takes them to mountain to teach them to ski, and takes them to her mother’s home for Christmas. But when abruptly a telegram arrives from India about Matteo's sickness and hospitalization, she instantaneously rushes to India leaving everything behind as if nothing matters to her. “It was clear her mind had been with Matteo all this time, her senses alert to receive any message from him” (177). She just wants to be with her husband now. Sophie comes to India on her second journey, which later on proves her journey to Ithaca in real sense. She desires to take her husband back to home to live with her and her two children. She feels miserable seeing her husband emaciated in a room of hospital. She says
more dryly to Matteo than she means: “If the mother is ill, it seems the devotees must fall ill too. Is she some Pharaoh to take you all to the tomb with her...If you stay, you will kill yourself” (3). The conversation between husband and wife again takes the form of argument and leads to vehement accusations and mutual recriminations. Matteo moans: “One can fall ill, Sophie —one can fall ill anywhere...You left me. I was alone” (3). Sophie reminds him patiently: “Oh, I left you, was that it ....Did you want me? Did you even notice if I stayed or left?... All you wanted was the Mother... you told me that. You said you needed the Mother — not me, not the children” (4). Regaining her consciousness soon, Sophie realizes that her husband is ill. She begs him to be together again at home with children, but he remains unmoved. Sophie knows that she has deserted her loving children too in order to accompany her husband. Through unending arguments of Matteo and Sophie, Desai reveals the irreconcilable differences between the European couple.

When Sophie’s arguments based on rationalism failed to convince Matteo, she intuitively decides to undertake her own voyage to unravel the enigma of Mother’s past to arrive at truth. She assures her husband: “I will make a connection between what you believe and what I know. It is the only way I will ever be able to understand you, what you have done to yourself” (179). Sophie collects all the information of Mother’s past in fragments as she travels through Alexandria, Cairo, Paris, Venice, New York and finally to Bombay in India, where she gets Mother’s diary from her old dancer guru Krishna. She comes to know that the Mother is none other than Laila, an Egyptian born Muslim. As a child she was disinterested in dogmatic modes of pursuing knowledge which was a matter of great concern for her parents who were academicians. Therefore, her parents sent her to Cairo and later to Paris to live with her aunt to continue studies. But material comforts and compliance of her aunt’s home made Laila feel stifled. She behaved aggressively in a defiant way as she was wayward and quite bold. She hated any sort of discipline in her life and wanted to make her own path. Meanwhile, she was attracted towards an Indian dancer that played the role of Krishna. Joining his troupe with much dedication and labour she toured Europe and North America. Her hopes were soon shattered, however, when Krishna and his troupe moved to Venice and shifted to New York for shows,
money and fame. Laila, who was by now bored with the dance performances, insisted her dance guru Krishna to move to India to seek serenity and spiritual delight which he had promised her. Here too, she found herself clutched in dance affairs as she was forced to perform for the sake of her guru. She was traumatized to learn that this dance had nothing to do with artistic purity and religious belief but it was a career of dance guru. Laila was broken as she felt herself betrayed by Krishna. Krishna too could not forgive Laila for leaving him. Their arguments were just like the tiffs of Matteo and Sophie, and for this reason, the reader seizes a slight touch of the man-woman relationship here. Laila, the ‘Mother’, had faced great turmoil and lots of ups and downs without any complaint with Krishna but finally got free herself from the clutches of this dancer guru. Directionless, disheveled, distressed and completely shattered Laila went to Himalaya, where she beheld his true Krishna ‘Prem Krishna’. She remained there at the feet of her master and little by little, he passed his duties to her and after his death Laila became the ‘Mother’.

Now Sophie is very keen to meet Matteo as she wants to share the truth of Mother with him. When Sophie reaches the hospital, she is informed that Matteo has left the hospital and gone. No one is able to tell her where he could go. Sophie is confused. Her urgency to see Matteo grows immense. From the hospital, she right away goes to the ashram, where she learns about the death of the Mother and departure of Matteo after her death. Sophie becomes purposeless and lifeless without Matteo. It’s not clear whether Sophie follows her husband or returns to her children, but it seem that she too, has taken on a journey to Ithaca:

Sophie is lying as still as a stone, with an arm across her eyes, thinking in the dark of that first pilgrimage she went on in India that had ended in the death of a child. Now she knows why the mother went on that pilgrimage, why anyone goes on a pilgrimage, and why she must go too. She says in a flat voice, ‘I’ll have to,’ and adds, what else? (348)

Suman Jana a noted critic observes Sophie’s journey, a journey of enlightenment and truth. “It is not merely Sophie’s journey through Alexandria, Cairo, Paris, Venice, New York to India, that Sophie reaches her Ithaca, her truth, her enlightenment, it is ultimately a journey within, a real pilgrimage into the heart of the beacon, a meaningful journey, a sojourn into the awakened awareness of
the real faces of India where all masks dissolve into insignificance” (Jana, 2004:366)

To sum up, the central issue in the novel is the search for truth and the disharmony between husband and wife relationship. All the problems between husband and wife emanate from the spiritual incompatibility and their own choice in life according to certain circumstances. Sophie and Matteo set off on their voyage together but could not celebrate their final discovery or achievement with each other.

The above thematic study of some of Anita Desai’s novels suggests that the portrayal of man-woman relationship is a dominant concern of the novelist. The husband-wife bond in her novels is disharmonious, unfulfilling, sour and disgusting. The modern and sensitive women in her novels are in a ceaseless quest for meaningful life in their domestic as well as social milieu. Maya, Sita, Nanda and Sophie are all women of deep emotions and quite dissatisfied in the matrimonial relationship with men. In the practical world, only women are enforced to sacrifice their identity to upkeep the man-woman relationship in society. It is for women to compromise, to adjust, to forgive like Sita, Nanda and Sophie. And if woman is not able to compromise or adjust, then she is obliterated like Maya of Cry, the Peacock or Monisha of Voices in the City.
Works Cited


Dalmia, Yashodhara. 29 April, 1979. “An Interview with Desai.” *The Times of India*.


