CHAPTER – I V

Alienation and isolation in Anita Desai’s

*Clear Light of Day* and *Fire on the Mountain*.

Anita Desai is portraying the changing roles of women and her own concept of feminism in the adverse circumstances of life. Her sixth novel, *Clear Light of Day* published in 1980, drew the attention of readers of Indo – English, as this novel was one of the nominations for the Booker Mc Connell Prize. *Clear Light of Day* describes the emotional reactions of two main characters, Bim and her younger sister, Tara, thereby the images of women and feminism, as well. They are haunted by the memories of the past. Preface the novel which highlight the effect of the remembrance of past on the chief protagonists.

While to Tara, the memories are a “Jubilee”, source of wistful ‘joy’. To Bim, they strike like the ‘Knell’ of sorrow. The former wants to live her past and enjoy it, while the latter is wearied of it and wishes to escape from it. The two captions very effectively point out the theme of the novel. The renewal of the self in another pattern is the theme of *Clear Light of Day*.

Through the dual perspective of past and present, Anita Desai offers both characters and readers the means for observing and
evaluating the sense of feminism and the images of women in the perspective of time. The title of the novel, *Clear Light of Day* suggests two perspectives symbolically.

First, the perspective of reality, seen through the inner light of spiritual illumination gained by Bim through the clarity of experience and maturity. The first perspective reveals the movement and flux of life while the second one offers an insight into the still centre. Thus two images are suggested.

In an interview with Sunil Sethi for *India Today* Anita Desai has commented on her recent novel *Clear Light of Day*. My novel is set in Old Delhi and records the tremendous changes… since 1947... my preoccupation was with recording the passage of time… to write a four dimensional piece on how… life moves backwards and forwards in a period of time. My novel is about time as destroyer, as preserver…. (142).

*Clear Light of Day* belongs to the later stage of Anita Desai. This novel surpasses her earlier ones, for she breaks new ground in her treatment of time as a fourth dimension, hitherto unexplored in indo-Anglian fiction, apart from her concept of feminism.
*Clear Light of Day* is primarily the psychological drama between the two women, telling the family’s story from their perspectives and enables the women’s differences to magnify, not obscure the other’s point of view. This novel includes a larger number of characters and the longer sweep of time than her earlier novel such as *Cry the Peacock* and *Voices in the City*.

The major characters in this novel are two sisters, Bim and Tara and two brothers, Raja and Baba. There is more complex interrelationship between the characters who are all members of the family than in *Fire on the Mountain* and *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* It is really a study of the connecting links between siblings who have been thrown together and become more dependent on each other, due partly to the indifference of their parents.

As in Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway* the idea that people are attached to each other by an invisible thread is present. “And they went and further from her, being attached to her by a thin thread, which would stretch, get thinner and thinner as they walked across London, as if one’s friends were attached to one’s body, after launching with them, by a thin thread” (Woolf 124). The attachments their pressures and influences form the texture of the novel.
The Hindu – Muslim tension during the partition provides one more dimension to his novel, where the Muslim landlord becomes a relative in those riot-torn years. Thus the tensions and conflicts within the family are connected to the tensions and conflicts in the city. The image of city, decadence of Old Delhi is further emphasized in the Misra family with the lazy, brothers and the hard-workings sisters, women earn to support their brothers.

The old world and the new are woven together to present a picture of transition. From colonialism to independence, from darkness to light, from decadence to purposefulness, from resentment to forgiveness and love. So, this is a more comprehensive novel than Cry, the Peacock and Fire on the Mountain, where Desai emerges as having a broader vision and greater understanding of human circumstances.

In some of her other novels, the women characters are locked in their own unhappiness and can see only death as the inevitable end, Anita Desai has written an altogether more balanced novel where guilt does not overwhelm but finds occasion for release and duty does not burden.
Bim, the chief protagonist of *Clear Light of Day*, a middle aged woman and she is a history lecturer at a local college in Delhi. She lives all by herself with her mentally retarded brother Baba in their old and dismal family home, getting duller and grayer every passing day – to struggle as she could against the assaults of time and existence.

Both Tara and Raja leave the old house in old Delhi in search of brighter aspects of life. Only Bim is left alone with her mentally retarded brother, Baba in the old house. Aunt Mira – Masi, who looked after them when they were children, is now a nervous wreck. She becomes mad and Bim takes on the responsibility of running the household. As children, they do not belong to their parents. The father is regular club-visitor and their mother is always on the bed, sick. Thus Bim is projected as embodiment of feminism.

In contrast, Tara marries an, I.A.S officer, Bakul and goes away. Raja is drawn towards Hyder Ali, who is the next door neighbour. He is attracted to the big house which Hyder resides. He marries Hyder Ali’s pretty daughter Benazir and leaves Bim to her suffering. Raja settles down at Hyderabad. Although he is concerned about Bim, he obviously has no attachment towards his old house and his sister. The suffering of
Bim withdraws into her shell. Thus the concept of responsibility, an aspect of feminism, projected.

The novel is divided into four sections. Tara’s visit to the old house starts off a series of recollections and bitter memories in Bim. This is observed in the first section of the novel. Bim not only travels back to her childhood days but she re-examines her personal relationships with Tara, Raja, aunt Mira –Masi and Baba. The first part presents sharp conflicts in Bim, Raja and Tara. A clear pattern is established in the opening sections of as in Where Shall We Go Summer? Clear Light of Day and Fire on the Mountain. The major characters, Nanda Kaul, Bim and Tara go back to the childhood to find moorings. They begin to search of the crucial connections.

In Clear Light of Day, Bim tries to search within the important missing link between the past and the present. She is on the voyage within to explore the hidden meanings of her life. Thus, awareness of one’s own self is considered as an aspect of feminism instead of being vague.

The second section is narrated in past tense. It covers a significant epoch in the history of modern India. It presents a picture of
the Great partitions, the massacre of innocent people, the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi and the fleeing of refugees, the violent communal clashes between the Hinuds and Muslims and the intense political activity of the summer of ’47. Hyder Ali and his family escape to Hyderabad from upheavals of modern India.

Raja’s father reacts violently when he comes to know that Islamic studies is the subject in which Raja is interested. However, the broad social milieu of the novel barely touches the individual problems of Bim, Tara and Raja. But the reference to Old Delhi and Tara’s reactions that nothing has ever changed in the old house is conducive to the sharp divisions that follow. Bim acknowledges that Old Delhi fails to ‘change’. Every house is a ‘tomb’. The old house of Bim does not ‘change’.

The second section also opens up the cracks and division between Bim, Tara and Raja. Tara and Bim travel down the memory land and conflicts surface. As children, they are emotionally starved of parental love. Tara is weak girl when she compares herself to her sisters Bim. Bim is dominating. She is a born leader and organizer. The natural energy and vitality of Bim is in clear contrast to Tara who hides behind Mira-Masi. But Tara hates to live in the old house, which makes her
sick. Raja protests against the overpowering influence of Bim. He walks out of the oppressive atmosphere and Bim is left to herself. Tara escapes and marries Bakul.

The third sections takes up the life of Mira-Masi. She takes up the responsibility of rearing Bim, Tara, Raja and Baba. She becomes the centre of the family. This section also covers the painful, recollections of the growing-up. Tara is mostly excluded from the company of Bim and Raja. Tara feels that she is an outsider to the enclosed world of love and admiration in which Bim and Raja move. Raja wants to become a poet. He has read Iqbal and Byron. He goes to the house of Hyder Ali to listen to Urdu poetry. Bim wants to emulate Florence Nightingale. Tara is a child who wishes to remain in her childhood dream of playing with a snail.

The concluding section picks up the discarded threads in the life of Bim, Raja and Tara. Bim feels that her love towards Raja and Tara is inadequate. When she listens to the music of old Guru, she realizes that they are all grown in the same soil of love. The classical raga of the old master, the music produces a total identification of a ‘new Bim’ in present state of living. She listens to the music not as an escape from the
stupid illusion of life but to identify herself totally with the complete truth.

Thus, *Clear Light of Day* falls into a regular pattern of evoking many creative moods to sustain life. It is a conventional novel in the sense that the structure has a beginning, middle and an end. But the inner flow of life is not conventional. All major events are stored up in memory and each important event has a direct connection with onward movement.

The stream of consciousness technique is at its best in character delineation. Though much of what really happens is narrated dramatically through flash-back, tension is maintained in contrast between Bim and Tara and the shadowy figures of the parents, Miramasi and Raja that rise form the consciousness of Bim and Tara.

The parents were hardly real to the children absorbed as they were in their own life…. Playing bridge with friends like themselves mostly silent, heads bent so that the knobs in their necks protruded, soft stained hands shuffling the cards. Now and then speaking those names and numbers that remained mystery to the children…..” *(Clear,22.)*
One reads of the diabetic mother to whom the father gives an injection, which Tara thinks it is murder. The distance to which the children were banished by self-absorbed parents is a crucial feature of the story which strengthens the bonds between the children.

The father is summed – up in the sentence, “they knew him only as the master of the entrance and the exit” (Clear, 53.) Even after his death, he left so little behind. “A wardrobe full of very dark and sober suits and very white and crisp shirts, a shelf ranged with shoes - all old but polished to the glow of wood, walnut, mahogany or black lacquer – and desk piled with office files; that wall all” (Clear, 64).

The children had a strange idea of what a wife should be from what they had observed of their mother. “Why, they felt, a wife is someone like their mother who raised their eyes when the father rose from the table and dropped them when he sat down, who spent long hours at a dressing table before a mirror, amongst jars and bottles that smelt sweet and into which she dipped questing fingers and drew out the ingredients of a wife-sweet smelling but soon rancid; who commanded servants and chastised children and was obeyed like a queen” (Clear, 110-111). She was so totally their father's wife that she was hardly their
mother. The children therefore adopted Mira-masi with open arms, who reflects the traditional mother – concept and image.

Thus, in contrast, Mira-masi is a lovable creature as a traditional motherhood, made for giving, sacrifice anything, who allows her strength to be drained from her till she has no more to give and has to draw sustenance from the liquor. Her early widowhood and her status or lack of it is summed up in, "Another household could find some use for her; cracked pot, torn rag, picked bone" (Clear, 108). To Tara however, "She was solid as a bed, she smelt of cooking and was made of knitting. Tara could wrap herself up in her as in an old soft shawl" Thus the image of motherhood presented (Clear, 109). Also, "Quick, nervy and jumpy yet to the children she was a constant as a staff, a tree that can be counted on not to pull up its roots and shift in the right. She was the tree that grew in the centre of their lives and in whose shade they lived" (Clear, 110), the image of tree and mother go together.

She too thinks of herself as a ‘tree’ towards them. In her consciousness, the images of ‘tree’ and ‘mother’ go together. She feels, "In the end they would swarm over her, reach up above her, tower into the sky, and she would be just the old log, the dried mass of roots on
which they grew. She was the tree, she was the soil, she was the earth" 
(Clear,111).

Their parents provided them security but it was Mira-masi who gave them comfort, a constant tangible mother figure in their lives, the concept of love and feminism emerges gradually unfolding itself. The distinction between Mira-masi’s relationship with Tara and her's with Bim and Raja is explicit. Her relationships with Tara was, "... an affectionate demonstrative one, always assuring each other of their love, while the one that grew up between Aunt Mira and the two older children was silent and instinctive, seldom demonstrated, often quite sarcastic, but organic, a part of their sinews and their blood" (Clear,112).

Her need of something when they outgrew is typical and the sad spectacle of Aunt Mira suffering the delirium is pathetic and touching but not ridiculous. Mira-masi identifies herself with the young ‘cow’ which got drowned in a well. Like it,she too suffered from a spiritual death, when treated as a 'cracked pot’, torn rag, picked bone' as a widow in her in-law's house. The oppressive patriarchy of the society is the
stagnant well where women like her have to drown themselves in sheer despair.

Bim identifies herself with Mira-Masi as she too is an abandoned aunt of the family, though the reasons are different, both are obsessed with the “well”, which becomes a haunting presence. The image of well and these two characters suggest the suppressive nature of male dominated society, their self – sacrificing nature and the novelist’s feministic theory and practice.

Raja, the eldest son, who wants to be a hero, cuts a rather sorry figure. His youthful admiration of Hyder Ali is not mellowed with maturity. He found escape in the home of their rich Muslim neighbour, landlord Hyder Ali, who is a liberal patron of Urdu poets, musicians and pro-muslim politicians. Hyder Ali is Raja's romantic ideal and is o continue so even in later life. To him, the Hyder home held out enticingly the possibilities of all that is lacking in his own shabby and sickness ridden home.

Bim and Raja enjoyed an intimate togetherness that excluded the other brother and sister and that was a solace and comfort in an otherwise bleak and empty childhood.
Anita Desai captures the evanescent and idyllic joy of togetherness between brother and sister in a lyrical passage which at once evokes vividly mood and landscape while telling the poignant tale of "growing up”

Not only are such moments of innocence very rare in the life of the protagonists of the novel, they are equally rare in the entire gamut of Desai's fictional world which is nearly always overcast with the dark clouds of existential anguish and trauma. Yet when they came together it was with a pure and elemental joy that shot up and stood straight and bright above the surrounding dreariness. There were still those shining summer evenings on the bank of the Jumna when they went together, Bim and Raja, bare foot over the sand to wade across the river, at that time of the year no more than a sluggish trickle, to the melon field on the other bank to pick a ripe, round one and cut it open with Raja's pen-knife and bite into the juice - suffused slices while the sun sank into the saffron west and the cannon boomed in the city to announce the end of the day's fast in the month of Ramzaan and the start of prayers in the great mosque (*Clear*, 121).
In reading and reciting English and Urdu poetry, Raja saw himself as a Byronic hero. Bim marvelled at what she saw as "his heroism, his independent thinking and courage. Raja was truly the stuff of which heroes are made, she was convinced" (Clear, 45). Not only did she share his love for poetry but also in equal measure his fears and joys. For instance, when he worried over the safety of the Hyder Ali during the partition riots he awake at nights. And he and she felt "relief as much for his sake as theirs’ (Clear, 72) when he learns of their safety.

All through the summer of 1947, when Delhi burned with the partition riots, Bim nursed T.B. afflicted Raja, with love and care, although he was often a difficult and irritable patient. Her problem increased to the limits of endurance when she simultaneously had to nurse Aunt Mira who had turned alcoholic and mad, slipping steadily into death. With Tara married and gone, aunt Misa confined to her room and retarded Baba forever listening to forties vintage old gramophone, Bim and Raja were "thrown together for company and comfort even more than at anytime of their lives" (Clear, 82). And yet everything changed. When Raja recovered from T.B. and no longer needed Bim's nursing, he decided to escape to Hyderabad to join the family of rich Hyder Ali, marry his daughter and inherit his vast wealth. Without any
qualms, he selfishly abdicated responsibility of managing his father's business, his disabled brother and unmarried sister, Bim leaving all alone to find for herself and Baba, the typical attitude and the image of modern women are projected in comparison to Raja's meanness and ingratitude which acquire ridiculous proportions when he shouts at Bim "you don't want me to spend all my life down in this hole, do you? You don't think I can go on living just to keep my brother and sister company, do you?"

(Clear, 100) It is a blow to Bim, who has spent a good portion of her youth nursing the sick, caring for the handicapped, running the menage, leaving her little or no time to even consider her own future, especially when she was just recovering from the rage and frustration at being grossly misunderstood by Dr. Biswas, the awkward young family doctor who had been extremely solicitous to her inspite of not receiving any reciprocation of his overtures. Thus the spirit of independence necessary for modern women is insisted along with feminism, subtly.

Raja, in his youth showed great promise in writing verse and all that dwindled into a trickle like the Jumna in the summer and to Bim, the discovery of his true nature - his mediocrity and selfishness came as a great disappointment and it takes her a long time to accept the disillusion.
Raja, celebrating the marriage of his daughter Moyna, is unchanged in the picture of soft living and old world courtesy, which shows for Raja's self-indulgence. Bim dismisses him with, "I'm bored with Raja utterly bored, 'she said evenly '. He is too rich to be interesting any more, too fact and too successful. Rich fat and successful, people are boring" (*Clear*, 142).

Not given to complaining or wallowing in self-pity, Bim tries to face up to the situation with composure as expected inspected in modern women, the concept of feminism. The novelist conveys her physical and mental exhaustion as well as the pathos of her plight is controlled but in convincing terms.

Bim sank down on to the steps beside him (Baba) . . . herself than to him. 'So now these are just you and I left. Baba' ... except you and I It's as if we are children ... waiting ... she yawned . . . when we were children . . . But she didn't say any more . . . nearly asleep" (*Clear*, 101).

Thus Bim is a beautiful piece of characterisation of feminism. She is seen through the lens of her sister, Tara's consciousness and is
also revealed through her. Two of the issues dealt within the novel are worked out through the character of Bim. One, in the matter of responsibility and the other the role of woman in post-independent India the souelists. Bim when declared, "she should be a heroine, although she would secretly have preferred to be a gipsy or a trapeze artist in a circus" (*Clear*,112). In spite of her secret wish she is a heroine of sorts - not the flamboyant, once-in-a-life, time act heroine, but the regular taking on duties that the others were unwilling to perform. She is a strong and intelligent person, very different from her sister Tara.

"To Bim, school and its teachers and lessons were a challenge to her natural intelligence and mental curiosity that she was glad to meet. Tara on the other hand, willed when confronted by a challenge, shrank back into a knot of horrified stupor and tended to gaze at the teachers when ask a question . . . ." (*Clear*,123).

Tara escapes from stifling conditions of her family life, while Bim confronting them and just did what she knew she had to do without any fuss and without a feeling of martyrdom. Dr. Biswas who, "had ~ inherited her (his mother's) gift for loading the weight of his self-
sacrifice on to others”. (Clear, 92) was despised by Bim and his statement, "You have sacrificed your own life for them" (Clear, 97) makes her shake with anger. "She even hissed slightly in her rage and frustration - at being misunderstood, so totally misread, then gulped a little with laughter at such grotesque misunderstanding, and her tangled emotions twisted her face and shook her, shook the thought of Dr. Biswas out of her" (Clear, 97). Spinster.

The concept feminism is well crystallized in the noble life of Bim who has rare ability to look on facts, however unpleasant, directly and to deal with them intelligently. She expects nothing of anybody and holds nothing against anyone except Raja whose sudden reversal of roles she could not accept.

“she felt only love and yearning for them all, and if these were hurts, there gashes and wounds in her side that bled, then it was only because her love was imperfect and did not encompass them thoroughly enough, and because it had flaws and inadequacies and did not extend to all equally" (Clear, 165).

Even in this case, she assumes responsibility for the way she feels. Her compassionate care of Mira - Masi is a lovely and touching
thing. There is no doubt that some of the quality of the clear light of day’ has its luminescence to Bim's image and feminism.

Baba's personality looked within itself and protected by the tones of the gramophone is described in a beautiful piece of rhetoric. The comparison to the status conveys the strange petrification of his faculties "... a finely composed piece of sculpture in white. Marble or milk or less, a spider's web, faint and shadowy, or just some moonlight split across the bed... He was no more and ho less than a white flower harmless garden spider" (Clear, 4).

He is an albino who cannot face the sun - or life with its cruelty and violence. He would be dependent all his life, and realised early that Bim would be the constant source in his life. Tara is baby of the family and after the birth of Baba, continues to play the baby whenever possible. With Mira – masi, she could huddle herself in the plum-coloured quilt and suck her finger - she wanted & protection attention and did not want to assume responsibility she is also shrewd enough to plan her escape from the old house with the connivance of the Misra sisters and managed to get away.
Tara has her own skill. She could flatter pompous Bakul, play the perfect hostess, and manage to overlook the short-comings of her husband. "To Tara he could speak in a different time, from Tara he got a different response. He smiled at her fondly, like an indulgent father. She smiled back gratefully. She had not an indulgent father, after all. She wore a while chameli flower in her hair. She was very like it herself. He hold her so" (Clear.71). This exchange sums up their marital relationship. Tara in her childhood is awestruck by the superior abilities of Bim and Raja, envious of the rapport they shared. In her later visits, she could see that Bim feel short in many areas, such as running the house, and gains confidence enough to try do things right between Bim and Raja.

This crucial episode in the novel is resolved through the efforts of Tara who repeatedly reverts to the topic and finally succeeds in dragging it into the “light of day” where it perishes through age and exposure. Tara's own guilt, her having abandoned Bim and later to the weight of family responsibility, is not so easily assuaged. She often refers to both but facts to be absolved. "And Tara, who had thought of redeeming herself to night from years of stickly guilt, felt she had thoughtlessly plunged into greater depths - murkier, blacker depths - and
was coated with the scum of an ever greater guilt" (*Clear*, 152). She wanted to be sure Bim had not come to any harm because of what she, Tara, had alone and that she was contented with the life she had made. Bakul reasures Tara on this matter, "contented enough he answered, no more and no less then most of us" (*Clear*, 158)

Tara though less able than Bim, has greater perception and is able to reveal the nuances of events and relationships through her point of view whereas Bim with her incisive vision cuts through Bakul's pomposity and reveals her boredom, Tara finds there is much to be gained in pornpering Bakul's ego ". . . that bland oil of self - confidence smoothing his voice and giving it a kind, calculated ease that may Tara gaze at him with of maidenly admiration and mad Bim look away into the shadowy garden with boredom" (*Clear*, 69).

Bakul for all material prosperity is an insensitive person, self-centered and covered with a heavy coat of complacence. In portraying him, Anita Desai echoes Bim's prophetic words at the engagement partly of the Mirsa sister, "why, because they might find marriage isn't enough to last them the whole of their lives" (*Clear*, 140).
Certainly with Bim's temperament Bakul and Dr. Biswas were poor choices when she could "Work -1 shall do things -1 shall earn my own living and look after Mira - Masi and Baba and be independent" (Clear,140-141). The image of birds, animal and insects are parts of the landscape of the house. They evoke the atmosphere, participate in the emotional turmoil of the protagonist and throw their states into sharp relief. The image of sunlight plays a functional role in this novel besides showing the ease and competence of Mrs. Desai in handling such images. The very first image of the morning sun is very harsh.

Tara ran down the steps, bowing her head to the morning sun that came slicing down like a blade of steel onto the back of her neck, and crossed the dry crackling grass of the lawn to join her sister who stood watching, smiling (Clear,1).

The summer is always identified with violent images in Anita Desai's novels as well as short stories. As Amina says the playfulness and innocence of the morning light in Bye, Bye Blackbird, disappears in this novel. The final scene is brilliantly lit by sunlight "There was only the clear light pouring down from the sun . . . illuminating them wholly"(Clear,177). The light symbolises the creative forces of renewal and
regeneration. Bim out of her own free choice had decided to stay on at the old house which now symbolises the enduring nature of filial ties. In doing so she had discovered her sense of inner place.

This place gives her a sense of equilibrium and a sense of direction. The spirit of place is finally seen in its proper perspective. The kind of concept of feminism is emphasized in Bim accommodating her weak-minded brother and sister in forgiving them, agreeing for a continuation. Bim experiences a great feeling of calm, purging her all the rancour, bitterness and suffering with love. She attains, at last, her movement of epiphany after great efforts of clearing away the debris from her life, allowing the “clear light” of the sun to pour into her dark self.

This thematic image of the “clear light” aptly suggests the inner tranquility of Bim which is also the image of feminism of Anita Desai. They sat in silence then, the three of them (Bim, Baba and the cat). . . Everything had been said at last, cleared out of the way finally. There was nothing left in the way of a barrier or a shadow, only clear light pouring down from the sun. They might be floating in the light it was as vast as the ocean, but clear, without colour or substance or form. It was
the lightest and most pervasive of all elements and they floated in it. .... 
(Clear, 177).

Bim's psychic journey towards redefining herself, reunion with Raja, becomes complete only when she attends the concert in the house of the Misras. Listening raptly to Mulk's and his Guru's songs, Bim discovers the right notes of her life lending beauty and harmony to her existence. In a flash she realizes that the talent that is dying in the old guru will continue in Mulk and his present rich, sweet voice may in time acquire the same sadness and poignancy. Then she remembers T.S. Eliot's lines about Time' that help her achieve her transcendence as it confirms her view, of Time' as a symbol of continuity: 'Time is the destroyer, time the preserver" (Clear, 182).

As R.S. Sharma states "the passages of verse the novelist quotes are not merely ornamental, they bring in tones, suggestions, nuances which are too tender, too delicate, too profound to communicate in prose" (145). Finally, in recognizing the song sung by the Guru as a verse of Iqbal's, who is Raja's favourite poet, Bim rediscovers the lost connection with her dear brother, who is her soul-mate. In this symbolic reunion amidst music and rapturous applauses, the novel ends on a note of affirmation.
As in *Fire on the Mountain*, in this novel too, the house is the central image as well as motif in the structure of the novel. The house is regarded by Bim as the projection of her lonely self. The passing moments, the voyage from childhood to youth, youth to adulthood, the events in the country, both the inner and outer time are depicted through effective images and symbols.

The paradox of change and continuity, gain and loss, and the healing power of time are rendered through image of time. Desai introduces the phenomenon of memory too which transcends time itself. As the day-break itself is a positive aspects of time, Bim becomes as fulfilled individual who experiences love and peace. This novel can be called another artistic triumph in the fictional canvas of Anita Desai.

Desai explores varied sensibilities and inscrutable relationship to plumb the depths of troubled consciousness, to depict states of mind and nuances of feeling, finally evoke mood and atmosphere so integral to her subject of feminism and the images of women. Bim's ability to "relate", to "connect" differentiates her from all other protagonists of the novels of Anita Desai, because it is precisely this ability that helps her to survive the threat to her sanity when pushed to the extremity of her
strength, helps her to overcome the death wish that tempts her when driven to the 'extremity of despair. There is no necessity for her to take recourse to suicide as Monisha does, no need to succumb to madness, like Maya, no need to cling on to illusion and then make an unwilling, unconvinced confused, compromise, like Sita, nor is there the need to simply collapse, like Nanda Kaul, under the strain of existential anguish and nullity. In fact, all these attitudes of Bim reflect on the feministic practice of Desai.

The feminist theme is further elaborated in her movement from hatred to love, from estrangement to rapprochement, from negation to affirmation. She has evolved and matured with dignity. In the words of Shanta Krishnaswamy, "Desai's study of the intelligent woman's psyche, the woman who is aware of her potentialities and sense of direction" (279), a creature who lives life on her own terms and yet understands the need to relate them to there. Bim is the most affirmative and fully realised of Anita Desai's protagonists, the very embodiment of feminism.

Through her characters, "the existential anxiety and the quest for self-hood that is pervasive in her earlier novels is transferred her in a new concept of self-hood. Bim achieves her identity and her 'self not in
isolation but in togetherness, not in rejection but in acceptance, not in withdrawal but in positive commitment" (Sharma 139).

By virtue of its theme and treatment *Clear Light of Day* is the most affirmative of Anita Desai's novels. It is perhaps also the most mature of her novels, for here, the novelist is not merely interested in character who are not average" (Dalmia 29), but reveal a concern to discover, however tentatively as feminist. R.S. Sharma points out "the final pattern of meaning that emerges out of the apparent meaninglessness of life" (130). Another critic says: ". . . every time the verbal dice is thrown the overall pattern of the game change and reveals new meanings suggesting the new aspects of the theme Time" (Goel 176).

The triumph of the novel lies in the presentation of Time, its haunting presence through the past and present, its dual role of destruction and preservation and above all its enigmatic healing power. While Bim's epiphany is illustrated through the image of ‘clear light’ pouring down from the Sun and the musical recital by Mulk and his guru, it is Time' that makes her aware of her imperfections and helps her to reintegrate with her family, society and nation.
FIRE ON THE MOUNTAIN

_Fire on the Mountain_, the fifth novel of Anita Desai, published in 1977, won Sahitya Academy award in 1978. Like her earlier novels, _Cry,_ _The Peacock_ (1963) and _Where Shall We Go This Summer?_ (1975), this novel also attempts to define the dimensions of feminism and the images of three women.

Santa Acharya feels, “there is greater sensitivity and restraint in the portrayal of theme in this novel common to all her.” (245). In this novel too, the novelist’s conviction that human relationships are inadequate and that loneliness and despair are inescapable human predicament presented. This malady affects the child, the young and the old. In this novel, two women, Nandakaul, Ila Das and the child, Raka suffer from lack of love and estrangement in varying degrees for different reasons and with thee characters the novelist presents the images of women and her idea of feminism.

The changing values of life change the images of women in any culture. The feverish and frenzied outpouring witnessed in the previous novels is missing in this novel. There is quite austerity and coldness in the principal characters, Nanda and Raka. Their attitudes and
temperaments call for controlled and mature treatment of the theme. The readers cannot miss its similarity to *A Room of One’s Own* (1929), of Virginia woolf who examines the quality and texture of a women’s life, “often nothing tangible remains of woman’s day. The food has been cooked eaten, the children have been nursed and gone out in the world …. Her life has anonymous character which is baffling and puzzling in the extreme” (Jasbir Jain 146). It is these baffling and puzzling elements that Anita Desai has sought to give form to this short novel. Like woolf, she sees consciousness as a complex of sensations, feelings, ideas and emotions and has achieved certain mastery over this style in combining hypersensitivity with keen observation and intellectual perception.

Structurally, this novel is an organic whole, relating the inner self to the landscape, projecting the image of individuals, making relevant connections between causes and events, introducing flash-backs to paint vivid images of early life of characters which are contrasted with present so that the composite image conveys a complete image of each of women and the girl.

The title of the *Fire on the Mountain* is perhaps derived from William Golding’s famous novel, *Lord of the Files*, the second chapter of which is entitled Fire On the Mountain. It is symbolic fire which
burns in the heart of an old lady, a great grandmother Nanda Kaul, the exploration loneliness of life whose inner emotional world and her longing for independence and fulfillment of life are presented by the novelist to poetry the theme of the novel, concept of feminism.

The symbol of ‘fire’ has thus been made a part of the atmospheric environment. As the critic says, “like a refrain in a song it has been very skillfully repeated and beautifully interwoven into the structure of the novel”. (Goel 65). The story or plot is very thin and there is practically no action except for the tragic end. As Maini points out, “the real strength of the novelle lies in the Anita Desai’s prose” (133).

The novel is pervaded by an overpowering sense of loneliness and isolation in the protagonist, Nanda Kaul,. Portraying a reverberating and pathetic image of old age, who lives a life a recluse in her village at Carignano in the Simla hills. Ramlal is the only other person who cooks for Nanda Kaul, in the house. Carignano is exactly to Nanda Kaul’s expectations and liking. Its ‘bareness’ and its ‘starkness’ please her most. She has preferred to live at Carignano because she does not wish her privacy to be disturbed at any cost.

The first part of Fire on the Mountain provides the geographical and psychological setting prior to the arrival of Raka, Nanda’s great-
grand daughter. After the death of her husband, Nanda has apparently chosen to live an isolated life. Except for an occasional telephone call and a visit from the postman, which she regards as unwelcome intrusions, and Ramlal, disturbs her solitude.

Carignano, her literal and metaphorical ‘retreat’, is perched on the side of a cliff and its setting suggests the precarious nature of the life she has established there. The life, free from obligations to others is threatened by the visit by Raka. When Ila Das, a friend since from childhood, telephones Nanda and also asks about visiting her, Nanda realizes that her ‘pared, reduced and radiantly single life’ is in jeopardy.

The second part of the novel concerns the interaction—or the lack of it between Nanda and Raka, who, despite the generational gap, are quite similar in behaviour. At first, Nanda considers Raka an ‘intruder, an outsider’. and resists being drawn into the child’s world. Nanda soon discovers, however, that she and her great-grand daughter have much in common, primarily their aloofness and determination, to pursue their own secret lives.

Raka is distant not only emotionally but also spatially and her Kasauli is not Nanda’s. Raka frequents, despite Ramlal’s warning, the
forbidden ravine behind and below Carignano. Inspite of their initial mutual rejection, Nanda comes to miss Raka during the child’s forays into the ravine; Nanda finds the child’s long absence as perturbing as her presence was irksome. Consequently, Nanda insists on accompanying Raka on walks, notably the one to a peak called Monkey Point, but Raka spurns Nanda’s overtures and prefers her own secret world.

When her plays prove unsuccessful, Nanda whets Raka’s curiosity by telling the child about her own childhood in Kashmir, where her idealized father had a zoo, including a pangolin, a “hard, scaly creature in its armour. Nanda’s father, an indirect contrast to Raka’s brutish one, obviously interests Raka, who resembles the pangolin also the object of the father’s loving care. Nanda’s stories, however, succeed only temporarily and she is reduced to thinking of giving Carignano to Raka. Meanwhile, Raka continues her exploration of the ravine and also visits an abandoned and burnt house near Carignano. When Raka leaves her ravin which is associated with nature and death, to visit the clubhouse which is associated with civilization. She is ironically, threatened for the first time in Kasauli. At the club the masked revelers appear as caged, clawed, tailed, headless, male and female monsters, who remind her of her father returning from a party and beating her
mother senseless. At this point, reality impinges upon her secret world and transforms it into a nightmare, the inner and outer correspond.

The final part of the novel also concerns a visit: Ila Das arrives at Carignano after being taunted and physically abused by a group of boys. Although she is aware of Ila Das's desperate financial plight, Nanda steers the conversation away from any discussion of Ila Das moving into Carignano. When the two old women persist in the 'game of old age,' Raka slips away and steals some matches. Finally, Ila Das leaves Carignano, and on her way home in the dark is raped and killed by the father of a young girl whose marriage to an old landowner she had opposed. When the police call Nanda with the news of the murder, Nanda realizes that it was all a lie. That her stories about her father, her loving husband and the entire circumstances leading her stay at Carignano were all fabrications. While she holds the phone, Raka announces, 'I have set the forest on fire.' It is symbolic of the fact that a world where a woman cannot hope to be happy without being unnatural, should be destroyed. The fire consumes the fictive world of Nanda Kaul.
The purpose of Anita Desai is to adroitly explore the emotional life of her characters, especially female characters in her novels, so she chooses only those characters who are emotionally starved and who have turned renegades. They choose to live in the cell of the self, building up a world of fantasy. Their preoccupation with the self becomes an obsession with them. All human relations, which are the best means of nourishing emotions have turned meaningless for these emotionally starved characters of Fire on the Mountain - Nanda Kaul, Raka and Ila Das.

Each one of them is victim of emotional alienation and craves for privacy, isolation and fantasy to escape from unpleasant reality of life, the sense of feminism and the images of women of Anita Desai. Most psychological novels depend for their effect on insight into character. In Cry the Peacock, Voices in the City, and Where shall we Go this Summer?, Anita Desai delineates women who defy and desist with their circumstances or who like Sita is want to break way from the traditional role thrust upon her in where shall the a this summer ?. This modern consciousness’ of feminism to be independent, individualistic for freedom and fullness of life.
Nanda Kaul and Ila Das have spent their lives serving others, doing their duty and in their cases, doing it particularly well, adapting to disappointments betrayals and carrying on to the best of their ability to the bitter end, when all obligations had been fulfilled and even after. These two women had given up themselves till there was nothing left. Dissatisfied by the obligations and duties for the self-centred and love less husband and children.

Nanda Kaul had come to Carignano to protect herself from further the slaught by others "To be a tree, no more and no less, was all she was prepared to undertaken." (Fire, 4). But then the novel ends with a holocaust? In this novel, Anita Desai tries to qualify and quantify a woman's life towards the end of what may be called long and effective service. This service is re-examined to see what or whom she is serving and whether this constitutes a meaningful activity.

In the case of Nanda Kaul, it was not. The care of others was a habit with Nanda Kaul which has mislaid. It had been a religious calling. She had believed in till she found it fate. It had been a vocation that one day went dull and drought - streak as though its life – spring had dried up.
This experience is conveyed not by formal narrative but by indirect and subtle intimation, not by analysis but by the sensations engineered in the character herself. The reader sits mesmerised while Mrs. Desai throws a pebble into a still pool and watches the ripples spreading further and further in concentric circles, finally the surface of the pond is shattered. Thus character is blended with the landscape to produce a powerful effect of unity, the unison of mindscape and landscape and the corresponding image of the person.

Carignano is an old, rather dilapidated house perched on a cliff with a few trees to give it protection. The house symbolises Nand Kaul, as well and the setting is dessicated as Nanda Kaul herself in her grey swishing silks as she moves about her garden. On one side is the Pasteur Institute - a huddle of concrete structures boiling down animal brains to make a vaccine and spewing out the bones which littler the slopes of the ravine. It is all of a piece with what is left to Nanda Kaul herself – all her vitality has been drained, her spirit sucked in and she claps what is left of herself, to nurture the husk with jealous protection, the image of Nanda Kaul.
The voice of Ila Das is described as a piping shrilling screech that was poor Ila's speech, "like a long nail frantically scratching at a glass pane, or a small child gone berserk and prattling on and on in a voice no one could hear without cringing" (*Fire*, 21), the image of Ila Das.

The voice disturbing the silence with which she had surrounded herself causes her pain and acute suffering and she "turned her head this way and that in an effort to escape. She watched the white hen drag out a warm inch by inch from the ground till it snapped into two. She felt like that worm herself and winced at its mutilation" (*Fire*, 21). Thus the parallel visual images are effectively used to convey emotion in the stream of consciousness technique. The two images merge together.

Nanda Kaul's determined effort to keep for herself an hour of rest and response when no one could make demands upon her are conveyed in series of images thus, "... she would lie still, still - she would be charred tree trunk in the forest, a broken pillar of marble in the desert, a lizard on a stone wall. A tree trunk could not harbour irritation, nor a pillar annoyance. She would imitate death, like a lizard. No one could dare rouse her" (*Fire*, 23). There is a certain amount of self-dramatisation as she feels she is needed but holds out for her full hour before responding "The effort not to respond would grow longer by the minute,
heavier, more endurable, till atlast it was sitting on her chest, grasping her by the neck" (Fire, 24).

The reading material of Nanda is also very unusual. The pillow book of Sei Shonagan and The Travels of Marco Polo are significant as they become metaphors of Nanda's present existence. The description of image of the life of a lonely woman given in the pillow book of Sei Shonaan interests Nanda. Each time she reads it or "it went down her throat with a clear, luminious passage, like chilled dry wine"(Fire, 27), she exults in living "a pared, reduced and radiantly single life" (FOM 31), in Carginano, a bare, black and austere place. She feels happy when she reads that book as she is living up to the ideas professed there. The other book. The Travels of Marco Polo creates for her a world of fantasy which she want: to believe in and bewitch Raka with. Nanda Kaul quotes a passage from, Hopkins to justify her position:

'I have desired to go Where springs not fail
To fields where flies no sharp and sided hail
And a few lilies blow. 'And I have asked to be
Where no storms come, Where the green swell
is in the havens dumb, And out of the swing of the sea' (Fire,58).
Although the poem is about 'a vocation - a nun's vocation' it seem to apply to Nana Kaul herself as well as to the whole region of Kasauli. Nanda Kaul has pursued a 'Vocation for her, the care of others had been a habit with her earlier, "a religious calling she had believed in till she found it fake. It had been a vocation that one-day went dull and drought-struck, as though its life-spring had dried up" (Fire, 30). She was seen a little too much of life. That is why she has come to 'this quiet place' to be 'alone', a cherred tree trunk 'as' a broken pillar of marble. She can be at peace in her lonely house and here hills melted into sky, sky into snows, snow's into air" (Fire, 28).

The novel, in the first selection incorporates a bizarre psychology. In her frustrations Nanda frantically searches for detachment as life has not honoured her claims. Her original self-effacing solution has not worked throughout her life so she substitutes it with the strategy of solitude. The protagonist's rebelliously detached attitude and her will to live in complete isolation tends to regard Nanda Kaul as a formidable old woman who has snapped all ties and discarded everyone. She avoids everyone because she has the moral courage to face the world all alone. This is the image projected by Anita Desai, "the feminine psyche of Nanda and the feminist experience in its expression by the writer. Thus
Anita Desai makes a claim for women that they too need a place and time to be themselves and to find fulfilment distinct from the biological role thrust upon them, a clear expression of feminine consciousness.

Anita Desai questions the belief that a woman's life is totally circumscribed by husband and children. And, are all marriages the marvellous successes they seem to be? Nanda Kaul is portrayed in flash-back, presiding over a polished rose-wood table, in silk and pearls, supervising, the making of special dishes, mending, caring for children and overseeing the servants. Was this activity not meaningful? Where lies the key that transforms these daily chores into fulfilling activity? Was the key mislaid by the Vice-Chancellor - husband who was in love with Miss David and did not marry her because she was a Christian but continued his affair with her? Was this alone the cause for her withdrawal? Anita Desai does not evaluate the situations but presents them.

Nanda Kaul feels used in every sense of the term by husband, children and friends and she has chosen Carignano as a refugee from all. One wonders that whether it is a haven or a burrow into which she crawls in order to escape. Emerging bruised from the buffets of life,
Nanda Kaul sees alienation and estrangement as her only protection. she has consciously cultivated so that it covers her like an armour.

A letter from her daughter Asha causes a ripple in Nanda's still consciousness, bringing back the unpleasant memories of her past life. She is not a conventional grandmother who would have rejoiced to meet her great grand daughter. The images referring to Nanda Kaul's attitudes and reactions bring out a picture of an educated, intelligent, sober, unsentimental and unemotional woman. Motherhood is never a joyful, fulfilling experience to her delight. " Their screams were shrill and could madden" (Fire, 4). The reaction is seen in her relationship with her own children.

Looking down, over all those years she had survived and borne, she saw them, not bare and shining as the plains below, but like the gorge cluttered, choked and blackened with the heads of children and grand children, servants and guests, all restlessly surging, clamoring about her (Fire, 17).

As the critic says, "the debunking of the myth of motherhood runs as a continuous thread in Anita Desai's novels" (Sharma 119). No other Indian English writer portrays the character of a mother in such
sickly, offensive image as Anita Desai does. Nanda Kaul meets her match with her great grand daughter Raka. Raka means the moon, one wonders whether there is a deliberate allusion to effects - as the watchman calls her, "the crazy one from Carignano" \textit{(Fire, 91)} There is nothing moon like about the child's exterior. She is a "mosquito" of a girl. One wonders whether Anita Desai makes a connection between the child's shattered personality and moon's instability. She is the image of flotsam, of the wreck of a bad marriage. The drunken father and the wreck blubbing mother and sojourn in strange parts of the globe have destroyed her faith in humanity and like an insect to which she is often compared, she burrows, hides herself in the dust. This is the image of the child, Raka.

The two characters are enclosed in private world as a result of their earlier suffering whereas one is self-conscious and deliberate to the other. So defiance and withdrawal and a way of life for them. In the case of Nanda Kaul, one senses that taste of unfulfilment. This is brought out by several touches, 'Why, why shouldn't she be happy?' Asha had written letter. Nanda Kaul had not replied, had been too disgusted to reply\textit{(Fire, 4). Again, }"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” (*Fire*, 18).

The habit of doing one’s duty dies hard and Nanda Kaul accept her responsibilities towards Raka and Ila Das as much as she hates to do so. Character delineation is very economically done. Nanda Kaul is a ‘tree’ - a ‘long pine’. Raka is an ‘insect’ and Ila Das a ‘bit of crumpled paper’ (*Fire*, 112). These are the images of the three women. Though they seem to be summarily summed up, their inner lives are delineated in detail. The thought processes of Nanda Kaul, her drifting meditations, floating across the years back and forth in the stream of consciousness style, reveal her image and completely.

Both Nanda and Raka have rejected society and family due to their experiences. In the case of Nanda Kaul, it is obvious that her armour of withdrawal has its chinks. She doesn’t refuse to take in Raka who needs a home and it is all she can do to resist inviting Ila Das to stay with her, when she hears of Ila’s pathetic condition even though she knew it would ruin her life. She is vulnerable and one realizes that she has a soft and warm heart in spite of her alienation.
Raka on other hand is with and fervid dreams and memories of the past come flooding back and she, ‘fled like an animal chased, sobbing, hate them – hate them’.

“Some where 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 comes under her bed clothes and wet the mattress in fright, feeling the stream of blood, 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 tried to get free of it. Ahead of her no longer on the ground but at some distance now, her mother was crying” (Fire, 71-72)

This dreadful experience so early in life, had warped her, had left her maimed and misshapen so that ordinary social functions, adults indulging in an evening of drinks and music at their club causes nightmares to recur and the reader can see that it has turned Raka an anti-social in every sense of the term. She doesn't even want a pony ride because, it's no fun that man(pony man) always comes along. She is
drawn to the fire watching it all night. Her joy seems to lie in her aloneness, the image of Raka.

Anita Desai makes use of even ordinary gestures and movements to suggest the inside revolutions of the protagonist. Nanda's growing admiration of Raka's independent spirit makes her want the child's company. But when she finds that the child prefers to the company of Ramlal, she becomes jealous. A simple gesture indicates her irritation at the way things are going. Watching Raka and Ramlal cross the yard in happy companionship. Nanda's hand "shot out of the folds of silk and slapped at a pair of bumbling flies on the pane" (Fire, 55). In a strange reversal of roles, it is Raka now who feels that her freedom is threatened by Nanda's unwelcome attentions.

The feminine consciousness of Raka is seen even in her moments of joy, Raka does not want to share them with anyone else as she likes the glorious feeling of being alone in the world, free to enjoy and explore the wild surroundings. "I'm ship wrecked, Raka exulted, I'm shipwrecked and alone. She clung to a rock my boat, alone in a boat on the sea, she sang" (Fire, 61-62). The picture seems
to be an obsession with Raka as the same image occurs later in the novel when she contemplates on forest fires.

The bronze Shiva is a symbol of destruction and liberation. The figure of Buddha here is a symbol of serenity, a trait that eludes both Raka and Nanda. Raka does not understand the symbolic purport of Buddha and his still posture as she has never known serenity in her life. Even Nanda's outward serenity is only a self-deceptive mask. Her stillness and withdrawal from life are life-denying. She too has never experienced inner serenity and has never known the peace of mediation. So both stare at Buddha without comprehending his message. "Both gazed at the Buddha, sole survivor of that splendour looking as though the holocaust around him was less than the dust to him" (Fire, 85). Instead of enlightening them, the bronze Buddha gives an excuse to Nanda to fabricate stories of adventures in order to lure Raka. But, being a perceptive child, Raka soon detects the false note, the nervous garrulity and mirth in her great grandmother's lengthy narration.

Added to this note of discord, Raka learns of her mother's illness in Geneva, Raka goes to her retreat and once again the inner and outer rhythms are synchronised in, "No one ever come here, but Raka and the
cuckoos that song and sang invisibly. These were not the dutiful domestic birds that called Nanda Kaul to attention at Carignano. They were the demented birds that raved and beckoned Raka on to a land where there was no sound, only silence no light, shade, and skeletons kept in beds of ash on which the foot prints of jackals flowered in grey" (Fire, 90). This beautiful piece of rhetoric describes the desolate spirit of Raka as well as image.

Anita Desai continues, "This hill, with its one destroyed house and one unbuilt one, on the ridge under the fire - singed pines, appealed to Raka with the strength of a strong sea-current, pulling-dragging. There was something about it illegitimate, uncompromising and lawless that made her tingle. The scene of devastation and failure somehow drew her inspired his". (Fire, 90). Nanda failed in captivating Raka and winning her attention, Nanda reverts to her old disapproving attitude. She exults when Ila Das's sudden kiss brings out a gasp from-Raka. "At last someone had swing a net over that crafty little mosquito" (Fire, 115). It is Ila Das who could get at the truth of Raka's nature as she says that "she's secretive as a little wild bird, or an insect that hides" (Fire, 132). Nanda too understands 'the wildness' in Raka as she feels "Raka no
more needed or wanted a house than a jacked did, or a cicada. She was a wild creature" (Fire, 103).

The image of Raka's world is wild, while Nanda's is crowded with rejections and resentments. All her life, Nanda is being rejected, first by her husband and then by her children. They have only used her for their own purposes, brutally refusing to nurture her craving for love.

Now, once again, stepping out of her world of withdrawal and solitary confinement, she tries to make genuine contact with Raka's as she is very much like herself. Even in this desperate attempt of Nanda, at the cost of her dignity and grandeur of age, meets with a total refusal from Raka. The denial and the thwarting of her needs and desires make her fidgety. She paced the garden at twilight, the he of her sari sliding over the pebbles . . . srr, srr, sir like a silken snake. (Fire, 98). The intensity of Nanda's irritation is being impressed upon the reader through this auditory image. According to the critic, these repeated associations of Nanda with snakes indicate that her withdrawal is an act of revenge as she was compelled to do what she hated throughout her life (Goel 65).

The third image of the trilogy of women characters is Ila Das. She is indeed mis-shapen, but only externally. Her dreadful shrieking voice,
her small figure with its button - boots and top - knot all served to incite the ridicule of the neighbourhood. Born to affluent parents, she is now forced to earn a pittance as a welfare worker in the village below Carignano.

Despite the privations and misery that Ila Das had experienced, she has not withdrawn herself from life, has not said, "the great No" to "the general current", has not relinquished her commitments and obligations to it. In fact she has actively and constructively involved herself in her job of welfare officer, taking to heart the problems of the villagers and striving to help them out of their abject misery, the typical and traditional image of human. While Nanda Kaul, weary of a life that was empty at the core, has adopted a sterile and barren existence, Ila Das has chosen to "make the best of a bad job" (*Fire*, 124). Thus two trend of feminism and images of women presented by the novelist.

The tragic news of Ila Das's rape and murder precipitates Nanda Kaul's inevitable end, Ila is being raped in the village, Raka is busy setting the forest on fire. Ila's excited talk of the past not only destroys the illusory world of Nanda but acts as an impetus to Raka to set everything on fire. Listening to Ila's raptures over the music and parties
of the golden era in Vice-chancellor's house, Raka aches to destroy everything. There is unconscious vengeance and vehemence in her thoughts.

All the premonitions of despair disaster and death, all the anticipatory images are concretized at the end of the novel when the police informs Nanda of Ila's rape and death and Raka informs Nanda of the forest being on fire. The melodrama is not complete yet. Nanda's facade of calm aristocracy while partially crumbles due to her desperate need to identify herself with Raka, disintegrates totally at Ila Das's death.

The news of her friend's death shatters her illusions about herself. It plunges her headlong into the tragic role of a woman betrayed by life, by a loveless marriage, by loveless children and by a meaningless past. As Ujwala Patil feels, "Nanda suffers the psychological shock of rape and feels, like Ila, that her womanhood too is defeated and self hood insulted (63) Ila's rape and murder, an event in the world of actuality, ignites the spark in Nanda's mind that burns her own pretences and make-beliefs into ashes.

As a symbolic correlative, the forest fire ignited by Raka, symbolizes the inner destruction of Nanda. The concluding lines of the
novel reinforce this. She twisted her head, then hung it down, down, let it hang . . . Nanda Kaul on the stool with her head hanging, the black telephone hanging, the long wire dangling (FOM 145). The same verb defines both the objects of the external world and the in her world of Nanda Kaul.

The symbolic correlation between the external and the inner world of the protagonist is thus achieved, hinting at the shared despairs. By setting the forest on fire, Raka is able to free Nanda from her fragmented self and quench her own inner rage. Raka's fury is directed at the entire civilized world as it contains only, despair and callousness. It looks as if she believed that after the total annihilation, a new world of love, hope and peace will be born. Her satisfaction at her act and her deep-rooted concern for human values are evident when she whispers to Nanda, "Look Nani, I have set the forest on fire. Look, Nani-look. the forest is on fire" (Fire, 145) One feels that Raka is tragic to comfort the disconsolate Nanda that the forest of pretences, hurts and miseries are on fire, there is nothing to worry about.

Though there is no lyricism or exuberance of flowery language, as in her earlier novels the images in this novel, relate to the title and the theme, thus contributing to the symbolic centrality. The title symbol
“fire” continually gains in power and significance by a number of recurrences lending a morbid shade to the whole of the novel (Goel 65). Every word, every phrase, every image is functional in this novel, which only proves the novelist’s superb control over her medium and matter. Despite its thin story line, gloomy ending and sickening image of the world. Anita Desai is certainly claiming for women, as a feminist, the freedom for choice and fulfilment of life, time and place, to be themselves, discarding the traditional obligations and duties thrust upon them, by suggestion and indirections, but not directly and openly as in the images of her women characters.