CHAPTER-V
ANITA DESAI’S SHORT STORIES

In the previous chapter entitled “Last Novels of Anita Desai” a
detail study of last four novels are done. Individual freedom, alienation,
self-fulfilment, East-West encounter, loneliness, identity crisis,
international violence are some of the themes of these novels. Anita
Desai, with all her tremendous success, has been considered as a
serious writer. It is chiefly due to the theme she deals with and the
characters she delineates. Moreover, her intense psychological
explanatory passages are quite in true with the patience of the reader,
although her psychoanalysis is not sometimes within the reach of
ordinary reader. Baumgartner’s Bombay, Journey to Ithaca,
Fasting,Feasting and The Zigzag Way are the novels which are dealt in
detail in last chapter. In this chapter Anita Desai’s three collections of
short stories are discussed thoroughly.

Anita Desai’s work has been described as containing a “modern
sensibility”1 (Ram 96), but the precise delineations of Desai’s
modernism have been the subject of critical debate over the years.
While all her fiction foregrounds many of the formal and thematic
constituents of modernism-subjectivity, formal fragmentation, temporal
dislocation and a quest for meaning, described by Desai herself as an
“effort of discover, to underline and convey the true significance of
things”2 (Sharma 12) – the development in her fiction has led some
critics to claim that she is in fact more of a realistic. This shift from the
private to the public, from an exploration of the psychological effects of
oppression to an emphasis on its social constituents, means that the
critical receptions of Desai’s work needs to be placed firmly in its time.
Hence, K. R. S. Iyengar’s claim in 1973 that "Desai is an eminently
psychological novelist”3 (Iyengar 464) is based upon a reading of her
early work, and Fawzia Afzal-Khans argument in 1993 that Desai “ultimately subordinates her poetic and mythical imagination to her moral vision, which carries “the moral weight of realism”⁴ (Khan 59-60) draws upon an awareness of her more recent fiction.

“Games at Twilight”, a collection of eleven short stories written at different times and published in 1978, is a transitional work. It reveals the ideological tensions of a predominantly modernist writer who seeks to reconcile her early celebration of the transforming power of limitations. It has been argued that Desai’s exploration of “stages of awareness” in short stories “is so obsessive that it sometimes violently separates the psyche from the social context”⁵ (Sharma 163). This claim is conditioned by a reading that privileges them over form. The separation between individual awareness and social context is not so much the result of Desai’s “obsessive” concern with subjectivity, a deliberate escape to the sanctum of the psyche, but rather, a desire to explore the fundamental links between the personal, spiritual and aesthetic and the social, historical and material, within the demands imposed by the short-story form Desai’s exploration of moments of individual insight and in particular epiphanic awareness reveals as much about the modernist short story from India as it does about the middle stage of Desai’s literary development. The following analysis of epiphany in Desai’s short stories examines the interplay between the structural constituents of the stories and their thematic concern and reveals the way in which her work opens up for scrutiny the complex relationship between epiphany and the short story form.

Epiphany is a central concept in short story criticism. Defined by James Joyce as a “sudden spiritual manifestation”⁶ (p. 216) the idea of epiphany sums to be implicitly accepted by a range of critics as one of
the key elements structuring the short story. Mary Pratt, for example, claims that “the moment of truth stands as the model for the short story the way, the life stands as the model for the novel” (p. 183), suggesting that the revelatory nature of epiphany is somehow supported but the short-story form and that it serves as a principle of composition for the writer. This view is qualified by Nadine Gordimer, who argues that “a discrete moment of truth is aimed at not the moment of truth, because the short story doesn’t deal in cumulatives” (p. 180). Yet is the short story is “a form which hugs the unknown to itself” (p. 30) suggests that the answer might lie somewhere in between: the short story, while promoting the desire for spiritual insight, might at the same time work implicitly toward denying the possibility of religious certitude.

This subtle negotiation is evident in the work of Anita Desai. Her short stories bring into sharp relief the difference between epiphany as an underlying structural principle in the short story, provided for what Hanson has called the “elisions and gaps” (p. 25) in the short story, and epiphany as the thematic concern. For while the stories in *Games at Twilight* show a common thematic concern with a moment of truth or insight, their textual construction works toward questioning the value of this insight. Therefore, in order to analyse the way in which Desai interrogates epiphany – a moment of spontaneous, sudden, and transforming spiritual insight - it is necessary to analyse her treatment of spiritual awareness as a whole. Indeed, only two of her stories describe epiphanies, *Studies in the Park* and *Surface Textures* Desai’s subversion of these epiphanies draws upon a broader subversion one that questions the value of all insight – evident in nearly all the stories in the collection after analysing the thematic and structural discontinuities in her work, It will show how Desai localizes epiphany,
giving this socially transcendent and universalizing experience a culturally specific bearing.

Illumination is the key theme of Anita Desai’s short stories. "It’s real and metaphorical manifestations not only structure individual stories, but also serve to provide the collection’s overall pattern, that element of fiction that Desai has claimed is of most concern to her."11 (Ram 100) The stories move between the “light” of insight however fluting, and the “dark” of indifference, between a development toward a moment of truth and an acknowledgement of the elusiveness of individual vision.

Anita Desai’s short stories reflect her deep sense of diversity and multicultural sensibilities. They are the mirrors of human emotions and feelings which reflects her understandings of temporary life style of the cities of India and the world. Her short stories sagacity and fusion of contemporary themes like globalization, self-assertion, violence, struggle between tradition and modernity.

The first story of Games at Twilight has its setting in a town in North India which is in the grip of fearsome. The summer heat holds no fears for the children in a large family – a gaggle of brothers, sisters and cousins. In the open, they decide on a game of hide and seek. Though unwilling Raghu, the older children among them is chosen to be ‘It’. Looking for a safe place to hide, Ravi spies the unused shed into which go the detritus of the household. He squeezes himself into a narrow gap were only young child can enter and feels safe there. Later after some time Ravi suddenly realizes that to win at hide and seek it is necessary to elude the ‘It’ and touch the den claiming victory. He burst out of the shed dissolving to children tears and screaming. The
children look at him as if they don’t quite know who he is. For the first time he understands that he is of no account in the world and it goes on without him.

*Private Tuition by Mr. Bose* is the story of Mr. Bose, a Sanskrit teacher who gives private tuition on the balcony of his cramped flat while his wife cooks evening meal. He has two students, Pritam and young women Upneet. Throughout the story Mr. Bose is placed on the balcony which gives him access to two worlds. As the story begins his is mindful of the blood line between domestic harmony and soft cooking voice as she rolls the chapatti and talks to the baby.

*Studies in the Park*, is the story of young man Suno, the main character, whose family is continually pressuring him to study for major exams which determine his future. But his other family members like brothers, sisters, father and mother disturb him so that he is unable to concentrate in his studies. Finally, Suno discovers that many young men like himself study in the park near his house and he also decides to study in the park. But one day before his exam he is interrupted by a sickly young woman lying on a park bench with her head on the lap of man. Suno is so disturbed by their vision that instead of studies for exam he chooses to pursue life as an adventure, rather than as race.

*Surface textures*, is the story of an escapist Harish, and his entire being just a psychograph of pusillanimity. He invites disciplinary action so that he can get rid of his family burdens and also to become a Sadhu in order to lead a life where he had to do nothing but to prosper on other’s earnings. This is a negative side of life, which Anita Desai decidedly hates has presented in this short story.
Sale, is a study of an artist whose paintings never sell. He is a painter gifted with unusual talents and calibre, but his misfortune is that nobody has the capacity to appreciate his creation. Once it so happens that three visitors come and make perusal of his paintings. They ask many questions about his professional and private affairs. Being encouraged by the interest shown by visitors in his paintings he answers all the questions asked by them. But despite all his pleadings they do not find anything substantial in his paintings. Here, Anita Desai has projected an idea of neglect of artists in the society through this short story.

Pineapple cake, another memorable short story by Anita Desai, is replete with a pathetic touch in the end. Victor is a child who is a given assurances a number of times to get a pineapple cake by his mother named Mrs. Fernandez. Carmen Maria, who hails from a Goa and de Millo, who hails from Bombay are to marry, where Mrs. Fernandez will also join with Victor only if he behaves properly. Mrs. Fernandez agrees to carry Victor to the church and provide a pineapple cake in that marriage. But at the time of marriage, a gentleman dies, which shocks Victor. Instead of enjoying pineapple cakes he ruminates over the death of the gentlemen. Cake appears as if it were a Corpse. He does not eat the cake but his mother eats a lot. Victor finds his mother conduct at the party quite inconsistent.

The Accompanist, deals with the life of those characters who feel happy to pursue the path of virtue and commitment. Mr. Misra and Ustad Rahim Khan are two major character around whom the story revolves. Mr. Misra, aged thirty, is a Tanpura player to his master Ustad Rahim Khan, a famous musician. Mr. Misra was just a fifteen years boy when he had come to his master. As a boy Misra use to get
lot of elementary knowledge of music from his master. He admires his master and has an unbounded love and he remains a life-long accompanist to his master.

A Devoted Son, is a short story of attitudinal clashes between a doctor son and his retired aged father. Rakesh is a doctor who by dint of hard work gets brilliant success in his medical profession. He is a very devoted son to his parents and after the death of his mother he takes an utmost care of his father. Rakesh wants his father to be healthy and have a long life. With this view he prescribes many medicines and powders regularly to his father. But his father is impatient to this habit and complains to his neighbour Bhatia. Here rises the clash between attitudes. Rakesh is guided by rational approach of doctor whereas father's sentimental pleasure on the earth seems to be that of eating. Even a young devoted son and a competent doctor is suspected by his aged father of tyranny and maltreatment.

The Farewell Party, is the story of emotions, sentiments and human relations. The Raman family is the centre of discussion by the neighbours. The guests who arrive profusely congratulate Mr. Ram on his getting promotion in the Indian Merchantile Company. The Farewell Party is therefore arranged by the Ramans and the guests and the neighbours sumptuously entertained. All praises Raman and becomes emotional, some start weeping and gives farewell to Mr. and Mrs. Raman. There was about it exactly that kind of sentimental euphoria that is generated at a ship-board party, the one given on the last night before the end of the voyage.

Pigeons at Daybreak, is a story of the valetudinarian psychology of Amul Bose. He is a type of Asthma patient who has some real and
imagined problems. His wife, Otima Bose, is highly devoted and sincere. One day, on receiving information about electric breakdown the whole night, Amul Bose’s problem naturally multiply. Throughout the night Otima massages Amul’s body and there was some cool breeze also. This brings Amul some respite, pigeons fly at the day break, and the flight of the pigeons also brings a temporary respite for Amul. Infact Otima knows the psychology of her husband well. Precisely, this short story is a psychological story dealing with the imagined problems of an asthmatic patient like Amul Bose.

_Scholar and Gypsy_, is a short story of temperamental contrasts. It centres around an American couple named David and Pat who have come to India to explore the mystery of the land India. David is certainly a scholar, whose interest in sociology entitles him to fame. Whereas Pat has entirely a different temperament and attitudes from David. On their arrival to India, David finds Bombay an enchanting city, which pat disapproves. In Delhi, Pat meets a number of people. She develops a sense of antipathy towards the people living in Delhi. For sometime she associates herself with Mrs. Sharma, who is a social worker. After some time she goes to Manali to enjoy natural beauty. She does a lot of shopping in the Tibetan quarters of Manali Bazar where she encounters many hippies. Later the couple enter into heated discussion on religions, hippies and Buddhist etc. David ultimately facts to prevail upon Pat and they finally get separated from each other. Disgusted and broken hearted David returns to his country alone and Pat joins hippies in search of spiritual solace and finally plans to be a Buddhist Monk.

But as the very title, _Games at Twilight_, suggest, the stories describe potential and partial illumination. Desai conveys this partial
illumination by yoking a character’s renewed awareness to the twilight hours. Twilight is the time when Raghu learns about the ignominy of defeat in the title story; it is the hour of release for Basu as he finally gains some peace in *Pigeons at Dawn*; it is the best time for reviewing and reflection, as Suno discovers in *Studies in the Park*, it is the hour of conviviality both forced and genuine in *The Farewell Party*. In all these stories the conjunction between time and renewed awareness is used to affirm a dream time, a time when the imagination is released, a time when Scheherazade can begin her work of storytelling. It is, in other words, a time for the suspension of belief. This is significant, for it allows Desai to throw into doubt the value if not the validity of the insights gained by her characters.

How does Desai succeeded in creating ambiguity in her depiction of spiritual insight? A brief look at the way she combines formal disruptions with implicit social commentary provides an answer. Desai successfully uses a number of different methods to convey a twilight quality; the tense changes in the first person narratives of *Studies in the Park* and *The Accompanist* emphasize developments in the state of mind of the central character, and the restless shift of focus from one character to another in *Games at Twilight*. *The Farewell Party* and *Scholar and Gypsy* draw attention to the temporality and transience of a suspended state of consciousness. This fluid form destabilizes the potential for a unified focus or moral centre to the texts. Yet Desai does not stop here. She highlights the divergence between twilight and daylight awareness, exploring the spiritual and emotional conflicts generated by the urge for self-reflection and the need to meet social obligations and material demands.
This conflict is explored in the story of Mr. Bose, who continues to provide private tuition despite finding it “intolerable, all of it except for the seventy five rupees paid at the end of the month” (GT 16). He discovers that “the two halves of the difficult world he had been holding so carefully together, sealing them with reams of poetry, reams of Sanskrit, had split apart into dissonance” (GT 17). The fragile harmony at the end is conveyed in suitably aesthetic terms, with literature and music providing the idiom for an uneasy reconciliation and acceptance: “The grammar re-arranged itself according to rule, corrected itself. The composition into quite clear the exhaustion of the child, asleep or nearly so. The sounds of dinner being prepared were calm, decorative even. Once more the radio was tuned to music sympathetically sad” (GT 19).

The harmony created Mr. Bose and his environment is quite clearly an aesthetic construct; his newly acquired tranquillity is described as a fabrication,” a composition into quite”, and it is this over aestheticism that draws attention to the author’s presence. It is as if Desai has stepped out from the shadows to reveal that Bose’s state of mind is constructed from an awareness that lies outside his own. The passage provides a gloss of unity and harmony, delineating an aesthetic resolution of material conflict, yet this exposure of the artifice that goes into the construction of a character’s awareness not only draws attention to the external presence of the writer, thereby disrupting of a hitherto – seamless narrative but also emphasizes the very exteriority of this moment of reflection, calling into question its authenticity and value.

This technique for destabilizing individual insight through self-conscious aestheticism is carried over in to Desai’s treatment of
epiphany. In *Studies in the Park*, Suno, stressed student, fails to concentrate on reviewing for his exams in a provincial park. There he sees something that, in his words, “burnt the surface of my eyes so that they watered” (GT 31). The exact import of his insight is, significantly, left unclear; what dominates is the form his vision takes. The sight of her makes him feel as if he “were gazing at a painting or a sculpture, some work of art” (GT 30). Suno compares the woman’s face to “a flower, wax white and composed, like a Persian lily or a tobacco flower at night”, and sees in it “a beauty I had never come across even in a dream”. He assumes that her paleness indicates that she is dying, and he even attempts a diagnosis- “she was very ill, with anaemia, perhaps, or T. B,” – and wonders if the old man accompanying her is “her husband, her father, her lover?” interpreting the intimacy between them as “inhuman” “divine” (GT 30). Upon this brief glimpse of strangers in the part rests an undefined insight that liberates Suno from his social responsibilities, leading him to abandon his forthcoming exams and his familial commitments.

There is clearly an ironic distance here between the immanent author and the central character, adjunction allowed for by the use of a first-person narrative rich in hyperbole and melodrama. Although the epiphany is undoubtedly a genuine experience for the central character, Desai’s depiction invites the reader to make judgements about it. Not only does she show the epiphany to be based upon a vast number of suppositions but the overtly romantic rendition of his experience suggests that it is shaped by an aesthetic idealism that renders it immature and vacuous, the product of a highly romantic, self-serving imagination. What is more, Suno’s vision of death in life so closely corresponds to his own sense of futility over his exams that it suggests that his epiphany draws upon a desire to escape from exam pressures.
The depiction of epiphany as an escape from social pressures is supported by Desai’s treatment of spiritual awareness in general. In Scholar and Gypsy, Desai wryly juxtaposes an American woman’s self-discovery and newly awakened religious awareness with the rationalists perspective of her unimaginative husband. Pat the American women, describes her experience in typically extravagant terms as an “escape from India, an escape from all those Hindu horrors and all the greasy Indian masses, whining and cajoling and sneering” (GT 128). This escape involves a reductive, childlike impression of the mountain folk whose harsh life is idealized under Pat’s new visionary awareness: “All they have is a black old kettle and a pack of wood on their backs, rope sandals and a few sheep, but they laugh and sign and go striding up the mountains like-like lords” (GT 129). Yet again Desai has developed a story line that upholds the importance of individual insight while simultaneously creating a formal dissonance that questions the value of this insight. What is more, Desai’s contextualization of spiritual experience furthers this destabilization. If the only option for a spirituality transformed person like Suno is to put out of society altogether, it implicitly calls into question the viability of the spiritual experience to penetrate the real contradictions of existence. In “Studies in the Park”, it is as if Desai self-consciously locates Suno’s epiphany in a tangibly godless world, exposing the experience as a self-indulgent fabrication and thereby subverting its transcendental potential to break the boundaries between spiritual and material world.

These boundaries form the subject of over half of the Games at Twilight stories, in which Desai repeatedly draws attention to a character’s failure to find a link between spiritual and material worlds, exposing the fragmentation of experience that is the very anti thesis of epiphanic awareness. Art and artifice, she suggests, can provide a
means of overcoming this fragmentation. Yet even in stories such as *The Accompanist* and *Sale* in which Desai explores the liberating factor. In *Sale*, for example, an artist who paints imaginary birds and flowers is shown to be hopelessly misunderstood by a couple of prospective clients. They withdraw with embarrassment upon interpreting his enthusiasm for personal anecdote as a sign of pressure to buy his paintings. When the painter crosses the boundary between solitary genius and ordinary man, his work, too, is called into question by these devotees of high art who wish to maintain their romantic view of the artist as a gifted genius despite the ample evidence of the symbolic relationship between material and spiritual need. Art has been created out of the "Rags and Grime" of the city studio and is less an “inspired act of creation”\(^20\) (GT 43) than a habitual way of seeing, a way of surviving, both physically and emotionally in the filthy city. The underlying logic of "Sale" is that the truth of imaginative insight, the path toward epiphany, must be publicly denied in order for the artist to achieve material success.

It has been seen that the depiction of spiritual awareness in Desai’s short stories is destabilized through a combination of narrative employment-focusing on the failed attempts of an individual to permeate the boundaries between material and spiritual worlds - and disruptive formal techniques. This combination works to take the reader out of the text and dissipates the potential for creating the single, reunifying effect of epiphany. It is as if the compression imposed upon the short-story form invites not the integrative vision of epiphany but the dissipitiation of partial insights. This is substantiated by Desai’s disavowal of epiphany in "Surface Textures". Here she brings together several of the techniques found in her treatment of spiritual awareness in a ruthless interrogation of the value of the sudden spiritual revelation.
Surface Textures centres on Harish a civil servant, who is permanently transformed when he observes the contours of a melon that his wife has brought for lunch; “From the start he regarded it with eyes that seemed newly opened. One would have thought he had never seen a melon before” (GT 35). From then on, he is captivated by the sight and shape of everyday objects, paying no attention to anything else. His eyes “slide about” over the surface of things, “taking in things normally considered nondescript and unimportant the paving stones on which feet momentarily pressed, the length of wire in a railing at the side of the road, a pattern of grime on the window pane of a discussed printing press” (GT 36). This aestheticized awareness is clearly induced by an epiphany, yet it leads him not merely to lose his concentration - so that “the people in the queue outside went for another day without rice & sugar & kerosene for their lamps & Janta cookers” (GT 36) - but also to lose his job, his wife his family, and his home. Harish's epiphany socially & psychologically dislocates him. His worship of surface textures induces a trancelike state that leads him, in turn, to be the object of devotion. He therefore comes to be socially relocated as a swami. Is Harish mad or is he a mystic?. Desai's ironic detachment leaves us little room for doubt. Harish's exclusive contemplation of external reality, including the objects of devotion brought to him, and the contentment of his devote to interpret his silent form as a manifestation of divinity reveal that both worshippers and worshipped are deluded by appearances. For Harish and his devotees, spiritual awareness is founded upon exteriority. By creating a disjunction between truth and the absolution of spiritual insight between meaning and its individual interpretation, Desai seems to contend that all truths, including those that are founded upon epiphantic experience, are partial, personal and plural. In Surface Textures Desai has not only made epiphany relative by exploring the difference between objective reality and subjective experience and creating an ironic dissonance between the two, she has
contextualised it in doing so, she has to come to interrogate the cultural value placed upon manifestations of divine insight.

Seeing is believing for the characters of Anita Desai, but the textual disruptions in her short stories question the possibility for lasting, meaningful insight. Indeed her work seems to promote what Dominic Head has described in his analysis of Joyce as the multi-dimensional ‘non-epiphany’, one in which epiphany becomes “a nexus of a variety of forces rather than a single effect” (54). Such a plural disruptive form of epiphany may well be one that is imposed upon the short story by the exigencies of the form. Not only does the very length of the short story enforce omission and exclusion, liberating the text from the imposition of authorial commentary, but the very open-endedness what Clare Hanson has described as the 'tangentiality' of the short story seems to invite and simultaneously to underline, the possible rendition of a single-effect unifying epiphany.

Anita Desai, who is basically known as an Indian English woman novelist, has now published her Diamond Dust and Other Stories, a collection of nine short stories. As in her novels, she has exhibited her creative talent in the short stories also. Like a good story teller, she selects a single event or thematic unit and explores its intricacies and highlights its significance in a very subtle manner.

Diamond Dust traverses a wide geographic terrain, moving from the Himalayas to Manitoba, Toronto, Cornwall, Amherst, Massachusetts, Mexico, and Delhi, but throughout the stories there are similarities in the characters, and in the theme; that of the underlying complexity of humans. People begin as one thing and end up another. There are always layers of meaning, the first a superficial one, what is
apparent, the sociology of the story society what the visitor's see, while below lay other stories, of love, forgiveness, meaning and understanding. There is always a revelation, although the writing is very subtle, and the underlying meaning is only hinted at left to reveal itself in the space between the reader and the work.

The first story entitled, *Royalty* the authoress picturizes the contrast between east and west, poetic and prosaic life and nostalgic attachment to one’s past. The protagonist of the story, Raja has returned to India from California where he teaches Sanskrit and composes poetry. Raja has a deep nostalgic attachment to things Indian. That is the reason why he dresses himself in a South Indian dhoti and shirt and travels in train to Delhi in order to relive his past and renew his relation with Indian reality and see some (Subtle and higher) beauty even in drab and ugly things. In Sarla’s eyes Raja is the one who “opened their eyes, who made them see it [the Lodi gardens] as they never saw it themselves, as a place of magic, enchantment, of pleasure so immense and rich that it could never be exhausted”25 (DD 19). Sarla who is a practical woman comparatively fails to understand Raja’s poetic approach to life. Raja who believes in unity of being, laughs at the double standards of Ravi, Sarla’s husband who dresses himself in tweed suit and hat and pretends to be a patriot. He enjoys the Indian music with real gusto. Thus his visit to India enables him to have an intense poetic ecstasy and share it with others. Perhaps there is no greater royalty than the rich artistic experience one undergoes. Anita Desai, thus, explores the psyche of an artist by contrasting it with that of the ordinary ones.

In *Royalty* a visit from the revered and campy Raja interrupts the preparations from the summer exodus to the Himalayas. Raja is a poet;
an academic. In Sarla’s eyes, he is the one who opened their eyes, who made them see it as they never saw it themselves, as a place of magic, enchantment, of pleasure so immense and rich that it could never be exhausted. When Sarla’s cook leaves on his over rue summer break to escape the summer heat of Delhi, Raja leaves Sarla and Ravi for the more socially graceful Dutta, Ray’s houseboat in Kashmir. Sarla’s disappointment combined with the superficiality of Delhi social life, and the enduring depth of Ravi’s love as they sit on top of a mountain provides a powerful opening to the stories.

*Winterscape* the second story delineates the widening gap between people of different generations and cultures resulting in a sense of alienation and lack of communication. The story highlights the contrast between Hindu culture and Christian culture. Whereas in Hindu culture filial bonds transcend the barriers of technical relationships of kinship, in Christian (and Western) culture, they are restricted by technical bonds. Whereas Hindu culture believes in a collective happiness, Christian culture believes in the individual happiness. This contrast is brought out in a subtle fashion by the writer. In a Hindu family there are two sisters, Asha and Annapurna (or Anu). Asha, the elder sister gets married, but does not have any issue. A little later Anu, the younger sister also gets married and has a child named Rakesh in course of time. After completing his education in Canada, Rakesh, like many ambitious Indian youngman, refuses to return to India and settles down in Canada by marrying a Canadian girl called Berth. The theme of cultural contrast is intersected by that of generation gap and time-gap. When the two mothers go to Canada to stay for a few days with Rakesh and try to remind him of his childhood days, they face lots of problems. Observing them in kitchen Rakesh says “Together the two would open the refrigerator twenty times in one morning, never able to resist looking in at
its crowded, illuminated shelves; that reassurance of food seemed to satisfy them on some deep level – their eyes gleamed and they closed the door on it gently, with a dreamy expression” (DD 43). He finds that he has forgotten the past because of the long interval of time as well as his long stay in a foreign land and culture. They fall ill because of the cold weather. The winter is not only real but grows metaphorical for them. There is not real communication between the two mothers and their son. Rakesh therefore, sends them back to India. His wife heaves a sigh of relief when the two mothers leave for India. In this story, Anita Desai has shown the contrast between an Indian mother and a Canadian mother in a very subtle fashion.

The title story, Diamond Dust depicts the theme of unusually intimate relationship between man and animal, between Mr. Das, the protagonist and his pet dog called Diamond. The dog is a terror to the neighbours. People who are scared of it try to avoid going to Mr. Das’s compound. Mr Das heaves a sign of relief on its arrival after the first outing. When it goes out for the second time, it is caught by the police and taken away in the police van. But when he finds it in the police van, he climbs the rear side of the van and dies when he is jerked back by the vehicle. His deep attachment for the pet dog makes him reckless and costs him his life. Anita Desai seems to teach the lesson that all love—whether of man, or woman, bird or beast requires some kind of sacrifice.

In Diamond Dust, Mr. Das’s puppy called Diamond grows into a “badmashi” (DD 62), a wild devil, which attacks the neighbourhood children and roams the streets in search of female canine victims. As is always the case in Desai’s world though, nothing is as simple as it seems. Mr. Das attachment to Diamond is genuine, as is his grief when Diamond disappears. The story is billed as a tragedy, and it raises the
kind of questions good tragedy always does who is right? Who is wrong? Is love and end in itself? Or is the tragedy in the delusion, the misplaced adoration.

In *Underground*, Jack and Meg go on holiday in Cornwall, and have trouble finding accommodation. Jack Higgins and his wife Meg go in a car in search of a hotel on a hot sandy beach. Meg has recently been treated in the hospital and needs rest now. Her husband has brought her in the car in the hot sun and searches for a hotel. But everywhere he gets a negative answer. Finally he has to be satisfied with an underground room. The story is episodic and the motif is not sufficient clear, although it contains very fine description of the coastal atmosphere.

The visual impression of Cornwall at the height of summer is conveyed wonderfully with long descriptive and busy sentences, words jostling with one another with few punctuation marks to slow down the imagery, adjective pushing their way forward to create a visual impression; “Boat sails, surf boards, waves, foam, debris and light. Fish and chips, ice-cream cones, bouncy castles, spades, striped windbreakers”28 (DD 64). The moving story within the story, of Bob and Helen, is handled very well. Kept invisible to Jack and Meg, who muse over the odd bod, that draft owner, of The White House who turns them away despite the empty rooms, the reader is forced to marginalise it too. It is the unknown history the pain and beauty which is under the surface of most lives. Despite Mc. Taggart's loss, as he" felt himself dissolve, become one with the silent evening, having no existence apart from it”29 (DD 81), there is still hope. The badgers return, along with his breath, renamed Brock and Helen, and hungry.
The Man Who Saw Himself Drowned is a psychological fantasy and it employs an interesting technique. It shows the death of the protagonist’s double by drowning in the river. He attends his double’s funeral. The protagonist is nameless. The story has the quality of a fable and is conspicuous for its psychological significance. It easily brings the novels of Katka to our mind. The point of drowning, the narrative changes from third person to first person. Is the man a ghost, coming to terms with his actual death, or does he take this apparition, a man who look enough like him to fool his wife and colleagues as more meaningful than it should be when he allows himself to absorb the death, failing to come forward and reveal himself. This is, a “fantasy many of us entertain in the course of our lives. What happiness, we think, to end the dull, wretched, routine-ridden, unfulfilling life we lead, and to begin on another - filled with all our heart desires” (DD 92). His presence is real enough to be seen by the children who throw rocks at him or the dogs who chase him down the street. However, as his identity is stripped, we begin to wonder that makes a person. Do we exist outside of the lies in our lives? Are the ties themselves meaningless? Is there anything left if you take away the trappings of a life, or do we simply become like the beggars- identity less, despairing. The Hamlet like soliloquy mingles with an almost Katka the quietness of despair which ends the story in a move back to third person, the noise of a flock of crows and the clattering of a dropped pot breaking the silence.

The Artist’s Life presents a picture of the paradox of an artist's life. It shows how an artist has to create beauty inspite of being surrounded by physical and behavioural ugliness. Here Miss Polly attends a summer school where she is taught by Miss Abigail to paint according to her dreams. Tom is Miss Polly’s brother. They have a tenant called Miss Mabel Dodd who is an artist teaching the
delinquents in a school. Miss Polly returns from summer camp imagining herself an artist, while their odd tenants Mrs. Mabel Dodd, a recluse, suddenly find herself someone to clean up. Set-against the backdrop of middle class Amherst Massachusetts an ordinary domestic life with neat suburbs and tidy garbage bins. Polly’s longing for real art contrast with the mundane world where “those unpredictable roseate dreams were cruelly limited, encroached upon by the undeniable reality of the house, yard, suburb - enemies, all, of Art”31 (DD 104). The disillusionment in the end when Polly hears that Mabel too is part of the secret world of art combines with the soft beds of warmth and sweetness in the peanut butter and jelly sandwiches made by her mother in the way which is masterful. But one day, Miss Polly and her mother are surprised to see that somebody has written ‘Pig’ on her car with excrement. They cannot guess as to who must have done the filthy thing. The police are called to investigate the matter. It is suspected that one of Miss Mabel’s delinquent students or the black youth must have done the heinous thing. This is the fate of an artist dealing with morally ugly people.

In Tepoztlan Tomorrow, Anita Desai highlights the generation gap between the old and the young, one’s nostalgic attachment to one’s native city and the progressive deterioration of the city. Louis, son of Teresa, who is the protagonist of this story goes to Tepoztlan and meets Dona Celia. While having his dinner, he inadvertently refers to Pedro and spoils Dona Celia’s mood. Next morning Dona Celia and her daughter Nadyn complain to Louis about a neighbour who is a professional garbage picker and who disturbs them with the stinking smell and the loud music of radio and TV and by other dirty habits. Later Louis goes to the golf club where he sees Alesandro playing guitar and Arturo. Then he sees some parts of the city, returns to Dona Celia’s
home and takes his leave with the pretext of continuing his research. The story, thus, shows a picture of decadence of the city in various ways, quite in line with Nirad Chaudhuri’s picture of American decadence as part of global decadence.

Poetic “out of the pelt of yellow fur that was the dust growing across the great northern Indian plain, a wavering grey line emerged. It might have been a cloud bank looming, but it was not - the sun blazed, the earth shrivelled, the heat burned away every trace of such beneficence. Yet the grey darkened, turned bluish, took on substance”32 (DD 115). As the stalled traffic line takes on a carnival atmosphere, with the paper toys, multi-coloured drinks, bamboo pipes, kits and puppets, the trivial dialogue of the family raises questions about identity, the remaining of the holiday, of where the actual story is. It is a theme which Desai returns to again and again, as in Tepoztlan Tomorrow, where Louis returns to his aunt's house, his old family home, in the Mexican town of Tepoztlan to find that some things have changed and some haven't. There is the mingled irritation and love, the longing and the rejection, the halycon past and the pull of the future.

Five Hours to Simla or Faisla, is one of the successful stories in this collection because of the clarity of motif in it. It is a humorous story about the adamance of a sardarji causing a good deal of tension to the travellers on the way to Simla. A family is going to Simla in a car. They have to travel another five hours to reach the place. But on the way, they are forced to stop the car as an unexpected difficulty crops up. Now the sardarji gets angry, parks his truck across the road thereby blocking the traffic from both sides. He demands compensation for the breakage of his windscreen by the goatherd. Meanwhile a temporary market gathers there. During the four or five hours of
tension and waiting, the members in the car compromise with the situation gradually. They are forced to eat and drink the cheap stuff that is available with the hawkers and vendors. After a long and tedious waiting, they are surprised to see a police van come from a nearby town. All the travellers are expecting an exchange of words between the sardarji and the police officers. But to their surprise, the sardarji, far from asking for any compensation, climbs into his truck, starts it and drives away from there without any demur. The family heave a sigh of relief after great tension. The sardarji’s behaviour is, obviously, as adamant as irrational and humorous. Desai has a way of contrasting the domestic with the exotic, posing in the most subtle but insistent; way, questions about desire, beauty, and the labels we give things. A similar questioning occurs in *Five Hours to Simla or Faisla*, where a family enroute to the Himalayas during the hottest part of the summer, are caught in a traffic jam by a truck refusing to move after being hit by a wayward rock. While the story is very simple, sitting itself within the traffic jam, the writing is exquisite.

In the final story, *The Rooftop Dwellers* deals with the problems of a working woman in Delhi. Moyna is a young lady who has passed master degree in English and wants to earn livelihood in the city of Delhi. She joins as a sub-editor of a literary magazine entitled *Books*. Tara happens to be her senior colleague whose husband Ritwik is a teacher in Jawaharlal Nehru University at Delhi. Moyna cannot afford to hire an expensive house or apartment. Besides, space is a big problem in the overcrowed capital city. Moyna, therefore, hires a rooftop barsati and suffers from minimalism, lack of social life and insecurity. She has to get up early in the morning to collect water from the tap as there is no facility for storing it. The owners of the house suspect her character when she brings male friends to her room. The
politician who is financing the magazine decides to wind it up. Finally Moyna is called by her mother to meet a bridegroom who has returned from America. Though simple, the story throws light upon the contemporary Indian society by highlighting the problems of an unmarried working woman like the financial, social and emotional ones. Anita Desai’s depiction of women’s problems has a ring of authenticity and sympathy.

On the whole, the stories in Diamond Dust are written from an omniscient point of view. Out of the nine stories, five are set in Canada and England and four in India. They are conspicuous for their remarkable and microscopic description, evocation of relevant mood and atmosphere and insight into the subtle working of the human mind. Sometimes her virtues become her vices in that the abundance of descriptive element tends to slacken the pace of the stories. As the blurb says, in Diamond Dust brilliant new collection of funny, sad, compassionate and charming stories, Anita Desai shows us ordinary lives in a disconcerting world, where hopes and dreams clash with disappointment and the human spirit shines strongly from India to Canada and England.

Anita Desai’s new collection of stories, The Artist of Disappearance includes three novellas featuring different forms of disappearance. The crumbling, all but abandoned Manor house as symbol of a social order in distress: the English may have invented that notion, but their former colonial subjects in India have also proved adept at employing it as a literary device. In the three novellas that make The Artist of Disappearance, Anita Desai uses it twice, in differing circumstances and locations, but to the same convincing and plaintive effect. Mrs. Desai's main themes in her new book are decay and disappointment, retrial and
regret, so that choice seems highly appropriate. Since the publication of her first novel, Cry, The Peacock nearly 50 years ago, she has often offer portraits of a certain kind of Anglicized Urban bourgeoisie or rural, landed gentry struggling for meaning against illusions, and The Artist of Disappearance, though barely 150 pages, fits neatly into that distinguished body of work.

In The Museum of Final Journeys, which opens the book were in the lush, green east of plantations left idle by the emergence of plastic as a substitute for jute. Mrs Desai’s unnamed narrator, “a mere subdivisional officer in the august government service” (TAD 3), is not unlike the protagonist of George Orwell’s “Burmese Days”, a callow bureaucrat charged with administering a rural distinct whose people and customs he does not understand, and unhappy with the responsibilities that have been thrust upon him. It is narrated by a failed writer and junior Indian administrative officer, is called in to appraise an old collection of antiquities. The civil servant travels in to the remote countryside to investigate. He learns that the family’s last son and heir, repelled by rural India, has spent his mother’s money travelling the world and kept sending back boxes of booty entering between “two marbles or highly polished ceramic slave figures holding up lamps filled with dust and dead moths” (TAD 25). Later he finds rich rug’s, “plum, wine, mulberry and pomegranate” (TAD 28). At first he sees only time, and dissolution, but as he examines the objects, he finds himself invaded by their poetic melancholy and fancying himself a privileged visitor to a past world. Yet in the end he does nothing, and readers are left wondering what happens to the collection.

The title of The Artist of Disappearance, is set in Mussoorie, a resort in the Himalayan foothills north of Delhi, which happens to be
the place where Mrs. Desai was born in 1937, the child of a Bengali businessman and a German expatriate. The main character is Ravi, the adopted son of a flighty, prosperous couple with social pretensions that have been rudely batted down, who has returned to the family's stately hilltop home after an unhappy sojourn in Bombay, seeking nothing but isolation. Like Nand Kaul in Mrs. Desai's 1977 novel *Fire on the Mountain*, also set in a hill station, Ravi is one of life's walking wounded uncomfortable in human company, at ease only in nature. Even after the family mansion burns down, he continues to live in its ruins, so interest is he on creating a private garden in a hidden glade. But his solipsistic existence is interrupted when a film crew arrives from Delhi, wanting to make a documentary about the environmental degradation taking place in a modernizing, industrializing India.

The second novella *Translator Translated*, is narrated by solitary embittered English teacher. It is a story of a professor named Prema Joshi, who starts translating Suvarna Devi’s stories. Prema’s secret love is her mother’s native language, Orissa, and “the unsung heroine of Orya letters, Suvarana Devi”36 (TAD 51). It is an example of another of Mrs. Desai’s preferred topics: literary and academic politics, which were also the subject of *In Custody* a 1984 novel later made into a Merchant Ivory film. Prema Joshi is a prematurely aged instructor of English literature at a girls college, a tired woman going home from work with nothing to look forward to, nothing to smile about, who sees a way out of her malaise. When she unexpectedly gets a chance to translate into English a set of short stories written in one of India’s many regional languages. Prema starts editing Suvarna Devi perfectly. But the author’s family complains the publisher to drop the work. Finally Suvarna Devi goes on living and creating far away in her village, but the secondary creator’s fate is sadder trying to write herself, Prema can only reproduce

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Devi’s literary voice. Once again the dead hand of our system of consumption suffocates the living impulse to create.

The focus here is the hierarchy that separates writer and translator, with the latter clearly in an inferior position and frustrated by it, and what happens when a translator violates that order. But Mrs. Desai also uses the novella for satiric purposes, perhaps to exact vengeance on some literary nationalist in India; at one point Prema and her publisher attend a conference where they are hectored by ‘a pudgy man in a sweet-stained suit’, who imperiously demands to know, ‘what made you decide to translate these stories into a colonial language that was responsible for destroying the original language?’. In recent years Mrs. Desai, an emeritus professor of humanities at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, has not been especially productive, or focused on India, for that matter, since “Fasting, Feasting”, short listed for the Booker Prize in 1999, she has published one novel and a collection of short stories, and there were signs that her inspiration and vigour might be tailing off.

Anita Desai’s writing in this novella remains striking. On the very first page of the book for instance, she describes the sun setting into a sullen murk of ashes and embers. Later there is this description of what happens when a monsoon arrives: “Everything in the house turned damp; the blue fur of mildew crept furtively over any object left standing for the briefest length of time: shoes, bags, boxes it consumes them all. The sheets on the bed were clammy when he got between them at night, and the darkness range with the strident cacophony of the big tree crickets that had been waiting for this, their season” (TAD 103). For her epigraph in The Artist of Disappearance Mrs. Desai quotes from ‘Awareness’ a poem by Jorge Louis Borges: One thing alone does
not exist ‘oblivion’ to disappear may be an art. Mrs. Desai goes on to suggest, but it is one that can never be fully realized.

Thus Desai brings her brilliant miniature expose of contemporary culture to its merciless conclusion. Under capitalism, everything must be collected, sold or destroyed, though every one of us... has had a moment when a window opened, when we caught a glimpse of the open, sunlit world beyond. Only a few stay free like Suvarna Devi, Ravi, Desai’s last true artist is still happy in the village, making a new, even smaller world in a matchbox.

To sum up in this chapter three short stories of Anita Desai are discussed. The transcendent epiphanies that conclude her novels Clear Light of Day and In Custody, the relativized epiphanies of Desai’s short stories invite the reader to question their meaning and worth. This interrogatory procedure transforms the epiphanies from passive principles – Ones that extol the value of passive awareness in the character and passive acceptance in the reader- to an active force that invites the reader to inquire into the very possibility of finding true values. In her short stories Desai repeatedly draws attention to a character’s failure to find a link between spiritual and material worlds, exposing the fragmentation of experience that is the very antithesis of epiphanic awareness. It has been seen that the depiction of spiritual awareness in Desai’s short stories is destabilized through a combination of narrative employment. Her fascination for the inner world of the mind, in preference to the outer world becomes apparent in the short stories. Her short stories are no less important because sometimes they form the basis of her novels.
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22. Ibid., p. 36.
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34. Ibid., p. 25.
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36. Ibid., p. 51.
37. Ibid., p. 103.