Quest for Liberty: A Recurring Theme in the Novels

Quest for liberty is the most prominent theme in the novels of Anita Desai. Due to its importance in her works, it is bound to find recurrence. The quest for liberty prevails as the dominant theme and all the major characters seem to be struggling for something with which they cannot come in terms with. The society in which they live and cannot go away from it leaves a deep question mark in their minds. They are in quest for liberty from past, present, loneliness death, captivity, social milieu and meaninglessness.

Anita Desai’s novels are concerned with the portrayal of the most troubled part of her protagonists’ life. The world seems to be ‘out of joint’, and in their helplessness, they feel like trapped birds. In all her novels there is a striving, on part of the protagonists towards surrender and liberty.

In her first novel, Cry, the Peacock (1963), Anita Desai reveals the grim psychological battle fought in the mind of protagonist Maya. She is portrayed as an anguished soul who does not grow out of her childhood world and shows little inclination to
take up adult responsible even though she has been married for four years to Gautama, a successful and busy lawyer. She is the daughter of a rich advocate in Lucknow. Being alone in the family, her mother being dead and brother having gone to America, she gets the most of her father’s attention.

Having lived a carefree life under the attention of her loving father, Maya desires to have similar attention from her husband Gautama. When Gautama a busy lawyer, who is too much engrossed in his own vocational affairs, fails to cater her demands, she feels lonely. Maya is in quest for liberty from loneliness. As long as Gautama attends to her she feels grateful and is flooded with “tenderness and gratitude”. She thinks of him as her protector and guardian. But as soon as her husband is called away by a visitor she is hurt. She feels that she is lonely and nobody understands her—she imagines that her loneliness is of his making. An average evening for Maya is hardly more than “a quite formal waiting”(7). What pains Maya is her utter “loneliness in this house”. She complains, “I am alone. Yes … it is that I am alone.”(9) The visit of
Gautama’s mother and sister Nila brings a relief to her and she enjoys her busy life in their company. But once they are gone she finds the “house empty” and herself alone. (162)

Maya feels lonely physically and emotionally and she craves for Gautama’s company. Her lot is “loneliness- loneliness of such proportion that it broke the bonds of that single word and all its associations and went spilling and spreading out and about.” (22). Maya suffers from loneliness, which is beyond the comprehension of Gautama. In her fit of loneliness her “dark house appears to her like her Tomb”. (129) In loneliness, she longs to see her father, to go to Darjeeling. Her loneliness is also reflected in the loneliness of the bear and of the caged monkeys. Her desire to get the monkeys released and her faith that her father would open their cages and let them out show her own suffocating loneliness.

The image of a train, rushing “crazily” through the countryside in the dark night evokes the world of loneliness, which
assumes an added significance in the context of Maya’s agonizing loneliness:

   Somewhere, his train rushed crazily through the night, this same night, screaming as it came to the green signal at a remote level crossing and, without slowing sped on, leaving the small signalman waving a pointless flag, lonely and sad at the door of his white wasted hut in the middle of the desert that was so cold at night. (56)

Maya seeks liberty from morbid fear of death for an albino astrologer has predicted that either she or her husband would die within four years of their marriage. During the fourth year of their marriage she is unable to release her thoughts from these fears of death:

   The years had caught up and now the final, the decisive one held me in its preparing clasp from which release seemed impossible. (82)

Due to her sensuous love for life and her desire for self-preservation Maya wants to get liberty from death. Maya is so much possessed by the prophecy that even peacock’s cry haunts her and reminds her of death:
“Do you not hear the peacock’s call in the wild? Are they not blood chilling their shrieks of pain? ‘Pia, Pia’ they cry. ‘Lover, Lover’. Mio, mio- I die-I die”. (82)

Listening to the cries of peacocks she realizes: “For God, now I was caught in the net of the inescapable, and where lay the possibility of mercy, of release”. (84) Initially, the reader feels that Toto’s death is the starting point of Maya’s fear. The novelist tries to project her inner fears and anxieties through the medium of Toto’s death. Indeed the fear of death is the main problem of her existence, which is brought to surface by Toto’s demise. How to be free from fear is one of her major concern throughout the narrative. The storm symbolizes her violent effort to free herself from fears and phobias. It makes her hour of release:

I saw the rush and whirl outside continuing with tireless spirits, for it gave me a sensation of flying, of being lifted off the earth and into the sunset release from bondage, release from fate, from death and dreariness and unwanted dreams. “Release and Liberty”. (158)
Maya feels fear of death even in her sleep. When her husband asks her to go to sleep she reacts fearfully. “‘No’, If I sleep it’ll come on me from behind” (107).

Death threatens her constantly and a strange horror of insane death pinches her in the case of her in the core of her heart. Running through the corridor of time, from the embrace of protection to the embrace of love, Maya was caught in the death’s net from which escape was impossible. Maya’s private world seems to her private hell to which she thinks she is doomed. She herself remarks:

Torture, guilt, dread, and imprisonment these were the four walls of my private hell, one that no one could survive in long.

Death was certain. (83).

Maya’s obsession with death coupled with her insanity leads her to think, “It was now to be either Gautama or I”. (32) In order to liberate herself from impending doom, she shifts the burden of the prophecy to Gautama’s life. And finally performs the act of murder out of her fear of death. In order to attain liberty from death, she pushed her husband to certain death.
She also yearns for liberty from reality. She clings to fantasy because she is unable to come in terms with reality. She has led a protected life and has been brought up on fantasies and now when confronted with the reality of life in shape of albino astrologer’s prediction, she is unable to face it. In order to make herself free from the burden of the present, she recedes to her past. She remembers her father’s garden the breakfast in the morning, which was like a revel of fairies and elves, the fairy stories of “Arabian Nights”, tales from Indian mythology, “tales of princes and regal queens of jackals and tiger”, which have an element of fantasy in them. Descending back into childhood (fantasy, past) she feels comfortable for a little while but when present looms large over her, she is nagged by feeling of unease.

Highly sensitive characters of Anita Desai scuttle between the past and the present as they withdraw from the demands of reality & seek easy mode of escape from these pressure. In the words of J. Krishnamurti:

Either the past is means of escape from the present, which may be unpleasant, or the future is the form of hope away from the
present. So the mind is occupied with the past or with the future and sloughs off the present. (Krishnamurti 223)

Embittered by the present and with no hopes of a satisfactory future, Mata takes road back to her childhood. She finds it difficult to survive without regressing back to her good old days. “Above all, I wish to return to my old home with its garden.” (175) She adopts the strategy of escape into the past, as the present with its confusing demands teases and torments her. In order to assert liberty from the world of harsh, unpalatable reality, she takes refuge in the fantastic world of childhood. She wants to escape from outer real world into the world of fantasy. But her retreat into the world of fantasy does not liberate her from the reality.

She wants to regain liberty, which she has lost at the altar of marriage. She tries to recapture her lost liberty, which is possible only by ridding herself completely of Gautama. Her own house is presented as a prison in disguise. She remarks herself:

---I felt myself trapped in an oneiric ball where the black masks that I had imagined to be made of paper tuned out a be of living
flesh and the living flesh was only a mockery, a gathering of crackling paper. (75)

Maya feels herself imprisoned in her husband’s house. Sense of imprisonment leads her to think:

Long black bars at the window shut us in and the thin walls of the small room locked us all close together. (60)

In her post marital loss of liberty she identifies her with caged birds, monkeys and bears. Mays’s feeling of imprisonment is presented in terms of a bird encaged or an animal deprived of its freedom. The incident of bears symbolically communicates this loss of freedom.

Maya desires for liberty for she is stifled with sense of imprisonment. The image of caged monkeys on the railway platform signifies Maya’s loss of freedom:

Some clung to the rails staring out with glazed eyes of tragedy, at the horrible vision of hell before them, close and warm and stifling. Some whimpered and drooping mother’s cradled their young most tenderly. A few shrieked as though they felt long pins boring through their flesh already, and revolted, and some bared their teeth in snarl of hate deeper and fiercer than any man knows. Cage upon cage of them. Long furred bodies swarming
upon each other, till limbs and tails were twisted together, the
elegant lines of their muscles contorted nightmarishly the work
of some fiendish maniac. And one that I saw was perfectly still
and quiet, backed into a corner by the frantic bodies of its
companions and gazed out with eyes that had melted into liquid
drops about to slide down its pinched indrawn cheeks. Its brow
was lined with foreboding and the suffering of a tragic calamity
and its hands, folded across its thin belly waited to accept it.
(129-130).

She evidently identifies herself with the monkeys as she too has lost
the freedom. The image of caged monkeys at the railway station
reveals the picture of Maya’s suffering at her assumed captivity:

There I was, amongst them, not one of those who sat quietly, in
an infinity of sadness and resignation, but one of those who
clung, clung to the bars till they cut into my flesh and rattled
them shook them, crying over and over again, ‘let me out’. (131)

The caged monkeys are thus directly suggestive of Maya’s own
captive spirit.

In order to secure liberty from sense of imprisonment she
murders her husband Gautama.
Maya’s brother Arjuna had also rebelled against his father for he was in quest for liberty from discipline imposed upon him by his father. Maya herself admits:

\[
\ldots \text{that one might as well have talked to a starfish as to him, and so there was nothing to do but set him free. Set free. If I was a partridge, plump, content, he was a wild bird, a young hawk that could not be tamed, that fought for its liberty.} \ (113)
\]

With Arjuna she had shared pleasant moments participating with kite flying during their childhood.

\[
\text{“Mine were outward kites that never lost their earth bound inclination. Arjuna’s were birds – hawks, eagles, swallows in the wind.”} \ (114)
\]

Arjuna had run away from their home for he was in quest for liberty from his father’s over protectiveness. He goes out into a wider world full of fellow beings. In his letter to Maya he writes:

\[
\text{Here I work with my hands in a canning factory. I am not paid much yet, and it is something a problem to make ends meet, but I find it exhilarating, and it is clearer than ever to me than life, no matter how elegantly lived, is meaningless when it is lived for nothing but one’s own pleasure.} \ (115)
\]
Quest for liberty is the dominant theme for the major character of the novel around whom the story revolves desire to attain it.

Anita Desai’s second novel, *Voices in the City* published in 1965, is a very remarkable existential novel that undoubtedly exemplifies what Anita Desai describes quoting Ortega Y Gasset in her interview with Yashodhara Dalmia as “the terror of facing single – headed, the ferocious assaults of existence”. (Dalmia 1979)

The novel is mainly devoted to the analysis of the dark domains of the psyche of three characters, Nirode Ray, Monisha and Amla. As Lionel Trilling aptly suggests:

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

In the very opening paragraphs of the novel Arun’s desire for liberty is conveyed by comparing him to “a bird poised for flight each feather alert and trained for it.” (7) The thematic aim of the novel is “escape, escape” (11) which Nirode feels in the sound of the funnel.
Nirode, the protagonist is in quest for liberty from the oppressive weight of this “devil city” Calcutta. He finds himself trapped in it with no hope of escape from it. He wants to get liberty from this world of ugly sights and horrible, repugnant smells. The world is unbearable for him for it is poisoned. He envies Arun leaving the city and wants himself to escape this world.

“Better to leap out of the window and end it all instead of smearing this endless sticky glue of sense lessens over the world. Better not to live.” (18)

His craving for liberty and release from his claustrophobic existence in the city is symbolically expressed through the image of kite. Nirode wanted to rise like a “Paper kite with a candle lit inside it.”

As a boy he had tried to get rid of this world by running away from home several times. “Caught, run away again and captured one more-regarding it always as temporary arrests, merely a stage in a certain journey” (11).

Nirode yearns for existential liberty. He develops his own value system and wanders in search of possibilities that could provide him with a sense of identity, which he had lost during his
journey from childhood to adulthood due to his parents’ sense of pride in Arun, his brother and partiality on the part of the parents. He makes various ideological and occupational commitments to get a stable ego identity. The desire to preserve his idealized image torments him and he does not allow him to succeed in his ventures. He says, “Happiness, suffering - I want to be done with them, disregard them, see beyond them to the very end.” (41)

In his quest for existential liberty, Nirode delinks himself completely from his family. He tells his friend Sonny:

“Look, do me a favour. Don’t keep bringing my family in, Sonny boy … I neither inherited nor do I now borrow a single damn thing from my family”. (55)

He desires to liberate himself from that image which has been inherited by him from his family.

By denying his past, his family name & claim to property, he tries to assert his existential liberty. He wants to live in “shadow, silence and stillness.” (10). He works as an anonymous and shabby clerk in a newspaper. He thinks that “three drinks and a room - a princedom”, is enough for him. When he achieves this, he gives up
his job and starts editing a literary magazine named Voice. Then he
suddenly changes to writing and when he finds it quite difficult to
earn his livelihood he opens a bookshop in dirty locality of
Calcutta. His shifting over from one project to another, like starting
a magazine and writing a play shows that he hated being
responsible for anything at all”. (72) He displays his desire for
absolute freedom in an existential manner when he says:

One must be king kite wheeling so far away in the blazing
empty sky as to be merely a dot, almost invisible to urchins who
stood below, stones in their firsts, ready to be aimed and flung.

(71)

In his quest for existential liberty, Nirode rebels against all forms of
work under others. It is:

… impossible, physically impossible to work under any man, by
his order, at a given time, at a meaningless job. I loathe those
autonomous at the top – I loathe their superciliousness, their
blindness. (19).

While leaving the job with Patrika, he does not realize the
humiliation of having to borrow money from his friends. Borrowing
is something less embarrassing than working under any man. His idea of starting his magazine Voice and work freely at his own command satisfies his sense of independent identity. The magazine however does not provide Nirode the desired liberty for it requires communication, contacts and competitiveness all of which he abhors. Like a true existentialist, he keeps experimenting with failure in quest of an abiding identity in life; “I want to move from failure, to failure step by step to rock bottom. I went to explore that depth”. (40)

Nirode’s search for existential liberty is shown when he prefers to put up with poverty and to live in a room unsuited even for pigeons but declines other’s help. Monetary assistance could come from many sources, particularly from his mothers who will open up her coffer for him but he refuses to accept his mother’s money. He tells Monisha:

Tell her to go shove it up that old major of hers, all her stinking cheques … I am done with signing my name believing my name or having a name. (133)

He does not strive for liberty in the manner of a healthy individual.
He says, “I want to lash out on my own now … whether I sink or swim.”

Nirode seeks liberty from social milieu. He himself knows that he is a man for whom “aloneness alone – the treasure worth treasuring.” (26) even if it makes him feel at times like a leper “diseased with the loneliest disease of all.” (61) Nirode abhors routine for it connects one with the day-to-day life. He wonders how can one spend one’s lifetime on “something that does not matter” for him. For him:

It is better to leap out of the window and end it all instead of smearing this endless sticky glue of senselessness over the world. “Batter not to live”. (18)

Nirode rejects his past, his upbringing and the wealth of his family, everything that may tie him with some kind of routine. He rejects intimacy and wants to be free in his private world. He closes himself in his world and moves away from the outside world. He reduces his needs to the barest minimum thus rebelling against pattern of routine.

In order to assert liberty from social milieu & reality, Nirode
frees himself from all wishes, ambitions, emotional ties and effort for achievement. He nurtures the negative impulse to run away from day to day life. For him, the whistle and the hooter of the train symbolize “escape, escape”

Nirode is envious not only of Arun but of all those who follow a routine. The thought of being one with the office going crowd repels him:

Revulsion filled him, so huge a distaste and horror filled him that he felt empowered by it – as Arun, who did not know it would never be empowered – to rise like a Clumsy paper kite with a candle lit Inside it that rises above the sooty chimney pots and crooked pigeon - roots to fly, fly through an immensity of air – above Arun in his crawling train, above the painted ship on the sluggish river intoxicatingly light and free & powerful. (10)

In order to assert liberty from routine he resigns from his job with the Patrika. He ignores the future implications of being unemployed. The fear of starvation is insignificant against his urge to be free of all routine. Withdrawal is an important solution Nirode adopts to get liberty from routine. He creates for himself dead
silence. Dr. Radhakrishnan thinks that these silent hours give us time in which … “we strive to free ourselves from the suffocating routine from masks and mummeries of existence.” (Radhakrishnan 57)

Anita Desai depicts Monisha’s plight more forcefully and closely relates it to the women who are like trapped birds in the cages. Monisha also seeks liberty from noisy & crowded “devil city” Calcutta. Its over population suffocates her and she wants a lovely place, where she may take refuse. She longs for release from the disgusting and cacophonous welter of voices in the monstrous city. Monisha is so sensitive to the oppressive noisiness of city that she is even repelled by the monotonous recitation of the Sanskrit lessons by Nikhil. The recitation that filter through the barred windows drives her mad, and even the slightest pause in ‘maniac recitation gives her some relief but she feels:

There is no escape from it. It surrounds the entire house. I lie on my bed and resign myself to it. (113)

Monisha hates the rapacity of the city of Calcutta and feels nostalgic about her mother’s place Kalimpong.
Anita Desai associates birds with freedom, which they enjoy in the flight to heaven, and in contrast presents her characters shackled by the chains of life to be lived in family, in the city, in the society.

Like Nirode, Monisha also yearns for liberty from duties, routine and responsibilities. In order to achieve liberty from social milieu, she retreats behind the barred windows, which instead of helping her in securing liberty makes her condition worse. In the house crowded with aunts, uncles and relative, she craves for liberty. She does all the domestic chores like cutting the vegetables, serving food and brushing the children’s hair. All this she does unwillingly for she wants to create her own inner world in which she were given some tasks which she could do alone in privacy according to her own instinct. She wants to be “away from the aunts and uncles the cousins and nieces and nephew”, for she feels, “Alone I could work better and I should feel more whole”. (115) Monisha chooses withdrawal as a strategy for survival in the uncongenial atmosphere of Jiban’s family.
She gets no pleasure in the routine of household job. She feels misfit among her in-laws. Monisha yearns an escape from worldly involvement. Her sense of “me” has become so strong that she cannot reach out to others.

In order to assert liberty from worldly involvement Monisha adopts a strategy to escape into the past. She often remembers her stay with Jiban, at the last place of posting away from the city and the family:

The solitude of the jingle there, the aqueous shadows of bamboo groves and the earth laid with green fallen leaves

… Jiban away on tour, I alone with myself, no visitor at all.

(116)

Monisha is in quest for liberty from reality for it seems to her tragic because she finds her experiences uncertain. She avoids any participation in the activities of the real world. She implores:

Allow us just this to-stand back, apart in the shadows, and watch the fire and the flames, the sacrifices that are flung into it, the celebrating, and the mourning and permit us-not to take part.

(136)
She feels trapped in the over populated house of Jiban where ‘moist palms, putrid breaths and harsh voices’ press down on her. She wants to get liberty from this captivity, but she finds no route of escape. Inside the four walls of house she feels, “locked in a steel container,” “a thick glass cubicle,” (like Beckett’s hero in the unnamable living) in which she lives without any “touch of love or warmth” from her in-laws. She says: “I am locked apart from all of them, they cannot touch me.” (237) As this awareness dawns on her she feels like a trapped bird and seeks liberty from her captivity.

Monisha feels imprisoned in Jiban’s house because even for Jiban, it is difficult to understand Monisha plight because he has seen women spending their lives like birds in the cages:

“Lives spent in waiting for nothing, waiting on men self-centered and indifferent & hungry and demanding and critical, waiting for death and dying misunderstood, always behind bars, those terrifying black bars that shut us in, in the old house, in the old city” (120)

Monisha thinks about the Bengali women who work for centuries inside the “barred windows”. She feels like a trapped bird and
wonders how can she “live, eat, work, sing bleeding through life”?

Whenever Monisha wants to liberate herself from the house of her husband, she feels the bars of the window of her room imprisoning her. Quite often she cries out her wish:

I long to thrust my head out of the window - and cannot, the bars are closely set- and scream: ‘Stop’! (110)

These bars signify her fear of having very little chances for liberty from captivity. To her, street singers and even drummer look like “caged animal” as they too had the same proud but defeated look of the “caged tiger”. Life seems to her “waste” for it is enclosed in a “locked container”. In her struggle for liberation from a trap situation, death seems to be the only way out. She is weary of living in a crowd, which appears peaceful from outside, but violent inside. Monisha grows restive to seek release from her captivity. She would prefer an end with the dignity of the tiger. Be it in the cage of her in–laws’ house, it certainly would not be “melancholy as in the settling of a puff of dust upon the earth”. (121) Like a maniac, she hurries out of her “stale room, filled with sounds of outer people’s emotions” (239) and commits suicide.
Amla is a brilliant portraiture of a rebellious young woman, eager to master life and seeks liberty from every obstacle caused by city Calcutta. A liberated and intellectual woman, Amla wants, “something greater than pleasure”. Indeed her quest is to get liberty from all fears and anxieties of life. She seeks liberty from welter of personal relations and emotional isolation. She regards art as the only way through which she can get liberty.

Dharma is a different kind of artist. Like Nirode, he too feels uneasy in the human world due to its rules and restrictions. He too seeks liberty from this world. To secure liberty he withdraws from it. But Dharma’a withdrawal is not like of Nirode’s, who withdraws from this world in bitterness. Dharma withdraws from human world to create a new world of his own. He takes refuge in the remoteness of a walled garden and its green life without completely serving his relation with the city and its life.

In some respect, Dharma for Anita Desai, appears to be an ideal artist who does not believe in complete escape from society but who creates his own world of “animated nature to which to
escape”. (5)

Dharma also desires for liberty from the “devil city” Calcutta because for him it is a poisoned and dead city. Being an artist, he is concerned with life; dead and decaying objects have no meaning for him. He cannot completely divorce the human world, but when he feels wounded and disillusioned by it, he finds relief in Nature.

When Amla begins to model for him, he decides to move back from the nature to human being.

David too, is in quest for liberty from this world. But instead of hating people he maintains a distance from them. In order to assert liberty from this world he escapes to the “sights and scenes flowing past like a bright river stained with colour-and the knowledge that in another minute he would be elsewhere and, in another hour, far, far, beyond”. (43) He does not like the world for it is too small to satisfy his wander-lust.

Anita Desai’s next novel **Bye, Bye Blackbird (1971)** deals with the theme of east-west encounter. Of all novels of Desai, this one is most intimately related to her own experience. In an
interview she held: “Bye, Bye Blackbird is the closest of all my books to actuality.” (Ram 31) In it, novelist explores the troubled psyche of immigrant blackbirds, Dev and Adit, who face racial and cultural discrimination in London. She herself confesses:

Their (immigrants’) schizophrenia amused me while I was with them and continued to tease me when I returned to India. I wrote it in an effort to understand the split psychology, the double loyalties of immigrants. (Desai 24)

Dev, the main character of the novel has come to study at the London School of Economics. He is confronted with problem of adjustment in a foreign land due to racial and cultural discrimination. When he arrives in London, he does not get a warm welcome; on the contrary he comes across various comments on Indians such as “Wogs” and “Macaulay’s bastards”.

With the intention to liberate him from the economic bondage, Dev leaves India. He seeks material liberty. But his quest for material liberty shatters when he comes across social, cultural & geographical bondage on his arrival in England. He feels humiliated due to racial discrimination. He threatens to reject – England:
“I wouldn’t live in a country where I was insulted and unwanted”.

(18)

Dev yearns liberty from racial, cultural and geographical bondages. Initially he is compared with the “eternal immigrants who can never accept their new home and continue to walk streets like strangers enemy”. (208) Even at the public place, discrimination is so obvious that Indians are not allowed to use the lavatory meant for English, “London docks have three kinds of lavatories –Ladies, Gents & Asiatics”. (19) It is not caste, creed or financial status, but the social & cultural differences that make people unequal. Dev feels uncomfortable for the world he sees around him is different from his own land socially and physically.

Due to the cultural and racial discrimination, he leaves the idea of study at London School of Economics. He asserts:

I can’t go to collage, not now. I want freedom not restriction.

(103)

What hurts him most is the indifference of people and pets. He is all the while confronted only with buildings and not human beings. Even after accepting English culture and way of life as it is, Dev
remains an outsider. “It is a strange summer, the outraged outsider and thrilled sight – seer – all at once and in succession”. (98) Ultimately he decides to live in the given circumstances and accepts English way of life.

Adit appreciates England because it has given him social and economic freedom. He has married to an English girl and adopted British citizenship. He praises English people and their habit but his visit to his in-laws becomes the turning point of his life. The behaviour meted out to him by Mrs. Rosscommon, Sarah’s mother, hurts him and he starts yearning for liberty from racial discrimination. He feels insulted when he hears his mother-in-law asking him: “You won’t mind having sandwiches left over from tea, will you Adit”? Though Adit seems temporarily happy yet this liberty from Indian convention and poverty creates other social and racial discrimination sometime more distressing. Gaining more freedom had crippled him. He wants to escape from this artificial world where he would pack up all “his cares and woe”. (169) He becomes aware that he will always remain an outsider in England
due to racial, cultural and geographical bondages. By marrying an English girl Adit could not cross the racial barrier.

The behaviour of Sarah’s mother startles Adit. He tries to get liberty from racial bondage by going back to India. He does not disclose that he is escaping due to his bitter experiences meted out to him due to racial and cultural discrimination, but puts forward the excuse of Pakistan’s attack and his feelings for his own country.

He is an Indian and can never breathe freely the English air due to racial discrimination. He suffocates and is fed up of wearing the label “Indian immigrants”. Now he is ready to surrender his economical & social freedom to assert liberty from racial & cultural discrimination. He has become nameless due to these discriminations. The label “wog”, “Asiatic” or “Indian immigrant” torment him. He admits his superfluous living in England:

It has not reality at all, we just pretend all the time, I’m twenty-seven now. I’ve got to go home and start living real life. (234) He wants to achieve liberty from this unreal and artificial life, so he decides to leave for his native land.
Although the novel revolves around the two male characters. The main story concerns with Sarah, who lives in a dual world- the two social worlds that do not meet; the two incompatible cultures that split her. As Meenakshi Mukherjee points out, “Sarah Sen is a typical Anita Desai character - complete, hypersensitive and intelligent.”(Mukherjee 227)

Sarah is troubled for she cannot fully involve herself in her husband’s culture, nor can she adopt herself to her own society. At home, there are Adit, Dev and their social circle. In school, she has her colleagues. She has to operate in two different worlds. Sarah vacillates between her two selves – public and private – and is torn between two worlds. She is in quest for liberty from her dual selves for she finds herself inadequate to her own British society and for her Indian culture is insufficient. By marrying Adit she has become a “Nowhere woman”. The division in her self can be clearly seen in her monologue: “In the centre she sat, feeling the waves rock her and then the fear and the questioning began: who was she …” (39)
Sarah feels sad when she is addressed as “Hurry, hurry Mrs. Scurry!” (37). Sarah is in quest for existential liberty, which she had shed in her marriage. She has lost identity in her own country. She questions herself:

Who was she – Mrs. Sen who had been married in a red and gold Benaras brocade sari one burning bronzed day in September, or Mrs. Sen, the Head’s secretary. (34)

She feels trapped between these two selves:

When she briskly dealt with letters and bills in her room under the stairs, she felt an imposter but, equally, she was playing a part when she tapped her finger to the sitar music on Adit’s records or ground spices for a curry she did not care to eat. She had so little command over these two characters she played each day, one in the morning at school and one in the evening at home, that she could not even tell with how much sincerity she played one role or the other. (34)

Sarah is aware of her two roles. She can be herself only within the house or school. She can be either an Indian wife or English woman but can never be both at the same time. The playing of two different roles torments her:
They were roles – and when she was not playing them, she was nobody. Her face was only a mark, her body only a costume.

Where was Sarah! (34-35)

Sarah wishes to discard these masks and wants her true self. She does not mind which identity she adopts - British or Indian - she wants it to be genuine. She wonders:

If she would ever be allowed to step off the stage, leave the theatre and enter a real world - whether English or Indian, she did not care. She wanted only its sincerity, its truth. (35)

But in her present position she can feel free only amongst strangers, where she is unidentifiable. Sarah’s reluctance to discuss her Indian husband before her colleagues shows her existential quest for liberty. Once Adit addresses her as “Sally” the way her mother calls her. She reacted angrily: “Don’t call me sally!” She yearns for liberty from self: the self, which carried the stigma of “Mrs. Sen”, which she wants to hide and escape from. She wants liberty:

She could be as eccentric, as individual as she pleased without being noticed by even a mouse. She walked out into the soft, muzzling rain with her packages, reassured to find herself an unidentifiable, unnoticed and therefore free person again. (39)
Sarah finally decides to follow Adit to India because in her homeland she considers herself not as a person but as roles – Mrs. Sen and Sarah. At least in India, she hopes she will get liberty from her dual selves. In India she hopes, she will have only one face – “Adit’s wife”

At time of departure, Sarah is sorry to see that:

It was (as if) her English self that was receding and fading and dying, she knew it was her English self to which she must say good-bye. That was what hurt – not saying good-bye to England, because England would remain as it was, only at a greater distance from her … English, she whispered, and then her instinctive reaction was to clutch at something and hold on to what was slipping through her fingers already. (221)

Sarah’s plan to leave for India with Adit is an attempt to escape. It is difficult to forget the real self, but she is hopeful that she will “come to life” in India. She will not have to play dual roles and thus get rid of her double identity.

As Meenakshi Mukherjee points out, “Sarah is an unusual character who is displaced in her own country, whose crises of
identity will perhaps never be solved although she believes that going to India will be final resolution of her ambiguous existence”.

(Mukherjee 228)

The fourth novel, *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* was published in 1975. In this novel the conflict is between conformity and rebellion: the ‘yes’ and ‘no’. As B. Ramachandra Rao points out: “Sita and Raman represent the eternal opposition between the passion and prose of life. Raman, the husband says the “great Yes” and achieves honour and social success. Sita in her obdurate pride says “No” and ultimately compelled to arrive at some kind of compromise”. (Rao 87)

Structurally, this novel seems to have been inspired by Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*. The novel seems to assert that the life should be lived in spite of its madness and boredom. Sita, the hypersensitive protagonist is in quest for liberty from social and familial norms. She thinks that everyone around her is leading an animal existence due to his involvement in routine. She thinks that: “They are nothing - nothing but appetite and sex. Only food, sex
and money matters. Animal”. (47) In order to get liberty from social
and familial norms she rebels against her husband.

In the first part of the novel entitled “Monsoon 67”, she rebels
against her family and decides to go to Manori to acquire liberty
from day to day routine which seems a madness to her, “what I’m
doing is trying to escape from madness here, escape a place where it
might be possible to be sane again” (35)

Sita wants to assert liberty from day to day life for normal
everyday life becomes intolerable to her. She wants to liberate
herself from it as she finds it impossible to continue a sluggish life
in her husband’s family. She feels trapped in the monotony of her
house, which offers her nothing but a “crust of dull tedium of
hopeless disappointment”. (58)

She has escaped on Manori Island because she is in quest for
liberty from “duties and responsibility, from order and routine, from
life and the city.” (139)

Sita seeks liberty from city life for she is disgusted with the
sweaty hustle and bustle of city life. She wants to escape from
loneliness and boredom, which are the two dominant characteristics of city life. In city, she finds her very existence threatened with boredom for her husband remains engrossed in his business and children are growing independent and nobody has time for her. She feels struggling in the grip of the monster of boredom. Maddened by the boredom and loneliness of her life in the city of Bombay, she wants to go back to her father’s island. She wants to abandon the turmoil of the city of Bombay for she finds chaos and meaninglessness in it. She sees her boredom stretching all around her and engulfing her. She cries out that she wants to escape from the madness here. In her assertion “I will go” lies her urge for liberty.

Sita is in quest for liberty from violence and destruction of city life due to her inability to bear the violence and destruction around her – the gossip and quarrelling of servants and the fighting amongst the children. She cannot digest the news about war in Vietnam. Sita moves away from Bombay to Manori in search of natural liberty. She watches disbelievingly at Menka when latter
crumbles a sheaf of new buds or tear off her painting. She is appalled to see destruction coming so naturally to the children. Karan builds a tower of blocks only for the pure lustful joy of throwing it over. She wants to keep her child unborn for she does not want to see another violent act by giving birth to the child. Small commonplace incidents like crows preying on the wounded eagle lying in the street and Karan’s scratching his leg by the spoke of the railing while climbing the gate terrifies her. Her quest for liberty from violence has been manifested in her provocative attitude towards the woman-folk of her husband’s family and in her taking to smoking.

Towards the end of the novel, she tries to maintain her liberty by telling Raman that she had to escape to the island in order to “stay whole”. Now he does not want to impose himself upon her because he is sick of her melodramatic ways. She is free at last: at liberty to live life in her own style. “He released her and at last she was free.” (149) For Sita this release comes as a surprise. She feels herself free, all emptied out at last.
Sita does not have a healthy human being’s concept of liberty. She seeks liberty from reality. Her return to Manori reveals her desire to escape liberty. In order to assert liberty from her present surroundings, she transports her to her childhood world of fantasy. She adopts the strategy of fantasy as a way of escape from the harshness and cruelty of her present situation.

The title of the next novel **Fire on the Mountain** (1977) is perhaps derived from William Golding’s famous novel Lord of the Flies, the second chapter of which is entitled “Fire on the Mountain.” Fire on the Mountain won Sahitya Akadmi award of 1978.

The protagonist of novel is Nanda Kaul the wife of an ex-vice chancellor of Punjab University. She is in quest for liberty from social and familial bondages. After having lived a busy life, discharging all her duties, she wants no one and nothing only desiring her privacy, to be left undisturbed. Nanda Kaul a great grandmother leaves all attachment to enjoy liberty at Carignano. Her humble wish is “to be left to the pines and cicadas alone”. (3)
She wanted “no one and nothing else. Whatever else came, or happened here. Would be an unwelcome instruction and distraction”. (3)

The sight of a postman “slowly winding his way along the upper Mall” irritates her. “The sight of him, inexorably closing in with his swollen bag, rolled a fat ball of irritation into the cool cave of her day. She wants to be away from the world of:

… bags and letters, messages and demands, requests, promises and queries, she had wanted to be done with them all, at Carignano. She asked to be left to the pines and cicadas alone.

(3)

As a Vice-Chancellor’s wife, she had managed the household affairs for her husband with great skill. All her life she has yielded to the requirements of her husband’s status and to his wishes. Till her husband’s death she led her life according to his dictates due to social norms. She feels relieved after her husband’s death because now she is free to live life according to her wish and desire: “She had been so glad when it was over. She had been glad to leave it all behind in the plains”. (30) After her husband’s death her persistent
desire is liberty from the maddening crowd of children and grandchildren, servants and guests. She wants to “merge with the pine tree and be mistaken for one. To be a tree, no more and no less was all she was prepared to undertake.” (4)

She seeks a life free of all demands. She considers Carignano “so exactly a right house for her”. In Carignano “all she wanted was to be alone, to have Carignano to herself, in this period of her life when stillness and calm were all that she wished to entertain”. (17)

After enjoying privacy for a while Nanda’s liberty from familial norms is threatened by the sudden arrival of her great-grand daughter Raka. She does not want to involve herself in any responsibility any more. Bewildered she questions herself:

Have I not done enough and had enough? I want no more. I want nothing. Can I not be left with nothing? (17)

The arrival of Raka would only mean letting the “noose slip once more round her neck”. (19) While comparing herself to a regal detachment of the eagle “gliding on currents of air without once moving its great muscular wings which remained in repose, in control”, (19) Nanda Kaul is called back to the duties by a cuckoo.
She desperately desires to get liberty from the noose of familial obligations around her neck. She longs to liberate herself from all familial involvements. She does not want to involve herself in Raka’s activities. Throughout the novel, she refrains:

“Discharge me. I’ve discharged all my duties, Discharge (30).

She wants to give up familial responsibilities.

To Nanda Kaul Raka’s arrival is an unwelcome intrusion. She appears to Nanda “like one of those dark crickets that leap up in fright but do not sing, or a mosquito, minute and fine, on thin precarious legs”. (39) Raka was simply “an intruder, an outsider, a mosquito flown up from the plains to tease and worry”. (40) Nanda doesn’t even go out to welcome her. She muses miserably over having to look after Raka:

Hanging her head miserably, it seemed too much to her that she should now have to meet Raka … She would have to urge her to eat eggs and spinach, caution her against lifting stones in the garden under which scorpions might lie asleep, see her to bed at night and lie in the next room, wandering if the child slept … She would never be able to sleep, Nanda Kaul moaned to
herself, how could she sleep with someone in the house … it would upset her so. (35)

Nanda Kaul reminds herself of her pledge – “She had not come to Carignano to enslave herself again. She had come to Carignano to be alone”. (80)

Nanda is in quest for liberty from the bondage of the past. It is only physically that she runs away from it. The biter reality of her life still has a tight hold on her mind. The painful memory of past days when the Vice-Chancellor went to drop Miss David home haunts her. She is in quest for liberty from past that’s why she rejects Raka for she things that her great grand daughter’s visit to her may force her to open the “troublesome ledger” again. (30) She also ignores Ila Das for she plunges her into the past and reopens the wound. She could not even die liberally for she thinks herself responsible for Ila Das’ rape and murder. She dies with the sense of guilt.

Raka too is obsessed with the desire for liberty. The child feels uncomfortable when the old lady hugs her and her eyes follow “the flight of the hoopoe that suddenly darted out of the tree”. Even
on the first day of arrival, Raka feels restless in the room as she longs to go out. She is in quest for liberty from “the safe, cosy, civilized world”. (91) Raka “wanted only one thing – to be left alone and pursue her own secret life amongst rocks and pines of Kasauli”. (48) She neglects her great grandmother for she desires for liberty from human company. Indeed, if Nanda Kaul was in quest for liberty “out of vengeance for a long life of duty and obligation, her great granddaughter was a recluse by nature, by instinct”. (48). When Nanda wants to win over the attention of the child by talking about various worldly mothers, the child feels uneasy.

Raka goes for long walks on her own & avoids human company she wants only to be left free- “Secrecy” was the “essence” of her life. She was so unconcerned about this world and its belongings that “she normally touched nothing in the house”. (82)

Her childhood impressions of reckless and dissipating revelries associated with social life in clubs play an important role
in making her unsocial. Running away from the club to escape the loathsome sight of social revelries, she exclaims: “hate them –hate them”. (71) Raka feels miserable in the company of her great grandmother. She feels like a caged bird, a wild animal tamed and domesticated. She wants to get liberty from this world in her dream world where she can happily celebrate her isolation:

I’m shipwrecked’ Raka exulted. I’m shipwrecked and alone.

She cling to a rock- my boat, alone in my boat on the sea, she sang. (61-62)

Raka is in quest for liberty from society that’s why she disappears silently for hours without informing her great grandmother. Raka’s desire for liberty from society is clearly shown when she says to her great grandmother: “ I’m always alone. I am never afraid”. (138) She doesn’t want human company. She seeks liberty from the house so tidily and austerely housing her:

It was the ravaged, destroyed and barren spaces in Kasauli that drew her; the ravine where yellow snakes slept under grey rocks … the skeletal pines that rattled in the wind, the wind-levelled hill-tops and the seared remains of the safe, cosy, civilized world
in which Raka had no part and to which she owed no attachment. (91)

She loves wild stretches for they offer freedom and do not overpower or confine one.

Anita Desai’s sixth novel, *Clear Light of the Day* (1980) is inspired by T.S. Eliot’s concept of time as outlined in his Four Quarters. In her interview with Sunil Sethi Anita Desai says:

I was trying to write a four dimensional piece on how a family’s life moves backwards and forwards in a period of time. My novel is about time as a destroyer, as a preserver. I have tried to tunnel under the mundane surface of domesticity. (India Today 142)

The novel revolves around Das children Bim, Tara, Raja and Baba. Novel begins with Tara’s visit with her husband Bakul to Bim who stays in old Delhi. Bim the elder sister works as a history lectures in a private college. After the death of the parents Raja and Tara embark upon the journey to their individual destination while Bim is left all alone to take care of her old aunt and retarded brother Baba. Bim the main character of the novel is in quest for liberty
from past for the memories of her past strike like the “knell” of sorrow. She wishes to liberate herself from the past and to close all chapters of childhood and youth as periods of “dullness, boredom and waiting”. (4) Her desire for liberty from her past days is clearly visible when she asks Tara:

    Do you know anyone who would – secretly, sincerely, in his innermost self- really prefer to return to childhood? (4)

Bim yearns for liberty from past for it is not a source of pleasure. For twenty years she has been struggling for the sake of her brothers and sisters sacrificing all her desires and ambition. No doubt, she wants to obliterate her past, but the past, in the form of the old house and retarded Baba ensnares her so tightly that she cannot disentangle herself from its strong grip. When Raja was sick Bim had taken great care of him with the hope that he would look after the family after getting recovered but Raja turns his back on Bim and goes to Hyderabad to set there. Raja’s desertion reminds her of the disappointment and deprivation of her childhood. His escapist attitude reminds her of unhappy past. She accuses her father for not teaching the children. She wants to escape from her
monotonous decaying house in old Delhi for it associates her with her sad past. She is afraid of past, as she cannot relate it with her present. She wants to forget it for it means involvement.

Sometime in her weak moments when her relations – Tara, Bakul, Raja, Benazir- look like brutal invaders into her life, she wishes to get rid of her responsibilities. In such moments she craves to run away from life. Her sister Tara had gone hurling down the grass stope while Bim had been caught “she had not got away … as she were chosen queen, made prisoner”. Bim’s rejection of Dr. Biswas’ proposal to enter into matrimony is prompted by the fact that she does not want to add more responsibilities to her life.

Idea of liberty from responsibilities comes in her mind. There are times when she wants to withdraw herself from responsibilities. She does not want to go and lie down on the cot near Baba’s. She dreads the unreal light of the moon and Badshah’s crazed barking. She dreads hearing Tara and Babul’s voices and prefer to stay in her “stifling, dust choked room, propped by cushions on hard woodendiwan”. (167) To halt these crazy thoughts she reaches out
towards her bookshelf to save herself from disintegration.

Tara was also in quest for liberty from unsatisfying situation of the house in Delhi. She intensely desired to escape from the dark, disease-ridden house into the glittering world of youth and comfort. Like other children in the family, she too had traumatic experience, which taught her to escape into Bakul’s love. During her childhood, neglected by Raja and Bim, Tara preferred to go out with the Misra sister because their company used to provide her an escape from the monotony of her house. Her marriage with Bakul made her free from every sisterly responsibility.

Tara’s dreams were dreams of escape, of shying away from school, running away during the attack of the bees on Bim and escaping to the Misra because their home provided a contrast to hers with its “solid middleclass bourgeois position.” (137) In fact Misra family offer escape route to Tara from her old house in Delhi.

To overcome his despair, Raja also wanted liberty from the house, which was to him like a house of dead. He tried to run away from sordid reality and old house in Delhi with Hyder Ali. Hyder
Ali’s family provides an escape route to Raja. When he recovered from his illness, the foremost task he did was to go and meet Hyder Ali’s family at Hyderabad. He got liberty from the disturbing reality of his family into pleasant surrounding of Hyder Ali’s house–hold.

After his parents’ death, Raja abdicated his adult responsibilities to set him free. He told Bim:

No, I don’t care what my father has written in his will – I don’t want to be a partner. I won’t have anything to do with it – I’m not a businessman … (65)

While Raja got liberty from the dreariness of his home through his interest in politics & poetry, Tara escapes by going to Misra’s home next door. Eventually, she escapes totally by marrying Bakul, a foreign diplomat. Bim escapes partially by reading history. All three had been distasteful to boredom and inactivity so they had sought personal escapes.

Anita Desai’s next novel In Custody is published in 1984. Desai has treated “woman in Crises” in all her novels from Cry the Peacock to Clear Light of the Day but In Custody is a poor exception. In In Custody there is neither a sensitive nor a highly-
strung woman protagonist. In it, there is a male protagonist Deven Sharma, “a diffident and awkward hero”. He belongs to a lower middle class family. Deven works as lecturer in a private collage in the small town Mirpore. He is in quest for liberty from his ordinary middle class life and mundane existence. He is suddenly pushed out of this ordinariness and given a chance of a lifetime by being asked to interview Nur. The prospect opens up entirely new world for Deven. His desire for liberty from mundane existence is also visible in the prospect. He “had been for years practicing” the trick of focusing “his eyes upon the door at the end of the room, the door that opened on to the passage, freedom and release.” (12)

The immensity of task, which is being thrust on Deven, frightens him rather than inspire him but it could have set him free from the trap of the mundane middle class life. The repressive atmosphere of a lower middle class ethos offers him no suitable avenues of recognition. He is very unhappy with his situation. He says to his friend Murad, “If I know a way to change my situation, I would do it”. (14)
In order to run away from the drab & prosaic middle class life, He escapes into the world of Urdu poetry. His love for Nur’s poetry is a mode of escape from the tedium of his middle class mundane existence.

Deven Sharma is in quest of “pure liberty”. The mundane reality of middle class life is oppressive for him. The possibility of liberty is visualized in the romantic world of Urdu poetry. Murad’s suggestion to have an interview with the famous poet, Nur, brings before his mind’s eye a bright new world of fame and recognition. The name of Nur opens doors for release, causes dust and cobwebs to disappear, vision to appear. It leads him into:

revenues that would take him to another land … these college grounds, these fields of dust, these fences of rusted barbed wire … all would be left behind. (105-106)

Deven can’t resist the temptation of making friendship with Nur for: “The unexpected friendship with Nur had given him the illusion that door of trap had opened and he could escape after all into a wider world”. (131) He is so desperate for liberty from his mundane existence that he runs away from his duties as a husband and father.
When he becomes familiar with the world of Nur, he becomes aware that his thought of “wider world” was an illusion. It was only a kind of zoo in which he could not hope to find liberty: “He would only blunder into another cage inhabited by some other trapped animal”. (131)

He is entrapped in Nur’s world. Nur’s poetry also becomes a trap for him. He intends to slip out from the babble of Nur’s company but is unable to as he is “like a fish in trap”. (58) The more he tries to make “a timely escape from complexities … ” the more he gets involved in it.

Ultimately Deven rejuvenates his vision with the cognizance that his friendship with Nur is not a trap but liberation.

Deven regards Mirpore as a prison where he is doomed forever to live an empty life. The “solidity and stubbornness” of the town have formed a trap for Deven. The city of Mirpore is a “cruel trap”, an “indestructible prison” for Deven from which there was no escape. Even a simple journey from Mirpore to Delhi becomes a possibility for liberty:
The bus soon left Mirpore behind. It came as a slight shock to Deven that one could so easily and quickly free oneself from what had come to seem to him not only the entire world … but an indestructible prison from which there was no escape. (19)

To Deven, Mispore is a place much like hell while going in bus to Delhi. He sees Mispore through the glass panes as a “released prisoner might” (24)

It is heavily ironical that Deven goes to Delhi from Mispore in search of liberty but he did not notice that Delhi itself is a “walled city”. It is ‘as gloomy as a prison.”

Even in his own house he feels like a “trapped animal”. (130) He thinks, “he must look like a caged animal in a zoo”. (131) Therefore he thinks “marriage, a family and a job had placed him in this cage”, now there was no way out. He is so obsessed with the sense of liberty that he sees himself always struggling for liberty in conscious as well as unconscious states: “His feet seemed to be enmeshed in the sticky net of nightmares that would not let him escape at any level of consciousness”. (31)
Desai’s next novel **Journey to Ithaca** is published in 1995. It is a novel about soul’s journey to enlightenment and awakening. Three journeys of Matteo, Sophie and Mother (Laila) form the core of the novel.

Matteo is in quest for spiritual liberty like so many western youths, a young Italian boy Matteo leaves his luxurious home in search of spiritual liberty beyond his mundane existence. From his very childhood, he is always ill at ease in the physical world. “He couldn’t stand the school from the first day the last”. (11) Right from his childhood he had been a peculiar child defying the decency of his home. His answers to the questions of his parents are sullen. His attempts to keep clear of other reveal his desire to escape from real life. His introduction to Herman Hesse’s, The Journey to the East by his private tutor Fabian transformed him but his mother was against seeing the book in his hand. Matteo is sick of his parents’ involvement in his life. Each suggestion from them erect a barbed wire fence between the child and his parents. Locks and barriers become powerless when he takes a flight from filial bondages. “He
would run and run as if all he wanted was a place, a distance between them and himself”. (27)

After his marriage, Matteo does not find satisfaction with his wife Sophie for she is in quest for physical liberty. He finds an abysmal barrier between himself and the mundane world. To get spiritual liberty he leaves for India with his wife Sophie. He thinks spirituality can be achieved by wearing a “faded kurta pyjamas and chappals”. Due to lackness of faith in himself, he withdraws from outside world. His quest becomes the quest for survival. His life becomes so meaningless that without having a vision of spiritual truth, “it becomes impossible to return to the room”. (67)

In order to get spiritual liberty Matteo moves from Ashram to Ashram and from one yogi to another, ultimately he reaches the Mother’s Ashram. His joy knows no bound. Mother’s voice makes him realize a sense of unity between mundane and divine. His escape in Mother’s Ashram becomes a pretext to renounce his worldly duties as husband and father.

Matteo totally becomes overpowered by what Mother speaks
or suggest. He clarifies to Sophie; “I have given myself to her” (160) He describes to Sophie that with Mother he experienced “unity of spiritual with physical” (99) for spiritual life does not mean renunciation of worldly duties. Matteo’s quest for spiritual liberty remained unfulfilled due to the death of Mother.

Laila (Mother) the daughter of Hamid & Alma is also questing figure. Her search is similar to that of Matteo. Laila considers the home on inadequate shelter; it’s like a prison trapping for freedom. “That is how I feel here – a prisoner” (165) says Laila, the eternal rebel, who wants to be free and her means of liberty is visualized through dance, “I want to dance … than I would be free”. (165) Laila feels oppressed when she is sent to school, for bookish knowledge is meaningless for her. She wants to be mistress of her own thoughts and action but studies put off her mind. Her mother comments, “such a small child so head strong, so independent, it was dangerous, any one could see that”. (164) The liberty, she aspires for is the liberty towards fulfillment of her unconscious desire. She hates her mother’s material possessions. In her search
for liberty she is unable to control her mind, and her senses are like unmanageable horses.

For the truth was that she was drawn first in one direction then another wherever she saw passion taken to its extreme whether celebratory or ascetic. (174)

In the month of Ramadan, Laila takes the liberty from restrictive routines of the school. Her desire for liberty is perceptible when at Al Azhar University, she says to her fellow students, “better to go to prison than live as slaves”. (172)

In Paris, she finds her Aunt’s household disgusting as the glass windows are always screened with lace curtain. She has the temperament of a free wonderer and the rich surroundings of her aunt’s house eclipse her vision of spirituality. She wants to keep herself away from the materialistic pursuits of life. Laila also follows her own unique way of living. Her spiritual instinct comes to surface when she says, “I am a vegetarian. No one will make me eat the flesh of slaughtered animals”. (185) Freedom of thought is the source of life to her.

Determined to attain spiritual liberty she forced her entry into
the oriental dance troupe and came to India with Krishna. But after some time she leaves Krishna for he guided her towards materialistic and worldly pursuits. Leaving Krishna, She embarks upon her quest for spiritual liberty single-handedly. Laila’s individual experience and struggle leads her towards her goal.

Sophie is in quest for worldly liberty but it is difficult to attain in stuffy life of Ashram because for Sophie, Ashram was a place to be trapped. She finds it a threatening menace. Like any other ordinary human being, she wants only a decent comfortable life, not a nomadic life-scratching mosquito bites. Her ordinary complacent – loving spirit queries, “why can we not together again at home with the children”. (4) She leaves the Ashram to seek liberty and individual independence refusing to:

be a silly fly to be caught in the spider web. She feels the real outer world thrusting itself at her like blows from its fists. (144)

Her act of smoking in Ashram depicts her rebellious nature with which she wants to achieve worldly liberty.

Sophie becomes rebellious against the forced decision of her husband to assert worldly liberty. She leaves the company of her
husband and goes to Europe for she wants to liberate from illusion of her husband about Mother. After acquiring information about Mother when she returns to India, she finds her life purposeless without Matteo hence she accompanies her husband in his quest.

Booker prize short-listed novel **Fasting, Feasting (1999)**, explores the values existing in the east and the west. The novel divided neatly into two parts depicts an extremely orthodox family on one hand, and an unusually whimsical family in Massachusetts on the other. Novel predominantly deals with woman’s constant urge for liberty.

Uma, the protagonist of this novel is in quest for liberty from the boundaries of household. She is bestowed with nothing in her life and ultimately is forced to lead a life amidst the ‘four walls of the house’. Uma is a woman lost in the jungle of duties – sometimes to her MamaPapa, at other times to her brother Arun. Since the birth of her baby brother Arun, Uma has been trained to sacrifice her private pleasure at the altar of familial responsibilities. Busy routine at home never left sufficient time for her studies and she got failed.
In spite of her failure in exam and all other responsibilities, she desired to continue her studies. But Mama did not give her freedom of choice. Mama told her: “Stay at home and look after your baby brother”. (21) All her pleadings to continue her school went in vain.

Once she tries to cross the boundaries of her house in spite of parental disapproval. She goes out to dinner with her odd club-footed cousin Ramu. It is one evening Uma really enjoys. But when she returns, the high balloon on which she had drifted is punctured by the sight of Papa who “comes thundering towards them with a face as black as night”. (52) While Mama hisses: “you disgrace to the family nothing but disgrace, ever”. (53) She is a caged bird at her home, singing to the tunes of and at the order of her MamaPapa. She is denied any kind of pleasure because of her parents’ disapproving attitude.

Uma is even not allowed to make a phone call which is always locked. Once, while parents are out, Uma rings up her favorite teacher, but unfortunately she forgets to lock the phone and when parents come home, her unauthorized use of phone is detected
and she is scolded. After her schooling is stopped, she is called on school functions by her teacher for help but her attempt to break the prison wall of her house to meet Mother Agnes is frustrated by her Mama. Uma is denied freedom. Once she had accompanied Miramasi on her pilgrimage, and enjoyed her stay due to freedom from ever demanding Mama Papa. She is free to do what she wants to do. She felt free for the first time in her life. “She had never been more unsupervised and happier in her life” (57) but soon Ramu bhai and Arun are sent to bring her back.

Uma is alone only when “MamaPapa has gone to the club to play bridge”. (198) The rest of the day they need her to fulfill their demands:

She knows that when she shuts the door MamaPapa immediately becomes suspicious … She stands waiting for them to shout or knock. (134)

She makes two attempts to get liberty from the cage of house by drowning herself in the river. She cannot pull herself from the mire for all doors shut light against her. To free herself from the cage she takes a quiet leap into river wants. She wants to merge with the
river when she goes along with Mira Masi on a ritual dip:

She sank up to her chin and the current carried her away, it had not occurred to her that she needed to know how to swim. She had been certain the river would sustain her. (43)

But she is brought back on the bank of life.

She is too domestic a bird to fly away in the sky with liberty. Her second attempt at making a watery grave for herself also depicts her quest for liberty from her caged life. Her plunge in the hard water of the holy river and her feeling of thrill in being carried away in the current shows her desire for liberty:

It was what she had always wanted, she realized it. Then they had saved her. The saving was what, made her shudder and cry. (111)

Uma’s imprisoned soul yearns for liberty. She wants to escape into her own world of abandonment.

An opportunity to escape comes in the form of Dr. Dutt’s proposal to employ Uma as supervisor of the nurses’ hostel, which she runs being a medical practitioner, Uma sees escape in the form of career:
Sometime miraculously, they sprouted forth the idea: run away, escape. But Uma could not visualize escape in the form of a career. (131)

But the offer is turned down by Papa. He looks down upon working women as stigma. When Dr. Dutt persists and asks for Uma’s opinion, he dismisses the idea and Mama speaks: “our daughter does not need to go out to work, as long as we are here to provide for her”. (143) Ruthless parents go to the extent of lying that mother has to undergo hysterectomy, which cannot be done without Uma’s assistance. Papa doesn’t permit his daughter to take up a job of looking after woman even when she is about fifty years old. Uma has nothing to call her own, not even her own life.

The only course now open to her is to go along with Mira Masi from one pilgrim centre to another. It too does not work. In the end she finds herself like a stranded passenger in some unknown land; a family prisoner for life with a coil of unshed tears around her neck. She is denied her desired lover Ramu, the world of nuns, or the gamut of knowledge and ultimately she is forced to lead a life which denies her any freedom except the boundary of household.
Arun, the son made his entry quite late into the family. Arun grew up according to his parents’ desire since the childhood. His freedom of choice had been smothered. He was dancing to the tune of his Papa. Night and day he is burdened with studies, tuitions and great piles of books and notes and the minute he gets time, he escapes into his comic book world. He is heaped with so much attention and affection that he feels suppressed. He is in quest for liberty from filial bondage. He is forced to eat food, he does not like. Arun was disposed off to a foreign land for he got admission in a foreign university. In America too, he tries to avoid company. He does not even mix with the Indians in the hostel. He likes to remain uninvolved with his classmates. He hides himself behind his books and withdraws in panic whenever people tried to make friendship with him. He feels fine when no one know him. He wants only liberty for himself. This is because it is:

the first time in his life he is away from home, from MamaPapa, his sisters … he had at last experienced the total freedom of anonymity, the total absence of relations, of demands, needs,
request ties, responsibilities, commitments. He was Arun. He has no past, no family and no country. (172)

In summer vocation, when students are required to vacate their room, he looks for a place where he will be able to enjoy liberty. He looks for “a single room in some featureless housing block”, (173) where no one should know him or talk to him. But even in America, he feels trapped and has no choice for his parents’ letter comes instructing him to get in touch with the Pattons and spend the summer vocation with them. He wondered, “Had they still not stopped discussing him, plotting and planning his life for him”. Immediately he was overcome:

by the sensation of his family lying its hands upon him. Pushing him down into a chair at his desk, shoving a textbook under his nose catching that nose and making him swallow cod liver oil, spooning food into him, telling him: Arun this Arun that. (175)

While his stay with Pattons Arun feels uncomfortable for Mrs. Pattons tries to make him as comfortable as possible. After a short stay with Pattons’, with a quiet determination, Arun breaks the tangled sugar-sticky web of filial bondage and family ties. As he
gives the packet of tea to Mrs. Patton and wraps the Kashmiri shawl sent by his parents around her shoulders, he cuts with the deftness of a surgeon’s knife, the “umbilical cord” that had tied him. The cutting of the old strangulating ties of hearth and home fill him with the thrill of liberty experienced by a bird just released from a long captivity in its cage.
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