CHAPTER II
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Anita Desai's conception of theme is significantly glued to her concept of characterization. Her vision of life is primarily dark, therefore probing the psyche of the delineated characters marks her forte as an artist of great skill. Her novels have for their main ingredients interpersonal relationship, mental unrest, conformity and nonconformity with set pattern of life and haunting fear of death and violence. However, the last three novels of Mrs Desai are different from her earlier novels. Clear light of day paints the force of Time; In Custody speaks of no refuge from the mundane reality; The village by the sea - a novel specially for children deals with the miseries of poverty and Baumgartner’s Bombay celebrates a heroic fight of the German Jew against isolation. Her themes need a small canvas but her novels do take up depth because they are concerned with the causes of human suffering. By shifting the emphasis from external to the internal world, she creates her fictional world with sensitive beings. All her female protagonists have a sharp and intense physical and emotional sensitivity. Their male partners are comparatively practical and matter-of-fact individuals. Moreover, they value their freedom and individuality intensively and do not allow any encroachment on their worlds. Maya suffers because she demands fatherly-love from Guatama where as Monisha suffers because of no honour to her individuality and lack of love.

The nonconformist attitude of Desai’s characters reveals reality to be intolerable and resort to destructive ways to come to terms with inner turmoil. Nanda seeks refuge in Carignano where as Sita goes to Manori island to protect the baby in her womb from being born in the world of violence. This chapter is therefore an
attempt to study Mrs. Desai's major thematic concerns and to expose her underlying objects.

*Cry, the Peacock,* is concerned with disharmony in man - woman relationship. The novel portrays how temperamental incompatibility puts the two characters at the disjointed ends of marital bliss. Maya, the protagonist is an anguished soul who does not grow out of her childhood world. She is the wife of an elitist lawyer, who is in deep distress because of the death of her pet dog Toto. This unexpected event so terribly upsets her that she is completely thrown off her mental balance. Gautama's indifference hurts Maya all the more because what he does is arrangement for a proper burial and gives a cup of tea to pacify her disturbed mind.

To alleviate her suffering she needed the benevolent patting of her despot father and not philosophising as Gautama does. He accuses Maya's father for spoiling her, for over-pampering her, and for her fairy-world childhood:

He is the one responsible for this - for making you believe that all that is important is to possess... Life is a fairy tale to you still.¹

The element of companionship never evolves in the relationship between Maya and Gautama. Inspite of temperamental differences Gautama loves her dearly but his weakness lies in his incapability to express his love. She tells him point blank:

Oh, you know nothing, understand nothing... Nor will you ever understand. You know nothing of me - and of how I can love. How I want to love. How it is important to me... And you don't love me.²

Maya's solitary upbringing, her peculiar relationship with her father and her marital discord pushes her slowly and surely to a mental state characterised by obsessive thoughts and compulsive behaviour.
In the shadows, I saw peacocks dancing, the thousand eyes upon their shimmering feathers gazing steadfastly, unwinkingingly upon the final truth - Death. I heard their cry and echoed it. I felt their thirst as they gazed at the rain-clouds, their passion as they hunted for their mates. With them, I trembled and panted and paced the burning rocks. Agony agony, the mortal agony of their cry for lover and for death.

The crux of Maya’s agonies and miseries are sparked off by Gautama’s indifference and neglect. Although living as wife and husband they are strangers to each other.

Maya’s conflict arises out of a lack of contact, relatedness and communion with her husband. She says:

Telling me to go to sleep while he worked at his papers, he did not give another thought to me, to either the soft, willing body or the lonely wanting mind that waited near his bed.

Marriage has provided Maya only physical proximity but not union of two minds and souls which always eludes them. That Maya wants a sexual union is clear from her admiration of the male and female papaya trees in the garden. She bursts out poetically and excitedly:

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

Gautama is a follower of the detachment advocated in the Gita. He practises asceticism as his name represents. On the other hand, Maya fails to anchor herself to the philosophy practised by Gautama.

to exist like a lily upon water, rooted in water yet with its
petals dry, untouched by it..."

Because Maya is in love with life, the philosophy of detachment which Gautama tirelessly preaches is unconvincing to her.

Finding no respite, Maya’s mind obsessed by the albino’s prediction, suddenly relishes the idea that it could quite possibly be Gautama who is destined to die, not she.

The man had no contact with the world, or with me. What would it matter to him if he died and lost even the possibility of contact. What would it matter to him ?

Maya’s horror of approaching death increases at the frantic dancing image of the Kathakali dancer and in the fit of it, she throws her husband down the terrace. Burdened with the guilt of murdering Gautama she returns to her father’s house - her fairyland enveloped with darkness of insanity. R.S. Sharma beautifully sums up Maya’s tragedy as:

Anita Desai seeks to universalize Maya’s tragedy by linking it to a way of life in which even the finest refinement of thought asks for the denial of self for a woman.8

Desai’s second novel Voices in the city is a comprehensive account of three voices - the siblings named Nirode, Monisha and Amla, who attempt to explore peace and happiness in the external world surrounding them. B. Ramghandra Rao writes:

Voices in the city in a sense, continues the theme of Mrs Desai’s first novel. The characteristic qualities of Mrs Desai’s art are once again in display in the novel.9

Maya (Cry the Peacock) revolts against the loneliness caused by her husband’s detachment whereas Monisha, the protagonist of Voices in the city, revolts against the
sordidness, the brutality and the dreariness of the physical world. Monisha, the unhappy married sister of Nirode is an introvert with sharp sensitivity. Like Maya, Monisha's life with her husband, Jiban is marked by loneliness:

The solitude of the jungles there, the aqueous shadows of the bamboo groves and the earth laid with great fallen leaves.... Jiban away on tour, I alone with myself, no visitors at all. Our house which we had to ourselves, its room almost bare of furniture, its squares of empty space and silence - friends to me, and I've had to leave them behind.¹⁶

Monisha's incapacity to bear a child is a subject of ridicule like her intellectual accomplishments amongst the elderly female members of the family. Her desire to have some sense of belonging makes her life all the more tragic. Her wish to have a child works in her unconscious mind. Seeing a Kangaroo lying in the sun she thinks:

A Kangaroo lies on its back to sun the soft honey fur on its belly, but its pouch, alas, is empty.¹¹

Monisha fails to pull her on amidst this sordidness, drudgery and lack of privacy. Contemplating her pathetic state, she says:

Is this what life is then, my life? Only a conundrum that I shall brood over forever with passion and pain, never to arrive at a solution? Only a conundrum - is that, then, life?¹²

The menacing world around Monisha is concretized by the coagulated blaze of light and sound and odour that was the city of Calcutta. The 'poisoned city' with its doubts, frustration and disillusionment forces Monisha to commit suicide. She had been charged of theft by her in-laws which left her totally disillusioned. Speaking about this unfortunate incident, she writes:

I am accused of theft.

These pettiest of people. They think me a thief. To be
regarded so low by men and women themselves so low, it is to be laid on a level lower than the common earth. I find that I am alone here."

Nirode, the main character in the novel is a young man who is brought up in an atmosphere of comfort by an over-indulgent mother. His mother's extramarital relations with Major Chadda estranges Nirode with his possessive mother. He turns down his mother's proposal to keep on sending to him a monthly cheque by writing to Monisha:

Raising himself on an elbow which shakes and trembles with the pressure of his shrunken body, he speaks with ferocity. 'Tell her to go shove it up that old major of her, all her stinking cheques. Tell her I want no share of it, no share of banks or finance or insurance and all the rest of her bleeding equipment. Tell her she'll never get me to sign my name or fill in a form. I'll not put my name to anything again to be gloated over by her or smirked at by those Theater Group goats. I'm done with signing my name, believing my name, or having name. Tell her that. I am nameless. Tell her that'.

His father's death and his mother's involvement with Major Chadda make him feel insecure and uncared for. As a mode of protest, he rejects all relationships and social responsibilities. His shifting over from one project to another, for e.g. starting a magazine, writing a play etc. show that he escapes from being responsible for anything at all. He says:

'...I want to move from failure to failure, step by step to rock bottom. I want to explore that depth. I want to descend quickly'.

In the third section of the novel which is entitled 'Amla', the youngest of the three moves from revolt to conformity. Her siblings Monisha and Nirode
experience no love in their lives but Amla enjoys exhilarating hours of love in the company of Dharma, a talented painter. The novelist describes her love as:

This was the perfection that every lover strains to make the criterion, and in it lay all the joy and the sense of being the right person in the right place that love should have made diffuse and scattered gently through the season. It had not done so, it could not, but that one evening it offered itself to her as the perfect, unscarred globe of a newly ripe pear. In Dharma’s measured talk and serene appearance, in Nirode’s appreciation of the change she had wrought in Dharma’s art, Amla was content. She gave no thought to the worm embedded in the fruit.  

Amla stands in sharp contrast to her sister, Monisha and her brother Nirode. To Monisha and Nirode unsuccess is the dead end of the life, but to Amla it is an opportunity for a fresh start. The narrator says:

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

Monisha’s death and Nirode’s disillusionment with life educates Amla in a better mode of existence. Amla-Dharma relationship is another step to this form of education. She is shocked to learn that her ideal man perpetuates cruelty on his young daughter, who has eloped with her lover to save her skin from her father’s brutality. His indifference towards his wife shows that he holds women low and insignificant. Amla’s breaking away with Dharma is the result of her belief that Dharma’s callousness may injure her any day. Seema Jena has explained the theme of this novel with appreciable clarity of thoughts and words.

In this novel Anita Desai is primarily concerned with the
dehumanization of man. She also tries to show for the artist, a way out of his dilemma, suggesting that between aesthetic and materialistic values, the artist should aim at the former without quite shunning the latter.

In her third novel 'Bye-Bye Black Bird' Anita Desai emphasises the idea that cultural factors are no less important in shaping the personality and psyche of an individual than the familial relations. The novel is not merely a sociological study of the East-West encounter. She does not prescribe rigid norms to judge social or cultural values nor does she make an analysis of human action but presents an unfamiliar world, occupied by some men and women, who do not agree to common accepted pattern, and therefore are at unease.

Bye-Bye Black Bird is a study of human relations tempered by cultural situations. Since the novel is about Indian living in England the atmosphere of the novel is English. The physical environment of England is the back-drop against which the immigrant Indians project themselves as social and human beings. Dev and Adit, the two immigrant Indians come to London to find themselves in an alien environment. Because of changed social atmosphere of England, they suffer from loss of identity. In the words of Seema Jena:

In her third book 'Bye-Bye, Black bird', the interaction between the locale and the individual acquires a new dimension, for the tension here between the white locale and immigrant black bird involves issues of alienation and accommodation that the immigrant has to confront in an alien yet familiar world. The migratory blackbird is drawn to and repelled by the white England as its new habitat.

Dev and Adit are black-birds who find the white atmosphere suffocating. Same is the fate of Sarah who feels lonely in her own familiar world because of nuptial ties with the black Adit. Like Adit and Dev, she too suffers from the crisis of identity.
Adit and Dev desire to be identified in a foreign land, Sarah struggles for the same in her familiar and natural land. The characters move against a background which fascinates them but also gives a pang of dissatisfaction. It is a story that explores two worlds simultaneously the real and the imagined, and its reactions that of fear, insecurity and reticence are highlighted.

The novel begins with the details of Adit—an Indian who marries Sarah, an English woman and settles in England. Maritally they share some togetherness until Dev reaches England from India for higher studies. He is hypersensitive to the alien environment and disapproves of everything that is English. Seema Jena puts in:

... one of the eternal immigrants who can never accept their new home and continue to walk the streets like strangers in enemy, territory, frozen, listless, but dutifully trying to be busy, unobtrusive and however, superficially to belong. The novel traces the various phases through which Dev finally comes to accept his new home. 20

Like Dev, Sarah is also upset by the change through her marriage to Adit. She cannot finally involve herself to her own society nor can she take a full plunge into her husband's life under the pressure of her cross-cultural marriage. She wavers between her two selves—public and private. She is more comfortable with her private self than with her public image:

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 fingers to the Sitar music on Adit's record or ground spices for a curry she did not care to eat. She had so little command over these two charades she played each day, one in the morning at School and in the evening at home, that she could not even tell, even tell with how much sincerity she played one role or the other. 21

Sarah's plight, like Dev stems from her realization of loss of self-respect. Her life as
a wife to Adit is an endless effort of adjustment. She has to shed her name and ancestry and become nameless. She is insulted by her own people, who call her- “Hurry, Mrs. Scurry”. Inspite of her devotion and sincerity in role-playing, the members of her family and people of her society look down upon her. Her struggle leads her nowhere—physically and mentally:

They were roles—and when she was not playing them, she was nobody. Her face was only a mask, her body only a costume. Where was Sarah? Great sadness, if she would ever be allowed to step off the stage, leave the theatre and enter the real world—whether English or Indian, she did not care, she wanted only its sincerity, its truth.

Sarah has her own ways to minimize her conflicts, whenever there is a blow seeming to disintegrate her personality. When Ms Julia invites her for a chat she refuses knowing that her “Indianness” would be the only topic for her. Although aloof, lonely and reticent, Sarah has the wish to start life afresh. When Adit declares his plan of leaving England and going back to India, she looks forward to the emergence of a new self in the alien world—the world of Adit, where she intends giving birth to his son. Her constructive thoughts now promise her an inner certainty through total participation in life.

On the other hand, at the start of the novel Adit, Sarah’s husband appears as a successful foreign based Indian with a happily married English woman. Adit too, is interested in making the best of his life at all costs. So much so, that he sacrifices his self-respect and loyalty and is complacent with his false and unreal role-playing. He turns into a nationalist by suddenly shunning his cosmopolitan garb and embracing oriental ideas and values. A week-end in the village with Sarah’s parents totally shatter him whereas it transforms Dev, an idolater oriental to an
accommodative immigrant. He expects a decent treatment from Sarah's parents being still an Indian at the core of his heart and is deeply touched by Mrs. Rasscenmon's insolent remarks. This induces a feeling in him that he is living an artificial life and to lead a real life, he plans to go back to his motherland:

I've got to go home and start living a real life. I don't know what real life there will mean. I can't tell you if it won't be war, Islam, communalism, famine, anarchy or what. Whatever it is it will be Indian, it will be my natural condition, my true circumstance. I must go and face all that now. It’s been wonderful here. Sarah, you know I've loved England more than you, I've often felt myself half English, but it was only a pretence, Sally. Now it has to be the real thing. I must go. You will come".

The Omniscient narrator says:

Somewhere, at same point that summer, England’s green and gold fingers had let go of Adit and clutched at Dev instead. England had let Adit drop and fall away as if she had done with him or realised that he had done with her, and caught and enmeshed his friend Dev. It was as though this were an arbitrary act of England's, an abstract law to which Adit and Dev had quite unwittingly succumbed.

Like Adit Dev too adopts English culture too soon, but feels himself an outsider. He does not understand why Englishmen should try to be shut up in their homes and avoid all social contacts. England is no better than a prison house to him. The omniscient narrator says:

Dev ventures into the city. He descends deeper and deeper into the whitetiled bowels of Clapham tube station.... The menacing slither of escalators strikes panic into a speechless Dev as he is swept down with an awful sensation of being taken where he does not want to go. Down, down and farther down—like Alice falling, falling down the rabbit hole, like a Kafka Stranger wandering through the dark labyrinth of a prison.
Soon a slow change creeps into his behavioural pattern and he becomes Adit-like whom he offended by address like "Boot-licking toddy" and "Spineless imperialist lover."

Sita, the protagonist of Where shall we go this summer? is a happily married woman of over forty with four children and the fifth yet to be born. Her husband Raman is a successful businessman but being "a middling kind of a man" is unable to gratify her emotional demands. Raman remains occupied with his business; her children grow independent and Sita is left all alone in the abyss of isolation. She feels that there is only loneliness, endless restlessness and evergrowing boredom in her existence. She feels that no one cares for her as an individual. Threatened by boredom she communicates her problem to her husband who fails to pull her out. He is surprised to hear her problem:

Bored ? he had exclaimed in genuine surprise why ? How ? with what ? and looked so puzzled so pained. Then it was her turn to be puzzled and pained she could not believe that he had really believed that all was well, not known that she was bored, dull, unhappy, frantic. She could hardly believe that though they lived so close together he did not even know this basic fact of her existence.26

Disgusted with boredom, she becomes excessively sensitive to the evils of the city. She spends almost all her time standing in the balcony and smoking. She is also appalled to see destruction, suffering and pains - the substance of the reality of life. She has no courage to confront even the small incidents. The sight of the crows making a feast of a wounded eagle unnerves her to the state of bitter shock. Her husband's casual remark, "they've made a good job of your eagle," seems to her inhuman. The turmoil, clash and clamour of the devil city Bombay is also depicted
through the quarreling ayahs. The sight of the screaming woman with their beastly
dirty nails makes Sita perceive the vulgarity of the world. Her emotional outbursts at
the face of such acts of cruelty makes her ridiculous before her children and her
husband. The city, imagined as a hissing sea, shudders her with the fear of revealing
more of the disputable world.

Sita watches disbelievingly at Menaka when she crumbles a sheaf of buds on the small potted plant. The same reaction is noticed when Sita finds Menaka tearing her painting into pieces, because she thinks “they are not worth keeping.”

The other act of cruelty which catches her attention is the fierce combat of her sons:

...One buckling the other beneath him being overthrown then both rolling, both enmeshed, thrashing, grunting. Her screams did nothing to stop them.

...They stopped suddenly too out of breath to strike another blow. She hated the sight of their red faces, dripping, their chopped hair sticking in clumps with sweat... “This is how they did it in the fil-um, the younger said”, surprised at her expression.

All these acts of violence lead Sita to think that:

How could civilization survive, how could the child? How could she hold them whole, and pure and unimpeached in the midst of this bloodshed? They would surely be wounded, fall and die.

She decides not to give birth to the child and wondered if “by releasing it in a violent, pain-wrecked blood-bath, she was destroying what was, at the moment safely contained and perfect”. She grows defiant in her behaviour and in hopelessness, decides to go to Manori - an island near Bombay to find the much desired peace and refuge. Her disappointment with life in the city, a crust of dull tedium take her back to the world of childhood fantasies, where she would hold her baby safely unborn by
Further she also believes that the sea would wash out the violent feelings out of her children's life and transform them into "smoother, softer beings."

Sita's second visit to the island after a period of twenty years is not blessing as she had imagined. The road, the grove, the fields and the native inhabitants reveal the ravages of time. This comes as a shock to Sita who had come to relive a life of primitive reality. She becomes aware that the island has lost its magic and glory. Besides it repeatedly reminds her of her vain attempts to forget the grim realities of life.

The second part "Winter 47" paints her earlier life with father. Besides it also enables us to understand the cause of her conflicts. The prevailing time is suspended for some time, and the past is revived to paint the external and internal life of Sita, and to reveal the process that shapes her vision of life. Reaching the island, she undertakes a journey back to her childhood with a grown up mind. She now examines it objectively, she learns that her mother had run away from home leaving her children to the care of a callous father who has no time for her children. She is a public figure and neglects her completely. His incapacity to provide her a home makes her insecure in life. She feels discarded and unwanted when she notices her father's love for Rekha.

Observing that it was always across the older sister's stolid shoulders that he placed his arm when they descended from the terrace... observing how he stretched out his hand and squeezed her fingers when they sat on the veranda and watched some young chela's pranks and charades - perhaps it was no unusual prick of jealousy that chilled Sita...
When Jivan informs her about an illicit relationship between her father and Phoolmaya and with her step sister Rekha, she ponders about the real nature of her father and the desertion of her mother. What agitates her innocent mind is that there is no resemblance between Rekha and her. Jivan’s hint at this shatters her faith in life:

Throughout their stay on island she could not verify Jivan’s story. But his words had dropped on her skin like acid and she felt them burn whenever she caught an exchange of that heavy-lidded look between father and daughter.

Towards the close of her father’s life, his chelas straggle away leaving the saint to his miracles. Only fisherwomen with physical and mental disorders come to him for his healing touch, the magic chants and the crushed rubies. On death bed he refuses to go to the hospital on the mainland. His long illness makes him speechless and he dies with only Sita, Rekha and Deedar around. That Sita has no one to call her own becomes apparent on the death of her father. Rekha goes on her own no sooner her father is declared dead:

... as though she had waited for and planned for this movement of release from the old man’s love ...

Sita is left all alone in Jeevan Ashram with no one to cremate the dead. Raman, Deedar’s son performs the final rites and sends her to the college as:

A tired manager drawing the curtains together, locking up the empty theatre... It was as though he had been expressly sent by Providence to close the theatrical era of her life, her strange career and lead her out of the ruined theatre into the thin sunlight of the ordinary, the everyday the empty and the meaningless.

As a helpless, lonely young woman, she marries Raman to provide new meaning to
her life. Highly sensitive to her helplessness, she feels safe and comfortable with Raman
who loves her dearly. Sita as an oblinging wife gives him four children with a fifth on
the way. Gradually Raman shifts his attention and energies towards his business with
the rise of responsibilities and concern for the future of his children:

... everything was so clear to him, and simple: life must be
continued; and all its business - Menaka's admission to medical
college gained, wife led to hospital, new child safely brought
forth, the child reared, the factory seen to, a salary earned, a
salary spent. 34

Raman's inability to honour her claims of love makes her unhappy.

To escape her perpetual misery, Sita resorts to uprooting herself from
her setting along with her children - Karan and Menaka. However, once on the island,
she realises that the island of her childhood days is no more there. She is disappointed
to see that it has lost its charm. She also realises that the magic which had drawn her
had gone with the death of her father. Moses, the servant who is incharge of the
house disdains her as an 'unworthy offspring of the illustrious father.' 35 Likewise,
Menaka and Karan display total disinterstedness in their new and alien surrounding.
Karan tries to run away from the 'bulbous' Miriam who fondles him by flinging in the
air and fondles his mouth with his drooping lips.

The island 'seemed so like a jail to both of them, surrounded by the
barbed wire of ceaseless rain drops.' 36 Because the island is incessantly lashed by
torrential rain, the children feel miserable there. As they are brought up in an urban
milieu they cannot accept the romantic dream which Manori represents. The island
turns equally oppressive to Sita for it fails to provide her the unity of being she sought
after. She begin to realise that their life in the flat on Napean Sea Road is comfortable
Observing the discomfort of her children, she is ashamed of her foolish adventure
Whenever she turned or looked up, she saw them staring at her, watching her as though waiting for her to break down and admit failure. She realised with a painful sloughing off of disbelief, it was life in their flat on Napean Sea Road that had been right and proper, natural and acceptable; it was this so called "escape" to the island that was madness.

Sita's escape to Manori turns out to be a blessing because on the island, all by herself she studies her life with Raman in an objective way. She tries to understand the precise language of the "invisible unquiet." A temporary separation restrengthens the waning relationship between Sita and Raman. Therefore, when Moses informs her of Raman's arrival on the island, she is overjoyed and feels a sense of great relief:

"It's all over" and then a warm expansion of relief of pleasure of surprise! She began to laugh for the children who were already shouting "When? When? Has he come?" Everything stirred, tumbled rose around her, strange she thought - the man so passive, so grey how could the very mention of him arouse such a tumult of life and welcome.

The pleasure fades out when Raman tells Sita that he had come on the island on the call of his children. Sita feels hurt and deceived learning that he had not come to fetch her but had come for the safety and security of the children. The emotional upsurge that had mounted within her heart at the sight of Raman ebbs out leaving room for harshness, anger and disillusionment. She feels "they had all got together... to fight her, to reject her, to run away and hide from her."

Then all of a sudden, she finds a way out of the vacillation between the great "Yes" and "No". Seeing the tired posture of Raman, she realises the worries and tensions that he is facing single-handedly. She feels sorry for him for undergoing the tough time at home with two of her children while she has been relaxing on the
There was a courage she admitted to herself in shame in getting on with such matters from whom she herself squirmed away, doged and ran. It took courage. That was why the children turned to him, sensing him to be superior in courage and in leadership.

Turned wiser Sita becomes aware of the real worth of her relationship with Raman. She is now determined to strive for compromise, adjustment and mutual understanding with her devoted husband. Her choice for togetherness saves her children from disintegration and chaos. Thus, transcending her dilemma, she chooses to return to her husband and family with a new courage to face the human conditions with all its limitations. With a happy glow of cherished togetherness, she plans to follow the trails of Raman’s footprints. Finally she returns to Bombay with a strong desire to give birth to her child which is symbolic of her acceptance of life with its dullness, calamity and moral buggery.

Fire on the mountain embodies Nanda kaull’s pledged detachment and aloofness from the ordinariness of life. Unhappy marital relations form again the thematic nucleus of the novel. The novel also studies the detrimental effects of a stifling home environment. When the novel opens we are told that Nanda kaull is a widow - a great grand mother, who has found life full of disappointments and betrayals. Her relationships with her husband was an unhappy one. Nanda’s husband is described by Anita Desai as:

.. a scholarly man who read many languages and always wanted her to be in silk at the head of long rose wood table in the dining room entertaining his guests.

Nanda kaull’s life as a vice-chancellor’s wife though full of social activity stifled her to
the verge of realising life both meaningless and unsatisfying. Being sensitive of her obligations to her husband and her children, she discharges her duty with grace and dignity. Once, she has discharged her duties she becomes a recluse, separating herself from every one and every thing. Her world becomes narrow and unoccupied by outsiders:

She has been so glad when it was over. She had been glad to leave it all behind, in the plains, like a great, heavy, difficult book that she had read through and was not required to read again. . . .

Discharge me, she groaned I have discharged all my duties. Discharge. 42

Emotional deprivation is at the root of her self-alienation and disillusionment with life. She did not receive the love of her husband in her role as a wife but was rather treated as an exhibit or a useful mechanical device for the smooth and efficient running of his household. She felt lonely, neglected and hurt because of her husband's secret and lifetime affair with Miss David, the mathematics teacher.

There was no emotional attachment between Nanda and her husband. She longed for and lacked of the surge of togetherness. The want of togetherness made her feel the vacuum of her life with poignancy:

"Nor had her husband loved and cherished her and kept her like a queen - he had only done enough to keep her quiet while he carried on a life-long affair with Miss. David, the Mathematics Mistress, whom he had not married because she was a Christian but whom he had loved, all his life loved and her children - the children were all alien to her nature. She neither understood nor loved them. She did not live here alone by choice - she lived here alone because that was what she was forced to do, reduced to doing."
The presence of another woman in her husband's life creates such a sickness of soul that she distrusts all human bonds. It is her courage to face life that saves her from despair and death and makes her insipid existence meaningful. Her coming to Carignano at Kasauli, a lovely barren place is a gesture of her annoyance. She is relieved after her husband's death and settles down in Carignano to live her life according to her wishes. Her life in Carignano is radiant until the letter bearing Raka's arrival comes. The unexpected arrival of Raka disturbs her mental and physical peace. Raka is "a mosquito flown up from the plains to tease and worry" her.

Raka is a child subjected to unhealthy environment right from her childhood days. Her mother's ill-health and her father's excessive drinking had made Raka ignore all human relation and live away from all human contacts. Her wish is to be alone and pursue her own secret life among the rocks and pines of Kasauli. Bidulata Chaudhary describes Raka as:

"The great grand daughter of the aged heroine, surprisingly shares her grand mother's sharpness of sensation. She likes to be left alone to pursue her own secret life. She, basically combines all the qualities of Nanda but with a difference. If Nanda is 'a recluse out of vengeance', Raka is 'a recluse by nature'. She is simply born to it.

The arrival of Raka is an arrival of disorder which wrecks her newly achieved peace and stillness. Nanda Kaul resents Raka's arrival at Carignano and regards it to be an intrusion into her private and secluded life.

Raka is a girl child, barely seven but strange and unusual in every way. She does not have any of the qualities that go normal with children of her age. She longs to live life all by herself. She loves to explore the mountains comb the forests and valleys fearlessly.
It was the ravaged, destroyed and barren spaces in Kasuali that drew her: the ravine where yellow snakes slept under grey rocks and agaves growing out of the dust and rubble, the skeletal pines that rattled in the wind, the wind - levelled hilltops and the seared remains of the safe, cosy, civilized world in which Raka had no part and to which she owned no attachment.

Raka shuns all communication and companionship as destructive, detestable and unstable. Her cynical behaviour is rooted in her father’s harassment and torture of her mother. Her mother’s self-pity, nervous breakdowns and regular hospitalization have a very destructive effect on Raka.

Raka is drawn as a parallel to Nanda Kaul in the second part of the story. She is sketched as a child in love with uncanny places and things. Her weird imagination affirms her abnormality. To Nanda Kaul Raka is “a wild creature”. Nanda contemplating on Raka’s behaviour, concludes.

There was something about it - illegitimate, uncompromising and lawless - that made her tingle. The scene of devastation and failure somehow drew her, inspired her.

Nanda Kaul now directs all her energies to captivate Raka’s interest. She had failed to win her husband but this time she is sure of her victory. She strongly desires love of her granddaughter and is afraid that her rejection would intensify her self-hate, even kill her. She weaves fantastic stories for Raka by borrowing material from the Travels of Marco Polo. Through such stories Nanda tries in vain to atone for Raka’s unnatural childhood. The novelist describes her predicament as:

Some where behind them, behind it all, was her father, home from a party, stumbling and crashing through the curtains of night, his mouth opening to let out a flood of rotten stench, beating at her mother with hammers and fists of abuse-harsh, filthy abuses that made Raka cower under her bed clothes.
Life holds little charm for her and destruction fascinates her. It is due to this, she sets the mountain - forest on fire knowing that it would consume her surrounding and cause great disaster. The second part of the story chiefly dwells on her.

The third and last part of the novel introduces another female character who is a match to Nanda in age. Ila Das, a spinster and social worker is a close friend of Nanda. Like Nanda, Ila too lives a life full of misery and meaninglessness but unlike Nanda she is bold, and energetic and courageous. Bidulata Choudhary says:

She is a scrap of burnt paper, drifting on currents of present air. She is made useless by the subsequent upheavals in the society with the two brothers captured at the height of false prestige away in foreign land. She is left behind. Her lamentation at the loss of identity is the real lamentation of the people between the pre and the post-independence era.49

Ila struggles all her life to provide herself with the bare needs yet she seems happy and tries to maintain the dignity of her rich and well - established father. She says:

... I've had to go from pillar to post trying to earn fifty rupees here and fifty rupees there, with not a room to call my own most of the time, and its grown worse and worse..." 50

Ila's death is as unhappy as her life. She is raped and mercilessly murdered, proving the futility of Ila's involvement in contrast to Nanda's withdrawal. All three characters - Nanda, Raka and Ila highlight Desai's vision that involvement and withdrawal do not attribute meaning to life in all conditions.

Clear light of day deals with the theme of time - “Time the destroyer is Time the Preserver.” In an interview with Ramesh K Srivastava Mrs Desai says

In my novel, Clear Light of Day, I have tried to construct a four dimensional world, the fourth dimension being time...
wanted time to have as palpable an existence as the spatial world perceived by the five senses. I wanted time to be an element like light or darkness, that is pervasive, and that is perceived by the characters as music is heard, scents smelled, food tasted, texture felt, sights seen - a part of their every day consciousness....what I have tried to prove is that although time appears to damage, destroy extinguish, one finds instead that nothing is lost, nothing comes to an end, but the spiral of life leads as much upwards as downwards and in a perpetual circular motion, both the past and the future existing always in time present.”

In another interview with Sunit Sethi, Mrs. Desai Said.

My novel is set in old Delhi and records the tremendous changes that a Hindu family goes through since 1947. Basically, my Preoccupation was with recording the passage of time, I was trying to write a four dimensional piece on how a family’s life moves backward in a period of time. My novel is about time as a destroyer, as a preserver and about what the bondage of time does to people. I have tried to tunnel under the mundane surface of domesticity.

The novel reveals the impact of congenial familial atmosphere on the growth of a child’s psyche. The three children Raja, Bim and Tara never found their mother at home. She conscientiously discharged her club duties and was punctual in her visits leaving the tiny kids to be looked after by their poor Aunt Mira. The feelings of the children has been described as:

“No one had ever made them things before, no one had ever the time. I’m just going to the club, I’m waiting for the car, the mother had said irritably when approached and the ayah would lift her arms out of the wash-tub,dripping to threaten them as she shouted ‘If you bother me, I’ll thrash you’, while no one had ever considered approaching anyone so unapproachable as the father.”

The novel focuses on the life of four characters - Tara, Bim, Raja and
Haba with contextual references to time. Time past and present is used to analyse
their lives in an old house of Delhi. The house never changes - 'a tomb with sleeping
graves'. Its decay, its darkness and its silence is a warning to them - no escape from
the onslaughts of time and ravages of physical world - the external life

Bim, the intelligent of the four, accepts all responsibilities which Tara
and Baba escape; discards the normal feminine life to marry and to be merry. She
stoically tackles Raja's long illness, Parent's death, looking after Mira Masi, disabled
Baba and her own career. Sunaina Singh describes her fate as:

Her desire to be independent, to be courageous, and to dress
and smoke like a man enables her to grow up both strong
and confident. It is because she has trained herself to be
different that the much eulogized traits of woman - weakwill,
dependence and shyness were alien to her sensibility.

Bim and Raja as they grow up find it difficult to realize their dreams and ideals. Tara
finds an escape from this old house only after her marriage with Bakul. After the
death of their parents, Tara and Raja make themselves free of their responsibilities.
Speaking about the content of the novel, Shashi Khanna writes,

The novelist has depicted the relationship between the two
sisters - Tara and Bim. It is quite natural that there are
temperamental differences between Tara and her elder sister
Bim. While Tara is meek and submissive, mentally dull and
timid, Bim shows extraordinary qualities of concern for her
family and a capacity to make sacrifice also... later in the story
we find that the opposite attitudes and life styles of the two
sisters have resulted in misunderstanding between them. What
is surprising is that both the sisters accuse each other of
extravagance. While Tara thinks that her sister spends lavishly
on books, Bim is of the opinion that Tara wants her money in
luxurious living.
Like Tara, Raja too moves to Hyderabad to continue to live in the house of his father-in-law. Raja's escape to Hyderabad make Bim brood over the futility of human relationship and affection- Raja's conversion to materialism is the destruction of Bim's illusion that Raja is a budding poet and would outshine all his siblings by his poetic calibre. As children Bim and Raja loved and praised each other, but in due course of time Bim feels betrayed by Raja's abdicating his duties after their parents death and running away to Hyderabad. Bim is now entangled with her abnormal brother Baba. She stoically fulfills the claims of life but at the same time suffers from a feeling of being cheated by her elder brother Raja - her Byron, her poet, she tells Tara that Raja was not meant for inferior things of life - family, money and business.

That's not what Raja had wanted from life. He doesn't need a hobby, he needs a vocation. He knows he has given his up, just given up what used to be his vocation turned it into a silly, laughable little hobby...

When Bim sees Raja in a clear light, she finds a shocking truth - Raja had no originality, he was only a weak imitator of romantic heroes. The knowledge of this mystery liberates Bim from her adherence to false idol-worship and confused values.

The title of the novel therefore signifies Bim's new journey to connect the artistic observation of life with its reality. This is how Anita Desai asserts Bim's struggle to achieve balance and wholeness in life - a positive vision to discover the ineluctable reality of existence. Seema Jena aptly comments on the motif of the novel:

In Clear light of the Day there is anger, bitterness but there is also an effort to reconcile and accommodate. All the elements that threaten to disrupt the pattern of life in all its aspects are brought under control through love, understanding, forgiveness and mutual acceptance. The triumph of these values over despair and destruction leaves the reader joyously participating in the musical recital that concludes the novel.
Deven, the protagonist of *In Custody* (1984) is a direct heir to Bim's conformity to reality. The novel unfolds the story of Deven Sharma, a temporary lecturer in Hindi in a Private College in Mirpore, a suburb of Delhi. As the novel opens, Murad comes to Mirpore to request Deven to interview Nur Shahjehnabadi for a special number of forthcoming issue of his Urdu magazine. Deven is a gifted young man but his lower middle-class ethos provides him no suitable avenues of recognition. That Deven aspires to be an artist is evident from the fact that he has written some poems. But the reality of his existence nips the bud of his aspiration. He perceives life as an impediment to his artistic sensibility. His financial and social background as an ad hoc lecturer in a college make him feel worthless in the eyes of all including his wife. The job is no good for it provides no psychological, social and aesthetic satisfaction. In order to escape the drab, unexciting monotonous life he escapes into the world of poetry and imagination. Nur's poetry is his mode of escape from the dull prosaic life of his middle class existence:

"It was to him as if God had leaned over a cloud and called for him to come-up, and angels might have been drawing him up these ancient splintered stairs to meet the deity, so jubilantly, so timorously, so gratefully did he rise. This, surely, was the summons for which he had been waiting all these empty years, only he had not known it would assume this form... Another realm it would surely be if his god dwelt there, the domain of poetry, beauty and illumination. He mounted the stairs as if sloughing off and casting off the meanness and dross of his past existence and steadily approaching a new and wonderously illuminated era."

Deven's first meeting with Nur is an unhappy experience and is abortive to his world of fantasy. He decides to give up the pursuit of literature but Murad's persistent persuasion forces him to continue, with the much-needed interview from Nur.
Deven's second attempt proved to be more bitter and disheartening because Nur, his venerable poet is busy with the celebration of the birthday of Imtiaz Begum - his second wife.

Deven's face was distorted with dislike of the scene. He had expected to come in and be admitted into the presence of the revered poet, he had hoped to put questions to him at last to listen, and record his words. Instead, there was the thrumming of the drums and drauling of the harmonium and above that the thin, high-pitched voice flaunting itself before the audience like some demented dervish of sound.

On Murad's suggestion, Deven visits the poet once again to get the Poet's recitation of his composition taped. With the help of his college colleague Siddiqui - the Head of the Department of Urdu - Deven gets a tape recorder and with three weeks endless labour his object is finally fulfilled. But soon Deven discovers that nothing worthwhile had been taped and his long labour has been a total failure. His fruitless pursuit of art and poetry brings out the contrast between reality and imagination.

Deven hopes that an interview of Nur would make him famous but soon his illusion is shattered. He is brought face to face with the harsh realities of the contemporary world. Deven's shuttling between Mirpore and Delhi finally brings him to the locale of liberation - a gain of positive vision.

Deven as a critic and Nur as a poet spring from the same basket. They are caught up in the world of illusions. And Anita Desai explores how their "life" at its core is absurd and has no ultimate meaning. The human predicament is one where man's visionary spirit is trapped in his materialistic body and the responsibility of the individual is to confront these painful truths but yet not succumb to them. And this bleak vision in the novel is plumbed through the sordid surroundings, ill-matched couples, unscrupulous businessmen and a friend like Murad who is slippery, frequently violent, invariably
unscrupulous and always complacently exclusive."

The novel, Baumgartner's Bombay (1988) is about two Germans Hugo and Lotte, who try to establish their identity in an alien land. But their journey takes them no where with Poignant feelings of disgust and frustration. Both of them are solitary foreigners in India and are uprooted from their own culture. They bravely face their predicament as passive victims. Commenting on the novel G.R. Taneja remarks:

_Baumgartner's Bombay_ is the story of the humanity's need to find sustenance within itself. It is a story of love that binds, sustains and ennobles; love that draws human beings to one another and responds to their innermost need for human warmth.

Hugo Baumgartner is a 'German jew, but the circumstances of his life compel him to leave the Country of his birth and come to India. A step - son of a rich father, Hugo has been very unhappy with bitter recollections of his childhood. During the time of Nazi Germany, violence broke out in Berlin and his father was forcibly taken away as a captive to Dachau. After his come back from mysterious disappearance, he finds his fortune totally ruined. This kills him and he leaves his young son and wife all alone. Hugo has to leave school and take up a job as an accountant in his father's shop now owned by his friend from Hamburg.

The story of Baumgartner further takes a tragic turn when he is sent to India by his mother for livelihood on the suggestion of a gentleman from Hamburg. Endless solitary existence marks his fifty years of life in India. The only company is that of cats, whom he nurses and loves. Like him, Lotte is another alien in India who had started earning her livelihood by dancing since she was twelve. After meeting Hugo,
Lotte came very often to his flat and they became friendly.

Lotte’s story like that of Hugo had been a tragic story of isolation. The life Kanthi Sethia gives her has no charm. She is reduced to the status of being his mistress, living in reasonable comforts but waiting for long periods for his short trip to Bombay. Later she is deprived of her flat and other comforts by Kanti’s sons soon after his death. Scared of isolation and cruel reality, Lotte takes to drink-sodden ways making herself a ridiculous figure. The same tragic isolation leads the “Billewallah Pagal” - the epithet with which Hugo is contemptuously addressed to death. He is murdered by a Young German, a drug - addict named Kurt whom he offers help and shelter.

The novel is a pathetic tale of two characters who in the midst of disgust and isolation remain heroic fighters on alien land justifying the principle of the dignity of man with kindliness and humanness at the core. Usha Bande in her assessment of the novel writes:

We are aware that Anita Desai’s concern in this novel, as in her other works, is neither social nor political but since individuals are a part of the system, they cannot help being afflicted by the times they are living in. Sensitive as Desai’s characters are, reality and life- experience are too much for them to face up to. They suffer, lose their foot-hold and become outsiders. By the world “Outsiders” I mean those characters who fail to achieve an adjustment with the world, who are homeless and who have a sense of personal inadequacy.

Village by the sea a novel for children, in the story of an adolescent protagonist, Han. He is a sick of the life of fishing as it has failed to provide the
means of livelihood to support his invalid parents and three younger sisters. This family has fishing as its traditional occupation; but the insufficiency of it makes Hari decide to switch over to some other job. A poor and loveless family atmosphere suffocates him filling a deep some of despair, frustration and insecurity. The omniscient narrator describes his anguish as-

Late at night Lila and Hari who were still awake heard the men coming home- their father and the three brothers from the neighbouring farm who drank together every night...

Lila and Hari, who knew their father was amongst them, tried to shut out the sounds by covering their heads with their pillows... Hari did not cry but he bit his lips and thought. “May be a poisonous snake will bite him. he may step on one and be bitten there are so many of them and it is dark. Then he would die.” He did not say that in fear, he had said it with hope, as if he wished that was what would happen.

Hari’s childhood is no happy and an innocent world. His mother’s illness and father’s alcoholism has made him leap over his childhood glories and embrace maturity. Consciously, he shuns all childhood dreams. This is explicitly brought out by the narrator -

No I he told himself, closing his eyes. That was a foolish dream. He could not afford dreams, he must be practical and think out a scheme. That was not easy and the effort made him tired so that he gave up and fell asleep.

Hari is very little attracted by the company of Ramu and other friends. The thought of earning a decent livelihood raced in his mind all through the day. He moves about in the village to find something that would provide a day’s meal. Hari’s sense of responsibility has been conveyed by a touching poignancy

He saw now that there were two or three possibility. Even if all he could do now was to fish and sell coconuts, later on
he would be able to choose between a factory job, a job an a big fishing boat like Biju’s or a job in Bombay if someone helped him to get there ....Now that was not enough Hari saw that like Biju, although on a different scale, he would have to make a choice no one else in the village had made before. How? who would help him? He walked along silently, worrying.65

Blessed with insight into future, he senses the urgency to change over to some other work to save his family from greater poverty and misery. The tormenting sight of his alcoholic father fills him with endless worries. To his anxiety his ailing mother in need of medicine is a big addition. Being considerate he shares his worries only with his sister Lila - the eldest of the four children. Food, clothing and shelter nag the tender minds of these two young children.

Disappointed in their mere onlooker father, Hari plunges with his boyish capacity to cope with his new circumstance - as provider to the family. Like Hari, Lila puts herself in a mother-role to discharge the necessary familial responsibilities in place of her bed-ridden mother. Whereas Lila has ‘home’ for the discharge of her freshly adopted duties, Hari has no place to earn for his family:

The only boy in the village with no boat and no job an the fishing boats. The sight of ladies buying baskets full of fish and crabs fill him with a sense of helplessness. A desire for a better job and a better life now become his object. However, physical incompetence and emotional dissatisfaction produces an intense feeling of frustration and resentment. These suppressed feeling find and outlet at the sight of dead pintoo - a companion and a pet to all the four children. He runs away to Bombay to escape the ugliness of the life at Thul.

Hari’s life at Bombay is another phase of struggle and suffering. The memory of Thul makes him sick at heart Bombay with its vastness frightens Hari.
with no one to hold his hand and offer a much required meal to satisfy his two days long tormenting hunger.

Hari undergoes a number of hardships working in Jagu’s restaurant. He slogs with the sunrise to sun-set with no interval of rest. Besides, the inside of the restaurant is too hot to sleep over during the night. On the advice of Panwallah, he goes to the park and sleeps there. Jagu and Panwallah are now Hari’s friends and benefactors. Mr Panwallah earnestly wishes to make Hari a watch mender. He advises Hari to make the best of the time available:

You can find work anywhere ...

As long as you can use your hands ... You can find work for them. And you have to be willing to learn- and to change- and to grow. If they take away your land you will have to learn to work in their factory instead. If you can’t stop it you must learn to use it- don’t be afraid .... You will find you can sell the vegetables ... to buy a cow or chickens and make a living from them.

Hari, now devotes all his spare time to learn the watch mending skills. He shows enough eagerness to learn new ways and techniques. This makes Panwallah an enthusiastic teacher. He encourages Hari:

Good!... That’s what I wanted to hear you say. Learn, learn, learn- so that you can grow and change. Things change all the time, boy-nothing remains the same.

Lila on the other, matures as does Hari. She cooks, clear house, tends to the children and nurse her ailing mother. She becomes a foster-mother to her younger sisters and the caretaker ever of her father. Like Hari, she too refuse to suffer total poverty and misery. She begs Mr De Silva to carry her mother to the Alibag Hospital in his car where she is treated for consumption. She assumes the role of a breadwinner.
too by working for Mr Sayyid Ali. She literally keeps the family together by making her younger brother and sisters responsible for a few chores, easy enough for their age. This is how each family member understands the importance of one’s duty for the welfare of others. Her assertive role transforms the home- her mother is eventually cured and her father gives up drunkenness.

Hari returns home with a constructive and positive vision. Better-equipped now, he plans to start a poultry farm and a little watch mending shop. He goes to Alibagh to buy sugar toys on the demand of his sisters and also brings his mother home. In perfect togetherness, they celebrate Diwali. The novels ends on a note of happiness and satisfaction. Hari’s mother says :“I feel wealthy when I see all of you beside me.”

To sum up, Cry the Peacock deal’s with the dissonance and disharmony that disrupt the marital relationship between Maya and Gautama; Voices in the City shows, the disenchantment of Nirode and Monisha with all human beings caused by marital discord of their parents; Bye-Bye Black-Bird has the East - West motif which causes a feelings of loss of identity to the immigrant Indians Dev and Adit and the white girl Sarah - Adit’s wife. Where shall we go this summer ? has dealt with a sense of meaninglessness of life by depicting the life of Sita, wife of Raman - a Prosperous business man. Sita has four children and is pregnant for the fifth time; Fire on the Mountain depicts the frustration of an elderly widow of a Vice - Chancellor - Nanda Kaul who lives in seclusion in Carignano along with her great grand daughter, Raka- an abnormal child - to run away from all human contact and to find relief from her past sufferings, Clear Light of Day marks out the triumph of human values like - love, understanding and forgiveness over despair and deep seated prejudices. In custody
postulates Desai's belief that artistic responsibility is relative to social context and any attempt would thwart an artist's ambition. And finally in Baumgartner's Bombay, Desai underlines the idea that life lived with integrity is life lived heroically.

A look at these novels individually reveals the fact that Anita Desai shows a marked change in the thematic patterns of her later novels. Cry the Peacock, Voices in the city, Bye, Bye Black -Bird, Where shall we go this Summer? and Fire on the Mountain have one feature in common—Marital discord damages conjugal bliss and destroys proper growth of one's personality resulting in nonacceptance of life. These novels are shrouded in pessimism but the later novels although tragic in nature, aims at asserting a heroic fight with oddities of life.
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