CHAPTER III

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Anita Desai's novels are explorations of the troubled aspects of a protagonist's life. In this chapter of my thesis, I intend to study the reasons that cause helplessness to a protagonist giving rise to a feeling that the world is not for her. For the above object, I will ground my arguments on three basic questions. They are: what is disharmony of a self, what does a protagonist experience during the phase of 'disharmony' and finally how does the disruption affect her/his purpose of life.

Characters like Maya, Nirode, Monisha and Hugo are cut off from the society and suffer the dilemma of rootlessness in life. These characters are constantly under the growing pressure of vacuity and meaninglessness. Their quest in life forces them to transgress the fundamental social taboos. For instance Bim reveals her intellectual independence and ability by taking up teaching as a profession; Amla (Bye-Bye Black Bird) reveals her aesthetic potential through paintings and Monisha (Bye-Bye Black Bird) expresses her literary taste by treasuring Kafka and Tolstoy. On the other hand characters like Nirode (Bye-Bye Black Bird) and Maya (Cry, the Peacock) develop aversion to all social contacts and attempt to seek peace, fulfillment and satisfaction in a lonely and detached existence. Their behaviour reflects a virtual break with the common and usual human concepts of reality. Maya (Cry, the Peacock), Raka (Fire on the Mountain) Sita (Where shall we go this Summer) Deven (In Custody) Bim (Clear Light of Day), all create an alternate reality to catch the long-wanted happiness.

Disharmony acquires a wide range of meaning and significance in the novels of Anita Desai. It is at times a form of loneliness or the rejection of social
contacts or established social norms. Almost all her characters experience ungratifying interactions with people around and find their environment thwarting. This shatters their faith in life and in the goodness of the world. These consequently hinder the development of their individuality as we see in the case of Tara and Raja (*Clear Light of Day*), Raka (*Fire on the Mountain*), and Nirode (*Bye Bye Black Bird*). The root cause of this weakness lies in the confrontation of the self and the society. Social pressures and expectations are too onerous for a protagonist to live by. The sense of being ill-equipped to withstand destroys the sense of self-worth, resulting in thwarting disharmony.

Anita Desai’s first novel highlights the idea that marital discord is the product of Maya’s disharmonious self. A number of clues inform the reader that Maya in her childhood was nurtured by fairy tales. This handicaps her and makes her loose the requisite of life— the self-confidence to adopt and relate herself to others. Her conflicts arise out of the ungratified matrimonial bonds and want of formative love and security.

Maya’s desire to find her father in her husband is the root cause of her anxiety and dissatisfaction resulting later in her mental disorder. Ultimately, Gautama begins to appear to her as an “Unreal ghost.” In utter desolation she says:

All order is gone out of my life, all formality. There is no plan, no peace, nothing to keep me within the pattern of familiar, everyday living and doing that becomes those whom God means to live on earth. Thoughts come incidents occur, then they are scattered, and disappear. Past, present, future Truth and untruth They shuttle back and forth, a shifting chiaroscuro of light and shade... Those are no longer my eyes, nor this my mouth. The pattern for an order of lines and designs, a symmetry that has deserted my own life. Strangers surrounded me...
Maya's shattered mental balance is revealed at the death of her pet dog, Toto, which is the first section of the three-part structure of the novel. Soon Maya realises that it is not the dog she mourns but alarmed by an unnamed terror.

Finding Maya's grief too unreasonable, Gautama tries to pacify her by preaching her the virtue of non-involvement. He quotes from the Gita to explain to her the high ideals of duty:

'He who, controlling the senses of the mind, follows without attachment the path of action with his organs of actions, he is esteemed.'

Gautama's philosophy fails to obliterate Maya's fear of death that claws her mind on Toto's death. It triggers off an unending flow of morbid thoughts in her mind. Toto's death suddenly reminds her of the imminent threat of death to one prophesied by the albino astrologer. The prophecy and the cry of the Peacocks are mingled in Maya's imagination.

"Am I gone insane? Father! Brother! Husband! Who is my saviour? I am in need of one. I am dying, and I am in love, with living. I am in love and I am dying. God, let me sleep, forget, rest. But one I'll never sleep again. There is no rest any more - only death and waiting."

Gradually, these images become real and exist for her:

"Wherever I laid myself, I could think only of the albino, the magician, his dull, opaque eyes, .... It seemed real, I could recall each detail, and yet-God, Gautama, father, Surely it is nothing but an hallucination. Surely not, I sobbed."

Dreams and nightmares and the fear of the albino figure haunt her leading finally to insanity. She fails to liberate herself from the albino and his prophecy and kills her husband by pushing him over the parapet wall.
The story of Maya's madness is well brought out and her aloofness is well articulated by her reminiscences of a number of dark and fatal images. The tragedy springs from her failure to harmonize herself with the existing clock-time reality, Gautama's intellectual aloofness and her inhibiting childlessness. Mrs Mrinalini Solanki is of the opinion:

Her life follows the course outlined in the quotation from the Bhagwad Gita: “From attachment arises longing and from longing anger is born. From anger arises delusion; from delusion, loss of memory is caused. From loss of memory the discriminative faculty is ruined and from the ruin of discrimination, he perishes.”

Voices in the City sketches the vain efforts of a world-weary, lean and hungry-looking journalist to find for himself - “three drinks and a room - a princedom.” All his efforts to taste success escapes him and he continues to meet failures after failures. The editing of literary magazine, writing a play, opening a book shop, taking interest in coffee and club gatherings show his desperate efforts to carve his identity. He gets tired by his own uncertainty and cries out;

...he drifted, a shadowy cipher and his life consisted of one rejection following another.... he loathed himself for not having the true, unwavering spirit of either within him. There was only his endless waiting, hollowed out by an intrinsic knowledge that there was nothing to wait for.

References to his childhood reveal that the estrangement of his parents hurt his tender psyche. Nirode feels humiliated and neglected when his mother enjoys herself in Major Chadha's company. He begins to hate his mother and uses filthy language unhesitatingly for her. His words “she cannibal”, “the Cobra” who swallowed her husband show his shocking disregard of filial piety.
Nirode despises his father but his unrequited love for his mother makes him imagine himself as a protective figure for his mother. His dreams reveal a lot to us when we map the disturbed state of the mind of adult Nirode.

Nirode’s mother violates the established moral and social norms. Nirode nourished a sublime picture of his mother, and his mother’s supposed illicit relations with Mr Chadha arouses severe repugnance in him and heightens his wish to be away from all social contacts. He loses faith in love and life and cries out bitterly:

“Amla, I know her now. She is Kali the goddess and the demon are one... she has at last seized and mastered death, she has become kali.”

He rejects his mother, his upbringing, the wealth of his family, everything that may tie him to any kind of intimacy and responsibility. His desire is to announce:

“I am a leper, he wanted to ring and call, leave me, do not come near. I am a leper, diseased with the loneliest disease of all.”

Nirode’s rebellion is finally completed through Monisha’s death. It acts like a cathartic agent purging Nirode of his morbidity. He concludes his exile at the sight of Monisha’s dead body by extending physical proximity to Amla. His pathetic condition is vividly painted by the omniscient narrator in the following words:

He seemed unable to remain still or silent, he was filled with an immense care of the world that made him reach out, again and again, to touch Amla’s cold hand when he saw it shake, or embrace the old woman in the battered wicker chair when he saw her weep. He pressed them to him with hunger and joy, as if he rejoiced in this sensation of touching other flesh, other's pains, longed to make them mingle with his own, which till now had been agonisingly neglected.
Monisha’s death gives a new lease of life to Nirode, who comes out of the shell of privacy and accepts life with a healthy forbearance and faith.

Monisha’s aloofness is more acutely realised than that of Nirode. Somewhat like Maya, Monisha’s relationship with Jiban, her husband is characterized by loneliness and loss of communication. Her inability to bear children further adds to her misery. Gradually life becomes a virtual imprisonment, and a self-inflicted death is a befitting end to such a misery.

The personification of the dancer-woman as Kali generates a self-destructive desire whereby she sets fire to herself. Unlike Maya, Monisha does not protect herself but desires an ideally free sense of individuality which clashes with the social pattern. This results in her aloofness and self-imprisonment. She is acutely sensitive to this:

What a waste, what a waste it has been, this life enclosed in a locked container, merely as an observer, and so imperfect, so handicapped an observer at that ... I have not given birth, I have not attended death. All the intervening drama has gone by, unwounded itself like a silent, blurred film that has neither entertained nor horrified me.¹⁰

Amla is very different from Monisha and Nirode and wants to enjoy life with all its sunshine and bloom. Appreciating Amla’s positive attitude to life, Aunt Lila says:

‘That’s the spirit in which to start your career, my girl. That’s what I like to see in young people-spirit. There’s not too much of it around’.¹¹

Hungry of love, she strives to achieve a warm and loving relationship with Nirode and Monisha but she fails as both of them dread emotional ties. She tells her brother in despair.
“It’s you, it is you, who are depraved, who make love into something ugly and degenerate.”

Amla is unmarried, career-oriented, energetic, and believes in looking life in the face. She is confident of herself:

‘...You know when your must fly, when you can rest, where you are going and how to return’.

But like Nirode, she too feels helpless and lonely in Calcutta. Her unconscious quest to protect herself forces her to accept the vibrant life offered by Dharma, the painter.

This relationship liberates Amla of her suppressed feelings of regressive childhood. She is now refreshed and unburdened of her disquieting past. The disclosure about Geeta Devi, Dharma’s wife, and his daughter make her feel the cruelty Dharma had been perpetuating on them. She now feels like:

...the enchanted maiden of love she had unwillingly let herself be lured. She had revelled in the enchantment, been grateful for its joy. What was it now that made her jump to her feet, hurry to say the farewell he had predicted, rush through the door to the wild and well-known world again.

Amla at once decides to leave Dharma and tears up the invitation to his exhibition. She, unlike Nirode and Monisha understands the value of life and maintains her poise which her brother and sister unfortunately lacked. She goes with Jit to the horse-race to gamble again with life and snatch her share of happiness.

Sarah, of Bye-Bye, Blackbird, is a case of both social and psychological alienation. The novel shows the impact of an East-West marriage on the Psyche of the English heroine, Sarah. Married to Adit, an Indian settled in England, she faces the problem of adjustment and loneliness. Her loneliness is not a product of her instinct but of circumstances of her marriage in an alien culture. Her identity is lost in playing
out two different roles:

She had become nameless, she had shed her name as she had shed her English ancestry and identity...

Sarah becomes a victim of the jeers and derisions of her own countrymen. She is hesitant to approach her English friends and unwilling to talk about her Indian ones:

...she wondered, with 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 is painted as a lifeless character the only part of her life that remains in focus is her English origin. Her daily interaction is with characters like Mala, Belle, Ratna and the old Punjabi lady who just gossip without any spiritual richness. The land of Adit is unknown to her but the small Indian world that surrounds her makes her aware of its ugliness. She feels as her husband does:

...the emptiness and sorrow, the despair and rage, the flat grey melancholy and the black glamour of India. They themselves were tossed about by the flood like flotsam and then became a part of it, the black flood.

Torn between the two world, she becomes alien to both—East, the world to which her husband belong and West—the world in which she was born.

Sarah is simply an epitome of miserableness reacting more against racial discrimination than the sordidness of the physical world. Her misery is rooted in the fact that she has sacrificed her identity as a British woman and has become an outsider to the British Community but she is not recognised as a native in the social circle of Adit. She suffers no less than an Indian immigrant in England. Her misfortune makes her an inhibited personality and becomes emotionally detached to her social circle.

All these conflicts and interpersonal tension does not deter her from the path of
devotion. She continues to be an ideal and faithful wife. In order to get rid of her despair and anguish she plans to leave for India with Adit.

Adit has his own share of anguish like Sarah. Married to an English girl he settles down in London, struggling to forget his Indianness. Talking to Samar, he says:

"Sometimes... it stifles me - this business of hanging together with people like ourselves,
... All our jokes about Indians in England, all our talk about our own situation - never about anyone or anything else... God, I am fed up."

His visit to his in-laws becomes the turning point of his life. He now yearns for his country. The lack of belongingness and self-respect make him crave for his country. He now realises his superfluous living in England:

"It has no reality at all, we just pretend all the time. I'm twenty seven now. I've got to go home and start living a real life."

The novelist deftly comments on the turning point of the fate of Adit:

"England had left 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."

The novel also records the pretensions of Dev who has come to London to study economics. He suffers from a loss of identity and his condition is like that of one of those...

...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."

This explicitly shows that Dev finds himself uprooted from his own moorings. The sense of racial discrimination hurts him which is apparent in his speech...
Here everyone a stranger and living in hiding. They live silently and invisibly. It could happen nowhere in India.22

The novelist makes his plight apparent to the readers.

...The menacing slither of the 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 Alice falling, falling down the rabbit hole, like a Kafka stranger wandering through the dark labyrinth of a prison.23

Dev's loneliness makes him remember his countrymen more sharply than Adit in the beginning of the novel. He expects the whites to be more social like Indians. The emptiness of the neighbourhood and streets make him restless:

The English habit of keeping all doors and windows tightly shut...of guarding their privacy as they guarded their tongues...remains incomprehensible to him.24

Soon he realises a crisis of identity oscillating between nationalism and cosmopolitanism. He expresses his feelings candidly when he tells Adit:

I wouldn't live in a country where I was insulted and unwanted.25

But soon Dev falls a prey to the various attractions and allurement of England and changes place with Adit:

He is intoxicated to think that of all the long programmes of music, theatre, cinema and art exhibitions that he sees in the papers, he can choose any to go to on any day at all...It is a strange summer in which he is the bewildered alien, the charmed observer, the outraged outsider and thrilled sightseer all at once and in succession.26

Although the novel does not make any further comment on the profound change, the reader is quite sure that the fate of Adit would be Dev's fate sooner or later. The spell of England would soon be over as it happened in Adit's case leaving
Dev with one choice that is, to return to his motherland.

Sita of where shall we go this summer? suffers because her business imprisoned husband, Raman trapped in his business does not give her. The sense of security that she longed for since her childhood. As a motherless child, she grows up in an atmosphere of neglect and hypocrisy:

She told herself she could never approach him to ask of such private and somehow, secret matters. As an adult, later, she asked herself had there been no opportunity ever of talking alone to him? 27

Sita's father totally neglects her but he certainly loves Rekha, his eldest daughter. The disclosure that Rekha is not her real sister shatters her faith in life and she feels as if the cruel reality was 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, or his arm in its fine white sleeve lie fondlingly across her round shoulders. 28

The disclosure that Rekha is not her real sister rather her father's mistress makes her believe that her world is full of hypocrites. This shatters her faith in life and in the goodness of the world. The disintegration of the family after her father's death engulfs her with emotional crisis.

She herself would have stayed on, in the deserted house, for she had not planned anything, had not understood the need to plan or plot or prepare and was quite destitute. She contemplated numbly, staying on alone into old age out of not knowing what else could be done with one's long life, too long life when Deedar's son came to cremate her father, shut the house, fetch her away, send her to college, install her in a college hostel and finally - out of pity, out of lust, out of sudden will for adventure, and because it was inevitable married her: 
Raman gives her the desired security after the sudden disappearance of Rekha and Jivan.

As Sita does not have a home she leans on Raman as her saviour.

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.

She now comes to Bombay, gives birth to four children and is pregnant for the fifth time. But gradually she starts feeling—

...puzzled and pained ...bored, dull, unhappy, frantic. She could hardly believe that although they lived so close together, he did not even know this basic fact of her existence.

Disappointed in marriage, she starts her journey to the Manori Islands—a journey to her past and to her childhood. She goes to Manori in the hope of a miracle that would save her from giving birth to her fifth child in the violence-ridden environment around her. The rapacious claws and beaks of the crows ready to tear a weak helpless eagle speaks of the innumerable acts of violence. The turmoil, clash and clamour of the devil city are depicted through the aggressiveness of the screaming women with their beastly dirty nails add to the violence around her:

There was a sudden sound like the screeching of brakes, a commotion—only it was not a common road accident but a clash and clamour of aroused women. The ayahs, the ayahs were in arms. Hearing the screams, Sita leapt up to lean over the rails and peer down the street, and although she could not see the women fighting in the cul-de-sac, she could not see the passers—by who had stopped to stare, and the whole street seemed to quiver and whip with their passion and rage. There was a clamour of shouts and accusations, screams and shrills, tooting sound as the argument gave way to action. She
thought she saw the madly flapping edge of the battle - scene - arms flailing, saris ripping. Certainly children ever crying. Tea, book, cigarette - abandoning them, she ran.32

Sita presents a gloomy picture to her children and a quizzical one to her husband

Menaka's indifference to life in plants and Karan's unconscious destruction in building blocks make her terribly afraid of violence and destruction around. She says:

"It all I want to keep it, don't you understand." ... I mean I want to keep it - I don't want it to be born.33

The above incident clearly reveals Sita's fantasies of violence. She is unable to get rid of the memory of the crows tearing into a wounded eagle, and the violence she herself had to indulge in order to make them go away. She observes the destructive element in her children's behaviour - Menaka crumbling a sheaf of new buds and tearing her painting. She begins to neglect her appearance and grows defiant and difficult to approach. She grows an onlooker on life, accepts a self-imposed exile upon herself by going to Manori Islands.

Separated from Raman and her children Sita looks within. She sees herself as a jelly-fish. And in another fantasy image, she reappears as a fish and her foetus, who jointly become the 'opaque' brain of a gigantic sea-monster. Sita, now desires a life of idealistic purity. This makes her expect a miracle of keeping her fifth child unborn in her womb. However, her visits to Manori makes her realise:

Which half of her life was real and which unreal? Which of her selves was true, which false? All she knew was that there were two periods of her life, each in direct opposition to the other. She shook her head angrily at the confusion, the muddle of it all. Neither sea nor sky were separate or contained - they rushed into each other in rush of light and shade.
impossible to disentangle.

She finds the Manori Island disappointing and shabby and is disillusioned to remember how her father exploited the gullibility of the villagers. Ultimately, Sita on her own realises that Manori is not the solution of ills existing in the society. She develops affinity with her husband and walks back home placing her feet in Raman’s footmarks on the sand. Her decision to contribute positively to the life of her husband and her children is an expression of an inner change in Sita.

Nanda, (Fire on the mountain) the oldest of Anita Desai’s protagonists and Raka, the youngest of Desai’s characters, have a tendency to isolate themselves from all filial and social contacts as an escape from their conflicts. The older woman is terrified of past, present and future striving to shut out the agony of experiences. Both endure a sickness of soul that they have internalised. Their trouble is rooted in the sense of insecurity developed in the claustrophobic atmosphere they live in. Raka has developed at morbid love for solitude, "wanted only one thing - to be alone and pursue her own secret life amongst the rocks and pines of Kausali."

On the other hand, her granny realises to the core of her heart that in the civilised world she has no part and consequently she has no attachment for it. The only voice she hears attentively is the crepitation of silence.

Would she own it herself one day, Carignano? Nanda Kaul wondered … ought she to leave it to Raka? "Certainly it belonged to no one else had no meaning for anyone also. Raka alone understood Carignano, knew what Carignano stood for - she alone valued that, Nanda Kaul knew."

She is aware of the betrayal from her husband and children but devoid of capacity to fight for her rights. Nanda Kaul recoils from all contacts. She leaves Kasauli and makes Carignano her home. At Carignano, she has none to her regrets and unfulfilled
dreams. Throughout the narrative, Nanda Kaul's cry resounds, "Discharge me...I've discharged all my duties. Discharge." 

Nanda Kaul's desire of a release from bondage is because she has nothing to look forward to. Her children are not close to her heart. Her suffering is implicit in the last sentences of the narrative:

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 novel does not provide any comment on the behaviour of her other children except, Asha, which implicitly reveals Nanda Kaul's failure in human relations. Nanda neglected Asha during her childhood who in turn neglects Tara, her daughter by dedicating her entire life to self-ornamentation. Tara grows up as a weakling and fails to enjoy the much-desired conjugal bliss as a wife to a rich man. Her daughter Raka suffers along with her mother due to her father's brutality. This shows how Nanda's failure to pattern her life affects three generations. Her misery grows in intensity as it travels from one generation to another.

Nanda's escape to Carignano is her desperate attempt to get away from the past. The painful memory of the days when her Vice-Chancellor husband went to drop Miss David home haunts her even in the isolation at Carignano. A moment before she breathes her last she is reminded of her husband's clandestine affair:

"...he had only done enough to keep her quiet while he carried on a lifelong affairs with Miss David...whom he had loved, all his loved."
Measuring "The immeasurable Emptiness" that Nanda suffers from, Usha Bande writes -

The dismal sense of having failed at everything in life produces self-reproach and self-contempt. These, in themselves, are damaging feelings. In order to escape the all-consuming self-hate, Nanda must find out some ways. The easiest course open to her is to shift her energies from complaint drives to resignation. As the novel opens, we meet Nanda Kaul, pacing alone the heights of Carignano .... She appears to be a resigned individual, all set in for spiritual experience of inner peace. However, we soon learn that this is only a semblance of peace, created to run away from conflicts. She feels secure at Kasauli because it is away from the plains where the drama of her life was enacted. Carignano has no memories of her past. Just as Carignano's chequered history is of no relevance to Nanda, so is Nanda's own past to it. An atmosphere of impersonal relations suits her. She has achieved the desired loneliness and feels happy. She has, however, over looked the basic principle that the past cannot be shut out by fleeing it.

The unexpected arrival of Raka unnerves Nanda Kaul and disturbs her privacy. To Nanda she was an intruder, "a mosquito flown up from the plains to tease and worry." No warmth and love grows between Raka and Nanda as both remain away in their self-built cocoons. Nanda wants to love Raka but the child rejects all love and tenderness. The text says:

"Raka had all the jealous, guarded instincts of an explorer, a discoverer."

She ignores Nanda so clamly that it baffles her to suffocation. When Nanda Kaul wants to win over the attention of the child by talking about various relations, the child feels uneasy. She wants to help the child in going to bed and tuck her in but shuns the wish to keep a safe emotional distance. For life held no attraction, what with humans turned into animals. Her father took pleasure in both harassing and torturing
her mother.

Raka despises both her parents, her father for being a powerful victimizer and her mother for being a willing victim. She perceives people as animals - some caged and some clawed. Her reaction to the club atmosphere gives us a clue to the factor that drives this young girl to be so isolated and shun the company of others:

Hate them - hate them...as she ran, her sweating fists beating her sides her feet tearing though the thorns, ferns and gravel. All caged, clawed, tailed, headless male and female monster followed her... Somewhere behind them, behind it all, was her father, home from a party, stumbling and crashing through the curtains of night, his mouth opening to let out a flood of rotten stench, beating her mother with hammers and fists of abuse - harsh, filthy abuse that made Raka cower under her bed-clothes and wet the mattress in fright.42

In an attempt to catch the attention of Raka, Nanda Kaul begins to weave a web of her own childhood filling it with treasures, trophies and even with a Zoo. But Raka is not allured by such fantasies. She is not a normal child. The bizarre spots of Kasauli, the dilapidated house and changed trees have an immense fascination for her. She is drawn to the ravines with lizards, snakes, bones and the discarded refuse, that comply with her weird imagination. She realises to her shocking amazement that Raka:

... was the finished perfected model of what Nanda Kaul herself was merely a brave, flawed experiment.43

Nanda Kaul is unnerved to see the total detachment of Raka and her uncanny enjoyment of the quiet desolation in and around Carignano. This is implicit in her dialogue where she likens herself to Raka:

'Raka, you really are a great grandchildren of mine, aren't you? you are more like me than any of my children or grandchildren. You are exactly like me, Raka' 44
Further the unexpected intimacy between Ramlal and Raka makes Nanda Kaul feel uneasy and incompetent in her role as a great grandmother. She fails as a mother, wife and a grandmother. Says the narrator:

Ram Lal could arouse Raka's interest and hold it as Nanda Kaul could not... Ramlal did it naturally and comfortably for Raka.45

Nanda Kaul's web of fantasy around Raka is shattered by her childhood friend Ila Das who carries with her the brutal dealing that she is living alone not out of choice but out of necessity. In order to please her old friend Nanda Kaul, Ila Das fabricates false stories about Nanda Kaul's glorious life to impress the child Raka. Her visit is shown as an unmitigated disaster as she reveals Nanda's secret past which the latter had tried to forget. On her return from Carignano she is brutally raped and murdered. The news of her violent death destroys the protective fort of Nanda Kaul, built block by block on the foundation of unreality. This shocking news rudely shakes her out of her complacence. In addition to this, Raka's setting fire to the mountain symbolically burns down the fictitious world of Nanda Kaul.

Like Nanda Kaul, Raka and Ila Das, Raja, Bim, Tara and Baba in Clear Light of Day are victims of lacerated selves. They spend their childhood in a home which reeks of disease, decay and disintegration. Mira Masi and the servants are there to take care of them, but the parents keep busy playing cards with their friends. The negligence and aloofness of their parents leaves an indelible mark of mystery of their preoccupation:

Wondering at this strange, all-absorbing occupation that kept their parents sucked down into the silent centre of a deep, shadowy vortex while they floated on the surface, starting down into the underworld their eyes, popping with incomprehension
Tara painfully recollects her unsatisfying childhood during her visit to her parent’s house after her marriage with Bakul:

...her parents had sat, day after day and year after till their deaths, playing bridge with friends like themselves, mostly silent...47

Because the parents are too engrossed in their Roshanara club and cards, they accept the benign presence of Mira-Masi, a mother surrogate for all their physiological and emotional needs. The affectionate response of the children towards aunt Mira has been described poetically as:

They grew around her knees, stubby and strong, some as high as her waist, some rising to her shoulders. She felt their limbs, brown and knotty with muscle, hot with the life force. They crowded about her so that they formed a ring, a protective railing about her. Now no one could approach, no threat, no menace. Their arms were tight around her, keeping her for themselves. They owned her and yes, she wanted to be owned she owned them too, and they needed to be owned. Their opposing need seemed to mingle and meet at the very roots, inside the soil in which they grew.46

The presence of aunt Mira made them feel safe and secure and the thought of the neglect of their parents struck them with great force. The novelist describes their trauma, highlighting their feeling:

No one had even made them things before, no one had ever had 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 even, considered approaching anyone so unapproachable as the father.49

The callousness of her parents scarred Bimla for life. She would often compare her relations with them to blood-sucking mosquitoes. The following excerpt from Bim’s
reminiscences suggests her pattern of feeling:

They had come like mosquitoes - Tara and Bakul, and behind them the Misras, and somewhere in the distance Raja and Benazir - only to torment her and, mosquito-like, sip her blood. All of them fed on her blood, at some time or the other had fed - it must have been good blood, sweet and nourishing. Now, when they were full, they rose in swarms, humming away, turning their backs on her.

Bim's desire is to possess and attain glory. Her childhood ideal has also been her brother Raja - a romantic young man with a touch of Byron. Raja achieves his goal by a short cut; marries Hyder Ali's daughter and settles down in Hyderabad with them. On the other hand, Tara marries Bakul.

Bim is nor free from the responsibility of a younger sister. The domestic disharmony suffocates Bim - an active, involved and purposeful individual. She finds companionship in Jaya and Sarla - the two Misra girls. They are neighbours to Bimla and suffer from a stroke of misfortune as estranged wives. Their misfortune are Bimla's objective correlative.

Raja desertion makes Bim contemplate over the futility of human relationships. Since childhood, she had adored her brother as a hero born for a great job. But when he marries Benazir, she feels cheated. Talking to Tara, she gives vent to her feelings:

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

Her heart is full of bitterness now and the image of Raja appears ugly against her own idealised picture. When Raja leaves her, Bim's reaction is as violent as her resentment against her parents. The narrator describes how the neglected children
fantasize about destroying the dark world of their parents.

...he would leap up onto the table in a lion-mask, brandishing a torch, and set fire to this paper world of theirs, while Bim flashed her sewing scissors in the sunlight and declared she would creep in secretly at night and snip all the cards into bits.\textsuperscript{52}

The bitterness which seems to corrode the innermost goodness in Bim, is created by the feelings, of being manipulated by her own kith and kin. If she feels cheated and thinks Raja and Tara to be selfish, perhaps that is an indication of a flaw in her personality. Her self-introspection makes her confess her flaws - the cause of her imperfection, and accept others in the light of understanding:

Bim could see as well as by the clear light of day that she felt only love and yearning for them all, and if there were hurts these gashes and wounds in her side that bled, then it was only because her love was imperfect and did not encompass them thoroughly enough, and because it had flaws and inadequacies and did not extend to all equally.\textsuperscript{54}

If Raja's ambition is to be a "hero" then Bim desires to be "a heroine". Her model women are Florence Nightingale and Joan of Arc. She possesses a strong desire to be independent like him and tries Raja's clothes. When she discovers Raja to be an ordinary young man, interested like others in marriage, property and enjoying material comforts, she is shocked and embittered. But contemplation of Dr Biswas's selflessness and inspiration is achieved in the last words of Aurangzeb. But she tears off Raja's letter and sends a word through Tara to make peace with him. She now gains the knowledge that the roots of her contentment and self-realization lies in serving the invalid Baba and Mira-Masi. Bim's expanding consciousness is illustrated by the following passage.
All these years she had felt herself to be the centre - she had watched them all circling in the air, then returning, landing like birds, folding up their wings and letting down their legs till they touched solid ground, solid ground. That was what the house had been - the lawn, the rose walk, the guava trees, the veranda. Bim’s domain. The sound of Baba’s gramophone and the pigeons. Summer days and nights. In winter, flower beds and nuts and cotton quilts. Aunt Mira and the dog, roses and the cat - and Bim, Bim, who had stayed, and become past of the pattern, inseparable. They had needed her as much as they had needed the sound of the pigeons in the veranda and the ritual of the family gathering on the lawn in the evening."

The bitterness that corrodes her innermost goodness is now removed by her forgiveness. Her realization that Raja, Baba and Tara are all a part of her, saves her from wallowing in pity about her loneliness. This makes Bim rise above the other characters like Maya, Nanda Kaul, Raka, Monisha, Amla and others. Her understanding brings her to ‘clear light of all the day’, justifying the aptness of the title of the novel.

Like Bim, Deven (In Custody) too is saved from the suffering of ‘wounded self’ by an honest recognition of human limitations. His positive vision paves a way out of the unsolved confusions and the resultant inner conflicts.

The novel unfolds Deven Sharma as a harmless lecturer in Hindi in a College in Mirpore living with unfulfilled aspirations - and a terrible inferiority complex. Apart from this, his limitation as a man of insufficient means makes him feel small. His sense of smallness is further agonised by his wife, Sarla who is also frustrated for having been married to a man with inadequate means and a son whom he is not able to look after properly. Being the son of a school teacher, he belongs to lower middle class and the socio-economic factors colour his personality. The disappointments of his mother and the failure of his father to make a mark in life generate in him the
negative feelings of helplessness and suffering. He says in utter desperation:

If I knew a way to change my situation, I would do it but—what is there to do?"

His unhappiness is further intensified by his wife's anguish. Deven takes pride in being a poet but Sarla does not glorify his achievement. The incompatibility between him and Sarla makes him sink and sink. Sarla's attitude intensifies Deven's sense of inferiority. The narrator says:

He understood because, like her, he had been defeated too; like her, he was a victim. Although each understood the secret truth about the other, it did not bring about any closeness of spirit, any comradery, because they also sensed that two victims, ought to avoid each other, not yoke together their joint disappointments. A victim does not look to help from another victim; he looks for a redeemer. At least Deven had his poetry; she had nothing, and so there was an added accusation and bitterness in her look.

To run away from his helplessness, humiliation and suffering, he escapes into the world of poetry and imagination. His love for Nur's poetry, a type of poetry which has become obsolete and a matter of past only, is not because:

... it made things immediate but because it removed them to a position where they became bearable.

When Murad, now the editor of an Urdu magazine requests Deven to interview Nur Shahjehanbadi, for a special number of his forthcoming issue, he jumps into a blind artistic pursuit risking his career, matrimonial ties and cash in hand. He cannot resist the temptation of fame and glory and starts for Delhi in the fascination of Nur's poetry. The narrator describes his reaction to this opportunity as
The unexpected friendship with Nur had given him the illusion that the door of trap had opened and he would escape after all into a wider world that lay outside..."

He unwillingly sacrifices his time, his responsibility as a father and husband, and even suffers humiliation at the hands of Murad for becoming a custodian of Nur’s poetry.

Murad, an unredeemed villain intensifies his tragic condition by making him feel low and insignificant. Murad (the name means ‘wish’) lures him into a false and corrupt world of art. Deven’s illusion of the world of poetry prevents him from comprehending the existing reality. The narrator describes his state of mind in these words:

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 away the meanness and dross of his past existence and steadily approaching a new and wonderously illuminated era."

The poetry of Nur opens another world for Deven, away from the drabness of Mirpore, promising the much desired superiority in life. The narrator deftly describes his expectations:

..avenues that would, take him to another land, another element. Yes, these college grounds, these fields of dusts, their fences of rusted barbed wire, these groups of hostile and mocking young students at the gate and the bus stop, all would be left behind, and he would move on into the world of poetry and art.

The contradiction, between his pious image of Nur and the real living Nur, shatters his childhood dream of the world of poetry. He gets disillusioned with the poet when at Nur’s place, he finds people mocking at Hindus and their language. He is also exposed to his model’s petty and ignoble thoughts which leave Deven helpless and humiliated. Chiding Deven, Nur says
'Forgotten your Urdu? Forgotten my verse? Perhaps it is better if you go back to college and teach your students the stories of Premchand, the poem of Pant and Nirala. Safe, simple Hindi language, safe comfortable ideas of cow worship and caste and romance of Krishna; That is your subject, isn't it, Professor?'

His desire for recognition is so intense that he bears all humiliation and insolence without defending his individuality. When Nur speaks low of Hindi, he feebly promises:

"I'll give it up - I will throw it away with all these dirty dishes..."

But soon he is disillusioned because the pious figure he deeply adored is surrounded by the riff-raff of the bazaar world. He turns his back to his idol-image at the sight of hypocrisy and degradation. His heart aches at the sight of the drunken state of Nur and the fury of the poet's first wife leaping over the second wife with Nur's body stretched between them. He drops the idea of doing the article half-heartedly but Murad's persistent persuasion forces him to make another attempt.

Deven's second visit turns out to be more bitter. This time he notices how Intiaz Begum - the second wife of Nur humiliates her husband publicly and the deplorable existence of the poet. His third encounter further clouds the bleak picture of the poet. It is only in the fourth encounter that Nur - the pious poet appears as an ordinary man and is stripped of the greatness - a halo woven around him by Deven.

Deven's nightmare ends here. He is now determined to accept life courageously. He decides to avoid falsehood and adhere to reality - the permanent truth:

Henceforth he would avoid that mirage, that dream that so easily twisted into nightmare. Any reality was preferable.

Deven's transformation blesses him with self-confidence, clarity of vision and equilibrium at the face of new problems. The narrator describes his change of vision.
Deven breathed it all in, finding it reassuring. For once he did not resent his ‘Circumstances’. Their meaness was transformed for him by his new experience and the still raw wounds it had left. Also by the feel of his son’s thumb enclosed within his fist. He walked along with a light step, breathing in the close stuffy air of the small colony, its odours of cooking and dust and chicken dirt and washing, as if it were invigorating. The calm exhilaration of the evening and the walk gave him an unaccustomed peace of mind, contentment with things the way they were, and a certain modest, suburban well-being.  

Baumgartner, unlike Deven is compelled to leave the country of his birth and come to India to find grandeur in suffering. The narrator describes his tragic life with moving poignancy. The life of Bombay which had been Baumgartner’s life for thirty years now - or, rather, the setting for his life; he had never actually entered it, never quite captured it; damply, odorously, cacophonously palpably as it was, it had been elusive still.

He is a German but Hitler’s Germany does not accommodate him because he is a Jew. Increasing violence forces him to come to India as a refugee and remain an alien in India until his brutal murder. His search for a refuge is a jump from one well to another, shaping him as a bitter, frustrated and hostile alien.

Baumgartner lives in India for a period of fifty years with no one to look after him. Having no company and being ‘a firangi’, he suffers in isolation:

He had lived in this land for fifty years - or if not fifty then so nearly as to make no difference - and it no longer seemed fantastic and exotic. It was more utterly familiar now than any other landscape an earth yet the eyes of the people who passed by glanced at him who was still strange and unfamiliar to them and all said, Firangi foreigner.
Stamped a “Firangi”, he could not establish contact and understanding with his neighbours - The Indians. It hurled him into the deep abyss of isolation from which he could never come out. The novelist describes his intense loneliness and pathetic state as:

Accepting - but not accepted, that was the story of his life, the one thread that ran through it all. In Germany he had been dark - his darkness had marked him the Jew, der jude. In India he was fair - and that marked him the firangi. In both lands, the unacceptable.

The life around Baumgartner is not only vacuous but is qualitatively degenerate and degrading. He finds himself surrounded by endless gloom. The narrator describes the house Baumgartner puts up as:

Even when he had parted these curtains, entered the house, mounted the stairs, careful not to step on the beggar’s and lepers and prostitutes who inhabited every landing and at last achieved the small cell that was his room, he had no sense of being walled away from the outer world as he had in the camp. There were the inevitable sounds of quarrels and violence at night when the illicit toddy brewed in the closed sheds and garages and odd corners of the compound was bought and consumed: then wives were beaten, children threatened or else the drunkards themselves abused and thrashed.

Withdrawn from the society of fellow-beings due to repetitive humiliation and insults, he feels mortified and enters the world of animals. His family comprises of himself and the cats which earn him the epithet “Billewallah Pagal”. As a “crab” and a “turtle”, he is forced to a cloistered living:

Nothing, then, was what life dwindled down to, but Baumgartner found he enjoyed that nothing more than he had enjoyed anything. Perhaps enjoyment was too strong a word for such mild pleasures as he now knew - watching his cats.
devour a bag of fish he had brought them, dozing with one of them on his lap for company, strolling down to Lotte’s for a drink - but they suited him. He felt his life blur, turn grey, like a curtain wrapping him in its dusty felt. If he became aware, from time to time, that the world beyond the curtain was growing steadily more crowded, more clamorous, and the lives of others more hectic, more chaotic, then he felt only relief that his had never been a part of the mainstream. Always, somehow, he had escaped the mainstream.

Baumgartner, in spite of innumerable oddities of life, is intensely emotional. Although he is socially an outcaste, yet his desire for human warmth and affection remain alive. He maintains a tender bond of relationship with Lotte all through his life. He visits her occasionally and the two make a perfect picture of reciprocation. Lotte’s company was the only consolation in Baumgartner’s solitary existence. He was always in search of a company to alleviate the burden of his isolation which was gradually crushing him. He is constantly in war with despair and isolation of life but never even thought of suicide to get over.

Just as Hugo has none except Lotte as a companion so also Lotte has none except Hugo. The narrator describes their companionship as:

It was only Lotte who kept him in touch with the German tongue - but that was not why he went to see her. He saw Lotte not because she was from Germany but because she belonged to the India of his own experience; hers was different in many ways but still they shared enough to be comfortable with each other, prickly and quick - tempered but comfortable as brother and sister are together.

Lotte provides some meaning to by otherwise meaningless existence and fills the void caused by his rootlessness. The strength of the relationship can be seen in her maddening grief at Hugo’s death.
Baumgartner, instead of the indifferent and cruel surrounding, lives stoically and ideally. He does not rear any sense of bitterness against his oppressors. He maintains his equilibrium and humanity along with his individuality. All through his life, he remains the same kind and hospitable human being. He show no reluctance in offering shelter to Kurt - an inhuman German, a drug addict and a “Hippy”. He kill his saviour for silver trophies to buy him a dose of much needed drug. He mercilessly strikes a knife into the sleeping, helpless nowhere man - Baumgartner. He pathetically dies as he pathetically lived, struggling in a web of hopeless existence.

Isolation chased Hugo right from his childhood and grew inseparable as his shadow. He was haunted by isolation since his childhood days in Berlin. It grew further with the death of his father, making him leave his mother to go to India in search of business as a dealer in timber. His “Sahib” complexion segregated him from others and the cultural gap was never abridged. His isolation is poignantly by the narrator:

He would have wanted, on that day, to have a hand settle on his wrist, lead him. Or at least a signboard. In a familiar language. A face with a familiar expression. He could not read not read these faces, or their expressions - joy? agony? Panic? He felt his own panic going out, mingling with theirs.

Hugo’s isolated existence is heightened in effect by repetitive use of expressions like - “Lump in grey pants” and “an old man with an empty bag.” The narrator’s use of such expressions symbolizes the emptiness of Baumgartner’s like by likening it to an empty bag. His helplessness in the trap of alien country makes the narrator describe him as “a netted fish.”

Further his choice of pursuing his business in Calcutta opens a new chapter of isolation in the life of Baumgartner. With the breaking out of the war, he is
kept imprisoned in a detention camp in Ahmedabad for six years, gradually draining his life and spirit. During his prison life, the only consolation was his memories of his past days in Germany:

It was as if his mind were trying to construct a wall against history, a wall behind which he could crouch and hide, holding him to be a desperate wish that Germany were still what he had known as a child and that in that dream - Country his mother continued to live the life they had lived there together.  

When he was freed from prison, his found life purposeless for he could not continue his timber business. The Pre-Partition violence still haunted him. In search of safe shelter and security, he leaves Calcutta and reaches Bombay. In Bombay, his search for lost identity continues. He observes that the conditions in India was taking an ugly turn. In order to find a release from the terrible oppression of the city, he strongly clings to illusory life.

Because alongside the train was always the shadow of the past, of elsewhere, of what had been and could never be abandoned - an animal in its grey pelt, keeping pace, clinging, refusing to part. An animal like a jackal in the day, a hyena in the night. In the darkness, it continued to chase the train, chase Baumgartner.

The end of his isolation was in his death - murder by a young German drug addict whom he had offered food and shelter out of benevolence.

The above study reveals the fact that the Protagonists of Anita Desai refuse to compromise and surrender to the oppressive demands of their partners and the world around, which inevitably imprison them in isolation and loneliness. Lack of faith as well as lack of vocation drive them to indulge in a futile search for fulfillment and identity. A perpetual quest for meaning and value of life, an attempt to grasp the incomprehensible and denial to float along the current of the materialistic world are the causes of a battered and bruised individual writhing in pain and anguish.
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