CHAPTER – V

THE SOUL OF ALL GREAT DESIGNS

Neil Bissoondath’s *The Soul of All Great Designs* (2008) is a story of Alec, a young independent businessman who is fascinated by vintage cars and is passionate about interior decoration, who has created artificial persona of a ‘gay’ only to get professional success in the field of fashion where it is anticipated that only ‘gays’ are suitable for fashion designing. His life is full of lies and his wish to keep those as ‘secrets’, leads him to compromise even with basic feelings and emotion that is every human being’s desire. Alec’s vision to live his life on whims and wishes, totally different from his parents’ lives which had happened out of circumstances, makes him cheat his parents as well as his love-“Sue” or Sumintra, the daughter of an Indian immigrant to Canada, who feels trapped between Western culture and Indian traditions. To overcome loneliness of teenage like other Canadian youth and experience some adventure in life, Sue falls in love with Alec and enjoys sensual pleasure but when the time comes to admit their relationship in public, both hesitate. Finally, Alec doesn’t respond positively to her proposal of a long term relationship like marriage as that would subvert his carefully cultivated image of being a creative gay. With the use of the voices of two different narrators, Bissoondath intertwines highly complex and multi-layered narratives in which Alec and Sue’s double lives, vague
relationship and the same taste for secrecy, compactly makes the novel hover between truth and illusion, fantasy and reality.

Like *Doing the Heart Good* (2005), Neil Bissoondath has opened his sixth novel – *The Soul of All Great Designs* (2008), which is quite simple in style and shorter in length compared to previous fictions, with the kind of universal truth that it is a ‘secret’ which everyone possesses in this world and every individual tries their best to keep the secret from other people. And when those efforts go beyond the imagination, it becomes the life of the protagonist of *Great Designs* (2008) in which his obsession to keep the secrets only to himself has crossed all the boundaries of holding something to the self only. It’s a kind of challenge for somebody to sustain his/her secrets even at the cost of their original identity, feeling and emotion which are essential for every human being:

Everybody has secrets…Secrets. We all have them. They’re our postcards from hell- postcards we never mail, souvenirs of dark trips we mount on the interior walls of our lives, part of the hidden tapestry, so to speak. Some secrets we create, others come to us. Small or big, they’re secrets all the same and we live in mortal fear of anyone ever finding them. The most important rule in life is: Don’t get caught.¹

Bissoondath’s philosophy of secret invites readers to pip into their souls along with the fear of not being caught or exposed infront of others because they are the untouched or covered or hidden corners of their hearts. Even Bissoondath accepts through opening lines – may be for protagonist or most probably for himself – that ‘I have a secret. Don’t you?’(3), which shows that the author himself establishes intimacy with readers to presume that he is wholeheartedly ready to share his secrets in his work of fiction, provided that he allows his protagonist to go to any extent for keeping it secret. Even Neil Bissoondath’s so – called hero ‘Alec’ accepts at the very beginning that he has secrets of any consequences. Alec is in his late thirties, lives a somewhat hermetic life because of his gestures, speech and his finely manicured hands which suggest femininity that leads others to think that he is not interested in women and he is a gay! To attract or convince, his clients, Alec behaves like a ‘gay’ but actually he is not a
gay though he is an interior decorator and designer and everyone assumed that only gays are appropriate for these jobs. It is one of his secrets that he is not a real ‘gay’:

My manner is meant to encourage trust on the part of my clients, the trust they must have in their interior decorator, a trust that arises from their own gently held prejudices. In my line of work, gayness – or what many conceive to be its manifestations – confers confidence. It is one of my secrets.

The whole story runs around the artificial persona created by Alec, and his struggle to sustain it against the circumstances. For instance, with Caroline and ‘Sue’ or ‘Sumintra’ his feelings of a normal man become heavy on the artificial persona, and finally that is how he has managed to deal with all the things to live his own life on his own terms. The novel is divided into three parts – first about Alec; his childhood, his interest, his parent and his so called success in the field of interior decoration whereas the second one talks about an Indian immigrants’ daughter- Sumintra or ‘Sue’ who feels shackled in between Indian thoughts and Western culture. And third part where both-Alec and Sue meet, fall in love, exchange sensual pleasure – all secretly and struggle to hide their relationship from the world as they have to lose lots of things if they were to be exposed. The whole novel develops with intermingling one secret to others and the sense of getting the thrill of exchanging it with one-another and finally it ends with the attempts to hide those ‘secrets’ from others, and to keep it only to their ‘soul’ which impels the readers to accept that such souls have ‘great designs’.

Cal-only once may be the real name of ‘Alec’ is spoken by his mother but here Bissoondath raises the doubts in the minds of readers too. He keeps it ‘secret’ about the original identity of his hero as the word ‘Cal’ has multiple meanings. “One is ‘devotion’ from Hebrew etymology which suits Alec’s dedication and fidelity to the field of interior decoration whereas the other meaning is ‘dog’ which is derogatory and used as slang for his too much devotion to his interest.” His parents are the perfect couple of balanced
dissatisfaction and contentment with life. His father works in a car factory, assembling the parts of some great creation and the mother is a housewife, spending her time in cooking and gossiping like other ordinary women. Alec believes that his parents’ life is like what happened to them but he wants to live his life on his own terms. He wishes to shape or decorate his own life on his whims or imagination and that is why he drops the idea of becoming an electrical engineer and chooses the field of interior decoration. The career for him is the problem from the beginning as his mother and father gave up the dreams of making him pianist and athlete or Olympic champion respectively. When he was only ten years old, even his teacher was disappointed, when he refused to read books to pursue career in literature because he was interested in interior designing although he wouldn’t have called it so at that time. He is already interested in cars, particularly in restoring old ones. The television documentary – quite about the fervour of the restorers – inspires and offers him new possibilities: “to take something that was old and rusted and broken down, bring it back to life with painstaking care, then use it” (07) He is dazzled with that idea. At the age of 14 or 15, he expressed his desire to pursue his career in car renovation to his parents who dissuade him saying that there is less scope of job as they can’t afford luxury cars. But he wants to prove his point and so he decorates his own room which resembles ‘a rooming house for rubies’. The passion to play with colours and decorate the places is so strong that he starts working to prove his talent by redecorating his own bedroom with some waste. Finally, his parents are impressed and feel relieved by knowing that ‘Alec’ has some talent for real work, so they pay fees for certificate or degree in ‘house painting or ‘home renovation’ at a local community college. But Alec still enjoys hiding secret from his parents like hiding porn-magazines under car-magazines and never telling his parents that the certificate at the college for which his father had paid, is not in ‘home’ renovation but in interior decorating. Though, he completed the course with distinction, he had added one more secret to his account by deceiving his own parents!
There was one more thing I never told my parents. The certificate at the college, which my father paid for and which I eventually completed with distinction, was not in home renovation but in interior decorating. There’s another one of my secrets.  

Meanwhile, his father finds a decent – paying job at a large hardware store where Alec begins discreetly slipping business cards to clients offering his services but most of the customers doubt about his talent - how can a twenty something – year-old male store clerk can offer good interior- decorating advice, even after his shift? He also has concealed it from his parents, and tries to be a good businessman by listening to needs of his clients though they don’t pay him for his innovative ideas. Once the remark of a couple – the woman is ready to give ‘Alec’ a chance but her husband refuses by underestimating his talent and look: “He doesn’t even look like a fag, what could he know?” (13), becomes the turning point in his life. The comment with the word ‘fag’ – an offensive word for ‘gay’ disturbs him for weeks and finally he has decides to be a ‘gay’ for achieving professional success. It’s like tailoring supply to the demand of clients who expect an interior – decorator should be a ‘gay’: “If gay was what they wanted, gay was what they would get – on a professional level, of course.” (14)  

It is difficult for him to behave like a ‘gay’ as he doesn’t posses the natural ‘gayness’, so to know the ‘gay’ world very closely, he visits the ‘gay village’ where he experiences discretion or exclusion from the gays as they do not wish to include normal human being in their world. Alec seems unfamiliar with the gay village.

… the gay village. It covered a few downtown blocks east of the commercial core, a neighbourhood once known mostly for drugs and prostitution but which had been gentrified in recent years. Despite my nervousness, I couldn’t help admiring the tastefully renovated row houses, the stylish bars and restaurants, the bookstores, the florist whose sweating windowpane revealed what appeared to be a tropical jungle.  

He meets a gay – Craig who discards him as Alec is not a real gay and so not useful for other gays like him at gay bar, “So what are you doing here then?”
(15). Alec finds unsettling novelty of being the object of an attempted pick-up and accepts it as a good sign. He continues his effort to be a gay though he knows that the gay world, like the straight world, has its darks corners; ‘STRAIGHTS LIKE VINYL, GAYS LIKE… LEATHER’!!! (16) and the opposites is also true. From keen observation and after much thinking he realizes that he has to develop the strategy to be a gay with a kind of gentleness.

… a strategy (to be a gay) : gentleness of voice, gentleness of gesture, and nothing more than that. Like the best of strategies, it was simple, straightforward and forgiving of the occasional slip-up. It’d be enough to establish suspicion without providing confirmation. All it called for was modulation, a kind of shading of my personality: trimming here, highlighting there, smoothing out the rough edges and getting the shadows – the fleeting gesture, a certain set of the lips – just right. It wasn’t a question of caricature, far from that. It was, above all, a matter of internalizing a tightly held dignity.  

Along with adopting strategies, he also worries about what would be the impact of such strategies on his personal life, which produces anxiety in his heart as well as the fear of being caught while playing this ‘game.’ Whenever he is alone, there is no risk of being caught but in public life, he has to behave very cautiously like a ‘gambler’ who plays a game only to win.

… when I was alone, with no risk of being caught out, but it was the anxiety of the game player, terrifying and exhilarating all at once. There was an art to this and, as someone, I forget who, once said, every artist is a gambler.  

Amid the struggling circumstances, Alec establishes his own company – New World Design and gets his first break from Ian, a gay who works in financial services for multi-national company and wants to get the ideas to do something different for his condominium in an expensive building. Ian has no limit of budget which is like a golden chance for Alec to expand and expose his imagination and it happens positively as Ian is impressed by the concept and allows Alec to redecorate his house for his gay friend – Manuel who works in Mexico City. Ian, as a gay loves Manuel who wishes to be with Ian in Canada,
but facing immigration problem for last two years because such things which are
taken for granted for normal people become problems for people like Ian and
Manuel in Canada. Ian becomes Alec’s big break as he is happy with Alec’s
work and wishes that Manuel would surely like it. Bissoondath here talks about
Canada’s immigration policies based on the multiculturalism which by and large
discriminates between straight people and Gay men.

Gradually, he gets more work than he could imagine within half a year, so
he wants to start his own business and wishes to leave the job at hardware store
but his father advises him not to leave and continue with the sure thing – job, as
the supply of work is unpredictable and it can dry up at any moment.

Meanwhile, he has saved fair amount of money and continues playing ‘game’
with the clients and parents who admire him for the consultation and physical
labour respectively. While searching for an apartment in middle of the town for
his company office, he comes across the fact the real estate prices in Canada
have gone up because of immigrants.

Over the years, the city had achieved success beyond its
dreams. The big, clean, safe, prosperous, slightly
provincial city I’d grown up in had become immensely
rich, a powerhouse of economic activity fuelled by banks,
business, the stock exchange, major- league sports teams
and the burgeoning beehive industriousness of hundreds of
thousands of recent immigrants.

The arrival of so many immigrants, not only has changed the city in shape
and hike in real estate price but also many changes take place at social level due
to multi-culturalism of the city as well as of the country. For instance, the city
breaths new energy and the old sense of city begin to shred. Even certain
neighbourhoods are not so safe after the dark. The policemen have to wear flak
jackets while on patrolling, and thick traffic, random shootings have become
common. It is like a simple part of the price to be paid for living in a city where
all manner of desire can be satisfied, where the streets are occupied with
limousines, well-dressed crowds shell out hundreds of millions for cultural
centres and the extravaganzas of one kind or another needs to fill them. The city
looks new and slightly maniac where the smell of money is much stronger than the smell of exhaust fumes. It is money which can buy anything in this city. While searching for an apartment Alec meets the manager, an immigrant from central Europe, who asks Alec to give bribe in shape of his talent of interior designing by redecorating the old lobby which can enable him, to ask for 20% hike in rent from the tenants, though the building is under the rent control. Alec refuses to do the illegal work. Only the death of an old lady—tenant comes to his rescue and he has signed the agreement within forty eight hours for an apartment after her death because the delay would cause the loss of opportunity to get the office. Ironically, he hasn’t told his parents about this deal and also that he is looking for a place for his own as he thinks that they won’t understand his stand. He feels attached to his house before moving out: “I had a moment of fear, a kind of shudder deep in my belly; I suddenly saw that, from now on, I would be absent here, and these colours, that odor, would go on without me.”(37) When he shares the ‘breaking news’ of his planning to shift, he is surprised and shocked by knowing that his parents have already paid the down-payment to Mr. Mumford, a real estate agent as they have decided to move to a small place, near his father’s factory plant. No doubt, they don’t want to push Alec out unless he plans to move, but Alec feels cheated by his parents’ secret! Mr. Mumford quickly finishes the formalities of selling the house and prepares the documents for another lease, but unluckily, Alec’s parents die in a car accident while returning from the new site of their small house. Alec feels alone, even though he gets some emotional support from aunt Ella, a female version of his father, elder sister, a widow as her husband died in an accident at oil rig, and Peter, his maternal uncle who is a high-school principal, comes with his third wife—Petra whose thoughts about mortality of human beings reminds us Asha in A Casual Brutality (1988). Petra says: “…our fates were written in the stars …the accident was simply destiny’s way of letting my parents know it was checkout time” (46). When aunt Ella suggests that Alec should marry and settle down, his uncle
doubts about his normality, probably he assumes Alec as a gay. It is only the
time when Alec realizes the need of girlfriend or woman in the life as his
parents’ world was small, compartmentalized and they operated with confidence
only within them, but for Alec it is difficult to sustain in the world of
imagination lonely for longtime because now his persona is becoming heavier on
his real self: “I hadn’t been acting, not even a little. My persona – marked by that
gentleness that had begun as a marketing ploy – had come naturally.” (48-49)
Though he has feelings and emotions, he willingly keeps himself away from the
company of a woman in society by considering it as risky and it is good or a
safeguard for his designed or fashioned persona for himself to get success in
business. He remembers a scene when Clarissa, from the lighting department at
hardware store, showed her breast to him like other new comers, but it was not
so important as at that time he was trying to begin his business. However, now
when he has enough money from his parents’ insurance, settlement of deal of old
and new house by Mr. Mumford, and he had developed his business, he realizes
the absence of something especially companionship, but he is not ready to
disclose his original identity as a straight person and not a gay because he fears
losing his business but he continues to get consolation from his condition and so
he continues living with artificial persona – of a gay who thinks that time will
heal all the wounds.

Some secrets resolve themselves, losing their weight,
shriveling and peeling away from that internal tapestry.
They cease being secrets because those who would care no
longer exist. As the shock of the loss of my parents
gradually thinned, a new sense of freedom slowly
germinated. 9

As life is full of surprises, the same happens with Alec when he decides
to say good bye to Tawny, a receptionist at his company office who is a plump
literature major and employed through the university student – employment
office as a part-time receptionist for three hours a day and five days a week,
quitting before his words as she has got a chance to write in a more lucrative
sex-advice column – Horny Tawny’s Bag of Tricks – for one of the city’s cultural weeklies. Before departing, Tawny who also considers ‘Alec’ as a ‘gay’, gives him some friendly advices – good marketing strategies to accelerate his company and its business:

Look, I know it’s not in your nature – you are the way you are, you know? – but you gotta be more aggressive if you want your business to succeed. …you ever thought about having some glossy brochures done up with pictures of your work? Ever thought about having a reception for some of your old clients – an opening bash, say, even if it’s a little late, but they don’t have to know that. Feed ‘em a little, water ‘em a lot, get ‘em talking. Make sure they know you’re here. Advertise in the alternative press. There’s thousands of professionals out there just dying to support business people from, you know, from their own community (gay). Get with it, man, or you might as well kiss this whole baby of yours goodbye.10

Surprisingly the strategies work as he follows them rigorously and within a short time he gets fame and name but he is not satisfied with his popularity of a ‘celebrity’ because he thinks that the circles of recognition are small where achievements are counted rather than the famous faces of a gifted surgeon or a brilliant physicist. In reality, he comes to realize that it is not his personality that motivates other to invite him but he gets invited due to the rituals of social hypocrisy which generally grease society’s wheels. He neglects all it against the flow of money as his company has four junior designer and various support personnel.

Once, he meets Caroline, a real estate agent who seems very confident and self-possessed but in reality she has to do that as a part of her work. In Caroline’s presence, Alec feels fully aroused and after so many uncontrolled efforts he mails her telling her the impact of her beauty has on him and expecting sensual pleasure from her which clearly indicates to Caroline that Alec is a straight man and not a ‘gay’. She also has feelings for ‘Alec’ but she knows about his obsession for his work, so she asks him what would be her place in his life if she accepts that mail. Caroline wants a long term relationship from Alec. But it makes Alec cautious about his persona, and finally he is ready to give up
the idea of ‘seducing’ her and finds another way of satisfying his erotic feeling
by hiring prostitutes from the agency, where there is no threat of any longtime
relationship or getting trapped and making the life spicy with different lady. His
obsession to make his life different from his parents, suitable tailored to his
wishes like a bed someone has made, feels is strongly reflected in his reply to
Caroline where he gives priority to his job than to love or to marriage:

I expect nothing of you Caroline. The facts are what they
are. I am married to my job and there’s really no place in it
for someone else, no matter how tempting… I made my
choice a long time ago. My life is made and I’m happy
with it. You’re still looking to make yours. I wish you all
the happiness you want… The man who seduces you for
life will truly be a happy man. 11

After Caroline’s departure Alec has scheduled his life and purchases physical
pleasure whenever needed through some agencies having specialization in such
services. He never mixes business with pleasure as it is too complicated. May be
his life is not a happy life, but he enjoys it as he made the choice voluntarily
unlike his parents who were without choices. He often spends his weekends at
far away places in comfortable inns and usually wanders to find out some
antique pieces at low cost for future decoration. Meanwhile, he comes across a
Chevrolet Sedan, having four doors and six cylinders, made in 1928 or ’29, and
his real passion to make something old in new thing again revives. He purchases
it for giving rebirth to his real passion – interior decoration, and while searching
for some original parts for this vintage car, he reaches Lambton where The
Classic Car Association has made arrangements for gathering in the park the
people who wish to come with their vintage vehicles for admiration from others,
he meets “Sue” who comes with her father in a van-fully loaded with food and
refreshment for the people. On the very first meeting both ‘Sue’ and ‘Alec’ have
fixed the date for their next meeting on Friday. Sue’s charm works like a magnet
and Alec automatically picks her up as his date.

There are some people like ‘Alec’ and Sue’s father Manohar who think
that nothing ever truly disappears and it can be given a new future especially the
classic cars. Manohar is simply fascinated about the world of automobile and
cars, though it is different from his profession of supplying food and refreshment to the people who work at various construction sites or gather at informal auto shows in small parks and towns. Manohar and his wife immigrated to Canada from Calcutta in India, and they had to suffer a lot in their adopted country as Manohar’s did not have great academic qualifications:

…being a civil engineer whose qualification proved so useless on his arrival in this country that he has had to support his family by selling food from a van.12

In such critical situation, he started smoking, without his wife’s knowledge, but only known to his daughter-Sumintra who does not mind for tobacco, as she herself prefers alcohol. It is not only Manohar, whose qualification has degraded, but Sumintra’s schoolmate Rima’s parents- the Prasads have also faced the same problem as Mr. Prasad, Rima’s father, an electrical engineer and Dr. Prasad, her mother, an obstetrician whose qualifications and experience are useless only because of their immigration to Canada from India. Moreover, the Prasads have to run an Indian restaurant in the mall, serving their subdivision. Even Canadians like Kelly-Ann or Kelly, Sue’s friend has to adapt with the situation to shape her career as she had completed degree in architecture but has to satisfy herself by designing shopping malls only. Sue knows Kelly for almost four years, became friend at university where Sumintra had given up architecture for studying English literature. Sumintra’s mother repents on her decision: “…it was too bad that Sumintra had chosen to leave architect- already bad enough: no doctor or biologist or geneticist for them – for English literature and wasn’t it wonderful that Kelly had stuck with it and was doing so well.” (81) Kelly is the representative of Canadian youth who is carefree and wants to live life on her own choice whereas Sumintra and Rima represent Indian girls in Canada who are controlled by their parents with traditional Indian mindset. Sumintra’s mother is a typical Indian mother expecting her daughter to behave like a sincere girl who should possess high qualification like Rima – Dr. and Mr. Prasad’s daughter, an intelligent and brilliant student who is expected to do serious research in Chemistry or getting
degrees at University of Toronto, not only by her parents but also by the community of Indian immigrants. Partially Rima and Sumintra, represent Indian origin girls in Canada, who have to suffer a lot in the name of family and community honour and also have to pass their lives by repressing their dreams, under the constant restraint of their parents like a ‘prisoned innocent’. It seems that there is no right of choice or freedom in Canada which is true for Indian girls from the instance of Rima who fell in love with a white boy- Jewish, and when her parents come to know, they send her back to India and takeaway her passports so that she cannot return to Canada again.

….Everybody at temple knows what happened…Their honour was at stake, and the honour of our community. They could not let it pass… They had to protect the family’s honour. It is not like here. A child does something bad and the parents can still hold their heads high. It is known in our community that some families have gone much farther than Mr. and Dr. Prasad. A man can be driven to physical violence against those he loves most when they betray him. Usually, it is hushed up. We hate to wash our dirty laundry in public. But that dirty laundry must be dealt with. Mr. and Dr. Prasad dealt with it in the most humane way possible. Nobody can fault them for that, daughter. 13

Even Sumintra finds herself in difficulty as she is in Canada and still has to follow Indian tradition and way of living. For instance when she calls her parents as ‘guys’, they rebuke her. Moreover, her mother strictly instructs her to keep distance from BMWs- Blacks, Muslims and Whites which shows their insular attitude. Even they hesitate to permit ‘Sue’ to go for party at Kelly’s apartment after graduation by giving excuse of security. Actually they fear that their daughter would become totally westernized if she is in touch with them and then it would be more difficult for them to handle her. To protect their daughter from so-called dirty world around, they insist Sumintra to choose a groom out of available three grooms viz a pharmacist, an aged widower Indian professor and a son of a successful Indian immigrant businessman because they feel that she is running out of choices. But Sumintra believes that whoever will be her husband would “accept her as she is and the life will (surely) bring that person” (134),
which is not accepted by her parents who say that it deviates from traditional Indian way of living life where the children live with parents till they get married, and their life partners are chosen by their parents, not by themselves: “It’s just the way things are here. They’re not like us, the kids living with the parents till they get married. It’s just different way of doing things.” (122)

It is like an attack on Sumintra’s freedom of choice and rights of individual, as she can’t live her own life as per her wishes, though she has dreams. Sumintra’s condition is so painful that she is torn between her parents’ Indian world and her own world of choice i.e. western world. Her effort at adjustment diverts her away from fulfilling her needs, and desires and dreams and so whenever she feels unable to control her sexual fantasy, she uses sex toys like Kelly and other Canadian teenagers, to fulfill her sexual desires. She rightly accepts that: “the body is the servant of the imagination. What takes root in the mind manifests itself in the flesh”(75). She sometimes tries to experience real sensual pleasure like Kelly who has many boyfriends and used to go for one-night-stand with them and once she joins Kelly at a party where Sue meets a white- British young guy-Dan who insults her as ‘cunt’- an extremely unpleasant or objectionable person for her hesitation to get pleasure from sex. Actually, Sue’s inbuilt Indian thinking prevents her from indulging freely in sensual pleasure that is why she rejects sexual advances of Dan. The racial remark- ‘Pakistani girl’ intensifies the sense of humiliation for Sumintra who faces identity problem as her parents have named her in remembrance of her mother’s cousin – Sumintra who was very helpful to their family initially when they arrived in Canada and died in 9-11, the terrorist attack on the twin towers of World Trade Centre with her twins daughters- Pria and Vasti. Her mother expects Sue to live her life like Sumintra as sincere, modest and helpful lady, which disturbs Sue a lot: “Sometimes I feel as if Mamu wants me to live Sumintra’s life for her, and maybe the twins’ lives, too”(105). She feels that she is not living her own life in totality for ‘Sumintra’s life’ though she likes to live as ‘Sue’. Her father consoles her that she is living her life and not anyone else’s but nobody’s life is ever complete: “Nobody’s life ever is, Sumintra. As you get
older, you will come to understand that we parcel pieces of our life out to others. Not to do so would be to defy God."(106) Sue has decided to accept a job in accounting department of an architectural firm, recommended by Kelly. Though it is not a job which she likes but it is well-paid. She convinces her parents for her stay at Kelly’s apartment for that job. She believes that ‘success can be defined not by what you have to do but by what you choose to do’ (84). She has taken this decision- on the one hand to live her life in freedom and on the other hand she feels a sense of guilt when she comes to know that her father had borrowed money from Mr. Kumar, whose interest rates are lesser than bank’s to pay the fees of her university course and other expenses. To make her happy they lived a life of deprivation in their adopted country during transmission. She smokes with her father on the way to auto show, to reduce stress or sense of guilt by reviewing that life is an expensive proposition and her parents started as ‘under-ducks’ and she hasn’t helped them while studying. When she was at home and her other classmates were doing part-time job. In reality she wishes to run away from the unexpected meetings arranged for her to choose her future husband, mostly they are not of her ‘type’. For Sumintra, the whole question of ‘type’ is a complicated one as she merely wants adventures in the presence of man in her life. By symbolically describing different classic cars and their changing owners the author tries to convey the fragility of marital relation in Canadian society. Moreover, the destination of the auto-show at some remote location reflects that even in that developed country there are some neglected places like ‘Centennial Park’ where life is little bit ‘threatening’.

Lambton… she finds it impossible to summon images of the lives within-it looks to her like one of dozens of such places dotted throughout the countryside. They are places, she feels, which can be known only from the outside, their references to people and events inaccessible to those who have not made their lives there. It is the kind of place that feels vaguely threatening. 14

Sumintra also feels neglected in Canada not only at personal but also at social level which is symbolically is shown by the scene at dinner table where she has knife in one and fork in other hand but has to eat Indian food and she
thinks if she has to follow Indian tradition even in Canada then what is the need of ‘fork’ and ‘knives’.

Alec introduces himself as a house painter to Sue when he first meets her at ‘Centennial Park’ where he is looking for some information regarding the parts for ’29 Chevrolet Sedan on which he is working. Not only profession, but Alec has hidden his real name and his identity from ‘Sue’ who feels partially satisfied in the presence of Alec, and so she is ready to go on a date with him. After Caroline, Sue is the only girl who is responsible for revival of Alec’s natural feeling and emotion as his mind always instructs his body what he should not do. It is as if, both were looking for each-other to share some part of their lives and add some more pages of secrets in their unread book of secrets. It had started with wrong information sharing, and then planning of dinner secretly from her parents as Sue stays at Kelly’s apartment for some work / job. Alec wanted to keep himself away from another near-death experience after Caroline but Sue is destined to become one of his secrets, as like he is destined to be one of her secrets. Alec is driven by magnetism felt by him for Sue, but he is also concerned about loosing his reputation in the business world for succumbing to his temptation for Sue.

The world, I thought, was full of temptation and this Sue was one of mine. There was a lot at stake, too much to risk. In my line of work, reputation is everything and my reputation had been built around the image. I’d created so successfully that my company had been asked to sponsor a float in the city’s gay pride parade.15

He tries to get rid of this temptation through agencies but fails, and finally meets Sue. On their first date, Sue feels excited and accepts it as an adventure in life. She has every reason to go on a date with Alec, as she is a lonely teenage girl. In response to the question of telling about themselves, both play safe game, share only the parts of their lives which can’t harm each other which means both are not so candid in sharing their secrets: “Tell me about yourself: a big question. She (Sue) shifts in her seat, wandering where to begin, what is safe to include, what is best left out …She edits the fact of her life.” (152)
The same way Alec has shared some selected facts about his childhood, his study and his profession, and gives his pseudonymous email address to her. On the first date, the expectation of Sue’s whole body remains only a dream for Alec who has to satisfy himself with only a kiss on her cheek, but even after it he feels so aroused that Alec chooses to have a one-night stand with a girl supplied by the agencies, but by and large he becomes more dissatisfied as he thinks about for Sue who hasn’t mailed him for two or three days. While mailing to Alec, Sue hesitates to use salutation like ‘Dear Alec’ after only one date, shows her Indian roots which do not allow her to cross the boundaries hastily but her understanding of respect to the value of Indian culture is much larger and less stricter than her mother. She tells Alec how much she had enjoyed the dinner and wishes to meet him again. Bissoondath has shown the problems of growing cyber crime-fake lottery prizes by showing how Alec and sue use technology. While passing her time by reading at nearby park, the presence of an unknown man gives Sue an alert and she feels scarred. She starts fantasizing that she is being raped by a stranger which shows her desperate need for sexual outlet which then is satisfied by a sex toy ‘Richard’. Instead of making love to Alec she has to remain satisfied with a sex toy which is a common object used by Canadian teenagers. Alec’s reply confirms his dilemma as to give in or turn away from his desiring Sue: “The world is full of temptations and you are of mine. Do I give in or do I turn away? Do I have a choice?”(167). He is perplexed about the future of his relationship.

…I was like a married man half–seduced by another woman: part of my instinct urging me on, another part urging caution, reminding me to understand what was at stake. The married man risks his marriage. I, on the other hand, risked a carefully tended reputation and, with it, a good part of my business. Surely it’s easier to find a new wife than to rebuild a shattered reputation.16

Alec has developed his career through discretion and measured manipulation but he can’t handle his relationship with Sue in the same way. Meanwhile Sue has to face a bachelor pharmacist who glares at her ‘shamelessly’ and she thinks that Alec is a far better guy for her. She wants to
continue her relation with Alec as she feels loneliness like Alec but none of them is ready to accept this fact: “…he is lonely but will not admit to it. It occurs to her that the same thing could be said about her” (170) Though Kelly is her best friend, Sue shares only favourable matter about him like only his name (which is not real) and also keeps it secret from her parents who wouldn’t like Alec’s colour i.e. white. Kelly considers Sue’s parents medieval and tells her that she would keep an eye on her in place of her parents especially when she is with Alec. For Sue, it is another pair of eyes, after her parent who will spy on her means her life has become a kind of film to watch or spectacle, as amusing to Kelly as she has long been spectacle for Sue before sometime. The situation in which Sue has to suppress her ambition and dreams from the very beginning which leads her to live life like a drifting boat:

When I was a kid, I wanted to be a stewardess—they don’t even call them that anymore, do they- and a guide at the U N and a ballerima, and an actress…. Architecture, English literature, the degree hanging on the wall of her parents’ house: nothing ever shook the sense that she was filling time, waiting for the day when something—the thing—it would fall into her lap and shape her days, her weeks, her years, her formless life.’

However, Kelly remarks that a drifting boat is not always ends up on some shore, because sometime it sinks at the bottom of the sea, but Sue wants to be optimistic and she is looking for a place where she can be with her real self, not with an artificial personality: “I’m looking for a place where I can be myself, just myself, all the time” (174). By smelling something dangerous, Kelly advises her to be cautious but Sue chooses to be less harmful than being so much careful every time for her life. To get more affection and focus from Alec, Sue concocts and tells a story to Alec that she had an elder sister named Sumintra who was died in a plane crash and her body had never been found, hence her parents in deep grief changed her name to hers i.e. Sumintra and from then, they expect from Sue to live like her and due to this Sue senses the loss of original identity with incompleteness of life: “…I’m me and my sister, I have to live for both of us—for them.”(176) As Indians, Sue’s parents expect her to marry an Indian boy,
have a bunch of kids and look after them until they get old, like her elder sister Sumintra. Actually, Sue has shared all the real problems, she faces in her life, but in different way by giving birth to her alter-ego in the name of her elder sister Sumintra. She tells Alec that her parents didn’t know about their relationship and also won’t allow or accept it, so they have to end their relationship. Alec assumes her parents as ‘racist’ and takes her to his home than to a hotel, frankly shares his first impression of Sue as a ‘slut’. By taking her to his home, he wants to give some assurance about their love but in reality both are manipulating the facts and cheating each other in one way or other.

I don’t know who was manipulating whom at that moment….In our need for secrecy, in the way we shared with each other only those parts of our lives we judged safe to share. Sue and I were kindred spirits-or perhaps, from another perspective, we were partners in crime. 18

Covertly, both are aware that they are hiding something from another partner but it becomes a kind of understanding between them as to respect each-other’s secrets. Sue’s temporary job of fact checking is about to end and Kelly doubts about Sue’s further plan to maintain contact with Alec so she tells her that she has to make choice out of two- keep relation with Alec and tell her parents about him or get rid of him and her parents wouldn’t know about him in future. Through ‘Ice Cube’ game, Kelly warns Sue to quit the drama but Sue is in a dilemma as Alec is her ‘desire’ or we can say he fulfills all her ‘desire’. She has love and a kind of madness- invasive, obsessive, irresistible for Alec-for his another personality which is not of a ‘gay’ so she can’t convince herself to betray Alec for the love of her parents and vice-versa. For the first time, Sue is not ready to take decision as per Kelly’s advice because she finds that the game-making the choice out of two- parents or Alec, guarantees nothing to her: ‘A game: the choice commits her to nothing’(185). It is only love for Alec that leads her to make decision, not a choice where she is taking a risky ‘chance’ by arranging meeting of Kelly with Alec, and then she takes him to her parents for confession of her love in front of them. The consequences are unimaginable as
Sue wouldn’t be able to ‘see’ Alec again in her rest of life if her parents react like the Prasads with their daughter – Rima. Even Alec is also suspicious of being caught in Kelly’s presence as they are from the same field-architecture/designing or he would be fodder for daily newspaper with headlines that a gay having affair with a girl which can ruin his whole reputation. Sue is ready to make such risky decision as her parents have made up their minds to marry her off to an aged professor Motilal Mukherjee, a widower, and son of Manohar’s mentor at engineering and a nuclear physicist which means a perfect Indian groom with high qualification and reputation though he has a ten year old daughter. The excuse given by Sue’s mother for that choice is that Sumintra is having less or no choices- “Sumintra! You are running out of choice.” (193) For Sue, it is her parents who are running out of choice. For Alec, there is nothing which can ever come between himself and his work but somehow Sue convinces Alec to meet Kelly and then her parents to inform them that she has chosen him, not her parents. In response to Alec’s suspicion about the idea of disclosing their relationship in public, Sue says: “It’s what I want, Alec. I’ve forced you to live like a criminal and you’ve been great about it. But it’s time I faced up to things. I want to make an honest man out of you.”(199) Alec realizes that Sue is in deep love with him and for that she is ready to face any difficulties, but when she asks Alec whether there is something mysterious about him on which she can’t put her finger on, Alec replies that: a little mystery is good as it keeps our interest up. From keen observation, Alec comes to know that Sue’s parents felt let down when she switched from architect to literature – no medicine or the sciences, and the teaching profession is not in high demand in the marriage market. Sue has stolen her passports and finally decides to run away with Alec after his meeting with Kelly at Den. Now, Alec is in a dilemma whether to stick to his persona – gay or accept Sue’s love and leave all behind. It is true that everyone strives to be real, genuine, true to them (their souls) but Alec follows the most useful advice-“Be true to the role you’re stuck with….Think before you act” (201-202)
rather than facing the reality, Alec believes that he is also a player like other human beings, of a great drama scripted by the God, so he decides to stick to his role which is precious to him.

The role I’ve written for myself is perhaps more complex than most. Nobody imposed it on me, after all. And I didn’t simply fall into it, either. I’ve designed it by playing with people’s stereotypes, by using their own prejudices against them and to my advantage. I never really expected things to go as far as they have. Who’d have thought that moment of teenaged frustration leading to that frankly outrageous resolution would provoke material success and consequently shape a whole life? Who’d have thought that moment would end up trapping me? How could I have known I’d still be playing this game so many years later? … This role is at the heart of the mystery. Sue was reaching for. She wanted to know who I am. But who I am is what I’ve constructed — ungraspable and enigmatic, fluid even to myself — and nothing, nothing, is more precious to me. 19

It seems that Alec is not ready to face his real identity as he is happy with his false/fake persona. He measures his relationship with Sue on a scale of contentment and dissatisfaction, contrasting with Tawny’s—his first receptionist, now a celebrity who writes that to make relationship work for long time, the winning column should be longer than the lost column by the end of each and every evening. To spend her life with Alec, Sue has stolen her birth certificate, passports and other testimonials from the house and leaves her home with hesitation. On the other hand, though Alec has the fear of being caught, he is ready to meet Kelly and when he reaches at the Den, he as well as Kelly quickly recognizes each other — Kelly is one of those college girls used by Alec for his physical pleasure, supplied by the agencies. Kelly is one of those girls in Canada, who lives in the big but so expensive city, just takes occasional call, a way of tiding things over or claims to be making ends meet — not really a whore. On that day Alec accepts Tawny’s words that ‘women will go to extraordinary lengths to protect each other’ (213) like Kelly. He runs away from that place and feels uncomfortable as Sue has made the situation untenable. He is looking for a way out. Once again when he realizes that Sue is firm and anxious to take their
relationship in public, he offers her a ride in his Chevy to the deserted streets in darkens nights. On the way he expresses his helplessness of coming out in public as he has to lose much: “I’m saying that I can’t do what you want to do. I have too much to lose.” (216). It’s shocking news for Sue as she has lost almost everything – her parents, house, friend and now Alec. Still Alec is in a dilemma whether to tell Sue about the secrets of his life, only known to him, but as having some feeling/love for Sue, Alec also takes a risky chance and shares all the secrets – his real name, real profession (not a house painter), his parents, his inheritance, his company, his persona and also about hotel rooms and the girls from the agency, about his arrival at the Den and about her friend Kelly. No doubt its a shocking news for Sue, but on the other hand Alec feels a sense of lightness or joy as he encounters his real self after very long time.

As I spoke, a curious feeling grew in me – a sense of lightness, almost of joy. My words were peeling back layer upon layer of fabrication, getting closer with each new detail to another me, one I thought I’d left behind, the me who began seeing ways of renovating my bedroom in my parents’ house, the me who had cheap business cards printed up to give to clients of the hardware store, the me who believed there was no price to be paid for what were merely creative means to a financial end. This was a me I hadn’t encountered in years. 20

Alec, on his adventurous journey not only with Sue but also with his real self, his persona, he opens his unread books of secrets by expecting liberation for his ‘self’ and forgiveness from Sue whom he assume that she would understand and accept his need for secrecy and she would continue their relationship, despite everything - whatever happened or shared, as being a partner in crime: “So you see, Sue, I can’t afford… well I guess I just can’t afford to have you in my life publicly. You get it, don’t you? So it’d be better if we just…” (218). But for Sue, it’s an extreme sense of betrayal by the person whom she loves and is ready to leave everything for him: “Don’t touch me…You’ve been lying to me all along.” (219). When Alec blames her for lying with her parents, her anger and sense of betrayal grows, and she orders Alec to stop the car and runs out of the car through the dark, deserted street. For Alec, Sue is being unreasonable,
and the fear of that she might reveal his secrets to the world make him murder Sue with his car.

Ironically, the murder is reported as a hit – and – run case and Alec has no fear of being caught by police, as his car is not registered and there is no witness. He dismantles all the parts of that car to wipe out any evidence, though those parts can be replaced with his talent – to make new things from old! Alec accepts that he would miss Sue as they were alike in so many ways for instance Alec comes to know from reports that Sue’s real name was Sumintra and she was the only child, not any elder sister, of Indian immigrant family lives in suburbs, not in midtown. Alec admires Sue for the game she had played with him. Moreover he admires ‘confession’ but also keeps the rights to have secrets and enjoyment of sharing the secrets.

I’ve always admired the Roman Catholic rituals of confession. As I understand it, you reveal your secret sins to someone who will forgive you for them but can’t do anything ‘with’ them. In practical terms, it’s if you haven’t told anyone but you still get the thrill of ‘telling’. Because that’s the best thing about secrets: the thrill of sharing an entertaining tale with a stranger who wields no power over you. Everyone benefits in his own way. After all, now that I’ve told you my secrets don’t you feel better about yours? 21

This novel is a tale of creating and keeping secrets (sins) only to us, and not to disclose to other and still getting the thrill of sharing the secrets. In real sense this is ‘a remarkable tale of obsession’ where some souls have been designed in a way that it impels them to think that they are of great design became of their unique secrets.
References:


14. *Ibid.*, p. 120


