CHAPTER SEVEN

ARGUMENTATION

[Nanda Kaul is interested in] a charred tree trunk in the forest, a broken pillar of marble in the desert, a lizard in a stone wall. . . .

[Fire on the Mountain, 1977, p. 23]

It ought to be stressed that Anita Desai’s fictions represent a unique blending of the Indian and the Western. Her novels capture the bewilderment of the individual psyche confronted with the overbearing socio-cultural environment and the everbeckoning modern promise of self-gratification and self-fulfilment. In the face of this dual onslaught her male characters are seen poised rentalizingly at different junctures of the philosophic spectrum.

Anita Desai’s female characters withdraw themselves away from their male partners. They lead a secluded life distancing themselves away from the company of the males suffering from a paranoid notion that the males are the domineering type and they have no softness or gentleness in them. The women neurotically consider the males as un-understanding characters who live in their own male world unmindful of the wants and desires and the longings of women.

The female characters consider the males as those that impose conditions of life and force the women to fall into the daily dull routine as devised by the males. In fine, the female characters go under the conviction that the males are unsympathetic, un-understanding, callous, indifferent, and remain ever domineering.
Therefore the women such as Maya in *Cry, the Peacock*, and Sita in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* and Nadna Kaul in *Fire on the Mountain* to quote a few, suffer from loneliness and self imposed alienation. The women feel that they suffer because of the men. The irony of it is their psychic states and hysterical outbursts cause great and enough harm and injury and promote mental pains to their males.

It is only with such a perspective of the female neurotically and psychically entertaining a wrong notion of all males as callous and unsympathetic and domineering that the human relationships between the males and females in the fictions of Anita Desai get torpedoed.

The women impose on themselves alienation and experience quite acutely the existential peril. But by extension they alienate the males from them, and subject them to the existential predicaments of turning the life of the males into one of struggle and continual suffering.

In the fiction, *Fire on the Mountain*, Anita Desai examines the theme of alienation overlapping and continuing with the theme of existentialism. In fact, *Fire on the Mountain* deals with the existential problems and predicaments and alienation of Nanda Kaul and her Vice Chancellor husband.

Nanda Kaul entertains the wrong notion that she suffers a life of dull routine because her Vice Chancellor husband imposes his life conditions on her. She alienates herself from her husband and leads a secluded life on the British conceived hill resort of Carignano. Nanda Kaul psychically feels that her Vice Chancellor husband is unsympathetic, and un-understanding, and callous.
Therefore, Nanda Kaul forces the alienated state on herself, on her own volition. Her sufferings are her own and not imposed on her from outside by her husband, as she imagines. It is a wrong step on her part to seek refuge in the sequestered life of an undisturbed privacy. Her affections are misplaced, as her interests are bizarre. Nanda Kaul is interested abnormally thus, and her interests disclose her neurosis. These reflect the neurotic and psychic mind-set of Nanda Kaul.

The main problem with Nanda Kaul is that she experiences the existential predicaments with her life turning into one of continual struggle and continual suffering all because of her ice Chancellor husband, who is totally absorbed in his academic routine, badminton parties with Miss. David, with recommending persons like Ila Das to teaching assignments and indulging in daily desk work.

In fact, Nanda Kaul neurotically feels that she is forced by her Vice Chancellor husband to experience the existential predicaments of continual struggle and persistent suffering, without realizing that it is not her husband who has caused these existential predicaments for her, but that she has invited them herself on her own self.

Nanda Kaul thinks that she has been subjected and exposed to the predicament of one confronting a protracted life of unrelenting dull and daily routine of looking after, cooking, washing and caring for her unsympathetic, un-understanding, and callous husband. Nanda Kaul considers that her husband has left her with her life in shambles and with little nerve in her to even a heave a sigh of relief now and then.

Nirode experiences life, and experiments with failures in his life like an existential hero. Wearied by his own uneasiness he appears thus [Voices in the City, p. 63]:

"Voices in the City, p. 63"
He [Nirode] swept back and forth like a long weed undulating under water, a weed that could live only in aqueous gloom, would never rise and spring into clear daylight.

Nirode’s existential search for meaning and value, and substance in life ends in emptiness and bankruptcy.

In *Bye-Bye Blackbird*, Anita Desai projects two male characters, Adit and Dev. Adit begins with a great love for England and everything England but finally ends up with disillusions about England and begins to hate England, and leaves for India.

On the other hand, Dev begins to hate England and ends up loving England, and decides to stay back in England. To begin with, Adit expresses unreservedly his fascination and love for the foreign land, England thus [*Bye-Bye Blackbird*, p. 164]:

> I love England. I admire England. I can appreciate her history and poetry as much as any Englishman. . . .

To him Sarah, the English woman, whom he marries, appears quite homely and seems almost a Bengali girl. To quote the significant and relevant textual passage; [*Bye-Bye Blackbird*, p. 73]:

> Her [Sarah’s] shyness and rectitude that brought out the protective in Adit whereas all the other guests and the hostess had only made him feel uncertain and possibly even humiliated. . . . [He expresses his love to Sarah thus] You are like the Bengali girl; Bengali women are like that reserved quite. May be you were one in your previous life. . . .
Adit is caustic in criticizing India, and at times it goes beyond the limits of tolerance for a perceptive and critically oriented Indian reader, and the textual passage runs thus [Bye-Bye Blackbird, p. 129]:

Nothing ever goes right at home [India] - - there is famine or flood, there is drought or epidemic, always. Here [in England] the rain fall so softly and evenly, never too much and never too short. The sun is mild. The earth is fertile. The rivers are full. The bids are plump. The beasts are fat. Everything so wealthy, so luxuriant, so fortunate. . . .

And contrastively, Adit has great admiration of England. Love, admiration, and loyalty are the things he offers to England. Therefore, he feels that he has every right to enjoy and celebrate everything about England. The textual passage makes interesting reading and it is worth quoting here [Bye-Bye Blackbird, p. 164]:

[Adit loves, admires and enjoys] the Covent Garden Operas and the pub down the road . . . picnics in the Hyde Park.. I have every right to enjoy them - because of my education, my taste, and my interests in them. No Englishman can deny that. . . .

At this point Sumitra Kukreti ‘s observation is worth quoting here for it brings to the fore why Adit took a U-turn to return to India. [“Love-Hate Relationship of Expatriates in Anita Desai’s Bye-Bye Blackbird,” in The Novels of Anita Desai: A Critical Study, 2000, pp. 45-46]:

Ironically, notwithstanding all his [Adit’s] appraisal, his worship and trust on this land of liberty, eccentricity, and individualism, he realizes
that England can provide him neither of these. Wherever he goes, he becomes a victim of racial discrimination and apartheid and is constantly regarded as not only a second grade citizen, but also as an intruder and consequently to stand in a separate lavatory queue for Aaiatics and to be called Wog, is his irresistible destiny, and he has to live on with it as long as he wishes to stay in England.

And finally Adit decides to return home, whereas Dev who began to hate England takes a U-turn and begins to love, and admire England.

In Anita Desai’s fiction, *Cry the Peacock*, the male character Gautama suffers because his wife Maya neurotically feels that he ignores her and never bothers to understand her needs and wants. Gautama’s diagnosis of her neurosis is correct. For Gautama, Maya’s psychic trouble is too strong to be handled. When he points out to her that for a woman to become pregnant is a matter of joy and it should not draw tears of sadness from a pregnant woman, Maya flies into tantrums. The textual passage makes interesting reading [*Cry the Peacock*, p. 57, and p. 58]:

I [Gautama] don’t even understand what you are working yourself up over. . . Like a foolish baby . . . round faced child in a white petticoat [you are crying]. . . . You are a grown woman no, Maya, no light headed child. You mustn’t allow yourself to grow so upset . . .

But she does not read any sense in his encouraging words. She frantically tries to terminate her pregnancy and wishes to stay away from Gautama. Similar is the strain in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* Raman suffers because of his neurotic wife, Sita. And Sita considers sex and food as fit only for animals and not human beings and
she wants to keep away from Raman because she feels that he has great animalism in him. She is fed with the Metropolitan life in Bombay. She considers the life in Bombay as dreary and monotonous.

Neurotically, Sita suffers from Father-fixation. That is why she marries Raman much senior to him in age. Sita wants to avoid Raman and Bombay-life by withdrawing to the island home of her father in Manori Island. Sita’s desire to uphold traditional values of an integrated life in face of the chaotic values of modern city civilization is at the root of her unhappiness and loss of her identity. And she cannot blame Raman for her not adjusting to changed life conditions in Bombay in her father-in-law’s house. She invites existential sufferings on her own self and she forces the same on her husband and her children quite unjustifiably. She fails to understand that if she neurotically suffers she passes that to her husband and her children, Baumgartner in Anita Desai’s Baumgartner’s Bombay suffers being marginalized in Germany and then in Bombay. But he confronts life. There is placidity in him. But then there is a great deal of good sense in him. The conclusive statement of J. Wilson is worth quoting here [“Multiple Meanings of Marginality in Anita Desai’s Baumgartner’s Bombay,” in The Novels of Anita Desai: A Critical Study, 2000, pp. 244-245]:

Hugo becomes one of society’s “self-impelled isolates” because it is a matter of survivability as when he deliberately avoids British soldiers recognizing in them a threat to his identity or when he makes silence his natural condition in the internment camp or when he built a new language using English or Hindi or Bengali in the India he was making out for himself, however, more than the mere need to survive, Hugo had carved out for himself the mental picture of the kind of life he wanted to
live. Venice, the city of his dreams, a land where East meets West becomes his ideal and he learns to cross man-made borders and accept life and humanity for what they are and on their own terms. Thus an unambitious life with his cats, caring for them and finding comfort and companionship in return and taking the risk in helping his Ryan enemy, which finally cost him his life, are all in keeping with his strange philosophy of life: to build and not destroy; to save, not to kill; to give, not expect in return, although he himself had met with nothing in life except defeat, betrayal and rejection. . . .

Anita Desai’s *Journey to Ithaca* is a compassionate portrait of people struggling to find a spiritual home. It delineates Matteo’s alienation and the concomitant quest for spirituality. And technique is the conscious and deliberate attempt of Anita Desai to give form and shape to her feelings, thoughts and experiences, and her germinal ideas. This Indian woman writer with astounding craftsmanship weaves ingenuously the different strands of her artistic, and well-crafted works by resorting to the elements of fiction and a number of literary techniques. In fact, she puts them to the optimum artistic use.

It must be said to the exclusive credit to Anita Desai that of all the Indian woman artists that she alone excels in describing and creating a sense of time and a sense of place. It is an acknowledged fact that Anita Desai admirably contrives textual matter in her fictions that highlights Anita Desai’s skill at narration and her exquisite ability to describe a scene with all the minutiae involved in it. She projects herself as not only capable of excellent description but also in the process as an image-maker in the vein of
Walt Whitman. Her picture making talent lies so very much latent in all her fictions. Furthermore, she demonstrates her masterful ability to delineate characters.

Like William Faulkner, in this fiction, *Cry, the Peacock*, Anita Desai employs the title as Faulkner does in his Nobel Prize winning fiction, *The Sound and the Fury*, with deep significance, and it is Anita Desai’s technical achievement and the relevant textual passage runs thus [*Cry, the Peacock*, 1980, p. 95]:

> And now I recalled that oil-slick sibilant tongue whispering poetry to me in the bat-tortured ark. “Do you not hear the peacocks call in the wilds? Are they not blood-chilling in their shrieks of pain? “Pia, pia,” they cry. “Lover lover. Mio, mio - - I die, I die.” Go out into the jungles before the monsoons come - - at the time when the first clouds cross the horizon, black as the kohl in your grave eyes. How they love the rain - - these peacocks. They spread out their splendid tails and begin to dance, but, like Shiva’s, their dance of joy is the dance of death, and they dance, knowing that they and their lovers are all to die, perhaps even before the monsoons came to an end. Is it not agony for them? How they stamp their feet, and beat their beaks against the rocks! They will even rasp the snakes that live on the sands there, and break their bodies to bits against the stones, to ease their own pain. Have you seen peacocks make love, child? Before they mate, they fight. They will rip each other’s breasts to strips and fall, bleeding, with their beaks open and panting. When they have exhausted themselves in battle, they will mate. *Peacocks are wise* [My Emphasis]...
Anita Desai equally excels in dialogue writing. In this respect, she richly favours comparison with the Russian American postmodern fictionist, Vladimir Nabokov. Anita Desai gets easily bracketed with the outstanding prose stylists, such as William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway, Vladimir Nabokov, and John Barth to quote the names of a few American intellectuals. Delighting in language she has used it as the means of the artist for creating a world and preserving it against time. John O. Stark’s observs [The Literature of Exhaustion, 1987, p. 83]:

In literature this bliss usually takes the form of wonder at the adroit use of man’s greatest invention, language, and this wonder is most intense when the wonderer is the linguistic master.

In fact, Anita Desai, the astounding creative artist, will continue to be read for the brilliance of her language and sharpness in rendering reality quite imaginatively. One comes away from the literary products of Anita Desai awed by many things but chiefly by the dazzling of verbal skill.

Anita Desai, the astounding artist, happily marries memory with imagination and creates a sense of a sunlit world, which is the hidden positive in her art products. She employs irony and paradox to great fictional advantage.

Moreover, in the art products of Anita Desai there is the perfect beginning, the gradual growth and development to the middle, and finally to the perfectly contrived and composed end. Each beginning is an entrance into a time and a place, and a culture and a faith and an eternity. At the beginning of her literary works there is the voice, which comes out of nothing and through the printed matter Anita Desai creates, like Walt Whitman, the illusion that someone somewhere is speaking to the reader.
Anita Desai asserts that artistic perception and design can transcend human fortunes and misfortunes; and chaos can be ordered by transforming the world into significant aesthetic form.

Anita Desai adroitly marries the past with the present. In fact, like William Faulkner she hauls the past into the present and projects both into the future. Her literary products are edifices whose every corner deserves the closest attention, and such an examination is invariably a rewarding experience. Her art products yield and present to the aesthetic sense the peculiar hardness of a finished fully meant thing. Her sentences are beautiful out of context.

A beautiful building is made up of hunks of metal, concrete slush, and other products of earth, air, and water. And yet when the builder is finished with these prosaic things, he has created something splendid. He has arranged reality creatively. A literary product, too, is one of creative arrangement, achieved by the writer through selection of the material of real life and the real world, which he has acquired either directly or vicariously.

In other words, the literary work that is well crafted is both a window into a segment of the human experience and an interpretative record of it by one who has either lived it himself or who has somehow understood and experienced it vicariously.

A good work of art takes the reader into another area of experience, which is the real world of the imagination. Moreover, a good literary product is perfectly contrived to be multi-dimensional and multi-layered in character. And the literary products of Anita Desai meet all these requirements. It is against such background study one examines
how Anita Desai employs the elements of fiction, such as description, narration, characterization, dialogue writing and argumentation in her fictions.

Anita Desai proves that she can blend her first-person “I” narration with that of the second-person “you” narration through the discussion that takes place between Nirode and Jit and the passage makes interesting reading [Voices in the City, 1965, p. 93]:

“Do you think that a matter for congratulation?”

“Why not, Nirode?”

“Because I refuse to be caught by its success. Damn it all, that blasted newspaper I worked for had been successful for years, everything moved smoothly, it employed people to work for it like a lot of dumb clogs in an oily machine.

I don’t want mine to become like that, for God’s sake. It’s getting to be bad enough with Jit breathing down my neck and panting “Why don’t you hurry the next issue? Hurry, hurry, this is your chance to break even at last.”

I have Sunny jumping up and down like a monkey on a stick and squealing “We’ll make a respectable man of you Nirode, we’ll see you happily married to your profession one day.” . . .

In the following textual passage selected from Cry, the Peacock, Anita Desai projects herself as not only capable of excellent description but also in the process as an
image maker in the vein of a Walt Whitman. Anita Desai’s picture making talent lies so very much latent in the quoted passage [Cry, the Peacock, 1980, pp. 5-6]:

Now and then she [Maya] went out into the veranda, and looked to see if he [Gautama] were coming up the drive, which lay shrivelling, melting and then shrivelling again, like molten lead in a rove cut into the earth, and out of the corner of her eye, could not help glancing, as one cannot help a tic at the small white corpse laying at one end of the lawn under sheet, under the limes. Later in the evening, when the sun hung pendant from the topmost branches of the trees swelling visibly like - - she thought - - a purulent boil [not a pleasant image, of course], until it was ripe to drop, her husband came home. . . .

It is of significance to quote the statement of Charles J. Rolo [“Candide in Harlem”, Atlantic, 190 (July 1952), 84]

Its [this age’s] point is that this age, with its passion for categories and its indifference to the uniqueness of the individual is reducing all of us to a condition of invisibility.

The fictionist Anita Desai is acutely aware of the societal conditions that the women confront, in the modern era. Understandably, she uses the medium of literature as the poignant outlet to voice her feelings, thoughts and experiences concerning men and women. In fact, not many writers could be so very representative of the community as Anita Desai is.

And Anita Desai makes the perceptive and the critically oriented readers become immediately conscious of her powerful assertion, which projects her female
wrath against the dominant attitudes and denials and deprivations meted out to the victims by the victimizers. Anita Desai motivates the women to realize their twin strengths, which is that women alone can carry the universe within themselves and approximate the creative work in bringing into being new births, and secondly it is the women alone who can initiate man into right action.

Moreover, Anita Desai opens the eyes of the women to know who they are, where they are, what they are and what they are not capable of. In other words, She educates women to discover themselves their inner strengths, and their limitations and think and act accordingly.

Anita Desai advocates to the women to take pride in the female sex, and shed their inferiority complexes, castration complex, and fear psychosis. Moreover, she educates the women to shed their submissive attitudes and approaches to life and emerge as women who have gained real empowerment to face any kind of challenge in life.

Anita Desai is helpful in guiding the perceptive women readers to discover their inherent strengths through self-definition and self-discovery. Above all she champions the cause of the women in their struggle for intellectual, moral, spiritual, economic, social, and political survival, and for their empowerment and emergence as women capable of doing all that the male sex is capable of, if not better.

In fact, Anita Desai awakens in the hearts of all perceptive readers a stronger sense of justice and a more Christian-like humanity. In all these respects she has proved itself to be educative, instructive, and trend setting.
It ought to be stressed at this point that the contributions made by Anita Desai, the Indian writer writing in English, to the growth, development and phenomenal strength of Women Literature and by extension to World Literature is significant, relevant, and consequential. Incidentally, Anita Desai cannot be dismissed as a second class writer when compared with male writers.

This is a wrong assumption and deserves to be deconstructed and thoroughly exploded. In actual fact, Anita Desai has greatly and immeasurably enriched and revitalized Women Literature by her signal contributions to Indian writing in English.

In case of Anita Desai there is no de-emphasizing of the role of woman as a mother but there is a deeper probe into its complexity. The mother is an embittered woman caught between her own personality and desires, and the life imposed on her as the economically dependent mother by the male dominated world.

At times the women live under the illusion that they suffer because of their men, when in actual fact it is this psychic and delusory feeling that they reel under the unsympathetic attitudes and approaches of their men that cause tensions and anxieties to the women and push them to a state of alienation.

But then, Anita Desai, the creative woman artist, has refused to be the obedient mouthpiece of male authors and be governed by the male literary convention. Instead she has delved into what Adrienne Rich has called the cratered night of the female memory to touch the true matrix: the wisdom of mankind.

Anita Desai traces the sociological, historical, and psychological approaches to highlight sharply the history of the plights and predicaments of women from the past to
the present, to underscore their claims on several issues and societal fronts. Anita Desai projects her viewpoints quite convincingly, persuasively, authentically and authoritatively, with a great sense of modern aesthetic. Anita Desai has been artistically capable in arguing her viewpoints with conviction, faith, and purpose. She has been differently affected by the great strides made in the fields of social theories and practices.

And these have transformed her female psyche and female autonomy as a writer. She has successfully introduced feminist modernism. She has in large measure succeeded in resolving the contradictions, tensions and anxieties -- *Angst* -- experienced by women in the post satellite era.

Anita Desai deals with the plights and predicaments, the stresses and strains -- *Sturm-und-Drang* --, the anxieties and tensions -- *Angst* -- and the handicaps confronted by women.

Anita Desai’s fictions are marked by their richness and thorough originality. There is a stinging immediacy. And she provides an excellent variety of characters quite credible and at the same time quite familiar people.

Anita Desai’s characters’ moral and spiritual entropy is set against the essential mysteries of death and sex, friendship and poverty, and the desperation and vulnerability of man that one encounters in many stories, but rarely so economically expressed.

Anita Desai’s narrative contains symbolical and fabulous elements and is laid out in small set pieces, snapshots arranged in a pattern that cannot be anticipated until the
author is done with her surprises. There is a great deal of humour here, and a sense of celebration, in spite of pains and miseries and self-pitying traumas, and all of it is beautifully wrought.

Anita Desai’s fictions are thought-provoking stories. They speak volumes for Anita Desai’s talent, and ingenuity. Her descriptive passages prove her great literary and artistic worth. Anita Desai lambastes in her fictions the moral prudery that dampens spontaneity, and twists natural appetites. She also directs her attack on the middle class hypocrisy. She illuminates the complexity of the attitudes of the Men and Women towards life. She presents them as martyrs of some terrible desperation.

Anita Desai argues that women could endure life’s calamities. She does not want the readers to become indifferent to these women. In fact, the characters, that Anita Desai portrays, come alive from the pages vital and strong because she has made the readers care about the pain in their lives. And ultimately her fictions are about pain and estrangement. All the characters are moulded by the quality and duration of their pain.

Anita Desai portrays her characters with an amazing delicacy and lightness of touch. Nothing glares out. Instead the perceptive and critically oriented reader reaches inside their beings and begins to understand what motivates their hostilities. The language is always simple and potent. It is tight and quiet, not over-luscious with flowery phrases. This spare quality of the writing blends softly with the languid and familiar tone of the dialogue.

Anita Desai’s expression of her style of writing goes thus [“Replies to the Questionnaire,” Kakatiya Journal of English Studies, III, 1 (1973), 18]:
I [Anita Desai] think the purpose of my writing is to discover - - for myself - - and then describe and convey the truth . . . the Dutch Old masters who could paint a loaf of bread so incomparably were not merely painting the meaning of that loaf, its significance to man, its quality, even its flavour . . . My writing is an effort to discover, underline and convey the significance of things . . .

A beautiful and haunting atmosphere emerges out of the wreck of these folks’ lives, a quality that is absolutely convincing and absolutely precise. The reader shares the tears and hurts of the characters as if it were through empathy, and as if they have watched it happen too often around him to deny them their tragedy. Anita Desai takes that simple locality and populates that landscape with familiar folks.

They are not limited to their time and space, but reach out to the readers and take in their pain also. The readers happen to be with them through lives, fraught like our own, with all sorts of tragedies and jokes. It is this capacity, which distinguishes Anita Desai’s Oeuvres. She can write so that it rings true to the readers. She draws a vision of pain that lives in the eyes of the readers.

Thus, through her fictions, Anita Desai projects herself as an outstanding woman genius. There are many compelling elements in Anita Desai’s fictions, including the delineation of the psychological and emotional effects of being owned - - of having no sense of self, of fearing to trust or to love when anything can be taken away at any time.

The portrayal of the very limited consciousness of the characters, and of their painful slow growth toward damaged self-awareness, is also effective, although
sometimes the halt and hesitant nature of their thoughts makes her novels almost catatonic.

Like Walt Whitman, Anita Desai writes powerful, expressive fiction in which she delineates the struggle of the characters for wholeness and political autonomy. In her fictions Anita Desai introduces several of the particular themes. But the major themes are the domination of powerful men over powerless women, and the sufferings of the women at the hands of the women who feel psychically that men torment them.

Thus, Anita Desai’s fictions have earned for her the universal acclaim that she is an astounding woman genius. Anita Desai’s Oeuvres have established her literary pre-eminence as one of the remarkable and accomplished and great women writers who have richly contributed to the growth, development, significance, relevance, and consequence of Women Literature.