To be human is to make decisions and to act in a world full of misery and heartbreak. Maturity comes about only as a result of experience, and experience always involves suffering. . . . [Allan Chavkin, “The Problem of Suffering in American Fiction”, Comparative Literature Studies, xxi, (Summer 1984), 162].

Anita Desai’s female characters, Maya in Cry, the Peacock, and Sita in Where Shall We Go This Summer? are the suffering and struggling individuals. Furthermore, Anita Desai’s male characters Baumgartner in Baumgartner’s Bombay and Matteo in Journey to Ithaca are the suffering and struggling individuals. They pass through anxieties and tension - - Angst - - and experience stresses and strains - - Sturm-und-Drang and confront several hardships. The life of Maya and Sita, Baumgartner and Matteo gets reduced to one of endless suffering.

Anita Desai’s Maya in Cry, the Peacock, and Sita in Where Shall We Go This Summer? and Baumgartner in Baumgartner’s Bombay and Matteo in Journey to Ithaca experience continual struggle against forces of which in the case of some they are ignorant of their cause and effect factors, and in the case of others they are helplessly tossed about. They suffer from fear psychosis as to their present and their future.

The environment, over which Anita Desai’s Maya in Cry, the Peacock, and Sita in Where Shall We Go This Summer? and Baumgartner in Baumgartner’s Bombay and Matteo in Journey to Ithaca have absolutely no control, controls them. As such to better
appreciate Anita Desai’s Maya in *Cry, the Peacock*, and Sita in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* and Baumgartner in *Baumgartner’s Bombay* and Matteo in *Journey to Ithaca* are the suffering and struggling selves, it is imperative to have a knowledge of what existentialism stands for and what is meant by naturalism.

To begin with existentialism is a philosophy and a cultural impulse, with roots in Biblical thought and ancient Socratic concept. Existentialism embraces a variety of styles and convictions. However, its one constant characteristic, as indicated by the origin of the word, is concern for human existence, especially for the affirmation of freedom and the refusal to subordinate personal awareness to abstract concepts or dehumanizing social structures. It represents rebellion against established ideas and institutions that inhibit personal freedom and negate responsibility. The terms in German are *Existenzialismus* and in French *L’existentialisme*.

Soren Kierkegaard, a nineteenth century Danish philosopher and theologian, was the founder of modern existentialism. It is true that he had a host of forerunners and that the entire romantic movement of his century shared in the protest against the dominant rationalism of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Yet it was Kierkegaard who established the concepts and vocabulary that influenced subsequent existentialists. He criticized reigning philosophies for their abstract speculations and their pretensions to answer grand questions without even asking the immediate questions of self-understanding.

Truth is subjectivity is the argument of Kierkegaard. He means that truth is meaningful only as it applies to a personal subject. In his understanding of existence, Kierkegaard emphasized the dizziness of freedom as man decides his destiny and the
anxiety of the contingent being who can find no meaning in the universe except as he makes a Leap of Faith. At this juncture it is necessary to examine the distinguishing properties of the concept of existentialism. The theist existentialist headed by Soren Kierkegaard and the atheist existentialists headed by Jean-Paul Sartre are of the view that man’s first existentialist condition is his singleness and loneness of life. Man is alone in the Universe. He has the will to choose. He chooses and regrets the choices made.

Man suffers from *Angst* - anxieties and tensions. He dreads death. But he appreciates the fact that death is inevitable. He is unable to find answers to the mysteries, doubts, irresolvable, unanswerables, indeterminacies, and uncertainties. He is naturally filled with nausea.

In sheer struggle he finds the meaning and substance of existence. He realizes that he cannot jump any situation. He becomes aware of the fact that suicide is no answer to the problems, plights and predicaments faced by humanity. And the atheist existentialists hold on to the view that life begins in void and ends in void. This idea is dramatically projected by Samuel Becket who persuasively opens his archetypal play of the Theatre of the Absurd, *Waiting for Godot*, with the loaded term, *Nothing*, and ends the play with the same loaded term, *Nothing*, to demonstrate the validity of Jean-Paul Sartre’s thesis in his classic work, *Being and Nothingness*.

Sartre presents his argument thus [*Being and Nothingness*, 1966, pp. 57-58]:

The Being by which Nothingness arrives in the world must nihilate Nothingness in its Being, and even so it still runs the risk of still establishing Nothingness as a transcendent in the very heart of
immanence unless it nihilates *Nothingness* in its being *in connection with its own being*. The Being by which Nothingness arrives in the world is a being such that in its Being, the Nothingness of its Being is in question. *The Being by which Nothingness comes to the world must be its own Nothingness* [Italics as in the Original]. . .

If the atheist existentialists maintain that existence originates and culminates in *Nothingness* and that negativities and negations, mark life the theist existentialists believe that existence begins in *Essence* and finally merges with that *Essence*. The theist existentialists find, therefore, meaning, substance, significance, relevance, and consequence in living by a leap of faith, and valuing inter-subjectivity, and practicing, in letter and spirit, the Christian concept of love.

Existentialism is concerned with human existence in its concrete reality. Existentialism as a literary movement and philosophy places the entire emphasis on the existence of the individual, an existence that postulates man as free from any natural or human standard in terms of which he must act.

The existentialist creates his world of experience through a choice of alternatives, a choice, which makes him free from all other men, but a choice, which enslaves him to his own doubts, and uncertainties, and to the consequences of his own choices. He has a consciousness, which considers what his choice has done to others. And the crisis of modern man is unique in its intensity through which one comes into contact with reality. Crisis is the way of life for the existentialists. And crisis comes with each experience, for there is always that moment when the decision either to make a choice or not to make a choice brings agony, *Angst*, and despair.
For Kierkegaard to think in existence is to recognize that one is faced with personal choices. One finds oneself constantly in an existential situation. For this reason, one’s thinking ought to deal with the problems of alternate choices. Subjectivity is what makes up each person’s unique existence. In fine, the philosophy of existentialism is concerned with human existence. Webster defines thus [Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary, 1983, p. 435]:

[Existentialism is] chiefly a twentieth century philosophic movement embracing diverse doctrines but centring an analysis of individual existence in an unfathomable universe and the plight of the individual who may assume ultimate responsibility for his acts of free will without any certain knowledge of what is right or wrong or good or bad. . . .

On the literary side, Existentialism as a philosophic movement was considered to be the principal expression by a group of writers who wrote during and after the last Global War, as Celine, Malrux, and Camus in France, Moraria, Rensi, and Vittorini in Italy, Kafka, Jaspers, Heidegger and Jung in Germany, Faulkner, Hemingway, and Steinbeck in America.

Apart from these writers, many religious thinkers like Paul Tillich, Soren Kierkegaard, Gabriel Marcel, Rudolf Buttmann, Helmut Thielicke, Stephen Neil, and Martin Buber acknowledged the impact of existentialism and convinced themselves thus [The Encyclopedia Americana, x, p. 763]:

. . . that neither authority nor rational argument can take the place of commitment or ultimate concern [Paul Tillich’s phrase] as a condition for religious understanding. . . .
These existential philosophers insist that one must understand one’s self. And that is precisely what Anita Desai insists in *Cry, the Peacock*, and in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* and in Baumgartner’s *Bombay* and in *Journey to Ithaca* through Maya, Sita, Baumgartner and Matteo. In this regard Paul Roubiczek remarks, [*Existentialism For and Against*, 1964, p. 6]:

. . . we may believe that everything is meaningless - - nevertheless the quest for meaning remains an essential part of our apparently meaningless life. . . .

In this connection, Kierkegaard insists that one should have knowledge of one’s self by directing one’s mind inward and by analyzing the situations in which one exists. Gabriel Marcel discusses the relationship between the external and internal life thus [*Homo Viator*, 1962, p. 78]:

. . . the more one strives to understand the meaning of existence, the more surely one is led to the conclusion that the outward is also the inward, or rather to the realization that this distinction has no meaning where the actual growth of a being is involved. . .

It is of interest to read this statement of Gabriel Marcel in conjunction with that of Stephen Neil, which runs thus [*Christian Faith and Other Faiths*, 1966, p. 786]:

The man who has chosen authentic existence is related to his own self in a new way. . . .

According to Heidegger man is confronted with two possibilities of existence, which are characterized as authentic and unauthentic. The man who lives an unauthentic
existence does not make any deliberate decision for his life, and he goes on living with
the crowd in an oblivious state of himself. Most of the Christian existentialists condemn
this kind of unauthentic existence. Stephen Neil observes [Christian Faith and Other
Faiths, 1966, p. 184]:

The reality of existence is to be found only in choice, in decision, in
the deliberate acceptance of the authentic and rejection of the unauthentic
existence. . . .

According to Kierkegaard, eternal happiness is not a static conception. It is not a
goal attained once and for all. It consists in living in the now and her. A miniature
imagistic masterpiece of Edward Estlin Cummings makes the point quite clear. The
poem makes interesting reading and it runs as follows [Complete Poems: 1913-1962,
1972, p. 781]:

now is a ship
which captain am
sails out of sleep
steering for dream. . . .

Moreover, man is endowed with freedom. So he is responsible for his actions
whether they are good or bad. And every individual is emotionally impelled to act. He is
pushed to act, and he wills to act. After choosing everything according to his desires, he
regrets. Life then becomes a series of regrets. And the intellectual understands that in his
existential situation, the freedom that he enjoys is never compatible with comfort.

Suffering and struggle is the part and parcel of the life of a man in his existence.
In fact, in struggle is existence. And man is filled with nausea when he is not able to
probe beyond the mysteries as it happens to Bartleby, the Scrivener the protagonist of Melville’s *Bartleby, the Scrivener*. 

Man is afflicted by fear of destiny, and is filled with anxiety at the dreadful possibilities of life and the dread of death. Kaufmann terms it thus [*Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*, 1999, p. 12]:

> It is a timeless sensibility that can be discerned here and there in the past. . . .

Man’s autonomy, assertion of his subjective self, his flouting of reason and rationality, positivism, and his denial of the traditional values, institutions, and philosophy, and his exercise of will and freedom, and his experience of the absurdity and nothingness of life are some of the existential themes, which are reflected in the writings of Anita Desai.

When Anita Desai’s Maya in *Cry, the Peacock*, and Sita in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* and Baumgartner in *Baumgartner’s Bombay* and Matteo in *Journey to Ithaca* are judged against the parameters of existentialism they are classic sufferers, whose freedom is not compatible with comfort, and they experience the fear psychosis. And Anita Desai’s Maya in *Cry, the Peacock*, and Sita in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* and Baumgartner in *Baumgartner’s Bombay* and Matteo in *Journey to Ithaca* suffer because of their environment.

Incidentally, a detailed knowledge of naturalism becomes necessary at this juncture. And naturalism rather than being a rigid philosophical system, naturalism has been described as a particular way or method of approaching philosophical problems and as certain set of conclusions arrived at, as answers to these problems and as a certain
set of conclusions arrived at as answers to these problems. Naturalism denies the existence of the supernatural anywhere in the universe and holds that if any non-natural entities exist they may be known only by their observable influence on natural objects.

Many naturalists describe their beliefs not as a theory of the nature of reality but as specific temper of mind - - namely, a confidence in the empirical, experimental, or scientific method as the man and the world. They reject faith, revelation, authority, tradition, deductive reasoning, and intuition as sources of truth and guidance.

All meaning originates in experience, and all beliefs must be tested by experience in accordance with the general canons of scientific method. In general, naturalism is opposed to the characteristic doctrines of religion, supernaturalism, and idealism. The main tenets that are ascribed to naturalism are the following:

1. Every taste of the world or event in it can be explained causally or mechanically by reference to previous states or events or else in the result of chance.

2. No god or other supernatural being is necessary to explain the world. The natural world of objects and events in space and time is all that is real.

3. Man is wholly a part of this natural world, and he is only an incidental product of the world process.

4. There are no absolute values or transcendental norms, known in no-empirical ways. All values and norms are in some sense a function of human attitudes, needs and satisfactions.
Parallels are drawn between naturalism and other systems such as empiricism, materialism, determinism, and pragmatism. All share to some extent a belief in the natural order and in experimental science.

Naturalism differs from others in its disavowal of traditional philosophy, believing that human problems can be solved through critical intelligence. Naturalism is traced back to British empiricism, and other European doctrines, but it came to flower in the United States in the 1930s and 1940s following the pioneering efforts of George Santayana and John Dewey and Dewey’s disciples.

And Anita Desai’s Maya in Cry, the Peacock, and Sita in Where Shall We Go This Summer? and Baumgartner in Baumgartner’s Bombay and Matteo in Journey to Ithaca favour rich comparison with Theodore Dreiser’s Sister Carrie. Sister Carrie and Anita Desai’s Maya in Cry, the Peacock, and Sita in Where Shall We Go This Summer? and Baumgartner in Baumgartner’s Bombay and Matteo in Journey to Ithaca suffer tragedy because of their environment. They are not able to create a second environment as recommended by Saul Bellow.

Moreover, suffering gives rise to a genuine sense of self and promotes self-awareness, self-knowledge, and self-discovery. In fact, one learns to be compassionating soul embracing humanistic concerns of love, kindness, goodness and mercy. The point that is made here is that suffering promotes humanism in the sufferer. After all what is against the credit of the individual is how he gives credit to the other as a human being.

Anita Desai’s Maya in Cry, the Peacock, and Sita in Where Shall We Go This Summer? and Baumgartner in Baumgartner’s Bombay and Matteo in Journey to Ithaca suffer because of their environment. For instance, Maya’s midsummer madness
heightens during the month of May. The heat glues her hair to the skin with perspiration. The heat oozes into the room and ours like thick warm, oil. It swells and expands till it becomes physical, a presence that presses against her body. This external heat relates itself with her psychic state, which causes Gautama’s fall. The outside heat is revealed as a parallel to the inside heat.

Similarly, the dust-cloud cloaks Maya’s vision. It predicts her future death and destruction. It becomes for Maya the final vision of her final fate. It is the inside insanity objectified. It makes Maya burst into a rhetorical flourish encompassing the events of her life. Her encounter with dust presages her violent act of killing Gautama.

Likewise, Sita in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* finds the home life and the surrounding nauseating atmosphere of Bombay as intolerable, but she has no control over the urbanized society of Bombay. In fact the environment of Bombay wields a control over her, and therefore she flees to Manori island to escape from her husband’s hostile and hypocritical world.

Reverting once again, to the consideration of how existential peril operates into the major fictions of Anita Desai, namely, *Cry, the Peacock*, *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* and *Baumgartner’s Bombay* and *Journey to Ithaca* it is argued that existentialism is a modern philosophical movement, that concerns itself with man’s disillusionment and despair.

Anita Desai’s chief concern is human relationship. Her central theme is the existential predicament of the individuals, such as, Maya in *Cry, the Peacock*, and Sita in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* and Baumgartner in *Baumgartner’s Bombay* and Matteo in *Journey to Ithaca* projected through the problems of the self in an emotionally
disturbed *milieu*. Delicately conscious of the reality around them, her protagonists, Maya in *Cry, the Peacock*, and Sita in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* and Baumgartner in *Baumgartner’s Bombay* and Matteo in *Journey to Ithaca* carry with them a sense of loneliness, alienation, and pessimism.

In fact, Anita Desai adds a new dimension to the genre of Indian fiction by probing the unquestionable existentialist concerns of her protagonists Maya in *Cry, the Peacock*, and Sita in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* and Baumgartner in *Baumgartner’s Bombay* and Matteo in *Journey to Ithaca*.

Toeing the line of the existential humanists, Anita Desai takes the term, *existentialism*, to mean mainly, the mad, the bad, the sordid, the shocking and the obscene. This is a narrow focus but it serves her fictional purpose adequately.

Anita Desai is obsessively occupied with the individuals’ quest for meaning and value, and for freedom and truth that provide spiritual nourishment to the estranged self in a seemingly chaotic and meaningless world. The search for identity on the part of the existential self in Anita Desai assumes a socio-psychic dimension.

In many of Anita Desai’s fictions the language and imagery have an existential tone. Anita Desai’s chief concern is human relationship. Her central theme is the existential predicament of the individuals projected through the problems of the self in an emotionally disturbed *milieu*. Delicately conscious of the reality around them, her protagonists carry with them a sense of loneliness, alienation, and pessimism. Desai adds a new dimension to the genre of Indian fiction in English by probing the unquestionable existentialist concerns of her protagonists. Anita Desai is obsessively
occupied with the individual’s quest for meaning and value, freedom and truth that provide spiritual nourishment to the estranged self in a seemingly chaotic and meaningless world.

Most of the protagonists adopt the existentialist, heroic posture to confront the ordeals of life. Anita Desai adopts the decadent type of existentialism that borders on nihilism. But the existentialism in Anita Desai’s fictions is not particularly disturbing. On the other hand, it is intellectually engaging and poetically captivating.

The protagonists of Anita Desai, such as, Maya in *Cry, the Peacock*, and Sita in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* and Baumgartner in *Baumgartner’s Bombay* and Matteo in *Journey to Ithaca* do not shy away from the assaults of existence. As existential protagonists Anita Desai’s Maya in *Cry, the Peacock*, and Sita in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* and Baumgartner in *Baumgartner’s Bombay* and Matteo in *Journey to Ithaca* face the problems of life single-handedly with courage and determination.

Experiencing disgusting absurdity of the world, they discover meaning in self-immolation or self-affirmation in a world irremediably absurd, where one is a stranger to oneself as well as to other people. Anita Desai’s fictions from *Cry, the Peacock* to her recent and latest fictions *Journey to Ithaca* and *Fasting, Feasting*, are studies in the depth and persistence of human affliction, inexorably sensitive and loving and compassionate as her protagonists are. Existential conflicts in Anita Desai spring from the self are craving for the fulfilment of certain psycho-emotional needs, from the desire to overcome the horror of separateness, of powerlessness, and of listlessness.
Anita Desai’s *Cry, the Peacock* depicts existentialism in its deep-seated morbidity though the neurotic and hysterical self of Maya pining for companionship. Here is an explosive life of non-communication. Her loneliness, her aching heart and the progressive disorientation of self make her an existential sufferer. The loneliness corroding her heart and lacerating her psyche is existential in nature. It makes her aware “of the loneliness of time, and the impossible vastness of space” [*Cry, the Peacock*, 1980, p. 29].

Anita Desai’s *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* is the shortest existential fiction. As in *Cry, the Peacock*, here too, Anita Desai very remarkably voices the terror of facing single handed assaults of existence, through her recurrent, favourite existential theme of husband-wife alienation.

An anguished soul, Sita in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* is fed up with the dreary metropolitan Bombay. Her father-fixation hinders her contact with her husband. Sita feels a frog out of water in her father-in-law’s age-old rotted flat. She feels that she is a pariah in her father-in-law’s house. She suffers from a life of subhuman placidity, calmness and sluggishness. Through Sita, Anita Desai projects the dehumanizing and destabilizing factors that cause suffering to Sita. Moreover, Sita suffers because she is not able to put up with the animal existence of human beings, including her husband’s. She argues thus [*Where Shall We Go This Summer?* 1982, p. 47]:

> They are nothing . . . nothing but appetite and sex. Only food, sex, and money matter. Animals . . .

Sita’s desperate escape to the idyllic environs of Manori Island is another exercise in futility. Everything is linked to her life of suffering.
Thus, it is established that Anita Desai’s Maya in *Cry, the Peacock*, and Sita in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* are psychologically fragmented individuals who rely chiefly on indirect methods of coping with a stress situation, which ventilates through various survival strategies. Escape, withdrawal, and a denial of reality are prominent primitive survival strategies among the protagonists of Anita Desai.

Anita Desai’s male characters Baumgartner in *Baumgartner’s Bombay* and Matteo in *Journey to Ithaca* are the suffering and struggling individuals. They pass through anxieties and tension - - *Angst* - - and experience stresses and strains - - *Sturm-und-Drang* and confront several hardships. The life of Baumgartner and Matteo gets reduced to one of endless suffering.

They experience continual struggle against forces of which in the case of some they are ignorant of their cause and effect factors, and in the case of others they are helplessly tossed about. They suffer from fear psychosis as to their present and their future. The environment, over which they have absolutely no control, controls them.

Baumgartner favours rich comparison with the old man Santiago of Hemingway’s *The Old Man and the Sea*, with the marked differences that Baumgartner is not old and that Santiago is not ignorant why he is suffering. Of the two, Baumgartner and Matteo, it is Baumgartner who is more affected by his environment in Berlin and then in Calcutta and finally in Bombay. He has no control over his environment.

In fact, it is the environment that has an iron grip over him and controls and determines his life. To appreciate this aspect of Baumgartner’s life it becomes imperative to have the theoretical knowledge concerning Naturalism, at this juncture. Baumgartner is a German Jew and naturally he suffers. The ironic part of it is that he
wishes to be accepted and he accepts everything and everybody but he is unwanted and
not accepted. He is too dark for Hitler’s society and too fair to be accepted in India. In
both the countries he stands a loner and a classic outsider. He remains a *firanghi* - - a
foreigner - - wherever he goes. It ought to be stressed that the suffering of the Jew
becomes acute and painful because of his Jewry. In fact, the intellectuals maintain that
the Jew is the type of the universal sufferer.

And Baumgartner’s sufferings follow as his shadow wherever he lives - -
Hitler’s Berlin, Calcutta, and Bombay. But then suffering is of exalting influence on
Baumgartner because it uplifts him and humanizes him.

Incidentally, whether Baumgartner stays in Berlin, Calcutta or Bombay, the
place of his residence is like the Egdon Heath of Clym Yeobright described by Thomas
Hardy in his tragic fiction, *The Return of the Native*. Just as Egdon Heath proves to be a
naturalistic environment that deterministically controls the life of Clym Yeobright and
Eustasia Wye, Berlin, Calcutta and Bombay control Baumgartner.

Moreover, suffering gives rise to a genuine sense of self and promotes self-
awareness, self-knowledge, and self-discovery. The pity of it is that the Jew by his
Jewry remains outside the social compact of the society where he lives, but ironically
and existentially right in the middle of the social drama. And the Jewish intellectuals
advise the Jews to appreciate the truth that self-discovery comes from suffering. There
is no meaning in accepting failure and defeat and harbouring a sense of doom and
annihilation. The Jews must rise above suffering and build a self-identity.

This is what Baumgartner tries to achieve but he is ignorant of the ways and
means as well as ignorant why he suffers where he suffers. The suffering Jew does not
surrender to despair. He does not allow himself to be crushed by suffering, which is an existential inevitability. He uses this experience of suffering to gain nobility of character and turn humanistic. All Jews are Jobs and all Jobs are good men, and Baumgartner is no exception. The Jews realize that suffering is the human lot. To escape suffering is impossible. But to turn into a good man through suffering all kinds of pains and miseries is not impossible.

In fact, one learns to be a compassionating soul embracing humanistic concerns of love, kindness, goodness and mercy. This is what Baumgartner turns out to be notwithstanding his sufferings. The point that is made here is that suffering promotes humanism in the sufferer. After all what is against the credit of the individual is how he gives credit to the other as a human being. As the compassionating soul he shows great sympathy on Kurt, the young German, only to meet with cruelty at the hands of Kurt. Anita Desai describes this scene grippingly and graphically thus [Baumgartner’s Bombay, 1989, p. 219]:

Kurt steadied himself, drawing his feet together, straightening his legs, both to ensure his balance and give him a position of strength. He brought his hands together so that both clasped the hasp of the knife and it seemed to take long moments before he could get his grip right, place his fingers in correct alignment, summoning up all his faculties so that they gathered in that one shaft. Then, with great speed, he raised the knife, then bent, and plunged it in, deep into that soft tallow so that it shuddered and let out a kind of whimper, or just a gasp, but some kind of flutter. It had to cease, it had to be made to cease. Withdrawing the knife, he plunged it again, and again, and again. With increasing slowness and
increasing weakness, till all movements came to a halt - - the rocking, the
quivering, the flutter, the gasp, all ended. . . .

This is a cruel end to the good Baumgartner who tastes only suffering, and
misery. Incidentally, Anita Desai’s world often proposes a kind of hard won eked out
saintliness: suffering and spiritual goodness are somehow linked. Concerning the cruel
death of Baumgartner Tony Simoes De Silva makes a pointed observation, which is
worth recording here [“Whose Bombay Is It Anyway? Anita Desai’s Baumgartner’s
Bombay”, ARIEL, 28 (3 July, 1997), 75]:

* Baumgartner’s Bombay * culminates with the death of Baumgartner at the
hands of Kurt. The symbolism, if anything, is transparent. It would seem
inevitable that Baumgartner a Jewish refugee from Nazi Germany should
be murdered by a modern day heir to Adolf Hitler’s poisonous
legacy. The manner of his death, however, and particularly the
carnivalesque quality of the scenes that ensue, are less
straightforwardly obvious. . . .

Derek Wright’s pointed argument reads well in conjunction with the assertion of
Tony Simoes De Silva [“Voyage Than Destination: Anita Desai’s Journey to Ithaca”,
RJ #, 1 & 2 (1995), 102-103]:

When he [Baumgartner] is stabbed to death by a vicious, drug-crazed
youth whom he has sheltered, his body oozes a “diarrhoea of blood”.
Baumgartner, a German Jew, who narrowly avoids the Nazi death camps
and then becomes an enemy alien interned in wartime British India, ends
his life as a drifter in a seedy, alcoholic expatriate community, cut off
from comprehension of an Indian world with which he shares only his degradation. A sleepwalker through his incredible history, he cushions himself against the horrors of both his German past and his Indian present by filtering it through infantile nursery rhymes and idyllic nostalgias. “Ignorance was after all, his element”, comments the narrator as he is murdered in his bed. It is also the element of his psychopathic killer, a dark version of the romantic-exotic addict who, in his drug-induced deliriums, conjures demented fantasies of India - - ritual sacrifice, cannibalism, diabolism - - from European travellers’ tall tales, gothic fairy stories, and Tantric myth-lore [My Emphasis]. . . .

Suffering teaches Baumgartner to do the right things to Kurt and thereby takes him to happiness, but not Kurt, the drug addict. Baumgartner learns that suffering is what brings one to happiness and the normative centre of suffering lies in teaching man to want the right things. But the pity of it is that Baumgartner has the appetite and strength and vitality of the natural person, but lacks the perception and insight of an individuated person. He allows to be swayed by Lotte and others.

Anita Desai traces in Baumgartner’s Bombay the growth of inwardness and the value of suffering. She strikes an affirmative note by arguing that man can redefine his life in the face of deprivation, disaster and other conditions of suffering. The greatness of Baumgartner’s Bombay lies in Anita Desai’s ability to treat the existential predicament of Baumgartner comprehensively.

Furthermore, Anita Desai marries the imaginatively born unreal with the factually real. Moreover, there is the affirmation of man’s ability to realize himself even
in the face of deprivation and disaster. Anita Desai presents Baumgartner as experiencing acutely and sharply the existential predicaments of suffering, *Angst*, and living a life of continual struggle.

Baumgartner is literally a fugitive from tyranny and injustice, running away from Hitler’s Berlin to Calcutta and from there to Bombay, with the hope for a better future always. All the same he understands the fact that the price for aspiration is invariably suffering, but he still feels that the bargain is worthwhile.

Anita Desai concentrates on the dominant existential predicament of suffering and argues for the need for hope no matter how heavy the burden of suffering and the necessity of not shutting one’s heart to the suffering and hopes of others. Anita Desai argues that the Jew serves to represent the individual’ existential situation as an isolated, displaced loner who has the potential for achieving moral transcendence through sufferings that engender insight and commitment to love. Anita Desai maintains that goodness is its own reward and evil inflicts its own punishments. Anita Desai projects through Baumgartner in *Baumgartner’s Bombay*. The argument goes that no suffering can be redeemed by any act of God, or the State. The only solution for the problem of evil is for people to respect and nourish each other.

Baumgartner and Matteo painfully experience *Angst* and anguish. The freedom that they enjoy is incompatible with the kind of comfort, which they wish to enjoy. They experience nausea. Their world is one, which blends despair with hope, pain with possibility, and suffering with moral growth.

Thus, through Baumgartner and Matteo Anita Desai captures the joy as well as the pain of life.
Anita Desai defines the dignity of human spirit searching for freedom and moral growth in the face of hardship, injustice, and existential anguish of life in our time. She captures, in fine the existential sense of horror in the modern world. As the existential hero, the experience of Baumgartner is one of unmitigated suffering. If Hitler’s Nazi Germany proves to be a naturalistic and deterministic force against which Baumgartner struggles and suffers, Calcutta and Bombay serve as the final horror of his predicament. In this context, Tony Simoes De Silva states [“Whose Bombay Is It Anyway?: Anita Desai’s Baumgartner’s Bombay”, ARIEL, 28 (3 July 1997), 65]:

. . . Bombay and India are simply the setting of Baumgartner's existential crisis. . . .

Derek Wright’s pointed argument reads well in conjunction with the assertion of Tony Simoes De Silva and it is worth recording here [“Voyage Than Destination: Anita Desai's Journey to Ithaca”, RJ #, 1 & 2 (1995), 102]:

The Calcutta and Bombay of Baumgartner’s Bombay are places of mud and filth in which the eponymous protagonist is a degraded and putrescent presence, unwashed, rarely changing his clothes, eating leftover food from a local café, and stinking of the city cats he harbours. . . .

Baumgartner is locked within the prison of his own suffering. Strangely, he proclaims the efficacy of suffering. It teaches him to desire for right things. He projects himself as the existential hero of patience and endurance. He is painfully; even pridefully aware of the tragic undercurrents of human existence. He demonstrates the suffering as the expression of true goodness. He proves true the religious definition of existential suffering.
James Hastings argues [Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics, xii, 1970, p. 22]:

Suffering, it will be urged, is a splendid moral discipline. God is present in all pain. He suffers in all suffering. He is the chief sufferer in the world. . . .

The dominant existential predicaments that Anita Desai explores in Baumgartner’s Bombay and Journey to Ithaca are that life is one of struggle and that in struggle is existence, and that life is marked by endless suffering.

In the manner of Fyodor Dostoevsky, Anita Desai maintains that suffering is the unavoidable part of human existence and it is a condition of freedom and mature awareness. In fact, the qualification of a sufferer as enunciated by Fyodor Dostoevsky defines Anita Desai’s Baumgartner and Matteo [Quoted in “The Sealed Creature”, in The Open Form: Essays for Our Time, 1965, p. 19]:

Like it or not, it is our nature to be free and under the sting of suffering to choose between good and bad. . . . And the romantic attitude is based on the concept of the inextricability of suffering, maturity and freedom. . . .

Like Baumgartner, Matteo is an existential hero whose dominant experiences have been to confront the harsh actualities posed by an un-understanding wife in Sophie, and struggles with them and suffers. Matteo becomes a powerful example of an existential sufferer, who redeems himself. He turns out to be a classic illustration of a human being’s ability to grow spiritually in the face of injustice, insults, and indignities.
Turning the focus on Anita Desai’s *Baumgartner’s Bombay* again, it ought to be noted that the novel opens with the murder of Hugo Baumgartner, a Jew, by a young German, many years after Baumgartner’s escape from Nazi Germany to India. Judie Newman analytically presents the gist of the story *Baumgartner’s Bombay* thus [“History and Letters: Anita Desai’s *Baumgartner’s Bombay*”, p. 1]:

In *Baumgartner’s Bombay*, however, Desai departs from her previous practice, in order to interrogate the relation of discourse to history, the language of the interior to that of the outer world. In this connection various inter-textual devices are significant - - letters, literary references, songs, nursery rhymes, and traveller’s tales. . . . Baumgartner’s story comes full circle and his trajectory is strongly marked by repetition. After being dispossessed in Germany as a Jew, narrowly avoiding the Nazi camps, he is seized in India as a German and imprisoned for six years as an enemy in a British internment camp. When world war gives way to partition struggles, his Moslem business partner in Calcutta is dispossessed in his turn by Hindus. After Baumgartner’s return to Bombay, however, the death of his new Hindu partner sees him booted out once more, into an independent India, which has little use for Europeans. The plot, therefore, seems to imply that history is only a meaningless series of re-enactments, a story which repeats itself. In Salman Rushdie’s dictum: “Europe repeats itself, in India, as farce”. . . .

Baumgartner’s sufferings begin from his childhood. He suffers as a result of his father fully concentrating on his furniture and not on fulfilling the longings of his child-son, Baumgartner. His mother’s possessiveness is another source of his worry. The
affluence of his father and the seclusion he is driven into by his over cautious mother is a strange admixture of the unwanted condition in the life of the growing child, Baumgartner. He is forced to turn pensive, and this pensiveness lands him in a further state of misery. In fine, his childhood was quite an unenviable state of pain and misery, notwithstanding his father’s growing wealth.

Anita Desai in the opening pages of her fiction, Baumgartner’s Bombay traces the several stages of sufferings encountered by Baumgartner in his child, and these passages make interesting reading.

The first textual passage fixes the discomfort to the child, Baumgartner by the restrictions and impositions laid on him by his father and mother and reducing his stay in his own home with a prison-like atmosphere. The passage runs thus [Baumgartner’s Bombay, 1989, p. 26]:

At home, Hugo skirted back and forth between his apartment and his father’s showroom and staircase in between a place of perilous choice, the no man’s land where he might be summoned and drawn by either. ...

Baumgartner’s mother was highly possessive. She was overcautious of her son. She loved to keep his movements confined to quarters close to her apartment or Baumgartner’s apartment. Furthermore, she did not want her son to be exposed to the competitive world of business in which Baumgartner’s father was always seriously engaged. Her intentions could have been well conceived, but her execution of the same was crude.
This affected the psyche of the child, Baumgartner, who developed a kind of hatred towards his mother, for restricting his movements and for denying him the opportunity to have an outing with his father. The textual passage runs thus [Baumgartner’s Bombay, 1989, p. 27]:

His [Baumgartner’s] mother did not like him to watch these commercial transactions. Whenever there was such a sale or delivery going on, she would send Berthe out on the landing to call him. He thought it was because she feared the deliverymen in their large, navy blue, wool coats as he too, a little, feared them. He went up with a mixture of relief and reluctance that gave him a stoic air [My Emphasis] . . . .

It is this possessive nature of his mother that kills the spirit for life in Baumgartner. Her letters to her son for three years from 1939 to 1941 once every month bear the same burden of asking her son to look after himself with care and caution. The textual passage makes interesting reading and it is worth quoting here [Baumgartner’s Bombay, 1989, p. 164]:

He [Baumgartner read the letters that had never reached him while he was in the Nazi Concentration Camp] searched the dates for clues. There was one for every month from October 1939 onwards . . . Each bore a stamped message that read, “Rückantwort nur an Postkarten in deutscher Sprache”. What officialdom they had passed through, giving them this chilling aspect? “Answers on postcard only, in German”. Only the endearments were familiar: “Meine kleine Maus”, “Mein Haschen”, and the signature: “Mutti”, “Muttilien”. “Mu”. Apart from them the
messages were strangely empty, repetitive and cryptic. “Keep well, my rabbit. Do not worry. I am well. Where are you, my mouse? Are you well? I am well. Do not worry, I have enough. Have you enough? Mutti, Mu”. Nothing more. There was none dated later than February 1941. . .

Whenever Baumgartner was denied the opportunity to go out along with his father, by his possessively inclined mother, he will turn furious. This surrendering to bouts of irritations and anger is another source of his misery and suffering. The textual passage is worth to quote here [Baumgartner’s Bombay, 1989, p. 33]:

Left alone with her, left behind by his father, he kicked at her with savagery, pummelled her chest with his fists, furiously. He blamed her [Baumgartner’s mother], blamed her entirely. When she put her arms around him and tried to draw him to her, it was that encirclement of soft, sweet-smelling arms that he blamed for his imprisonment in this flat, this house [My Emphasis]. . . .

Baumgartner’s longing as a child for an outing to the races with his father never gets fulfilled even once. And this is again the source of his suffering and feeling miserable about everything in life. The textual passage runs thus [Baumgartner’s Bombay, 1989, pp. 34-35]:

When his [Baumgartner’s] father left the apartment, dressed for the races, in his hat and with his ivory-topped cane, Hugo could not believe. For a long time his mouth remained open, and he watched the door, certain it would open again and his father would come to fetch him. How could he not be taken to share a treat? The minutes passed, the footsteps on the
stairs receded till they could be heard no more. The door slammed. Then Hugo moved, with a roar. He ran to the window and beat on the glass as if to break it, so that his mother had to hold him away even if she were kicked and beaten. “Hugo”, she said at last, kneeling there with her hands in her lap, “Hugo, I have never been either. He looked at her with the hatred of one prisoner for the other [My Emphasis]. . . .

This life of suffering persists even in Baumgartner’s school, which was another prison for him. The textual passage is given here in extenso [Baumgartner’s Bombay, 1989, pp. 37-38]:

Then, as it happened, he [Baumgartner] never returned to that school. In the New Year, speaking to him with an artificial, brittle lightness of manner, his mother took him on the tram a long, long way into the city instead, on a gray grizzling morning, with office-goers and shop and factory-workers hemming them in with folds of dark, damp wool, all the way to the other end of the city, he felt, and then delivered him up to what seemed a warehouse with no windows or lights, only a mass of squirming, frantic children and a teacher who had a face like curdled milk in pan and was called Reb Benjamin; Hugo recoiled from his grease-lined collar and patched and odorous jacket; strange, large volumes lay open on his desk from which he read in a harsh and melodramatic tone in a language Hugo had never heard before. The boys who shared a wooden bench with Hugo spent the morning trying to shove him off so that he had to grip the edge of the seat to keep from falling off. “Was it los, Baumgartner? What is the matter”, the teacher
asked. “Is it the bathroom you need already? And the children grew
pinched and blue in the face with laughter. It was in this school for
Jewish children, oddly enough, that Hugo first had a remark directed at
his nose. When he went out into the yard where the mud was frozen and
broke under his shoes, he heard around him a chant that came from all
the children as they jumped, hopped and clapped their hands to keep
warm: “Baumgartner, Baum, hat ein Nase wie ein Daum! Baumgartner’s
dumb, has a nose like a thumb!” He fell to fingering it nervously, trying
to discover the relation between his nose and his thumb, a habit that
never let him [Italics as in the Original]. . . .

As his father’s furniture business dwindled the growing Baumgartner began to
feel the pinch of penury. Of course, they were not as poor as others, but his father and
mother were highly depressed and this added to his worry and misery. The textual
passage is quoted here [Baumgartner’s Bombay, 1989, pp. 40-41]:

Yet they were not as poor as others were. Unlike the men who searched the
dustbins for chicken bones and slept under sheets of Berliner Zeitung, or
the women who stood on the streets because there was nowhere else to go,
their scent reeking of cheapness, the Baumgartners did not starve. Somehow Herr Baumgartner brought in money, sometimes from the
racecourse to which he still went, whenever the Gentleman from Hamburg
came and sometimes even without him - - but without that debonair air of
twirling his moustache or his ivory-topped cane - - merely thoughtfully,
worriedly or guiltily. Hugo no longer asked to accompany him [his father];
he did not like the looks their neighbours threw them when they left the
house, and knew it would be worse on the racecourse; he wished his father
did not go. He sat on the window-seat, watching till he returned, and then
left the room so as not to hear his parents’ conversation. “But Siegfried”,
he heard his mother whisper, “in this we are not alone”.

“Who is there? Who is there?” his father asked dramatically, not
whimpering at all. He was opening and closing his fists as to catch a fly. .

The complete financial ruin of his father brought added misery to Baumgartners.

They were subjected to nervous anxiety and fear as to what would happen to them at the
hands of the moneylenders. As they feared they were subjected to hardship of the worst
kind. Anita Desai depicts this scene of suffering. And this is again a source of
suffering for Baumgartner. The textual passage is quoted here in extenso

In the night the noises in the street were so hideous that Hugo stirred but
only to slip deeper into his bed. He woke when his mother sank silently
down at his bedside. “Don’t look”, she told him, “don’t get up”, and he
obediently pulled up his quilt, burrowed under its protection and breathed
in the darkness. Next morning he saw the letters JUDE painted in red on
the showroom window.

His father was standing in the hall and staring out. Immobile. He made
no move to wipe it off. When Hugo spoke to him, he answered in a kind
of hiss that frightened Hugo so much, he ran. The next night the noise
increased - - glass splintered, crashed, slid all over the floor in slanting,
shining heaps. Men lifted tables, commodes, armoires, chaises-lounges,
and the mirrors of the walls; it sounded as if the house, the whole street were being evacuated. His father stood at the window upstairs and watched, cursing, but his mother held Hugo by his arm and would not let him go near. “If they see you they will stone you”, she warned, sternly enough to stall him. “Hide, we must hide, Siegfried”. Hugo found himself shamefully willing to do so, even the broom cupboard seemed a haven on that night . . .

Baumgartner’s sufferings continued to persist him, wherever he went. It began in his childhood. It continued when the Nazi Gestapo under the leadership of Adolf Hitler persecuted the Jews in the Concentration Camps. Baumgartner eludes death in the Concentration Camps by fleeing to India - - to look after the timber-supplying end of the furniture business.

There is a brief spell of high life and high business in Calcutta - - then the war reaches British India and Baumgartner is interned for six years as an enemy alien, a German. The prison life in the text is depicted thus [Baumgartner’s Bombay, 1989, p. 108]:

Timetables were pinned to the notice boards, whistles were blown, and sirens sounded. The men queued up in order to collect blankets, tin spoons and plates, work tools. They queued up again to have their tin plates heaped with coarse rice and lentils ladled out of buckets; then they lined upon benches in a great draughty hall to eat the stuff. At the sound of another whistle, they were all in the bathhouse, washing themselves with cold water. Another whistle they sunk into the bunks, expected to sleep like schoolboys. In different circumstances, it might have seemed
an insane but all the same highly comical dream - - grown men fading themselves returned to their school, a rigorous and not uncharacteristically vicious one. . . .

Another textual passage grippingly presents the sufferings of Baumgartner and his longing for the war to end so that he could experience release from his sufferings. The passage it is worth quoting here [Baumgartner’s Bombay, 1989, p. 132]:

Then you would see how Mann has described it all, all, just as you say, in The Magic Mountain. But Baumgartner was not attracted by the title, it seemed to have no relevance to this flat, dust-smothered camp, and he thought that it was just like Schwarz to refer everything in life to books as though that were the natural solution and end of it all. While Schwarz droned on about a sanatorium in the mountains about the sick and the healthy, about sanity and lunacy, Baumgartner sighed, shuffled, smoked, slapped at mosquitoes, and wondered when it would be cool enough to go inside and sleep. . . .

Janette Turner Hospital observes, the nature of Baumgartner in the face of the harsh actualities of life [“The Heroic Outsider”, The Toronto South Asian Review, Winter 1989, p. 68]:

But in Baumgartner’s Bombay something has changed. In the face of great and active evils (war, imprisonment, betrayal, murder, Hugo Baumgartner, the displaced Jew become Indian citizen, little man, outsider, firanghi, the Madman of the cats, buffoon, recognizable a Desai protagonist in his heroic refusal to accept defeat, nevertheless has
abandoned the quest for meaning. Over and over, Baumgartner quietly reiterates for himself the bleak fact that there is nothing to be set in the balances against random savagery, and the butchery of family and friends [My Emphasis]. . . .

In one of the book’s many ironies, Nazis and Jews (all “Germans”) are thrown together in the same internment camp, and a war is chronicled. When that war ends, Baumgartner is released, the streets of Calcutta are full of ferment, full of Congresswallahs and Jinnah supporters and partition violence. The textual passage depicts Baumgartner’s life in Calcutta and it reads thus [Baumgartner’s Bombay, 1989, p. 166]:

The Calcutta he lived in now – the Calcutta that had seen the famine of 1943, that had prepared for a Japanese attack, that has been used and drained by the war and war profiteers and now prepared for the great partition - - - was the proper setting for his mourning. . . . The hopelessness of it seemed right to Baumgartner; this was how the world ended, there was no other ending. . . .

The life in Calcutta ended for him with the beginning of the partition riots. Perforce he had to move to Bombay, his ultimate place of suffering and tragic end. As a grown up fugitive from Nazi Germany first in Calcutta and then in Bombay he relives the days when he was loquacious and how he has turned now one incapable of a fair and coherent speech. This loss of the art of effective communication means is one of the causes of his sufferings. The textual passage makes interesting reading [Baumgartner’s Bombay, 1989, p. 11]:
There was a time when he [Baumgartner] enjoyed every opportunity to talk, even to strangers, particularly strangers since all acquaintances with them, however quick, however warm, had to be fleeting leaving him to go on alone. Now the habits of a hermit were growing upon him like some crustaceous effluent; it required an effort, almost a physical effort, to crack it, to break through to the liquidity and flow and shift and kinesis of language. Crustaceous - - crab - - ungainly turtle: that was how he thought of himself that was how he saw himself, - - an old turtle trudging through dusty Indian soil. . .

Ultimately at the end of the novel, Baumgartner’s Bombay, the only enlightenment is a stark one. The meaning is that there is no meaning. Two textual passages conclusively sum up the sufferings of Baumgartner, and they are introduced one in juxtaposition to the other. The first one reads thus [Baumgartner’s Bombay, 1989, p. 211]:

Nothing, then, was what life dwindled down to, but Baumgartner found he enjoyed nothing more than he had enjoyed anything. . . .

The second passage runs thus [Baumgartner’s Bombay, 1989, p. 219]:

*Ignorance was, after all, his element. Ignorance was what he had made his own. It was his country, the one he lived with familiarity and resignation and relief* [My Emphasis]. . . .

Turning the focus on Anita Desai’s fiction, Journey to Ithaca, it ought to be stressed that the male character’s sufferings are mainly due to an un-understanding wife in Sophie.
Matteo’s childhood was one that was clouded by his pensive moods. In his reflective nature, and silent withdrawal from others begin his pain and misery, and suffering. The following passage captures the pensive character of Matteo, which was a cause of his sufferings. The passage also highlights the disparity in the dress modes of Sophie and Matteo, which is a subtle representation of the discord and disharmony that prevailed in the home of Matteo because of Sophie [Journey to Ithaca, 1995, p. 41]:

That was what Sophie suspected most - - Matteo’s reflexiveness. She kept a sharp and suspicious eye on him, especially when Pandey came to visit them. Swinging his leg energetically up and down under the table in the restaurant, Mr Pandey enthused. “She is great, the Perfume Saint, no?” Up and down, up and down swung his leg. “I can show you others, many other like her - - saints, great souls, siddhis. Our country is full of such people who have found enlightenment. I will take you to see others if you like”. Matteo too as if hypnotized, swung his leg - - up and down, up and down - - although more slowly, in wide pyjamas. He had given up wearing Western dress - - he was dressed now in wide pyjamas and a cotton vest bought from a pavement stall, already tattered and faded from the original red to a mottled salmon pink. . . .

Anita Desai admirably and adequately traces the withdrawal syndrome of Matteo, which was another factor that added to his sufferings. There are two textual passages that highlight this facet of Matteo’s suffering character. The first passage is quoted in extenso [Journey to Ithaca, 1995, p. 14]:
To begin with, Matteo cannot be separated and made to stand clear of all
the uneven surfaces, the subtle colourings and the shadowy inter-
weavings that construct the house and their family. He dwells in them, a
pattern of the Chinese silk screens in the bedrooms, no more than a gray
and white moth’s wings brushing across the ivory silks, and the merest
shadow in the tapestries in the hall, thickly woven forests in blue in
which birds hang suspended in silence and apples redden sunlessly. He
hides from Nonna, and from Isabel, in the rushes of the lake in the great
tapestry that hangs over the table in the hall, together with a stag that has
been driven into its waters by baying hounds while the huntsman blows
his horn to summon the hunter with the knife for the kill.

Frightened out of hiding, Matteo leaps up into the chandeliers like a
small monkey, and hangs there, no more than a velvet tassel, of olive, or
mahogany silk, or a spray of bronze ivy or mistletoe, or leaves of crystal
that catch the light and separate it into fragments of ice. If Isabel
tiptoes in to find him, if he catches at a corner of the tapestry and shakes
it or pushes a brocade-upholstered chair out of a dusty corner or draws a
forbidden book of a shelf in the Library, *Matteo flees, as thirty years
previously he had fled from his mother* [My Emphasis]. . .

The second passage even more clearly underscores the withdrawal syndrome
that causes sufferings in Matteo and it reads thus [*Journey to Ithaca*, 1995, pp. 26-27]:

*Matteo was running once again. They could not stop him - - he would not
stay in the house or garden, he would climb the walls or over the gate if*
they locked it, and run and run as if all he wanted was to place a distance between them and himself, a distance he drew out to greater and greater lengths with each run [My Emphasis]. . . .

Matteo’s school life was literally hellish. He hated his school for he felt that his seclusion was eroded and that the curriculum was a great bugbear for him. He could not understand his teacher’s language and expression. Therefore, Matteo found his stay within the school highly tormenting and at every opportunity he would stay away from the school only to avoid the tortuous conditions at the school. The textual passage makes interesting reading, and to quote it here *in extenso* [*Journey to Ithaca*, 1995, p. 18]:

The sense of mathematical mystery proves prophetic. Matteo could understand nothing. He rubbed and rubbed at the pencil markings in his book till everything was a gray blue but could come to no solution; none that was accurate. If he was in any doubt about that, he was soon provided by certainty: the angry slashing lines made across the page by Father Giustino’s pen and the zeros furiously scrawled in the margins.

Failure followed him up and down the long corridors of the school. In the choir, Matteo learnt that he could not sing. At home he had bellowed out the hymns in San Giacomo along with Caroline and his mother and no one had told him that the sounds he made were not singing. Now he was told. *It baffled him like the geometry and algebra.*

Matteo had always played by himself. Now he was put into a team and saw that he was expected to play with, and for the team, not for himself. But he did not know how to do that. *He watched the other boys from the*
corners of his eyes and tried to pick up clues but they always proved wrong [My Emphasis]. . .

The unsympathetic response of Matteo’s mother to his miseries in school only attenuated the pains and pangs of Matteo. The textual passage is worth quoting here, [Journey to Ithaca, 1995, p. 19]:

He [Matteo] looked away, sulking. He would tell them nothing about the school or his uncle’s household. His answers to their questions were sullen and monosyllabic. He would eat none of the meat and gravy and pastries Mama tried to force on him; he insisted he wanted only bread and water that was all.

“She’s perverse”, Mama exclaimed. “Unnatural! I call this unnatural”.

Matteo gave her a cool look; he said something she was to remember later. He said, “You don’t know what natural means, Mama”. . .

In the following passage Matteo displays his hatred towards his father. In fact, the one who submits to the baser and ugly passions of jealousy, anger, and hatred naturally suffers. The seeds for such a state had been sowed way back by Satan who grew jealous because Jesus was given the preferred place on the right hand side of the Living God. He therefore entertained anger against, and hatred towards the Living God, which culminated in his being thrown out of Heaven and driven into the bottomless Hell of eternal punishment and suffering. The textual passage is quoted here, in extenso [Baumgartner’s Bombay, 1995, p. 29]:
Matteo looked at him [his father] with the faintest smile as at something so absurd it merited no more than that - - a smile. If he had taken it seriously, he might have struggled but he gave no grounds for complaint. . . .

With his marriage with Sophie begins another phase of Matteo’s sufferings. In the face of apparent agreement in their voyage to India, there are already signs of discord, disparity, and disharmony. She wants to deduct why and how Laila turned into the Holy Mother, and Matteo moves to India blindly based on superficial understanding of Herman Hesse’s book, *The Journey to the East*. The textual passage is worth quoting here, *Journey to Ithaca*, 1995, p. 31:

In the summer of 1975, Sophie and Matteo, having first married to pacify their tearful and lamenting parents, left for India, dressed in identical blue jeans and T-shirts and sports shoes, carrying identical rucksacks on their backs as did so many of their generation in Europe. Only Sophie still her hair very short and Matteo was growing his long. They left on foot. In Matteo’s pocket was the copy Fabian had left him of Hesse’s *The Journey to the East*. . . .

Matteo comes across Hermann Hesse’s *The Journey to the East* quite unexpectedly. The textual passage runs thus, *Journey to Ithaca*, 1995, p. 21:

Matteo craned forward to read the title: *The Journey to the East* by Hermann Hesse. Matteo was confused - - what was it, a geography text?

Papa bellowed, “is it in English? The boy must read English. English is what you must read with him”.
“I will, and we will read it together”, the young man lightly replied, and took a cream, horn from the plate on the table and bit into it without any self-consciousness. Over its ridged crust he gave the watching Matteo a cream-flecked smile... 

Matteo’s sufferings never end because he went to India without a deep knowledge of what India is and what its scriptures, Vedanta and religions represent. Quoting C. P. Cavafy’s Ithaca in the fly leaf of the fiction Journey to Ithaca, bearing no page number, Anita Desai argues the point that without a thorough knowledge of Oriental philosophy and Hindu religion Matteo ventured into India only to attenuate his sufferings. The significant, relevant, and consequential passage runs thus:

Always keep Ithaca fixed in your mind.

To arrive there is your ultimate goal.

But do not hurry the voyage at all.

It is better to let it last for long years;
and even t anchor at the isle when you are old,
rich with all you have gained on the way,
not expecting that Ithaca will offer you riches

[My Emphasis]. . . .

In India Matteo’s continual struggle is to grapple with Oriental philosophy and religion. More than that he had to suffer at the hands of Sophie who as a wife never understood him and sympathized with him. To quote the textual passage, [Journey to Ithaca, 1995, p. 47]:

155
Yet when Matteo came to her in the night, she [Sophie] fought him off fiercely. “I can’t - - I can’t here, in this zoo. I want to go away. I want us to be by ourselves”.

“By ourselves”, Matteo withdrew in distress. “By ourselves we will never come to know India”.

“Why not? I want to go to Goa and eat shrimp. I want to go to Kashmir and live in a houseboat. And lie in the sun and shampoo my hair and eat omelettes all day”.

Matteo was disgusted. “That isn’t India”.

In the following interesting dialogue what surfaces is the discord and disharmony that prevailed between Sophie and Matteo, resulting in Matteo suffering a great deal in the company of a woman, who never understood him at all. The textual passage is worth quoting here, *in extenso* [Journey to Ithaca, 1995, p. 57]:

Matteo lay with his limbs spread out, wanting only to sleep. Why would she not lie down quietly and let him sleep? He groaned, “What do you want, Sophie?”

“I want to know why we are here [in India]”.

“I told you - - to find India, to understand India, and the mystery at the heart of India”.

“I have found it. At its heart is a dead child. A dead child Matteo!”

“Don’t shout, Sophie, I can hear”, he hissed. “And why is it a dead child? Why not the temple? Or the people climbing up the hill, singing when they reach their goal? Why not their journey, our journey?”
“Because at the end of that journey is a dead child”, she repeated. Matteo covered his ears with his hands.

“Don’t people die elsewhere?” he cried. “Haven’t children ever died in your own country?”

“Then why”, she breathed, lowering her knees and coming closer to him, “couldn’t we say in our country? To die there?” . . .

The following dialogue captures for the perceptive and critically oriented readers the disharmony prevailing in the home of Sophie and Matteo [Journey to Ithaca, 1995, pp. 33-34]:

“When will we leave, Matteo?” she [Sophie] asked sharply, out of a wish to interrupt more than anything else, and break into his privacy. “Must we wait till the Mother’s death?”

He looked at her sorrowfully, not closing his book, or putting down his pen. “You are free to leave when you like, Sophie”, he said, trying to sound cool and controlled. She hated it when he made his effort to seem controlled.

“I know”, she replied, “I know I am free. But you? What I want to know about is you. Are you free?”

“I am free, Sophie”, he said in the same infuriating tone. “But I am waiting - - for a sign. I have always waited for signs. And then followed them”. He shifted his legs in their threadbare pyjamas: they were still pathetically thin and weak. “I must follow the signs. There is a design”.
She threw back her head, rolling her eyes at the ceiling. “A design? You mean, your destiny? Look - - just look - - how glorious!” She swept her arm to indicate the sick room, its enamel pan, its steel furniture, its metal tumbler of water and tray for pills, and the patients slowly shuffling down the veranda outside the door. . . .

It is because of the mindset of Sophie and Matteo operating in a diagonally opposite directions Matteo suffers a great deal at the hands of his wife who is a confirmed rationalist. The textual passage makes interesting reading [Journey to Ithaca, 1995, pp. 43]:

Another time she did have Matteo to herself by the sea. They walked alone the Worli surface, bending over as the wind struck at them, laughing when the waves climbed so high over the seawall that they towered, briefly glittering over their heads, and then washed over the street to the delighted shrieks of the other walkers.

“Monsoon is coming!” they heard children scream. “Monsoon is coming!”

“When?” Sophie asked screwing up her eyes at the livid sky, the heavy leaden light of the afternoon. “I don’t see it, do you?”

“Sophie, Sophie”, Matteo said, putting an arm over her shoulders and shaking her, “will you believe only when you see?” [My Emphasis] . . .

Thus, Anita Desai projects Maya of Cry, the Peacock, Sita of Where Shall We Go this Summer? and Baumgartner of Baumgartner’s Bombay and Matteo of Journey to Ithaca as the suffering selves, quite convincingly and persuasively. It is to her credit as an artist of integrity that she has done an outstanding job in these portrayals.