CHAPTER VI

ANITA DESAI AND THE WOUNDED SELF
Anita Desai's modernist novels have received widespread publicity and favourable critical response for their formal coherence and lyrical texture. But what is more interesting is the way in which the lyrical texture of her novels unravels the complexity associated with women who are burdened with the problems they confront in negotiating with a network of familial relations. The following passage from *Fire on the Mountain* illustrates the point:

The old house, the full house, of that period of her life when she was the Vice-Chancellor's wife and at the hub of a small but intense and busy world, had not pleased her. Its crowding had stifled her.

There had been too many trees in the garden—dark, dusty guava and mango trees, full of too many marauding parrots and squirrels and children that raided them for fruit and either over-ate or fell from the tops.

There had been too many servants in the long, low row of whitewashed huts behind the kitchen, so that the drains often choked and overflowed, and the nights were loud with the sounds of festive drumming, of drunken singing and brawling, of bathing and washing and wailing children.
There had been too many guests coming and going, tongas and rickshaws piled up under the eucalyptus trees and the bougainvilleas, their drivers asleep on the seats with their feet hanging over the bars. The many rooms of the house had always been full, extra beds would have had to be made up, often in not very private corners of the hall or veranda, so that there was a shortage of privacy that vexed her. Too many trays of tea would have to be made and carried to her husband's study, to her mother-in-law's bedroom, to the veranda that was the gathering-place for all, at all times of the day. Too many meals, too many dishes on the table, too much to wash up after.

They had had so many children, they had gone to so many different schools and colleges at different times of the day, and had so many tutors—one for mathematics who was harsh and slapped the unruly boys, one for drawing who was lazy and smiled and did nothing, and others equally incompetent and irritating. Then there had been their friends, all of different ages and sizes and families.

She had suffered from the nimiety, the disorder, the fluctuating and unpredictable excess.

She had been so glad when it was over. She had been glad to leave it all behind, in the plains, like a great, heavy, difficult book that she had read through and was not required to read again.¹

The passage under review unmistakably suggests the loss of privacy a housewife experiences in discharging what society thinks to be her responsibility. Nanda Kaul feels that her life as the wife of a vice-chancellor is "like a great, heavy, difficult book that she had read through and was not required to read again." After reading the book, she felt happy to close it and is not interested in opening it again. She is afraid that her great-granddaughter's visit to her may force her to open the "troublesome ledger" again. The reasons for her fear and disinclination to get involved in a network of family relations are obvious. As the wife of a vice-chancellor, she has lived in an "intense and busy world." The repetition of the word "many" and other synonyms, reinforced by the participles "crowding," "drumming," "singing," "brawling," "bathing," "washing," and "wailing," graphs the shortage of privacy that vexes her and the crowding that stifles her. That the family is an essential part of a woman's expanding consciousness—and however disinclined she may be to reopen the past, the past has inseparable link with the present—is clearly orchestrated in the following passage from Clear Light of Day:

Fire on the Mountain, p. 30.
With her inner eye she saw how her own house and its particular history linked and contained her as well as her whole family with all their separate histories and experiences—not binding them within some dead and airless cell but giving them the soil in which to send down their roots, and food to make them grow and spread, reach out to new experiences and new lives, but always drawing from the same soil, the same secret darkness. That soil contained all time, past and future, in it. It was dark with time, rich with time. It was where her deepest self lived, and the deepest selves of her sister and brothers and all those who shared that time with her.\(^3\)

In the preceding passage, Bim, in a mood of intense reminiscence, accounts for the significance of "house" and "family" in maturing one's awareness and experience of the complexity and richness enshrined in familial relations.

While Nanda Kaul thinks her past to be a "troublesome ledger" and doesn't want to reopen it, Bim in *Clear Light of Day* feels a metaphysical thrill in thinking that "it was where her deepest self lived, and the deepest selves of her sister and brothers and all those who shared that tie with her."

Sita in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*, in order to avoid giving birth to another child, leaves her home and stays in an island where she has a house she inherited from her father.

When her husband goes there to take her to the city, where she may have a safe delivery, she tells him that one of her profound experiences of joy was when she beheld a couple in the hanging gardens. The couple were so absorbed in each other that they were like a work of art, and she adds, "They were not like us--they were inhuman, divine. So strange--that love, that sadness, not like anything I've seen or known. They were so white, so radiant, they made me see my own life like a shadow, absolutely flat, uncoloured. That, that was the only--the only happy ..."4 Raman, her husband, made uneasy by her strange words, tells her, "Any woman--any one would think you inhuman. You have four children. You have lived comfortably, always, in my house. You've not had worries. Yet your happiest memory is not of your children or your home but of strangers, seen for a moment, some lovers in a park. Not even of your own children."5 Sita, in a distracted mood, says, "Children only mean anxiety, concern--pessimism. Not happiness. What other women call happiness is just--just sentimentality."6 To Sita familial happiness or happiness in general doesn't consist in a har-

4Where Shall We Go This Summer?, pp. 146-147.
5Ibid., p. 147.
6Ibid., p. 147.
monious existence with one's near and dear. It is just sentimentality. Maya, Anita Desai's protagonist in *Cry, the Peacock*, causes the death of her husband, Gautama, in her struggle to achieve that which Sita calls sentimental.

The foregoing comments on Anita Desai's characters clearly demonstrate that most of her protagonists suffer from an extreme sort of self-introversion. We may not be wrong in saying that they are an intelligent but obsessed lot. The obsessions usually generate sometimes from a disharmonious family background, as we have it in *Voices in the City* and *Clear Light of Day*. In *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* and *Fire on the Mountain*, the obsessions are the consequence of the protagonists' craving for undisturbed introversion and introspection. Anita Desai's themes seem to direct her narrative mode, which we may call psycho-narration. But when she negotiates with a public theme, she employs the traditional narrative mode, which we notice in her latest novel, *In Custody*. Deven's struggle to capture and preserve the glory of Nur's Urdu poems leads to a shocking revelation, the deteriorating socio-cultural values. In order to draw a clear distinction between Anita Desai's private themes and public themes, and the narrative modes that organize them, let us first discuss *Voices in the City*, which has thematic complexity and textural richness.
Voices in the City dramatizes the waste-land motif of the city as a place that generates intense aridity of feeling and frustration. The atmosphere of the city, which dissolves all values of life and makes life amorphous, is suggested by the following passage, which is fairly representative:

Striding off the bridge into the coagulated blaze of light and sound and odour that was the city of Calcutta, Nirode cried: Unfair, life is unfair—and how faint and senseless it sounded in all that tumult of traffic and commerce about him. In the darkness of that unfairness he saw Arun's future as an undimming brightness. To have watched Arun play a game of cricket as a boy was to have been made aware of this ineffable brightness. His parents, his sisters, all had acknowledged it. Where the light came from, where was its source—each had his own theory about. His father had thought it to be a brilliant career as a surgeon and sportsman, his mother had insisted it would be the love everyone extended to him so freely and unquestioningly. His sisters—what had they thought? What were they thinking tonight? Nirode did not know, he only saw the tedious stability of this one light amidst all the uneven glare that issued from the tea-shops, the grain shops, the stalls where the green coconuts, pan and cigarettes were sold. This light was crass, it stung his eyes, and what he wanted was shadows, silence, stillness—and well, he told himself, that was exactly what he would always be left
with. He remained in the half-dark—and each light on that street served to show up an expanse of wall, a doorway, a balcony that was darkly shadowed—and bled with longing to go; Arun had gone. Here he was still, the anonymous and shabby clerk on a newspaper, calling himself a journalist, for that is a fine, crisp and jaunty word. But the dismal truth was that all he did was cut out long strips of newspaper and paste and file them, occasionally venturing out to verify a dull fact in some airless office-room. Arun would be at a college in London, amongst students, in beer-halls—Nirode fought that vision of student-life abroad, that splendid vision that so dazzles those who do not know it.

The above passage conveys in halting rhythms Nirode's disgust, and implicitly suggests that the cause and the effect are one. Nirode's mind is obsessed with the idea that life is unfair to him but at the same time it appears to be sensitive, perhaps too sensitive, to his brother's future as "un-dimming brightness." The lights in the street are contrasted with the darkness that ensues from life's unfairness. The obsessive notion of life's unfairness makes him brood over his own position as "the anonymous and shabby clerk on a

7Anita Desai, *Voices in the City* (Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 1985), pp.8-9. All subsequent page references are to this edition.
newspaper, calling himself a journalist." Nirode likes to blot out the vision of Arun in London," amongst students, in beer halls." The entire family, including his parents and sisters, have immense confidence in Arun's success, which has an ineffable brightness about it. Nirode's disgust with himself and his frustration are the consequences of the self recoiling from an intense feeling of righteousness wedded to an ideal. The following passage very well exemplifies the cynicism that vitiates all enterprise:

The book he had meant to write, once he had created the proper conditions for the writing of it, seemed no more urgent now than it had one misty autumn night long ago when he had first thought of this plan. Nothing existed but this void in which all things appeared equally insignificant, equally worthless. Would he one day, he wondered, walk to the temple at the edge of this void, lay himself down on the flagstones smoothed and oiled by the passage of so many worshippers, bow his head at the feet of an inscrutably smiling idol and, inhaling the dense smog of incense, give himself up to the tolling of bells and a silent, shapeless god? The question had no substance, for Nirode knew he would never approach a god housed in a temple bustling with libidinous priests, vendors of garlands and plaster images, and women perspiring with
piety. That odour of hair-oil, joss sticks and decaying flowers, the odour of worship, made his stomach heave.8

The word "void," in the above passage, reminds us of what the echo murmurs in Miss Quested's ears in A Passage to India, when Dr Azia and Miss Quested approach the Kawa Ool: "Everything exists, nothing has value."9 The reverberating echo that comes out of the caves appears to be meaningless to Forster's characters, who try to hide their uneasiness by indulging in metaphysics. But Nirode's void, "in which all things appeared equally insignificant, equally worthless," emerges from an awkward and embarrassing domestic tension. As a practising poet and journalist, Nirode moves among the budding poets of the city, who have poor wit and imagination. "He longed to remind them of the two rights Baudelaire had added to the rights of man— 'the right to contradict oneself, and the right to leave,'"10 The "void," in the earlier passage, and "the two rights Baudelaire added to the rights of man," in the preceding passage, are subtly fused in Nirode's consciousness, which is distorted by family

8Voices in the City, p. 63.
10Voices in the City, p. 71.
politics. Baudelaire's cynicism was the effect of his mother's second marriage. As a boy, he adored and loved his mother so intensely that her second marriage shattered his heart and damaged his psyche. His dandy exterior could not conceal his inner misery. Nirode's heart also has a similar chink, but it is more visible than Baudelaire's. He dislikes his mother for becoming the mistress of Major Chanda. Nirode's void and his cynicism stem from his mother's betrayal of the family prestige. His tough-guy attitude makes him vulnerable to the seedy atmosphere in which he lives. The following passage amply demonstrates the point:

The bus came toiling up the road. He ran to it, along with the others from the queue, feeling queasy with the awful drink swelling and fizzing inside him. He had to fight for standing room. The washerman was turned away by the conductor, but managed to leap on once the bus started up, and even to haul up his laundry basket with him. The bus reeked of stale, sour laundry. Nirode felt lurching inside him an increasing burden of dissatisfaction and irresolution.  

The last sentence of the above passage throws light on the inwardness of the self, which is not a blessing but

11 *Voices in the City*, p. 72.
a torment. Moreover, Nirode's pretensions and pretenses as the budding Baudelaire of the city make him edit a magazine called *Voice*, which provides an opportunity for all seedy poets of the city to rush into print. He often mocks them and mocks himself and thereby betrays his lack of conviction in any healthy and sober enterprise. He seems to take unjustifiable pride in parading his over-burdened conscience. No wonder, he esteems Baudelaire, the arch-poet of modernism and the city. But Nirode is not a Baudelaire. His problems are too personal and his notions are too obsessive and erratic to find a steady and mature articulation. His study of Camus helps him little, for he does not assimilate the existential postulates to his scheme of values. Discussing Camus with his sister Amla, he says, "He wrote that 'in default of inexhaustible happiness, eternal suffering would at least give us a destiny. But we do not even have that consolation, and our worst agonies come to an end one day.'"¹² He writes a play and gives it to his elder sister, Monisha. After reading it, she writes in her diary that "Knowing Nirode as he was in these years after he ran away from college and floundered about in such torment, I would have thought him

¹² *Voices in the City*, p. 184.
capable of precisely that action without regard for the fruit of action which the Gita tells us is the finest wisdom of all. So was his action when he worked on that grim newspaper, so was his action even when he edited his own magazine. But this play has trapped him at last. And he is more involved with mother and the past than I had suspected. Cast away involvement, I plead with him silently, cast it away and be totally empty, totally alone." Any reader would feel uneasy, though not surprised, when Monisha commits suicide. But it is surprising that Monisha's suicide brings about a sudden change in her brother's attitude towards everything, including his mother. Monisha's suicide may be taken as a physical enactment of Nirode's comment on Camus, which we have cited earlier. But his mental squint makes him unaware of his own contradictions, although he claims the right which Baudelaire added to the rights of man, viz., the right to contradict oneself. In the case of Baudelaire, the assertion of the right to contradict oneself takes the form of the symbolic enactment of the self searching for a principle of affirmation in a city, where the possibility of such an affirmation is fast dwindling. The Baudelaire-Camus-Gita

13Voices in the City, p. 129.
strand in the narrative, involving Nirode and his sisters, dramatizes the inward turn the self takes, because of the tormenting and turbulent external world, and suggests that this inward turn does not lead the self to the felicity and harmony that it longs for. The aberrations we notice in Nirode and in Monisha have their roots in the family disharmony, which is aggravated by the seedy society in which they find themselves. Monisha's diary very well illustrates the point. Married into a joint family, she finds herself crossed and contradicted on every occasion, and her privacy terribly violated. The following passages reinforce the point:

I am glad they give me so much work to do. I am glad to be occupied in cutting vegetables, serving food, brushing small children's hair. Only I wish I were given some tasks I could do alone, in privacy, away from the aunts and uncles, the cousins and nieces and nephews. Alone, I could work better, and I should feel more—whole. But less and less there is privacy.14

From all sides their moist palms press down on me, their putrid breaths and harsh voices. There is no diving underground in so overpopulated a burrow, even the sewers and gutters are choked, they are so full. Of what? Of grime, darkness, poverty, disease? Is that what I mean—or the meretriciousness, the rapacity, the uneasy

14Voices in the City, pp. 115-116.
lassitude of conscience? Has this city a conscience at all, this Calcutta that holds its head between its knees and grins toothlessly up at me from beneath a bottom black with the dirt that it sits on.15

The focus in the above passages is on the strong sense of preserving one's privacy as far as possible. But not only the home, the city also seems to encroach on the self and deprive it of the privacy it longs for. Monisha is seriously troubled and disturbed by the uneasy lassitude of conscience that is ubiquitous in the city, and she imagines it to be a ghostly and toothless being that grins at her. It is this kind of obsessive and innate antipathy towards civil actuality that unnerves and drives Monisha to suicide. She cannot withstand a group of roadside singers performing their usual show. Just before she immolates herself, she feels, "I am standing here, pressing myself against the wall so as not to feel senior aunt's flesh bump into me. I could not bear to have her touch me while she is sighing and humming and swaying to this loud music. I could not bear to touch, however vicariously, this appalling exhibition of a passion that ravages

15Voices in the City, p. 116.
the soul and body and being. If I did, I should be a traitor, and a liar. I have never been touched by it, nor ravaged. I bear no scar on my body. I am different from them all. They put me away in a steel container, a thick glass cubicle, and I have lived in it all my life, without a touch of love or hate or warmth on me. The narrative irony in the novel is such that the self turned inward, which is like a self kept in a steel container or a thick glass cubicle, does not acquire detachment or non-involvement. But it is conscious, maybe too conscious, of the causes that make it court alienation and aloofness. The inwardness of the self which Monisha searches for escapes her, largely because of her failure to educate it according to the ethics of the Gita. Nirode seems to acquire it by coming out of his self-imposed solitude and by seeing in his mother the goddess Kali, the Mother of all humanity. He tells his younger sister, Amla, "Oh, I see so clearly now, I feel my skin is stripped away and my interior has melted into the exterior. I know it so well. I see now that she is everything we have been fighting against, you and Monisha and I, and she is also everything we have fought for" (emphasis added). Any reader would be

16 *Voices in the City*, p. 239.

17 Ibid., p. 256.
surprised to notice that the change in Nirode is quite sudden and startling, because in the three preceding sections the narrator has not prepared him to take it as a culmination of a slow and steady discovery. Perhaps the vision recorded in the above citation may be taken as an epiphany for which it is not possible to assign any relevant cause.

Voices in the City explores the life of the middle- and the lower middle-classes of a city which is densely populated. Sociologically speaking, the seedy and nauseating industrial backdrop seems to play a crucial role in generating various kinds of mental aberrations and psychic disorders. Nirode's wounded self, Monisha's agonized self, and Amla's insecure self fail to cope with the continuous violence inherent in the "cityscape" meticulously evoked and stabilized in the novel. The vision that Nirode earns may provide the badly needed healing touch to Nirode's wounded self. But in the case of the other, women protagonists of Anita Desai it is not obviously there. Fire on the Mountain very well illustrates the point. Nanda Kaul, through whose consciousness the violent events of Fire on the Mountain are filtered, suffers from an intense awareness of lost privacy and the self's eagerness to recover and rehabilitate it. The following passage very well dramatizes her problem and her struggle:
She would barely have splashed her face with some water and combed out her hair when the baby would come crawling in, the first to hear her stir, the most insistent in its needs. Lifting it into her arms, she would go to the kitchen to see the milk taken out of the ice-box, the layer of cream drawn off, the row of mugs on a tray filled and carried out to the green table on the veranda around which the children already sat on their low cane stools—the little girls still having their long hair plaited and their fresh cotton dresses buttoned, and the boys throwing themselves backwards and kicking the table legs and clamouring with hunger. Then there was the bread to be spread with butter, jam jars opened and dug into, knives taken away from babies and boys, girls questioned about homework, servants summoned to mop up spilt milk and fetch tea, and life would swirl on again, in an eddy, a whirlpool of which she was the still, fixed eye in the centre.

The above passage may be taken as a description of the normal duties and responsibilities of a housewife. But the images that conclude the paragraph, especially the image of the whirl-pool, make the passage somewhat tense in tone. She is conscious of the monotonous "swirl" of life which she

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18 Fire on the Mountain, p. 24.
experienced as the wife of a vice-chancellor. After her husband's death she comes to Kasauli and stays at Carignano. She gets used to the still and solemn surroundings of the house and practises "stillness" and composure, which are supposed to act as a balm to her wounded self. The only visitor is Ila Das. Nanda Kaul's family and Ila Das's family were in close contact even before they come to renew it in Kasauli. She and Ila Das used to play together and go to school together, but Nanda Kaul cannot approve of her wholeheartedly. Her reservations about Ila Das stem from an attitude that is rather rigid. Moreover, Ila Das talks about things which Nanda Kaul utterly dislikes. When Ila Das tells her, "Darling, I am growing o-o-old!" Nanda Kaul feels terribly upset. "The entire weight of the overloaded past seemed to pour into her like liquid cement that immediately set solid, incarcerating her in its stiff gloom. She sat with her lips tightly set." But Ila Das discharges her duties as a Welfare Officer in the area promptly and efficiently. It is her passion for justice, change, and reform that brings her trouble. She is assaulted, raped, and killed because she prevents a child marriage. When P.K. Shukla, the

19 Fire on the Mountain, p. 117.

20 Ibid., p. 117.
police officer in charge of the area, informs Nanda Kaul about the murder of Ila Das, the news shocks and kills her. It is at this moment that she becomes acutely aware of the discrepancy between what society thinks of her and what in fact she is. Her silent and unspoken confession betrays her wounded self, and it is as follows: "Nor had her husband loved and cherished her and kept her like a queen--he had only done enough to keep her quiet while he carried on a lifelong affair with Miss David, the mathematics mistress, whom he had not married because she was a Christian but whom he had loved, all his life loved. And her children--the children were all alien to her nature. She neither understood nor loved them. She did not live here alone by choice--she lived here alone because that was what she was forced to do, reduced to doing" (emphasis added). Now it is clear that Nanda Kaul, nursing the skeleton in her cupboard, in other words, surviving with a wounded self, tries to cultivate a measure of composure in her struggle to forget the wound caused by her husband's indiscretion. She is afraid of the past, and Raka's (her great-granddaughter) visit once again plunges her into the past and reopens the wound. Not only

21Fire on the Mountain, p. 145.
Nanda Kaul, but Raka also seems to suffer from an oppressive memory associated with her parents. There seems to be no love lost between Raka's mother, Tara, and her husband, who is an officer in the Indian Foreign Service. Her father, having failed to "socialize" her mother, ceases to take interest in her even as a patient. When Raka beholds through a chink in the door what is going on inside the club on the mountain, she feels, "Somewhere behind them, behind it all, was her father, home from a party, stumbling and crashing through the curtains of night, his mouth opening to let out a flood of rotten stench, beating at her mother with hammers and fits of abuse." It is in one of her secret trips to the mountain that she sees a huge fire devastating the dried vegetation below, in the valley. The death of Nanda Kaul, caused by the unhappy fate of Ila Das, seems to be a thematic variation and a symbolic concomitant of the fire Raka causes on the mountain. The fire that her father's behaviour creates inside Raka suggests that the wounded self which Anita Desai portrays in her fiction is a consequence of a disharmonious and sometimes violently disturbed family atmosphere. Most of her protagonists, in a state of nervous break-down, turn inward for a

\[\text{Fire on the Mountain, p. 71.}\]
healing touch which sometimes they find, as we have seen in the case of Nirode in *Voices in the City*. More or less, we notice an identical pattern in *Clear Light of Day*.

*Clear Light of Day* dramatizes the story of a family of two brothers and two sisters. Raja is a poet, who marries a Muslim girl and lives in Hyderabad, keeping a tenuous connection with his brother and sisters, who live in Delhi. Baba is a mentally retarded person who always stays at home and enjoys obsolete music from gramophone records. Bimla works as a lecturer in a Delhi college and nurses an eternal grievance against her brother for deserting the family. Tara, her sister, marries an officer in the civil service, leaving Baba and Bimla to seek their own salvation in the ancestral house. It is Tara's visit to the ancestral house with her husband and children that makes Bimla revive the past and reflect on it.

Her father and mother spend most of their time in the Roshonara Club playing bridge. They seem to take no special care in bringing up their children. In fact, their aunt brings them up. From his boyhood Raja evinces great interest in poetry. He studies in the Hindu College but is a constant visitor to Hyder Ali's house. Hyder Ali, a wealthy Muslim,
is forced to leave Delhi because of the Hindu-Muslim clashes that occurred in Delhi and the environs before and after Independence. Hyder Ali leaves for Hyderabad and stays there. Raja, who develops emotional links with the family of Hyder Ali, goes to Hyderabad and does not return to Delhi. He marries Hyder Ali's daughter without taking into consideration the opinion and the feelings of his sisters. As the narrator observes, "When Bim realized, although incredulously, that Raja was withdrawing, that his maleness and his years were forcing him to withdraw from the cocoon-coziness spun by his aunt and his sisters out of their femaleness and lack—or surfeit—of years, she grew resentful."23

Bimla, the central consciousness in Clear Light of Day, whose self is wounded by the callous behaviour of her brother, very often compares her relations and their memory to mosquitoes. The following excerpts from her reminiscence clarify her feeling:

The memory came whining out of the dark like a mosquito, dangling its long legs and hovering just out of reach.24

The mosquitoes that night were like the thoughts of the day embodied in monster form, invisible

23 *Clear Light of Day*, p. 118.

24 Ibid., p. 151.
in the dark but present everywhere, most of all in and around the ears, piercingly audible. They had come like mosquitoes—Tora and Bakul, and behind them the Misras, and somewhere in the distance Raja and Benazir—only to torment her and, mosquito-like, sip her blood. All of them fed on her blood, at sometime or the other had fed—it must have been good blood, sweet and nourishing. Now, when they were full, they rose in swarms, humming away, turning their backs on her.

The above citations suggest the pattern of Bimla's feelings. Ironically enough, she doesn't articulate her feelings. But Dr. Biswas, who comes to treat Raja, diagnoses Bimla's predicament and says, "Now I understand why you do not wish to marry. You have dedicated your life to others—to your sick brother and your aged aunt and your little brother who will be dependent on you all his life. You have sacrificed your own life for them." Although the narrator seems to think that Dr. Biswas misunderstands Bimla, we are not wrong in inferring that somewhere in her consciousness Bimla's frustration crystallizes itself into tiny spot, which gradually develops into a perpetual and unhealed wound. The


domestic disharmony that often stifles and chokes Bimal's adventurous spirit has as its objective correlative the fortunes of the two girls, Jaya and Sarla, in the Misra family. The Misras are Bimla's neighbours. Though the girls are married at an early age, they are abandoned by their husbands. Talking about the familial life of the Misra boys, Bimla says, "The wives wanted the new life, they wanted to be modern women. I think they wanted to move into their own separate homes, in New Delhi, and cut their hair short and give card parties, or open boutiques or learn modelling. They can't stand our sort of Old Delhi life—the way the Misras vegetate here in the bosom of the family. So they spend as much time as they can away." Though Bimla's comment refers to the Misra boys, it applies with equal force to her parents, her brother, and sister. Moreover, Bimla's resolve not to marry is firmly rooted in her domestic circumstances. The following conversation between Bimla and Tara about the Misra girls illustrates the point:

'Their mother wanted them to be married soon. She said she married when she was twelve and Jaya and Sarla are already sixteen and seventeen years old.'

\[28\] *Clear Light of Day*, p. 151.
'But they are not educated yet,' Bim said sharply. 'They haven't any degrees. They should go to college,' she insisted.

'Why?' said Tara ....

'Why?' repeated Bim indignantly. 'Why, because they might find marriage isn't enough to last them the whole of their lives,' she said darkly, mysteriously.

'What else could there be?' countered Tara. 'I mean,' she fumbled, 'for them.'

'What else?' asked Bim. 'Can't you think? I can think of hundreds of things to do instead. I won't marry,' she added, very firmly.

Tara glanced at her sideways with a slightly sceptical smile.

'I won't,' repeated Bim, adding 'I shall never leave Baba and Raja and Mira-masi' ....

The above dialogue does not reveal Bimla's confidence in herself but only exposes her wounded self. Almost a similar feeling, perhaps more mature recognition and acknowledgement of the implications of her resolve, is suggested by the following passage:

All these years she had felt herself to be the centre--she had watched them all circling in the air, then returning, landing like birds, folding up their wings and letting down their

*Clear Light of Day, p. 140.*
legs till they touched solid ground. Solid ground. That was what the house had been—the lawn, the rose walk, the guava trees, the veranda: Bim's domain. The sound of Baba's gramophone and the pigeons. Summer days and nights. In winter, flower-beds and nuts and cotton quilts. Aunt Mira and the dog, roses and the cat—and Bim. Bim, who had stayed, and become part of the pattern, inseparable. They had needed her as much as they had needed the sound of the pigeons in the veranda and the ritual of the family gathering on the lawn in the evening.  

The above passage, the most revealing in the text, graphs the development of Bimla's expanding consciousness. Unlike Maya in Cry, the Peacock, Monisha in Voices in the City, Nanda Kaul in Fire on The Mountain, and Sita in Where Shall We Go This Summer?, Bimla's wounded self discovers the soothing balm and the healing touch at home and in the family. She becomes a part of a pattern, and the pattern consists in her realizing the importance of her relationship with the lawn, the rose walk, the guava trees, the flower beds, the dog, the pigeons, aunt Mira, Baba, and the sound of Baba's gramophone. It is this inclusive vision of the

self's affiliations with the family and society that enriches the experience, harmonizes the self's connections with the family and society, and makes the self bathe in "clear light of day." The two epigraphs, from Emily Dickinson and T.S. Eliot, prefixed to the narrative signify the role of memory in achieving an adequate awareness of the theme of the loss and renewal of the self. While Eliot's lines from "Little Gidding" emphasize the pattern that emerges as a result of the process of the loss and renewal, Emily Dickinson's lines suggest that memory is capable of celebrating the gain and consoling the loss at one and the same time. The repeated allusion to Eliot's *Four Quartets* in the text is more suggestive of a pattern that may emerge in the self negotiating with its own problems than any kind of affirmation about the self's supremacy or maturity. Anita Desai's latest novel, *In Custody*, is a re-creation of the problems and the agonies of the wounded self. Unlike the novels that we have discussed so far, *In Custody* has at its centre an ineffectual but well-meaning young man whose problems are not just personal and private but public and social. Deven Sharma, a temporary Hindi lecturer in Lala Ram Lal College at Mirpur, has great passion for Urdu poetry, which he inherits from his father. The narrative is organized in such a way that
the cultural past of India becomes part and parcel of the bubbling and throbbing consciousness of Deven. The town Mirpor has a Muslim area and a Hindu area, dominated by the mosque and the temple respectively. Deven's friend Murad, who edits an Urdu journal, Awaaz, from New Delhi, prevails on him to write an article on Nur's poetry for his journal. Though his financial circumstances do not permit him to make a trip to Delhi, the temptation to acquire name and fame by writing something on a celebrated Urdu poet like Nur propels Deven to commit himself to the task. When Murad's boy takes him to Chandni Chowk in order to have an interview with Nur, Deven finds himself in an alien and suffocating atmosphere. When Deven explains the purpose of his visit to Nur, the poet says, "You don't look fit to serve anyone, let alone the muse of Urdu .... It seems you have been sent here to torment me, to show me to what depths Urdu has fallen."

Though the poet is impressed by Deven's clean and chaste pronunciation, he is not in a position to discuss his poetry with Deven because his mind is not on poetry but on the ways and means of tackling people who swarm round him for various reasons.

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31 Anita Desai, In Custody (London: Heinemann, 1984), p. 43. All subsequent page references are to this edition.
Deven is impressed not by Nur's latest poetry, which is absolutely nil, but by his still active and virile imagination. To Deven, Nur is a significant poet not because he makes things immediate but because he removes them to a position where they become bearable: "That was what Nur's verse did—placed frightening and inexplicable experiences like time and death at a point where they could be seen and studied, in safety." While Deven's aesthetic sensibility moves in the right direction, his confidence in translating it into a written document slowly dwindles, for Nur's health, the riff-raff that gathers round him every evening, and the incessant friction between his wives are the insurmountable obstacles any admirer of Nur has to face. The social and the cultural significance of In Custody in terms of the self consists in Deven's honest efforts to surmount these insurmountable obstacles.

Encouraged by his friend Murad and a liberal grant from the college authorities, Deven arranges to record Nur's views on poetry and a few poems which he may recite from memory. One of Nur's wives helps Deven. She agrees to bring the poet to an upstairs room in the locality, so that Deven

32 In Custody, p. 54.
may interview him without interruption. But the whole thing misfires because the tape-recorder doesn't work properly and the assistant sent by Murad doesn't know how to operate the recorder. Deven spends the money given by the college authorities not only to procure the recorder but also to feed Nur and gratify the lady who arranges the whole show. The aus-
tensible aim of the entire enterprise is to keep the tapes on which Nur's voice is recorded in the college library for the pleasure and benefit of all lovers of Urdu poetry. But when the tapes are played, they produce neither a coherent dialogue nor the recitation of poems but a nonsensical jumble of voices. Cheated by his friends and suffering from an intense awareness of failure, Deven feels that "He could lead the rest of his life in this near-unconscious state. He hoped his former life of non-events, non-happenings, would be resumed, empty and hopeless, safe and endurable. That was the only life he was made for, although life was not perhaps the right turn. He needed one that was more grey, more neutral, more shadowy. He sifted through alternatives like torn pieces of grey paper, letting them fall to the floor of his mind with a whisper and bury him in sleep."\textsuperscript{33} The events that precede the hopeless position in which Deven is trapped emerge from a cultural

\textsuperscript{33}In Custody, pp. 183-184.
matrix and a social milieu over which Deven has no control. The following passage very well illustrates the truth of the foregoing observation:

Turning his mind decisively away from these dangerous shoals, he paced up and down in his bare feet, his pyjamas and the vest full of holes, scratching at mosquito bites, smoking an occasional cigarette, refusing to entertain poetry and thinking in strict prose that he must look like a caged animal in a zoo to any creature that might be looking down at earth from another planet. And that was all he was—a trapped animal. In his youth, he had had the illusion of having free will, not knowing he was in a trap. Marriage, a family and a job had placed him in this cage; now there was no way out of it. The unexpected friendship with Nur had given him the illusion that the door of the trap had opened and he could escape after all into a wider world that lay outside but a closer familiarity with the poet had shown him that what he thought of as 'the wider world' was an illusion too—it was only a kind of zoo in which he could not hope to find freedom, he would only blunder into another cage inhabited by some other trapped animal. Being an illustrious poet had drawn people to the zoo to come and stare at him but Nur had not escaped from
his cage for all that—he was as trapped as Deven was even if his cage was more prominent and attracted more attention. Still, it was just a cage in a row of cages. Cage, cage. Trap, trap. 34

The above crucial passage, with its recurring emphasis on "trap" and "cage," brings to a central focus the private and the public themes. Deven's efforts to escape from the cage of marriage, a family, and a job land him in the public world of Urdu poetry and intellectual fame. But that wider world itself is a kind of zoo in which he finds the poet attracting prominent and public attention. Whether it is the private world or the public world the self doesn't find freedom for itself, for the obvious reason that the forces that control the two worlds are beyond its control. Even after the failure of the entire project, Deven is under social pressure. His students, who help him to restore a semblance of coherence in the tapes, demand first division marks. Nur writes to him for medical allowance and an endowment for his child from the college authorities. Murad wants him to complete his article on Nur. Reeling under various kinds of pressures and demands, Deven feels that "He had imagined he was taking Nur's poetry

34 In Custody, p. 131.
into safe custody, and not realized that if he was to be custodian of Nur's genius, then Nur would become his custodian and place him in custody too. This alliance could be considered an unendurable burden-- or else a shining honour. Both demanded an equal strength." \(^{35}\)

The epigraph prefixed to the novel, taken from "Rob Roy's Grave," suggests the ironic perspective that controls the narrative. In Wordsworth's poem, the speaker feels that the Scotch thief, who was brave and wise, entered society "an age too late;/Or shall we say an age too soon?" \(^{36}\) for the obvious reason that his love of freedom, or liberty, has to encounter a society dominated by "rents and factors, rights of chase,/Sheriffs, and lairds and their domains." \(^{37}\) Rob Roy felt that books and statutes are the barriers that man himself placed against the self. In the world of creatures no such barrier operates, so that "they should take, who have the power,/And they should keep who can." \(^{38}\) This unwritten social dynamic is "God's appointment who must sway,/And who

\(^{35}\) *In Custody*, p. 203.


\(^{37}\) Ibid., ll. 69-70.

\(^{38}\) Ibid., ll. 39-40.
is to submit." Because of the unseen operation of this social dynamic, society is free from incidents and impulses that provoke the strong to wanton cruelty. Like Rob Roy, the free spirit of Deven longs for freshness and stimulation at a time when social civility has deteriorated into social uncivility. It is not social uncivility that wounds Deven, but his intrinsic compulsions. The compulsions emerge from his domestic and financial circumstances, which make it impossible for him to keep what he has achieved. The locale and the atmosphere which are foregrounded in the text consist of a city with endless slums, hawkers, beggars, shopkeepers, and swindlers, all busy in their own way, transforming poetry into shocking and turbulent prose. Cold shouldered by one of his colleagues when he approaches him for help, Deven feels, "He could not see why anyone should help him. He no longer knew if he ought to be—or even if he wanted to be helped. Were these people really helping him to succeed in a unique and wonderful enterprise or simply locking him up more and more firmly in a barred trap? And was the trap set by Murad, by Siddiqui, or by Nur and his wives? All he knew was that he who had set out to hunt Nur down was being hunted down himself, the prey." If we gloss the passage in terms of


40In Custody, p. 143.
the epigraph prefixed to the novel, it becomes subtly ironical, in the sense that among Deven and his friends neither Rob Roy's primitive social dynamic nor that of the French revolutionists, who are alluded to in the poem, prevails. But what is significant and revealing is Deven's determined effort to keep what he has achieved and, in the process, heal the wounded self. While Wordsworth's Rob Roy thought of vindicating the self by visualizing a state of society much later described and advocated by Rousseau, Deven tries to salvage the self by patiently resisting the social and the anti-social forces. In spite of the crises he faces, "He thought of Nur's poetry being read, the sound of it softly murmuring in his ears. He had accepted the gift of Nur's poetry and that meant he was custodian of Nur's very soul and spirit. It was a great distinction. He could not deny or abandon that under any pressure" (emphasis added). Nur's gift to Deven is not an object, a system, or a creed but a sensibility that can ruminate repeatedly on a couplet like "The breeze enters, the blossom on the bough wafts its scent./ The opened window lets in the sweet season, spring."

The texts of Anita Desai we have discussed and analysed are remarkable not only for their stylistic alchemy

41 In Custody, p. 204.

42 Ibid., p. 106.
but also for their socio-cultural commentary on modern modes of existence. City life in India, in all its variety and detail, constitutes a large chunk of her writing. Calcutta, New Delhi and Old Delhi, and Bombay are not actualities but are the re-created images of the Indian social scene in *Voices in the City*, *Clear Light of Day*, *In Custody*, and *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*. Breathing the polluted air of the city, her characters try to escape from their cages sometimes successfully and sometimes not, and in the process get themselves mentally bruised and spiritually battered.

The narrative base in Anita Desai's texts is the family. As Robert D. Hess and Gerald Handel have observed, "The family's life together is an endless process of movement in and around consensual understanding, from attachment to conflict and withdrawal—and over again. Separateness and connectedness are the underlying conditions of a family's life, and its common task is to give form to both." Anita Desai's narratives not only give shape to separateness and connectedness that emerge from a family saga, but dramatize the way in which the self receives wounds, which are aggravated or healed by the socio-cultural matrix, which is its soil and sustenance.

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