Anita Desai has carved a niche for herself among the Indian-English novelists. Her fiction explores in a distinctive way the human psyche. The silent desires, reactions, ambitions, aspirations, and the values which the characters have found for themselves are the subject of her exploration. So naturally the action is laid 'within' the individual characters and not in the concrete world. She does not draw on the established themes, plots and characters for her fiction. And herein lies her distinction. She herself has declared:

All my writing is an effort to discover to underline and convey the true significance of things.... Next to this exploration of the underlying truth and the discovery of private mythology and philosophy, it is style that interests me most and by this I mean the conscious labour of writing language and symbol word and rhythm. One must find a way to unite the inner and the outer rhythms, to obtain a certain integrity and to impose order on chaos.
One thing that easily strikes the reader is that all her novels revolve round their central characters and the characters are usually women. They are obsessed and passionate beings. Anita Desai presents them with deep understanding, intense care and pervasive knowledge. In a way she explores the psyche of Indian women at crossroads when they are in conflict with the environment and situations typical of Indian way of life. Her novels can be described as the tender, rhythmic and logical treatises of the provocative, troubled and mutilated existence of human beings caught in a whirlpool of personal emotion and tragedy. Ultimately they gain universal appeal. These suffering women are victims of tradition, superstition and male domination. They emerge as a class of their own - the suffering and the mutilated.

Anita Desai carefully avoids to be associated with any feminist movement. But her novels show her concern with women's problems. Her intense awareness of their predicaments can not go unnoticed. She can easily penetrate into their pitiable plight and their troubled mutilated lives. We find in her novels individual characters—

facing single handed, a ferocious assault of existence.
They get sequestered in a cloister of intense personal suffering arising from emotional needs which is different from the suffering arising out of struggles on the materialistic plane. Her female protagonists are usually drawn from well-to-do class. They can easily lead an affluent life, but they retreat to their private suffering. The examples are Nanda Kaul in *Fire on the Mountain*, Sita in *Where shall we go this Summer?*, Maya in *Cry, the Peacock*, Sarah in *Bye-Bye, Blackbird* and Monisha in *Voices in the City*.

A word should be said about Anita Desai's technique. She uses the 'stream of Consciousness' technique which enables her to explore the unfathomed depths of feelings and emotions of the characters. Her use of imagery, lyricism, language, rhythm and style deftly highlight her ability to portray and present characters with maximum effect and intensity. Perhaps she is the only Indian English noveleist who employs exorbitantly the natural symbols like moon, trees, woods, mountains, insects and co-relates them with the psychic torment and the state of mind of her characters.

This is essentially a psychological novel. Anita Desai's main concern in this novel is to show how some Hindu traditions and superstitions make life miserable to women. But in the course of the novel she makes references to women's problems: unequal marriage, wife's neglect, longing for male babies even by educated women and prostitution.

Anita Desai proves that Maya's tragedy occurs at two levels. One at the hands of her Superstitious father and the other at the hands of her busy husband. Maya's obsession is the result of the superstitions of her father. As a child, he send her to the albino priest with her ayah to get her horoscope written by him. The priest prophesied her fate and compares her marital life to the mating of peacocks. She being the devoted daughter of an orthodox Brahmin father became obsessed by the prophesy of disaster. She would have been little relieved from her obsession or would have attained normality, if at all she had no dissonance in her marital life. But, Gautama never provides the moral support she wants desperately. Because they like many Indian couples belong to two incommunicable
worlds. Anita Desai gives here a clear picture of a disillu-
stoned woman.

Already we belonged to separate
worlds ...... 3

and

There was no bond, no love—hardly any
love, And I could'nt bear to think of
that. 4

and

Nothing was hidden. All was revealed
and it was not what I hunted for. He
was not on my side at all but across a
river, across a mountain and would
always remain so. 'There is nothing'.
I breathed, half in question, half in
statement. You are untouched. How
can I explain it to you then? I shall
never be able to tell you now, you
shall never help me. 5

Anita Desai also gives a hint of how men treat
their wives. Even educated men look down upon their wives.
as inferior beings, incapable of intellectual discourses.
Gautama too is indifferent to his wife. Her words and
ideas infuriates him as he feels that they interrupted the
chain of his serious thoughts. And when he spares some
time to talk to her it would be about "cups of tea." Maya
lamments the way he and his family treat her when they discuss serious matters.

Yes, I cried yes, it is his hardness—no, no not hardness, but the distance he coldly keeps from me. His coldness, his coldness and innocent talk of cups of tea and philosophy inorder not to hear me talk and talking reveal myself. 6

They (the inlaws) spoke to me, the synocete, only when it had to do with babies, meals, shopping marriages, for I was their toy, their indulgence, not to be taken seriously. 7

Anita Desai feels for the women who are denied of companionship in life. Mayas' destiny is to live in loneliness like that of any woman married to busy men. Gautama spend his time either in the office or in his study reading and re-reading his files. Occasionally, he throws parties to the intellectuals. Whenever Maya is forced to go there by an inner urge to be in the midst of those gentlemen she is rebuked, rubuffed and rejected by Gautama's indifference. The men too feels uncomfortable in the presence of an woman. Anita Desai stresses here that, it is natural for any woman to seek the warmth of friendship like a man does. She feels
that sex of a person is very important in matters of friendship. Society frowns at the thought of women having friends from the opposite sex. For a woman to trespass into a man's circle of freedom is a taboo whereas the other way round is permitted and sanctioned. Maya wonders.

Was it so unforgivable to wish to share in human friendliness? In companionship? To Gautama it was — for a woman....

and

I relived the horror of those awesome realizations that had followed, sometimes a moment of union, and taught me how hopeless, how important is sex — where not union but communion is concerned.

Anita Desai criticizes the way people crave for male children. She also shows how life patterns are formed by superstitious minded, traditional women and are passed on to the younger generation. Even Pom an educated and enlightened woman could not withstand the temptation to follow her mother-in-laws' advice to get a baby boy. Pom readily complies her instructions to pray and offer gifts to Vishnu.

'Yes' she says 'I must, if I want a son.
I suppose she knows', Pom mused, crumpling the petals in her hand, 'she has four sons.'
The discrimination against baby girls can be found even among the elite class. When Mrs. Lal has told her guests that she has four daughters, they all clicked their tongues and twisted their lips in sympathy as though having female children is a crime or a curse. One reason why people dread female children is because of the problems a girl will bring to the family at the time of her marriage due to certain social customs like dowry system. People are biased in their attitude towards women and are often considered as commodities. Maya understands the real meaning of the word 'woman'.

..... now the word (woman) brought up visions of dowries, of debts, humiliations to be suffered and burdens so gross, so painful that the whole family suffered from them. Why? I was angry with myself, yet could not shake off the truth ......

Anita Jesai also speaks about the fate of fallen women. Though she does not probe about the problems of these women or write about the pathetic circumstances that lead to their downfall, she is certainly sour about the way society treats them and at the same time how it encourages this profession. Maya is troubled to see the acrobatics
of the Cabara girls at a hotel they visited. Men call them harlots or bitches ...... beautiful bitches. They click — their tongues and make amorous advances at the sight of these buxom beauties but hoot… at them in scorn and abuse them in their absence. This is an example of the way men exploit some women as objects of lust.

2. VOICES IN THE CITY (1965)

Voices in the city echoes the inner voices, inner conflict, silent sufferings and problems of a woman in a joint-family. In a way the story depicts Indian social values, tradition, conservatism and their impact on the lives of innocent women. Monisha's life is an example of the despair and distress women experience in marriage and the harassment they suffer at the hands of their inlaws. The tragedy is that Monisha does not marry Jiban by her will alone. Her father purposely marries her off to Jiban's rigid household to arrest her individuality, independence and emancipated ideas. On the other hand he allows his son Nirode to pursue his ideals and lead a Bohemian life because he is a boy.

Anita Desai wishes to say here that in every Indian family a new daughter-in-law is expected to adjust and change
according to her husband's inclination and pleasure. No compromise is possible to draw a middle line between her and her inlaw's family members. So a woman experiences inner conflict to accommodate herself in a strange new family, whereas man is free to continue his usual life without any hindrance or inner conflict for adjustment. Monisha too feels suffocated in the presence of those curious women and an oppressive, authoritative mother-in-law. She who cannot completely dissolve herself into the throng watched them like a passive spectator. But they expect her to be like one of them satisfied, dependent, eternal curious gossipmongers. Each movement of hers is censored, measured and valued by her inlaws. They harass her and ill-treated her in all the possible ways. She has not even got the right to touch her husband's money without his permission. So, when she took Jiban's money to pay Nirode's hospital bill without his prior permission she is accused of theft. Every one in the family, including Jiban confront her with hatred and suspicion. Thus her life as Jiban's wife is an incubus. Her life would have been free and more meaningful if she had pursued her real inclinations. Now that she is already sacrificed by her father all the escape routes are sealed and blurred from her vision of sight.
and thought. She tries to act the role of a young wife but at times she snarls, in self-contempt and longs for privacy.

Look at me, my equipment, my appurtenances. My black ward robe, my family, my duties of serving fresh 'chapatis' to the Uncles as they eat, of listening to my mother-in-law as she tells me the remarkably many ways of cooking fish, of being Jiban's wife.¹²

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. Even my own room, which they regarded at first as still bridal, now no longer is so and the sisters-in-law lie across the 'four-poster' discussing my ovaries and others.¹³

Virginia Woolf wrote about a similar longing in women devoid of money and privacy. These women are too poor, and they live a dependent life at the mercy of their male earning member. So privacy or "a room for one's own"
(which represents the wish to follow one's own aspirations and ambition) is a mirage. It becomes inevitable for any woman to tolerate the misfortunes of life in her husband's house even if it is a virtual hell. Monisha too is forced to endure a dependent life of the Bengali women who follow five paces behind their men. They are meek, mute followers of their men and possess no rights, personal demands, separate identities and no personal grievances against oppression. Monisha feels ashamed of herself when she watches the degraded lives of other Bengali women around her.

They make me a little ashamed of myself of — my defiance towards Kalyani and Jiban's mother—and I think of generations of Bengali women hidden behind the barred windows of dark rooms spending centuries in washing clothes, kneading dough and murmuring aloud verses from the Bhagavad-Gita and Ramayana in the dim light of the sooty lamps. Lives spent in waiting for nothing, waiting on men, self-centred and indifferent and hungry and demanding and critical, waiting for death and dying misunderstood, always behind bars, those terrifying black bars that shut us in, in the old houses, in the old city.
These words seem to be the key words of this novel and Anita Desai’s message to us. She is concerned about the predicaments of women, especially about the ones who experience agony. And Monisha represents all Bengali women who are doomed to cook, wash, clean, wait upon men to satisfy their ego and then to wait for death to relieve their pain and distress. But Monisha commits suicide when she could no longer live in her bleak world devoid of feeling, desire, experience warmth and pain. Monisha’s self immolation is symbolic. Here Anita Desai speaks about the tragedies of our Era—an Era famous for ‘bride-burling’ and the atrocities committed on women by their inlaws.

Unlike Monisha’s father Lila Chatterjee (Monisha’s aunt) has emancipated and progressive ideas about women especially about young girls like Sita and Amla who have possessed abundant spirit and freedom. She watches passionately and wistfully the metamorphosis of her only daughter Sita into a ‘more rare and more responsible person’. Lila would have been a powerful character with ideals and ideas (like the emancipated aunt in Amy Killer’s novel The Rebel Generation) if Anita Desai has not portrayed her as an half embarrassed emancipation freak.
Her description of Lila makes her character part comic and part serious. Yet Lila's criticism on emancipation of women is noteworthy. She advises Monisha's sister Amla to lead an independent life:

A girl must have spirit and profession.\(^{15}\)

Women place themselves in bondage to men whether in marriage or out. All their ambition is channelled that way while they go parched themselves.\(^{16}\)

Anita Desai's message to Indian-English readers is that 'women should not place themselves in bondage to some men'. They should strive hard to achieve individuality, freedom and self esteem. Woman should cultivate courage, will power and initiative to fight against the adversities of life to be full-fledged individuals.

3. **BY-BYE, BLACK BIRD** (1971)

Bye-Bye, Black bird revolves round Sarah an English woman married to Adit an Indian. ... In this novel Anita Desai also deals with feminist problems such as the problems of role-conflict among women, the superior headstrong nature of Indian husbands to dominate over
their wives and the problems of unmarried working women in India.

Anita Desai explores the deepest fathoms of the mind and soul of Sarah to show how a woman can be torn apart and how she experiences self-torture in playing two different roles. There is a look of stark loneliness, whenever Sarah is not acting the role of an efficient secretary or the role of Mrs Sen who ground spices for an Indian curry which she does not care to eat. Sarah like any other woman experiences self-torture and wants to ameliorate her condition by entering into a real world.

If only she were allowed to keep her one role apart from the other, one play from the other, she would not feel so cut and slashed into living bleeding pieces. 17

Sarah's personality is a glittering star in the vast galaxy of faded Saxon women characters portrayed in the Indian English literature. Her determination, will-power, personality and her self-esteem are visible in the way she behaves in presence of Adit's friends, her parents and her acquaintances. She has the guts to select a non-English husband. She does not mind in expressing her idea of
conceiving Adits' brown children though it shocks Mrs. Millers and Christine. She even gives a cold shoulder to her mother. Her self-esteem and determination is visible when she says about her parents to Adit.

Don't you treat me the way she always does as though I am not an individual with my own life to lead. but just some appendage to them, with nothing but duties and responsibilities instead .... instead of rights. 

Unlike Sarah, Adit is more or less a typical oriental man having certain pre-conception about women. By the juxtaposition of Sarah ( a woman conscious of her rights) with Adit ( a westernized Indian), Anita Desai shows Indian men's dominating attitude towards their women. And that in husband-wife relationship wife being English does not make any difference to them. Indian men are the same. their attitudes, opinions prejudices, pre-conceptions and the way they treat their wives seldom differ. Adit is not quite different from others in this respect. It is true that he helps Sarah in cooking at times. He in spite of his westernized ways treats Sarah in his typical Indian arrogant way. Once late in the night Adit
and Dev see their friends off and while coming back to the house Dev whispers in low tones.

"Shh" hissed Dev suddenly delicately on his toes. "You will wake Sarah" "so what?" Adit roared. "She is used to being woken up. These English wives are quite manageable really, you know. Not as fierce as they look—very quiet and hard working as long as you treat them right and roar at them regularly once or twice a week". "Not so different from the meek Indian gazelles then".19

Adit is a typical Indian husband to shout at his wife for simple things. He does not mind to fling food items out of the window if Sarah cooks anything which he dislikes. He like any Indian man compares his mother's qualities with those of his wife and has the habit of bringing his mother as a good example for everything. Anita Desai stresses that mothers in India play a major role in Indian men's life. Adit who is used to his mother's purity and ablation explodes when Sarah's pet cat sniffed the rice. He orders her to cook some clean rice. And he does not forget to mention his mother's cleanliness to her.
He does not like Sarah to continue her job because in India many a times a woman has to give up her interests and outside pre-occupations after her marriage. Adit says to his mother-in-law about his idea:

"How often I have said 'Sarah give up your job, it does not look nice for you to work after you are married', and every time she says to me 'No Adit, I love it'."

Anita Desai stops to say that egoistic men always treat their wives as slaves and shout at them. Men think it their privilege to sit back and enjoy while the women slog about. They believe that it is a wife's duty to serve the husband. This kind of a behaviour pattern is still prevalent in almost all Indian joint-families. Adit's friends in England are not much different in their oriental male superiority complex. Jasbir the doctor has the oriental effrontery to shout at his wife infront of his friends in a typical English country home though he is exaggerating.

'Mala' shouted Jasbir, 'come on woman, you are supposed to be an Indian wife always serving her husband. Why don't you go and make us some pakoras?"
Anita Desai is very critical of the ways and attitudes of Indian men towards women other than their mothers. She also speaks about the typical Indian opinion about unmarried women staying alone in foreign countries. Society looks down upon an unmarried woman, because it is a common notion that she lacks something to lead a barren and insignificant life. Or that her disappointment in some love-affair prompts her to lead a lonely life. She reveals the Indian male attitude towards spinsters by presenting the experience of a working spinster in India. Meenakshi's friend has left Oxford to take up a job with A.I.R. She was used to freedom and better treatment in London and nobody there considered her insignificant just because she is a spinster. But in India she is shocked to see the discriminations against an unmarried woman. People looked down upon her, especially men. Indian men consider women vulgar, indecent and devoid of status if they do not marry. She describes her horrible realization to Meenakshi.

"Those horrible men, those ogres" she hissed unaware of Dev behind her, leaning forward like a gargoyle. "All at least fifty years old and with a dozen grand-children at home, but if they saw
an unmarried working girl - Toba"

she explained "they just go mad.
They think that if you are working
and not married it must be because
you are...." her voice dropped. 22

In Where Shall we go this Summer? Anita Desai
depicts the emotional problems of women married to men who
are superior to them in all respects. She also depicts the
suffering a woman goes through when there is a communi-
cation gap between her and her husband. As Betty Frieden
pointed out in her Feminine Mystique when a woman is
doomed in her silent personal miseries (lack of identity,
subservience, economic dependence, illiteracy etc) she will
not feel confident or happy though she has a husband,
children and abundant wealth. Anita Desai has substantiated
all these ideas through the frustrated life of Sita.

Sita like any Indian girl came to her husband's
house expecting and dreaming of a luminous future. So
she can not bear the hypocrisy of her class and the
gluttonous ways of Ramans' joint family. Later when they
shifted to an independent flat life is not all that
happy for Sita. She could not stand the concrete buildings, the congested urban settlements, the hurried life and the violence in people. Raman is not a perfect partner to understand her sensitive heart and problems and thereby save her from her personal sufferings. Though he is a good provider of material comforts and does his duty as a husband he fails to communicate with her. This lead to marital disharmony. All through their married life Raman and Sita tries to avoid a mutual confrontaion. She buries her needs deep inside her. He passively watches her emotional needs from a distance.

..... had nothing more to give her.
Or he was quite unaware of her needs and demands. 23

Sita tries to cope up with failures and problems of life but often travels alone mentally and emotionally. Her children and husband often catch her in a placid mood which prompt them to ask occasionally whether she is waiting for someone.

'I am waiting' she agreed—although for what, she could not tell. 24

and

..... she herself was turned to the colour of waiting, was turned a living monument of waiting. 25
Anita Desai has repeated the word 'waiting'. Life is a long waiting for Sita. But for what? She is waiting for an escape route because life for her is a sedimentary rock of boredom where boredom settled on layers year after year. But why is she dissatisfied with life? She has everything an ordinary woman would expect in life—a loyal husband, independent flat, car and bright children. So Raman like any Indian man is puzzled and pained to see her bored. He asked her.

'Bored? Why? with what?' and could not begin to comprehend her boredom.

Anita Desai suggests here the typical dissatisfaction among the women of all classes. Though they possess material comforts an unknown boredom pokes them because they later realize that they are dependents, having no self-esteem and self-identity. When the pangs of dissatisfaction becomes intolerable they are forced to run away like Sita's mother who ran away to Banaras. It is this unknown boredom which prompts Sita to talk and think about the hitch-hiking foreigner whom they met once. Her admiration for the foreigner reflects Sita's own wish or dream to free herself from the material entanglements. She wants to be her real self, especially after she has seen the couple in the
hanging gardens. She describes it as the happiest moment in her life. And her description of those Muslim couple is symbolic. It shows that she never experienced tender love or understood the real meaning of life. People like Raman find it difficult to comprehend the boredom and dissatisfaction of women like Sita. Sita is forced to run away to Manori Island. When total liberation is not possible within the regulated precincts, one escapes to an unknown destination. That is what Sita's mother did, Sita does and everyone is forced to do. Anita Desai also reveals here that liberation from the routine, regulated life can bring chaos and confusion into the lives of women, especially for an unaccomplished woman like Sita.

Anita Desai speaks here about the predicaments of an uneducated girl who is left to face the future empty-handed. Sita, as a girl, is not sent to school or provided with opportunity to channel her thoughts and action. She has neither instincts nor the training to grow up into a sensible woman. Anita Desai poignantly presents "why" and "How" an innocent woman is left out, ignored and rejected even by her own kith and kin. Once Sita confesses her agony and helplessness as an unaccomplished woman to her daughter Menaka:
I wish I had your talent. I would nurse it so carefully—like a plant—make it grow. I used to think after I had left this island and had to think what I would do next—that if only I could paint or sing, or play the sitar well, really well. I should have grown into a sensible woman. Instead of being what I am.  

I should have known how to channel my thoughts and feelings, how to put them to use. I should have given my life some shape then, some meaning. At least, it would have had some for me—even if no one else had cared.

Sita's confession is so meaningful when we consider the way to link her plight to that of the women in real life. Having nothing to hold on they like Sita desperately cling to the rags of their battered life. In the case of Sita the insecurity and infirmity has started growing right from her childhood. As a last resort she comes back to her father's magic island—Manori. Her first appearance near the beach suggests the shattered soul inside her.

She did not have it—had nothing
in fact not even one piece of valuable luggage, seemed quite empty, vacant and stumbling.
It was the face of a woman unloved,
a woman rejected. 30

Anita Desai presents this tattered dissatisfied
woman in a symbolic way. Even the luggage Sita brings with
her - is symbolic. The luggage appears - shabby, old, worn
out and insignificant. She herself was another insigni-

cient. and inexpensive piece of luggage.

5. FIRE ON THE MOUNTAIN (1977)

In Fire on the Mountain Anita Desai deftly portrays
four female characters: Ila Das, Nanda Kaul, Raka, and
her mother, each one different from the other but all
suffering owing to the dissatisfaction created by the
circumstances in which they are placed. Here again we find
Anita Desai showing her concern for women's problems such
as the problems of an independent single working woman, the
sense of 'void' the educated and enlightened women feel
when they are nailed into housekeeping and child bearing
and the degradation that women feel when their men are
given to drinking.
Ilā Das's life is a chain of misfortune and failures. In a way discriminations against her start from the early childhood. She and Rima are tutored at home whereas her brothers are sent to Oxford and Cambridge for higher studies. Ilā once laments before Nanda Kaul that she is "handicapped" by her posh upbringing. She wished she were properly educated to earn her living.

Anita Desai's objective implication of the fate of the uneducated and untrained women is clearly visible here. Women should be educated, possibly trained to face the challenges of life and not to bow feebly before adverse circumstances. If one is well-equipped to fight the adversities of life nobody can beat her down. Ilā Das too is not properly educated to secure a job. She manages to get a post in University by the recommendation of Nanda Kaul. But she has to leave the post when a new Vice-Chancellor takes charge. Ilā's narration of her bleak life thereafter is the plight of every uneducated, unskilled women.

... and you know how things have gone for me since Nanda. You know how I've had to go from pillar to post, trying to earn fifty rupees here fifty rupees there with not a room to call my own most of the time and it's grown worse and worse.\footnote{31}
...Ila Das does not lose her will and initiative. 

Her strength of character is proved by her decision to take a course even at an age close to the official retirement. By acquiring a job, she wants to get a little bit of security and a tiny bit of status of an independent working woman. She also could help her sister from her meagre salary. Thus Ila came to the Himalayan foot hills as a social worker. Here Anita Desai apprises us of the horrible consequences a woman has to face for enlightening the village women who were steeped in ignorance and slave for men. Ila Das is progressive minded and she sincerely tries to instruct women of the cause of their suffering. But the villagers are infuriated to see their women swaying under the spell of a woman and wake from their cocoon of ignorance to fight against male supremacy. No man wants to lose his hold on his women, especially the village head and priest who live entirely on the gullible women. Ila says:

"I do believe the women would listen to me, if it were not for that impossible priest. It is so much harder to teach a man anything, Nanda, the women were willing, poor dears, to try and change their dreadful lives by an effort, but do you think what their men will tell them? Nooo, not a bit..."
Yes, she could not make any headway with men especially with Preet - CT Singh who wants to sell his seven year old daughter to an old villager. No woman can ever make headway with any man if she has to touch matters concerned to his male supremacy. So by hook or crook he would try to snuff the revolt in women. And many a woman would be martyred before her successors get a better footing.
Preet Singh who symbolizes debauchery in man does not hesitate to liquidate Ila Das for coming in his way. She is strangulated and raped—the worst punishment or harassment given to a woman to ally her ideas. Thus the villagers and the men remunerated an innocent woman for her enlightenment and hard work in a crude barbaric way....

..... he (Preet Singh) left the ends of the scarf, tore at her clothes, tore them off her, in long screeching rips, till he came to her, to the dry, shrivelled, starved stick inside the wrappings and raped her. Crushed back, crushed down into the earth, she lay raped, broken, still and finished. 33

However Ila cannot be regarded as a failure. Because she becomes a victim of an abominable crime. Shyam Asnani writing on the theme of withdrawal and
loneliness in *Fire on the Mountain* deals with the tragic end of Ila Das. To him Ila Das suggested another dimension of agony, suffering and meaningless futile existence. He says of Ila and other protagonists thus:

> What is startlingly original is that in their failure, Anita Desai does not portray her protagonist as a pitiable mess needing sympathy and compassion, but as a dignified, strange, unpredictable and beautiful individual.34

True, Ila is a pitiable character but she also arouses our admiration. Anita Desai has shown great poignancy and sensitivity in creating Ila Das. There is no sentimentality in showing the way society has punished an innocent woman. Though lonely and deserted she symbolizes strength of character, individuality and martyrdom (all harassment committed on innocent women). Her life itself is an amalgam of hazards; her drunken brothers; her unskilled sister, her poverty, her handicapped upbringing, her ugliness, her shrill voice all like poisoned arrows pierced her one after another. Yet she shows her will power by the way she faces the challenges and adversities of life. She shows her character and self-esteem by not asking Nanda Kaul for a room in Carignano and for not begging a kilo oat-meal from the
shop-keeper. She does not hesitate to resign her post in the University when it is a question of common sense though it gave her a bleak future. And also she has the individuality and courage to face raw life and its problems single handedly.

In *Fire on the Mountain*, Anita Desai also pictures the unrewarding, unpaid work of a housewife which has neither scope nor decent status. Nanda Kaul's life reveals the complexities and breakdowns a woman may experience when she is a fulltime housekeeper-cum-mother. Anita Desai shows the busy schedule of a housewife by a brief sketch of a day from Nanda Kaul's life. Work would swallow her the moment she gets up at 4 A.M. And she has to take care of the insistent needs of her baby, other children, husband, servants, guests and do a number of other odd, monotonous work.

Anita Desai's novel is an exploration of the state of mind of middle-class wives who are obsessed by the monotony and boredom arises out of self realization. Nanda Kaul too realizes the futility of the make belief religious sanctity attached to a woman's 'natural (?)' work; housekeeping. Betty Frieden has proved her candid opinion about this discontentment among women of all classes in her
book 'The Feminine Mystique' which is written by accurate analysis of the case studies of women from different strata of society. Various other psychologists, researchers and sociologists support this unknown discontentment among women who are tied to house-keeping and are restrained from pursuing their personal interests. Nanda Kaul too wants to alienate and escape from her duties and roles like Mira in Marlyn French's feminist novel A Woman's Room. Shyam M Asnani finds streaks of feminism in Nanda Kaul.

Once an important figure in society as well as in her vast family, Nanda Kaul is one of those intelligent, unsentimental Indian women with a built-in streak of sardonic feminism who do not love their matriarchal role.35

In Fire on the Mountain Anita Desai is also explicit about the degradation of human values and the suffering of women when their men are given to drinking. Drinking among men can cause not only their own suffering but also the suffering of their family members. A drunken man loses his sense and would not mind treating his wife ill and children too. Rakas mother is such a victim of liquor. We get to know about this character through the sensitive eyes of her innocent daughter Raka. Her little psyche becomes perverted
when her drunken father commits violence right in front of her eyes. She can't clearly recall the daily scences.

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 strength, beating at her mother with hammers and fists of abuse—harsh filthy abuse that made Raka cower under her bed clothes and wet the mattress in fright feeling the stream of urine warm and weakening between legs like a stream of blood, and her mother lay down on the floor and shut her eyes and wept. 36

Raka's mother is tortured both mentally and physically. She symbolizes women who receive ill-treatment at the hands of their husbands. Though Raka's mother lives in posh bungalows and luxury hotels in foreign countries she has never experienced equal treatment from her husband. She is a virtual slave and a watch dog for him. Anita Desai introduces here an example of the women who live in luxury and hold status symbols but are virtual slaves to their husbands. They are often degraded as second class citizens.
In Clear Light of the Day Anita Desai presents in Bim—the protagonist—the growth and development of a single independent woman. She also gives insight into the lives of poor dependent widows like Mira Masi; and the discontented lives of wives like Tara. And the plight of divorced women like Misra girls is not much different from Mira Masi.

As Bim, Raja and Tara reached the adolescent stage, they are all feeling suffocated in their house. Raja can occasionally escape from that unsatisfactory, morbid atmosphere by various ways. But the rich, vibrant possibilities and rapture Raja enjoys do not open to others. Because Bim and Tara are girls. Though the children cannot pinpoint the reason for the separate behaviour pattern imposed on girls and boys they are conscious of it. Anita Desai clearly describes here the way young girls first experience and react to the sexual double standards imposed upon them by society. The first turning point in Bim's childhood is when she and Tara stole into her brother's room and accidentally wore Raja's trousers. 'Bim wearing Raja's trousers is symbolic. It is a revelation to Bim.
They prance in Raja's room feeling free, confident and light in appearance and abilities. A sudden urge to understand, experience and rebel prompts Bim to push Raja's cheap cigarette packet and a box of matches into her trousers' pocket. It was this sudden realization which makes Bim rebellious and critical though she does not know the exact reason for the biased attitude towards the moral conduct of a girl. She wonders:

Why did girls have to wear frocks?
Suddenly they saw they were so different from their brother, so inferior and negligible in comparison, it was because they did not wear trousers. Now they thrust their hands into their pockets and felt even superior—what a sense of possession, of confidence it gave one to have pockets to shove one's fists into them, as if in simply owning pockets one owned riches, owned independence.

She strutted about the room, feeling the cigarettes and matches in her pocket, realizing now why Raja walked with that fine, careless swagger. If she had pockets, if she had cigarettes then it was only natural to stagger, to feel rich and superior and powerful.
Even at a tender age Bim feels disgusted with Misra Girls and all others who are not self-equipped or neglect their studies and in a hurry pursue the easy way to acquire a living i.e. Marriage. Bim says:

'Why' repeated Bim indignantly. 'Why because they might find marriage is not 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.

and

I shall work- I shall do things' she went on. I shall earn my own living- and look after Mira Masi and Baba and be independent. There will be many things to do-when we are grown up.

Through the life of Bim, Anita Desai proves that marriage is not the only vocation and the final solace of a woman. There are innumerable ways open for women if only they have the mind, will, courage and capacity to pursue them. Bim's strength of character lies in the way
she faces reality whereas others run away to a world of colour, rhythm and marital bliss. Bim shoulders all burden on her frail shoulders and does all the possible things to help Mira Masi and her mentally retarded brother-Baba. During this hectic period she finds time to educate herself and secure a job at a nearby college. She feels pleased to fulfil her dream to earn her own living independently and not surrender to fate or man as her father has left her to do. She has the additional burden of looking after their father's Insurance business. She even rejects Dr. Biswas' marriage proposal. Because she has no notion that marriage is the sole aim of her life.

But Anita Desai does not wait to shroud her protagonist in miraculous personality traits. In spite of Bim's independent ideas and yearning she is portrayed too earthly by the novelist. Bim has jealousy, hatred, hostility, wrath, grudge and aversion. Bim appears quite real like any of her living counterparts. Thus Anita Desai gives an objective portrayal and creates an awareness among the readers that a spinster can be a central character and yet can hold our attention and appreciation. Bims' character is worth appreciating as the 'new woman' - independent, working, competent and capable of fighting the adversities.
of life. Blm emerges victorious as a human being, a full-fledged woman who lives her life as she envisages.

Anita Desai has portrayed Tara and the Misra girls as the 'reverse of Blm. They symbolize all that is meek and dependent in women. They like many Indian women opt for marriage expecting solace in the strong hands of their husbands. Men and fate are cruel to the Misra girls. Both the girls are abandoned and divorced. Anita Desai poignantly and a bit ridiculously portrays the agony of Misra girls who are not properly educated to earn an income for their survival. Having no other way to earn a living, the grey-haired bespectacled middle aged women give dance tuition to young girls for a meagre income. Tara's life is not much different. Because Bakul always ruled her, taught her 'a different life' and at the end she follows him like a meek, content and obedient dog. In many of her novels, Anita Desai's heroines find it awful at the later stages of their life to bear the strain of monotany, dependence and meek obedience. Tara too realizes the strain of passive acceptance and how her 'pig-like contentment' has smothered her personal desires and wishes.

She shook her head. She felt she had followed him enough, it had been such an enormous strain, always pushing
against her grain, it had drained her of too much strength, now she could only collapse, inevitably collapse. 41

Anita Desai criticizes the foolish notions and prejudices society holds against a spinster. There is a social tendency to judge a person by her marital status and people rarely bother to consider her other achievements as a human being. It is Tara's prejudice against spinster that prompts her to raise her eye-brows in wonder and embarrassment when Bim fiddles her pet cat. Anita Desai wants to say that not only Tara (who represents the dependent, weak wives) think spinsterhood a curse, but almost all the people hold such prejudices against women. Bim tells Tara.

'I know what you are thinking' she said 'You are thinking how old spinster go ga-ga- over their pets because they haven't children. Children are the real thing you think'. 42

Anita Desai wants to stress the point that even after the abolition of sati, widows in Indian society are tortured to a gradual, painful death. Mira Masi is one of them. Mira Masi is married at the tender age of fifteen
and is cursed to become a virgin widow. Like in any other
Indian orthodox family the in-laws ill-treat her in all the possible ways and rob her of all her bridal jewellery and silk sarees.

..... they blamed her bitterly for his death; it was her unfortunate horoscope that had brought it about, they said. She should be made to pay for the guilt. Guiltily, she scrubbed and washed and cooked for them. At night she massaged her mother-in-law's legs and nursed wakeful babies and stitched trousseau for her sisters-in-law. Of course she aged. 43

She is poor, dependent, old, weak and unwanted by the time she has outgrown all their usefulness. So they are relieved to send Mira to look after Baba in her distant cousin's house. Here too Mira Masi is conscious of her inferior status as a widow. When her frail self can no longer suppress her pain she is down with a mysterious disease. She screams, prances and streaks in the open drive-way. When we consider our modern era famous for the atrocities committed on woman by their 'inlaws', Mira Masi's character can certainly awake our conscience. Here, Anita Desai has succeeded in communicating to her readers, her own awareness and concern for the struggling women.
In this novel the scene is a village called Thule near Bombay. Here Anita Desai draws our attention to yet another problem - the tragedy of a family caused by the influence of liquor. She also narrates superstitions and other social evils that effect the lives of these poverty stricken fisherfolk, especially their women. This is a realistic story as Anita Desai herself says in the introduction. The men in Thule village drank today and loitered in the coconut groves or slept at the beach. It is the women who suffer a silent suffering. These starving women try to manage with one or two coconuts they sell or by the mollusca they chip from the beach.

Lila's family represent the Thule village. So their story is the story of each family in Thule village. Lila has a happy childhood when her parents are young and her father owned a fishing boat. Later, like most of the villagers Lila's father became a drunkard. He also starts selling every bit of his material possession to buy toddy. When all the ways are closed he starts drinking on credit. His addiction to drinks slowly turns his family into a virtual hell. His son runs away from a drunken father. His elder daughter Lila struggles hard to make both ends meet.
and his youngest daughter starves. His dog is poisoned by his neighbour because he has not returned debts. And above all this, his wife lay paralyzed for lack of food and medicine. They like any pauper villager opt for a village witch doctor to treat her. Thus his drinking habit has pushed his family further and further in to the caverns of poverty, illness and misery.

Anita Desai seems to emphasis the fact that in a village or in a city the mental condition of the drunkard and the state of their family is the same. This she does well by bringing an episode from Hari's life in Bombay. When Hari confesses to Jugu's wife about his father's drinking habits she enquired eagerly whether his father too is like the men in the Slum areas.

"He does, does he? And beats your mother? And starves you?" She asked interested.

True, their life is full of fear, anger, despair and nightmares like it happens in any other drunkard's family. In their hearts of heart they all felt awkward but nobody dares to question the authority of their father. Because he is a man and the head of the family by an unwritten law.
Lila could smell the fermented toddy even from a distance—it was a smell she had known and hated since she was a small girl. She kept her nose wrinkled up and wished her father would throw himself into some other corner to sleep and not foul her mothers' room with the stench of drunkenness. But no one dared to tell him, least of all her mother. 45

Here Anita Desai indirectly points out the patriarchal system of our society which is well founded by Manu's injunction. From time immemorial the Smritis and society has promulgated that man is the head of the family and a woman's duty is only to follow the footsteps of her man and worship him like a living God. The Smritis says:

The wife should ever treat the husband as God, though he be characterless, sensual and devoid of good qualities. 46

Lila's father too is a characterless man, a drunkard, an idler and no supporter of his family. But he believes in the patriarchal, unquestionable authority of a husband in the family. So he shouts at Lila for admitting his wife in Alibagh hospital without his permission. He is
wild and screams in anger for questioning his unquestionable
male authority. He breaks all water pots, earthen wares and
demands an explanation for her imprudent behaviour.

There was a dangerous roaring sound
as he swayed on his feet above her
like a tree about to fall. His shadow
on the wall was made huge as a giants
by the small flickering flames of the
fire. "Why did you send her away
without asking me?" He roared. "You
were...... You were asleep, father"
Lila whispered. There was another
roar from him. "I will go to her"
he shouted "Why did you take her
away without telling me?"

Though Hari is a very young boy he knowsthe
inferior social status of women in his village.
The men treat them as dependent inferior beings devoid
of feelings. That is why the villagers laugh at the
women when they witness a procession by women in Bombay.
It is all new for the villagers because so far they have
seen only the self denying, suffering, meek and obedient
women. Women agitating for their rights and demands is a
strange, new idea to the villagers. For them women are
always slaves or child bearing machines who bring problems
worries and debts.
As a side issue there is a reference to dowry system. She points out that the system of dowry troubles the minds of people who are not in a position to satisfy the undue demands of the bridegroom. Even Hari, a young boy could understand the futility of his sister's life. They are girls and marriage is their only vocation. He realizes that his sister would not be qualified even for that vocation because they are born in a poverty-stricken family having only tears and misery to offer as dowry. His young mind could understand the difficulties to provide them with dowry and marry them off. The following passage is an example of Anita Desai's intense awareness of this problem.

The bridegrooms might demand a dowry a bicycle or even a scooter. Gold buttons, coins and jewellery. A cow or a buffalo. A piece of land. He had heard of the fantastic demands that bridegrooms made and that parents had to meet. How could he ever meet them? Even if he found a job he would never earn enough to buy them such riches. He would have to borrow money from the village money lender and then pay him out of his salary for years, perhaps all his life. And that was if
he was to find his sisters a way out of this dark gloomy house. 48

In this short novel for children Anita Desai notes the point that it is wonderful to earn one's own living, be it a man or a woman. Work can occupy a person and give her or (him) economic independence self steem and a wonderful feeling of freedom. Lila feels the same when she starts working for the gentleman in "Mon Ropos" and gets her first salary. Anita Desai also points out the advantages of not drinking. Thus Anita Desai ends her fairy tale like novel with an underlined moral tag pinned to it.
CHAPTER V

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