Sita clearly specifies for herself that life is a constant struggle. The more lasting will be the existence, the survival, self-improvement and preservation. She finally makes a compromise, though it is hard to do so. She understands that life and all its business must be continued. Life remains a riddle but there is no realization of the need to live it in a positive manner. She comes to understand that, “Life must be continued, and all its business- Menaka’s admission to medical college gained, wife led to hospital, new child safely brought forth, the children reared, a salary earned, a salary spent” (138). She accepts the grim truth that she has to face the assaults of existence all alone.

In the title, if someone asks the question without ‘this summer’, it becomes ‘where shall we go?’ and there is confusion. Because, world is filled with brutality, murder, corruption, forces of money, machines, automations, skepticism and violence which result in despair, maladjustment, divorce, rape, melancholy and frequent emotional psychological breakdowns. No one is secured. Even mothers are afraid of giving birth to their children in this brutal world. The novel does not end on a sad note. Sita’s return to Manori shows that she is wiser about the ways of life.
Anita Desai is an expert in dealing with the lonely experience of the women characters. In *Fire on the Mountain* (1977), her journey moves from adulthood to old age experiences of the protagonist Nanda Kaul. In this novel, she moves towards the landscape of a small holiday resort called Kasauli in northern India. It raised her reputation making her one of the foremost Indian English novelists. She was awarded the Royal Society of Literature’s Winifred Holtby Memorial Prize and National Academy of Letters Award in 1978. *Fire on the Mountain* was shortlisted for England’s coveted Booker prize, and the first of her novels to be published in the USA.

*Fire on the Mountain* deals with the loneliness, isolation, agony and the resultant angst in the deserted life of Nanda Kaul who presents an unforgettable pathetic portrait of old age. The novel is an original full of delicate observations about human nature and parental relationships. Loneliness is a presentation of both inner and outer conditions and hence, its sense can be experienced even everyone in our society. Thematically the novel is an extension of Desai’s conviction that everyone in this world is solitary and that involvement in human relationships invariably leads to disaster. Desai is highly a sensitive interpreter of the maladies of lonely individuals, women in particular.

Kasauli, a hill station, is presented as a barren, dry and unattractive place, surrounded by scenes of past and present forest fires. Nanda’s choice of a house, at such a
place, becomes the focal point of this dry and burnt landscape, which in fact, symbolizes the inner self of the protagonist. Anita Desai’s fifth novel *Fire on the Mountain* focuses on three women and their complex experiences in life. It is a study of loneliness-the loneliness that takes refuge in fantasy. Certainly, fantasy and fairy tales have their place in life.

The novel is divided into three parts which describes one of the three women characters in the novel. The three parts are further divided into several short chapters. The first part *Nanda Kaul at Carignano* runs into ten chapters which deal with Nanda Kaul, the main protagonist’s lonely life in Kasauli. The second part *Raka comes to Carignano* contains twenty one chapters which reveals the experiences of Raka who appears to enjoy the richness of life in Carignano. The third part *Ila Das leaves Carignano* is divided into thirteen chapters which present the futile life and the tragic end of Ila Das. Carignano is an important symbol in the novel and it is an island. Throughout the novel, Carignano is associated with death and it is a place where memories reside. Anita Desai puts stress on the landscape and co-relates it with the psychic states of her characters.
The novel deals with the tensions and struggle of Nanda Kaul who lets fantasy overtake reality to such an extent that ultimately reality has to assert its position. The novel is a histrionic rendering of the woeful and unhappy death of Nanda Kaul, triggered by the distressing news of her friend Ila Das’s rape and murder. From its gentle opening to its violent end, the novel depicts a wonderfully observed picture of Indian life and an unforgettable portrait of an old age. Parasuram observes, “It tries to acquire a degree of independence, integration, and self-awareness that cannot be found in any of her previous heroines” (59). The novel centres on the conflicts between an older Indian woman and her mentally ill great granddaughter.

Carignano is a perfect shelter to Nanda’s yearning for loneliness and privacy. When she walks across the lawn, she enjoys the fresh fragrance of the flowers. Also, she is refreshed by the sight of the phlox bloomed in a border edging the lawn. She forgets herself with colour and freshness of the garden which denotes a projection of Nanda’s self that is bare and empty. Carignano has beautiful landscape but no activity. Nanda also wants to lead a lonely life without any activity. She does not wish to plant a tree in it like any other owner but enjoys its bareness.

Nanda builds an imagery world round her father and the fantasy which she weaves a desire to relate and to communicate: it also reflects her dissatisfaction with her own family life. The hollowness of Nanda’s married life is suggested by not sharing a bedroom with her husband. Her impenetrable agony caused by her miserable lonely life is symbolically depicted through the description of a lapwing bird. She feels hate her
nervous unconscious is now far away from her reach and that there remains only the conscious mind which is not weak and nervous but is like a prowler out to attack and find what it wants. The seemingly self-imposed exile of the protagonist Nanda Kaul is “eventually revealed as a consequence of her female existence within the socio-familial realm” (Dengel 117). Nanda does not want any interference in her life.

The title *Fire on the Mountain* has the symbolic interpretation of the novel. Both ‘fire’ and the ‘mountain’ are natural elements. The fire is man-made and Raka symbolizes it in the novel. The mountain is natural. So, the title refers to the words of Raka, the great granddaughter of Nanda Kaul in the end: “Look, Nani, I have set the forest on fire. Look, Nani-look-the forest is on fire” (FM 145). R.S.Sharma rightly observes: “The words are expressive of Raka resolve to destroy a world where a woman cannot hope to be happy without being unnatural. The forest fire in the novel is a major threat to the residents on any hill station and here it becomes ‘symbolic of an impending tragedy that occurs in the end of the novel’” (Sharma 32). The title calls back to the title of the second chapter of William Golding’s celebrated famous novel *Lord of the Flies* (1954) of which the second chapter is entitled *Fire on the Mountain*. It symbolizes fire burns in the heart of an old lady, a great granddaughter and Ila Das. The exploration of her emotional world is the theme of the novel. The title suggests that the revolt of the new generation of women against a world is dominated by harsh and cruel men. The title has its symbolic meaning which points out the nature symbolism.
Carignano is presented in this novel as a contrast to the life of the city. Nanda Kaul dislikes the city life and her escape to the hills. Nanda’s house is situated on the knoll. There are no trees to protect it from the wind, it is bare and stark and vulnerable. It has a long history of having housed the fugitives of life; it is like a burial ground. She desires to pass her rest time of her life peacefully in a solitary confinement. She determines to love her loneliness. Desai’s intention is not to describe the landscape but the psychology of the protagonist and the landscape is used only to reflect symbolically the mindscape of Nanda Kaul who wants Carignano exclusively for herself. “It was the place, and the time of life, that she had wanted and prepared for all her life - as she realized on her first day at Carignano, with a great, cool flowering of relief - and at last she had it. She wanted no one and nothing else” (3). It symbolizes that in her past life, she lived only for others. She won’t take anything for herself. In Carignano, she is expected to live for herself. She also doesn’t want to share with others. Naturally, “to be alone, to have Carignano to herself, in this period of her life when stillness and calm were all that she wished to entertain”(18). Her fond of privacy is symbolized by an eagle, like a free soul that is not bound by any responsibilities or duties.
The novel gives the message through the character of Nanda Kaul that one should not take a prejudiced view about anything. It explores the effectiveness of escapism as a coping mechanism. The central character Nanda Kaul suffers from the lack of friendship. In spite of grandsons, she considers herself as a companionless and alienated woman. This novel concerns with the existential angst experienced by the female protagonist Nanda Kaul, an old lady leading a life of isolation. It also projects inner turmoil of a small girl, Raka. She is haunted by a sense of futility. It presents plight of a helpless woman, Ila Das. She is conflict with forces that are too powerful to be encountered, resulting in her tragic end. The major themes of the novel are solitude, alienation, the futility of human existence and struggle for survival. Her loneliness is suggested by the image of the eagle:

An eagle swept over it, far below her a thousand feet below
Its wings out-spread, gliding on currents of air without once
moving its great muscular wings which remained in repose, in control. She had wished, it occurred to her, to imitate that eagle -gliding with eyes closed (21).

Nanda Kaul is perfectly comfortable in her quiet house on a ridge facing the Himalayas, in the Simla Hills of Northern India. She wants to lead her part of her life without any human attachment. But, She is perturbed by receiving letter from her granddaughter, which contains the arrival of her great granddaughter, Raka. When postman enters her house, she stands under the trees like one among the trees. It looks
like unemotional and still. She resembles the trees because she is also in the flames of disappointment, disapproval and torture. Postman gives her a letter which introduces the new characters- Nanda’s daughter Asha, grand-daughter Tara, great grand-daughter, Raka. Her daughter Asha writes about her daughter Tara who is in Geneva. She has been ill-treated by her often drunk, unfaithful and husband who has now been appointed as Diplomat in Geneva. Asha advises her daughter to give one more chance to her husband for his recovery. Going with her husband, she sends her daughter, Raka to some other place. Because Raka has just recovered from the fatal attack of typhoid. So Asha writes that she will send Raka to Carginano and hope that the company of the great grand-daughter would relieve her of boredom and loneliness. Nanda Kaul does not like this duty - “she struggled to suppress her anger, her disappointment and her total loathing of her daughter’s meddling, busybody ways, her granddaughter’s abject helplessness, and her great granddaughter’s impending arrival here at Carignano” (16). The letter from her daughter denotes that her children are not bother about her feelings or her convenience. But they remember only for some selfish reasons. Her daughter Asha mentions that ‘darling mama’ only she wants the help of her mother. Asha’s character denotes that she is a self-centered person.
Nanda Kaul is disturbed by her strange and silent great-granddaughter and the broken old woman who is her only friend are touched in varying ways by the violence of living. Receiving the letter, she says, “Have I not done enough and had enough? I want no more. I want nothing. Can I not be left with nothing?” (17). Nothing suits her more than the peaceful stillness of living alone. With grace and dignity, Nanda Kaul plays her role as the wife of a Vice-Chancellor of the Punjab University. She has chosen to spend her last part of his years high in the Mountains. But her solitude is broken by arrival of her great granddaughter. As she receives the news about Raka’s arrival, she makes false notions about the child. The child would scatter her toys all over the house. She would have to be coaxed to eat eggs and take to be quiet so on and so forth. Through the long hot summer, hidden dependencies and old wounds are uncovered, until tragedy becomes inevitable. Secretive Raka proves to be very much like Nanda Kaul. A spiny little ghost of a girl, Raka prefers spending hours alone exploring the forests and the hills and seeking out the beautiful and dangerous wildlife of the region- hoopoes, jackals and snakes. When an old friend of Nanda Kaul appears, the story takes a bizarre twist as hidden truths with unexpected violence. Shyam Asnani in his article The Theme of Withdrawal and Loneliness in Anita Desai’s Fire on the Monutain says, “Nanda Kaul’s quest for identity succeeds in communicating a sense of myopic horror” (84). While in reality the girl needs no attention and the young girl lives in double singleness.

The novel presents a study of trauma of a housewife that takes refuge in seclusion. Desai makes use of “the flash-back-technique in describing the central theme
of the trauma of a housewife” (Tiwari 106). The life-long faithlessness of a Mr.Kaul to Nanda and the hypocritical situation force her to avow this severance, Nanda has conceded this after passing through psychic suffering and bitter experiences of a married life. The wedding is veritably based on physical lust and circumstantial convenience for Mr.Kaul and he doesn’t love her as a wife. She plays the gracious hostess all the time and enjoys the comforts and social status of the wife of a dignified person. Nanda becomes a mother, grandmother and great grandmother of many unwanted and unloved children. Her life as the Vice-Chancellor’s wife though crowded and full of social activity was truly purposeless and unsatisfied. There had been too many guests coming and going all the time, leaving little privacy for her. For Nanda, they were the moments of her glory and gratification, when the visitors said, “Isn’t she splendid? Isn’t she like a queen? Really, Vice-Chancellor is lucky to have a wife who can run everything as she does” (18). She looked after the children, family, his house, servants, shutting the doors, cooking food, lunch, dinner and guiding supper table, keeping the visitors at ease and waiting, ever waiting with a singular, burning, soul-destroying.

Emotional deprivation is at the root of Nanda’s disillusionment with human bonds. Her husband did not love her as a wife. He treated her as some decorative yet useful mechanical appliance needed for the efficient running of his household. She played the gracious hostess all the time and enjoyed the comforts and social status of the wife of a dignitary. But she felt lonely and neglected. Her husband carried on a love affair with Miss David, the Mathematics mistress. This had been a source of agony throughout her
life. She now believes that every attachment is the preface of a new betrayal which 
creates in Nanda such a sickness of soul, that she distrusts all attachments and affairs.

Nanda’s relationship with her husband was an unhappy one. She led her life out of 
a sense of duty. She fulfilled the needs of her husband. Yet she could never consider his 
house as her own. Really, it did not belong to her. She had been so glad after the death of 
her husband: “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… Discharge 
me, she groaned. I’ve discharged all my duties. Discharge”(30). She is not interested in 
the affairs of life, even in the lives of her own children and grandchildren. Her arrival at 
Carignano is a turning point in her life. After the death of her husband, her children 
vacate Vice-Chancellor’s residence; they pack and distribute some of the goods among 
themselves and to settle Nanda at Carignano and attend their own duties within a few 
days. Nanda has relief not only from the over-busy schedule but also the cares and 
worries of the mundane life. She renounces the world and accepts life as it comes to her 
after a great inner battle.
Nanda craves for a blessed widowhood- the complete separation from the crowded house. These are the situations which have forced her to get such a dreamed house at Kasauli. She prefers seclusion not because she favours it but to give rest to her painful psyche and her stagnated pulses. She attempts to get in the shelter of Carignano doubtless need that rock-like exterior to give her identity, a wholesome structure, a hopeful destination.

While lying on her bed, in the afternoon, Nanda remembers how she used to take rest in the afternoon throughout her very busy life. This practice of Nanda is indicative of her cheerless empty life which has been full of responsibilities and duties. Her one hour rest in the afternoon was actually her silent revolt against her burdensome sense of duty. Also, it suggests that she is all the time trying to have the old age, and calm and peace would be her companion. Now, her life is only an expansion of that one hour of rest in the afternoon. She guarded her privacy of an hour very rightly in the past and now she is trying to guard her privacy in Carignano very carefully. In the past, “she was forced to come out of her shell after an hour… All right she’d sigh, come, come all of you, get me, I’m your, your again” (32). In fact, her attitude symbolizes the hollowness of her married life. She didn’t have any genuine love from her husband and children and did not share happiness and sorrow with them.
Anita Desai unfurls her past in the form of long interior monologues punctuated by authorial interruptions. “Indeed, on a first reading, the sudden violent eruptions of the last two chapters almost seem inexplicable in the context of the work as a whole” (Krishna 164). Violence and death form an aspect of the theme of loneliness in the novels of Anita Desai. Nanda has witnessed only betrayals and demands in life before her retirement to Kasauli. The memories of her children make Nanda shudder at the very thought of her past. Whenever she looks at the tall pine trees that stand out from the underwood, she is reminded of her own alienation. She is awaiting the inevitable end to all human existence: death. It is world of private fantasy in which she lives; “an escape, for after all nobody wanted the truth and no one could bear it” (89). It is because reality is unbearable that she builds a protective wall of solitude, only to find that it is vulnerable and requires constant effort to be maintained.

Nanda finds herself slowly getting involved in Raka and she is overcome by a strange desire to hold on to the child, “somehow she could not bear to let her slip away, it was as it Raka’s indifference was a goal, a challenge to her-the elusive fish, the golden catch” (98-99). When Raka arrived, Nanda Kaul gives a cold shoulder to her, she feels that she is independent at Carignano but gradually becomes emotionally dependent on Raka. She wishes to break up with the past, but the past continuously impinges on her privacy and distracts her vision. No wonder, Raka’s prospective arrival is disturbing her. Moreover, she is sent to her not for her sake but for the convenience of Asha. Nanda feels very old. Raka’s arrival makes her realize that she is quite aged.
Nanda tells her servant, Ram Lal about the arrival of the girl with “a nervousness that alarmed him as a thunderstorm in the air might have alarmed him” (31). Neither of the two has any idea what should be cooked for the child. She thinks of various recipes, but fails utterly. She writes on several scraps of paper, but tore them up and threw them away. She selects to prepare potato chips with tomato ketchup for lunch. Ram Lal ascribes his failure to prepare a menu for the child’s lunch to the aged persons as he says, ‘She is old, I am old. We are old, old” (33). As a poor man, he does not know that it is their lack of interest in the world. Nanda does not go to the taxi stand to receive her great-grandchild, Raka, but she sends Ram Lal instead to bring her home.

Raka too, loves a life of loneliness. She wants only one thing – to be left alone and to pursue her own secret life amongst the rocks and pines of Kasauli. “If Nanda was a recluse out of vengeance for a long life and duty and obligation, her great-grand daughter was a recluse by nature, by instinct”(48). Desai’s above observation about Raka’s character at once brings out the similarity and difference with that of Nanda in their mental makeup. Raka’s character has been introduced by the novelist as a foil to Nanda Kaul. If Nanda symbolizes a particular aspect of existentialism, Raka epitomizes another aspect of the existentialistic predicament: the influence of her parents on her life. Anita Desai makes Raka both young and temperamentally solitude-loving. When she is first introduced, the reader is informed that she is the granddaughter of Asha, the most problematic of Nanda’s daughters. That she is an unwelcome intruder into Nanda’s life is suggested by the image of an insect.
Raka seems to have no need for human company. She goes for long walk on her own and avoids human company and conversation. She seems to be a totally absorbed in a world of her own and ignores Nanda Kaul with a “total rejection, so natural, instinctive and effortless” (47). When compared with Nanda’s own flawed experiment, Raka wants only to be left free to pursue her own secret life amongst the rocks and pines of Kasauli. When Raka arrives, Nanda Kaul thinks her as “an intruder, an outsider, a mosquito flown up from the plains to tease and weary” (40). Nanda wants to penetrate Raka’s secret world. She offers to go for a walk with her and during this walk, there is a moment of shared laughter, a coming together as it were, only to pull apart the moment, the idea of pattern enters their conversation” (58-59). Raka’s sense of the essential upsets Nanda Kaul. Raka’s silence and withdrawal is the result of a long chain of events, it is the result of her mother’s nervous breakdown and grandmother’s heartless exuberance; caught between the two extremes, her natural instinct is perfect.

Raka is the catalyst in this novel. She leads Nanda to the discovery of truth. She is often referred to an insect, a cricket, a pet insect which suggest that she is completely one with nature. She is ecstatic to set the forest on fire. Raka is completely devoid of them, unlike Nanda Kaul who discovers her life as a lie in the end. Anita Desai says, Raka is “the little girl who has grown more and more impatient… with Nanda Kaul’s fantasies and fabrications… she herself is only interested in the truth of things-stones, pine-cones, solid objects and finally she sets fire to that whole illusory world” (Feroza 162). Raka means moon. Her name represents, “the soft or tender aspect of the moon”. Raka’s desire
to set the forest on fire is not drawn by the cosy world of civilization but by the forces of destruction and negation. It is but “the burnt houses on top of the hill which attract her… This hill…inspired her” (9).

Raka’s presence is instrumental in bringing about the spiritual awakening in Nanda Kaul, prior to her confession of being a liar. She is filled with concern for everyone and everything around her. Raka feels alone and insecure internally. Her sense of insecurity and fear of cruelty are again suggested by her knowledge that the bright light on the hill is fire which she sees for the first time: “Shivers ran through her, zigzag leaving streams, of sweat in their wake. Hugging herself with thin arms. She stood on one leg” (81-82). The fire is symbolic of the violence and cruelty in the world. Obviously, Raka is very much upset and is not able to sleep at all. Her fear of violence is suggested by her restlessness to see the fire again and again. The fire distresses her very much and she wants to know how it will die. Fear and distress keep her awake throughout the night. At last, Raka visits the club to find out the truth of life there. Her desire to see life from the outside and to get the true picture of it is suggested through her journey to the club in the night. Her instinctive nature discovers that the young boys in the club appear to have “something more alarming about them, to them, in the wails of the Jackals or the sudden rattles of the nightjars in the darkness” (90). This is symbolic of the fact that human beings are more dangerous than the wild animal. Naturally, she finds darkness very friendly.
Though Nanda Kaul wants to be detached, yet deep in heart, she pines for the love and care of her children and relatives. This conflict within herself takes place between her conscious mind and the unconscious and it is suggested by the ringing of the telephone bell. She wants to avoid it, but is unable to do so, she goes to attend the phone and it looks, “to her like a weakness, offending her still further” (110). The telephone call is from Ila Das, one of her school mates, and at present, a social welfare officer in a neighboring small village. Ila wants to meet Nanda. “And when can I come and see you? Screeched Ila Das. We haven’t met for ages, dear, and I’ve so much to tell, I’ve been so busy, I must tell you all …” (21).

Ila’s desire to meet Nanda suggests that she may express her inner tensions and depression before one whom she respects and loves. But, hearing Ila’s voice, Nanda’s face is, “cut from end to end with black furrows of desperation” (140). She asks Ila to come sometime after Raka has settled down. She didn’t get any genuine love from her husband and children and she also didn’t share her feelings with them: she thought after an hour, “life would swirl on again, in an eddy, whirlpool of which she was the still, fixed eye in the centre” (26). She does not like anything new to be added to her.

Ila Das is a metamorphosed figure in Fire on the Mountain. The novel deals with the tragedy of Ila Das. Her life symbolizes the universal tragedy of a woman in Indian society. She depicts a fragmented life. She is an individual and at the same time she represents the colonial past of the country. She is Nanda Kaul’s childhood friend. The character of Ila Das gives the message of making untiring efforts for welfare. She has pity
for the poor of her area. She fights against the reactionary religious forces at the risk of her life and meets a martyr’s death. When the young boys chase Ila Das, they not only destroy her dignity but also expose the extreme vulnerability and their own thoughtless aggression. They underline the hostility which comes to them so naturally.

When Ila Das is about to reach home, Preet Singh, who is very angry with her because she tries to prevent him from selling his daughter to a rich landowner, attacks her. She strangles her then brutally, and rapes her dead body. This scene symbolizes barbarity and woman’s helplessness to save her life and honour from the cruelty of man. Though Ila suffers and leads a poor, insecure life, she represents lofty values of life like nobility and humanity. Though she is unable to look after herself properly, she shows unending concern and love for the poor. Her struggle to reach home through the dark, lonely area is symbolic of her fight against forces of life. She tries to save Preet Singh’s daughter from ill-fate, but becomes the victim of it herself.

Ila Das is a welfare officer. She has devoted herself to social work. Inspite of her sincere dedication, she faces a tragic end. A view has been expressed that the incident of the brutal murder of Ila Das is sprung too suddenly upon us as an element of melodrama, and it does not seem to fit into the psycho scope of the story. Ila Das is another important pathetic character in the novel. Ila Das’s life symbolizes the tragic life of a woman in our society. This part of the book suggestively paints the condition of women in our society through different characters, Ila Das, Nanda and Tara- all suffer in one way or another at the hands of men. The way, the boys insult Ila on her way to Nanda’s place is symbolic
of the behavior of young boys towards women. It also suggests that Ila is laughed at and rejected by the society. Now, Ila is lonely and unloved. Her need for love and company is suggested by the enthusiasm with which she greets Raka. She holds the child’s limp hand and insists on being accepted as a friend or a relation.

Despite all her sincere involvement, Ila faces a tragic end. Her life suggests another dimension of misery and meaningless existence. Ila’s real involvement in people’s welfare assumes tremendous symbolic significance when contrasted with the barren, unfulfilled and lonely existence of Nanda Kaul. Though she plays a minor role in the novel, she is also an allegorical character in the novel. She not only lives in isolation but also braves the brute majority with conviction and commitment as her tools. She meets with a tragic end but she has made her existence significant in exhibiting courage and determination in the faces of stiff resistance and threat to life. She epitomizes the existential concept of struggle against the odds of life. She stands for the thinking individual. Sustaining herself on a meager pay and putting up with the inevitable condition of solitude, she wages a valiant battle against the dictates of the society.

The story of the novel is narrated by the novelist herself, but she has made it credible by her intimate knowledge of the situations and the characters. She very often makes her characters speak for themselves to support her own version and views. She informs the readers about Raka’s arrival at Carignano and makes her information credible.
In the novel, Nanda uses her memories to distance the past, while Ila Das welcomes her nostalgic memories. They both view the past from entirely different points of view: Nanda Kaul resents which the claims the past had made on her, the curbs it had placed on her freedom and the deceptions it had held, while Ila Das romanticizes it with her memories of the badminton game, the music and jam. For Ila, it is a piece of heaven the memory of which renders her present moment tolerable.

Memory of the past is used as an important narrative technique by Anita Desai. The characters grow, and emerge and define themselves through the process of remembrance. Like the other works of Anita Desai, the present novel contains neither any story value nor events that are interesting by themselves. Indira notes: “The story is very thin and there is practically no action except for the tragic end” (95-96). The three sections of the book represent the three characters in reality. Nanda Kaul wants to shout at the world with a conscious effort at retreat. She is unable to relate to it anymore, while Raka has never desired to establish equation. Ila Das lives in a world of fantasy and hope and is finally destroyed by them.

The lonely house is symbolic of the lonely life of Nanda and Raka. Raka’s character has been introduced by the novelist as a foil to Nanda Kaul’s. Nanda symbolizes particular aspect of existentialism. Raka epitomizes another aspect of the existential predicament: the influence of her parents on her life. The sudden shift from the interior monologues about her bitter past to the present observation of the jackal crying, the latter superimposed on the former brings out Raka’s predicament.
When Ila Das visits her, Nanda Kaul has to exercise a strong control on her impulse to invite her to stay with her and to suppress her sense of guilt. Ila discharges her duties as a welfare officer in the area promptly and efficiently. She is brutally assaulted, raped and murdered by Preet Singh only because she tries to stop the disastrous child marriage of Preet Singh’s daughter. The news shatters Nanda’s inner world. The fallacious world, which she had constructed as an emotional refuge, absolutely breaks down. Raka finds, “Nanda Kaul dies on the stool with her head hanging the black telephone hanging on lone wire dangling” (145). Here, the view of Usha Bande seems to be right: “Feminist criticism spots out a social reality in their deaths, signifying the social forces which destroy woman from within” (100). Ila’s life indicates tragic life of a woman in our society.

Nanda Kaul is an old woman caught in the web of self-contradictions. She wavers between two contradictory forces: withdrawal and involvement, detachment and attachment, the need to withdraw in order to preserve one’s wholeness and sanity and the need to be involved in the painful process of life. Nanda, the oldest of Desai’s protagonists and Raka, the youngest, take recourse to self-destructive isolation. While the older woman has a tendency to look back and regret, the younger one is terrified of the past, the present and the future, striving to shut out the agony of experiences. Both suffer from self-alienation of a severe kind leading them towards neurosis. They suggest a sickness of soul which is imposed upon them from inside. Raka’s predicament, for instance, is identified in her confrontation with the painful reality of her home. Nanda’s
difficulties arise out of her intense self-contempt resulting from her failure in life. The telephone call, announcing the death of Ila Das overwhelms Nanda Kaul. The deaths of Ila and Nanda are interpreted as the final reality suggesting the futility of human existence. Ila dies because of her concern for others. Nanda dies because of her concern for her loneliness.

When asked by Feroza, the meaning behind Nanda Kaul’s death or suicide, in the fire, Anita Desai replied: “I never meant the book to end suicide, or even death. I’m perfectly ambivalent about the ending myself. (laughter) I have no idea what happens to Nanda Kaul (...) I don’t visualize her end. It’s over for me with that fire” (166). The fire lit to the mountain also assumes symbolic significance. It stands for the funeral pyre that ultimately consumes and annihilates everything.

Through the novel, by direct narration and also by oblique references, one comes across the topic of relationship between man and woman, Nanda Kaul and her husband, Tara and her husband, Raka and her father, Ila Das again with a stranger. Whether the man has the intimate bonds of family or he is an outsider, it makes no difference. In all the cases there is an element of cruelty, moral turpitude, injustice, exploitation or sadism meted out to women by men. Sincere to her convictions as an artist, Desai, in her novels, seizes upon that incomplete and seemingly meaningless mass of reality around her and tries to “discover its significance by plunging below the surface and plumbing the depths then illuminating those depths till they become a more lucid, brilliant and explicable reflection of the visible world” (Asnani 91). That is the single-minded and compact
theme and also the crux of the story. Secondly, the sufferers, here, have no fruitful resistance to offer. They are meek victims to their male counterparts as if they are born to bear all kinds of injustice.

At the end of the novel, Anita Desai comes to such a stage. Nanda Kaul, Ila Das, Tara, Raka and the peasant girl, all of them female, have had to endure exploitation and injustice by the so-called powerful male counterparts, against whom they could do nothing. This helplessness takes the form of anguish of the inner self. One excepts then strong feelings and desires against the exploiters – like killing or burning them etc. This anguish works at the sub-conscious level. For the final act of Raka, a compact metaphor takes shape. The proud and tall trees of the forest on the hills look down upon the humble earth like the transgressing male. Raka, however, gets hold of an image, and has the temerity to act boldly. She burns them down. The trees would revert to the earth rendered into ashes, to the earth from where they had originated and obtained sustenance. The ashes would then bring a sense of equality and mutual respect. The woman of future, the child Raka offers this message of Anita Desai to the next generation whose mothers, sisters and daughters who had so far been subjected to gross organized injustice and exploitation as they considered themselves too weak to resist the male offenders.

The most notable feature in all these women is their respective roles in society. The anguish they carry within their heart is fermented by the atrocity of males. It is in no way a part of their natural being. Through these women, the novelist has put question marks on the status of women in contemporary society where marital, filial, social and
communal relations have almost lost their true sense and where women are fated to live stunted lifes. Spivak illustrates that: “women are universally oppressed by men, may be a necessary position to take up to start with, but it is certainly not satisfactory” (117). Thematically the novel is an extension of Desai’s conviction that everyone in this world is solitary and that involvement in human relationships invariably leads to disaster.

Desai, the woman novelist, presents the woman’s problems with such an understanding that she is feministic, to say the least. In the four novels taken for discussion, Sarah in *Bye-Bye Blackbird*, is the only girl with an employment and that too, that of a teacher. In the other three novels, women are housewives. By presenting the stereotypical woman and her problems in an understanding and sympathetic way, she makes everybody realize the predicament of the woman in a male-chauvinistic society. The protest element is implicit. To say that Anita Desai is a Feminist writer is not to deny her artistic achievement. That woman is the centre of her novels is not only natural but quite convincing. P.S. Solanki comments:

As a consummate creative artist, Anita Desai shows tremendous potential and vitality. In her writings she not only offers an expose of human life in its shocking shallowness or outward show, but also provides, down deep, a philosophical probe or basis to sustain our life, she emerges neither as a downright pessimist nor an incorrigible optimist. All along, her earnest endeavour is to hold a mirror to life, and in the process, to unravel the mystery of human existence. (185).