CHAPTER II

EXISTENTIALISM
Chapter II

Existentialism

Existentialism is one of the significant themes in the novels of Anita Desai. Her novels are coloured by the philosophical and grave ideas of existentialism. The existential afflictions of her characters are associated with psychological complexities. In fact she deals with the psycho-existential problems of her characters. Existential predicament of an individual is the central theme of her novels. She had always concentrated on existentialist philosophical issues. Anita Desai shows outstanding skill in depicting the psycho-existential concerns of the modern man. Before discussing the theme of existentialism in Desai’s novels we should understand the concept of existentialism.

Existentialism as a philosophy belongs to Europe, both historically and culturally. It is a philosophical movement that emphasizes individual existence, freedom and choice. It has spread widely and became almost modern international phenomena. As for the different philosophies of the west concern, existentialism is the dominating one. The movement has influenced many diverse writers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Because of the diversity of positions associated with existentialism, the term is impossible to define precisely. Certain themes common to virtually all existentialist writers can, however be identified. The term itself suggests one major theme: the stress of concrete individual existence and consequently, on subjectivity, individual freedom and choice. Marjorie Greene observes:

"The more fashionable a philosophy becomes, the more elusive is its definition. So the proponents of existentialism proclaim that, though many attack, few understood them.... as the word goes around, every treatise that dooms men to destruction, every novel whose characters are mad or bad, every play that depresses without elevating, is labelled 'so existential'. Hence existentialism, more even than the naturalism of Zola or Ibsen in their ways, comes to mean the shocking, the sordid or obscene."1
The major existential states are disappointment, isolation and meaninglessness. Through existentialism the unfortunate spiritual predicament of the modern man is expressed. It was a reaction against the speculative idealism of Hegel and Sappe. The 19th century philosophy of Schelling and Nietzsche was truly existential. Most philosophers since Plato have held that the highest ethical good is the same for everyone, in so far as one approaches moral perfection, one resembles other morally perfect individuals. Soren Kierkegaard, a Danish philosopher was the first person to call himself existential, reacted against this tradition by insisting that the highest good, for the individual is to find his or her own unique vocation. Other existential writers have echoes Kierkegaard's belief that one must choose one's own way without the aid of universal, objective standards. Nearly all-existentialist philosophers have confessed their long struggle with idealism. As idealism leads to some kind of loss of the actual world, existentialism seeks above all to insist on the concreteness of the world. Marjorie Greene tries to define existentialism precisely:

"Existentialism is the philosophy which declares as its first principle that existence is prior to essence."  

Against the traditional view that moral choice involves an objective judgement of right and wrong, existentialists have argued that no objective, rational basis can be found for moral decisions. Friedrich Nietzsche contended that the individual must decide which situations are to count as moral situations. In deciding both the questions of both morality and truth, all existentialist have followed Kierkegaard in laying stress on the importance of passionate individual action. They believe that personal experience and acting on one's own convictions are essential in arriving at the truth. Neeru Tandon defines existentialism as:

"It (existentialism) grapples with the problems of man who is uprooted; lonely, forlorn, dismayed, anguished, fighting against destiny just to prove his identity. It is normally applied to writing that emphasizes
man's responsibility for forming his own nature and that stresses the prime importance of personal decision, personal freedom and personal goals." \(^3\)

For Kant, existence was inseparable from spastic-temporality, embarrassed the rationalist theologians. Logic is considered as the key to reality by all existentialists, assuming that the real is the rational. Hegel, a German philosopher, represents the desired goals of all existentialists. Existentialists derived a belief in the possibility of describing structures of consciousness. It is from German romanticism that existentialism derived the notion of the heroic wanderer.

Freedom of choice is the significant theme of the existential writing. Each human being makes choices that create his or her own nature. Choice is central to human existence and it is inescapable, even the refusal to choice is a choice.

Although existentialism as a distinct philosophical and literary movement belongs to the nineteenth and twentieth century, but existentialism can be found in the thought and life of Socrates, in the Bible, and in the works of many modern philosophers and writers. The first thinker to anticipate the major concerns of modern existentialism was the seventeenth century French philosopher Blaise Pascal. Asserting in his *Pensees*, (1670) that a systematic philosophy that presumes to explain God and humanity is a form of pride, Pascal rejected the rigorous rationalism of his contemporary Rene Descartes. Like other existentialist writers and philosophers, he saw human life in terms of paradoxes. Defining existentialism, Margaret Chatterjee remarks:

"Existentialism above all is an autropocentric world view built around the central insight that man cannot be defined. No single one of the cavalcade of 'natures' which the history of ideas has paraded - man as rational animal, child of God, tool - user, spinner of words, the laughing
animal symbol - user - none of them will do, for man has a condition, he is always in a situation." 4

It is very well known that the post-war period has been called the age of anxiety. People experienced depression and faced gruesome realities, the Germany of the Weimar Republic, the Spanish of the Civil War and existential philosophy were produced. Political realities spread a poll of terror. Berdiaev fled from Russia to Paris. Marcel worked at the Red Cross trying to trace missing men. Satre was an important member of the Resistance Movement. Camus faced the realities of French Revolution.

Kierkegaard has been acclaimed as the founder of the modern existentialism. He attacked Hegel's attempt to systematize the whole of existence. He opines that a system of existence cannot be constructed, since existence is incomplete and constantly developing. He ultimately advocated a 'leap of faith' into a Christian way of life. Nietzsche propounded his existential thought through his criticism of traditional metaphysical and moral assumptions and through his espousal of tragic pessimism and his life affording individual will that opposes itself to the moral conformity of the individual.

The existentialist's reaction against objectivity is a symptom of their dislike of the epistemologist's way of regarding man's relation to the external world. There are three other fertilising streams in German history of ideas, first is the Lebensphilosophie (life philosophy) of Dilthey. According to this philosophy man is not merely a being who observes but one who has lived experiences. The second approach is associated with Grimm and Herder through Hegel to Spangler and Troeltsch. Their personal biographies are shorn both of rationality. The third is the idea of alienation, which comes from Hegel and then Marx. It is an existential gulf, which obtains between man and himself, man and others. Heidegger, like Pascal and Kierkegaard, reacted against an attempt to put philosophy on a conclusive rationalistic basis. He argued that human beings could never hope to understand why they are here; instead each individual must choose a goal and follow it with passionate
conviction aware of the certainty of death and the ultimate meaninglessness. Heidegger's opinions about existential philosophy are an original emphasis on being and ontology as well as language.

The term existentialism was first given by Satre by using it for his own philosophy. After this he became the prominent one of the distinctive movement in France. According to Satre, human beings require a rational basis for their lives, but are unable to achieve one. Thus human life is a futile passion. Satre's existentialism was a form of humanism and he firmly lays stress on human freedom, choice and responsibility. He tried to harmonize these existential concepts with a Marxist analysis of society and history. The existential thoughts contain the uncompromising atheism of Nietzsche and Satre and the agnosticism of Heidegger. The religious philosophies of Pascal and Kierkegaard have thorough and abiding influence on twentieth century theology. Karl Jespers, a twentieth century German philosopher also rejected religious doctrines, influenced contemporary theology through the limits of human experience. The German Protestant theologians Paul Tillich and Rudolf Bultmann follow Kierkegaard's thoughts. The French Roman Catholic theologian Gabriel Marcel, the Russian orthodoxy philosopher Nikolay Berdyayev and the German Jewish philosopher Martin Buber. In the reference of different philosophers and scholars, defining existentialism, Neeru Tandon rightly observes:

"Soren Kierkegaard stresses that uniting himself with God is necessary. Gabriel Marcel perceived that inhuman values had reduced man to a meaningless code of words. Karl Jespers believes that morbid search for identity lies at the core of all philosophical thoughts while Heidegger's theory is that man is thrown in a particular situation, not chosen by him, but Satre believes in the supremacy of Man's existence in a Goldless world." 5

Albert Camus also propounded his existential thoughts. According to Camus the initial stage of existential dilemma, a clash between man's need for
coherence and meaning and chaos and meaninglessness takes place. The confrontation with these contrary pulls is responsible for man's absurd existence.

The confrontation between the contrary pulls is the starting point of man's existential dilemma. Living, working and breathing in the midst of mechanical existence, man becomes frustrated of his deadening routine. In existentialism man feels anger and rebels, like Camus and the earliers, a number of existentialist philosophers and thinkers used literary forms to convey their thoughts and existentialism has been as vital as extensive a movement in literature as in philosophy. Fydor Dostoyevsky is probably the greatest existentialist literary figure in world literature.

The twentieth century novels such as The Trial, (1925) and The Castle, (1926), written by an Australian Jewish writer Franz Kafka, present existential predicaments of the characters. Kierkegaard's thoughts can be found in the novels of Walker Percy and John Updike. Various existentialist themes are apparent in the works of Norman Mailer, John Barth and Arthur Miller. Among the Indian novelists, writing in English in India, existentialist themes are very prominent in the novels of Anita Desai. In this reference it is worth to quote the words of Anita Singh:

"A few recent Indian novelists in English have made significant efforts to delineate the existential dimension of the modern man and woman. The novels of Arun Joshi and Anita Desai manifest existential trends. Consequently, in the pages of their novels, there appears 'anti-hero' endowed with all the complex and fears devoid of any trust in people and in the future."  

Anita Desai's novels are replete with the existential afflictions of her characters. These works conform her apprenticeship with various existential thinkers like Jasper, Camus, Heidegger, Kafka, Proust and Satre. Jasper, Camus, Heidegger and Kafka mainly influence Anita Desai. Her major
characters are tormented by their fears and phobias, as they feel circumscribed by the frightening conditions of their existence.

Existential predicament is the central theme in the novels of Anita Desai. She colours her novels by the views of existential thinkers. She keenly prosecuted insight through the existential canons. She always concentrated on existentialist philosophical issues. In this regard Madhusudan Prasad rightly puts:

"As for the themes in her novels, she has been deeply influenced by the existentialists. In her novels, we obviously find the unmistakable reverberations of Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Bergson, Marcel, Heidegger, Proust, Camus, Satre and Beckett-to name the prominent ones, who have seriously considered in their works the various emotional problems, predicaments and crises that remain unchanged, despite the passage of time." 7

For Anita Desai writing is a process to discover the reality of human existence. She puts aside other aspects of the life of individuals and provides a razor-like sharp awareness of the meaninglessness of individual's existence. Her characters are overcast by shadows and half shadows, half-revealed and half-concealed. Her concern of the personal tragedy of individuals plays a significant role in existential predicaments in her novels. Suresh Singhal rightly opines:

"She is constantly engaged in this exploration of the human condition which often tends to be existential. She does it through her protagonists, who are free individuals having their own dreams and aspirations... they are free to make their choices of negating or accepting their existential situations in spite of their absurdities and shapelessness." 8

Anita Desai's existential dilemma is the stage where her protagonists come to encounter the contrary pulls involved in their predicament. She deals with the dislocation of normal life, recklessness of behaviour and morbidity of
temperament, maladjustment in family life and such contradictions. The instinct of revolt and rebellion is the central aspect of Desai's existential theme. Instead of dealing social or political aspects, she treats the personal existential predicaments. Anita Desai's fictional output is her private effort to seize upon the raw material of life - its shapelessness and meaninglessness.

The characters in Desai's novels, when caught in the dilemma, they feel themselves entrapped. They identify an unfathomable gulf between ideal constructions and the world's consistent denial of them. She dives deeply and silently tries to work out the inconsistencies and dichotomies of the virgin territories of existential afflictions. Through the existential theme Anita Desai explores the miseries and agonies of the characters of her novels and visits the rare and unvisited regions of human mind. Jasbir Jain rightly remarks that Anita Desai is essentially a novelist of "Existential concerns". whose "primary preoccupation remains with the absurdity of human life, with existential search for meaning in it."9

As the Desaian protagonist's trial is mainly a clash between what he is and has been and what he wishes to be. Most of her protagonists are found enmeshed in subjectivity, which virtually becomes a fundamental mode of their existence. Therefore it is pertinent to record that for Anita Desai individuality is an existential probe into the complexity of selfhood when the protagonist is engaged in the impossible quest of authenticity.

The novelist presents the protagonists of her novels, fallen into the everydayness of existence. They strive to define their existence but reality frustrates them. They begin their odyssey of life with rosy colour of romantic dreams, which in due course, turn out to be illusory, meaningless and exasperating. Due to naked reality their desire of freedom and human aspirations are found incompatible. They are governed by the deformation due to the biased reality. This results into existential void for her protagonists. In the reference of Desai's existential theme S.P. Swain puts:
"Anita Desai's chief concern is human relationship. Her central theme is the existential predicament of the individuals projected through the problems of the self in an emotionally disturbed milieu. Delicately conscious of the reality around them, her protagonists carry with them a sense of loneliness, alienation and pessimism." 10

The characters in Desai's novels strive for their existence. Even in their youth they cannot enjoy animal spirits. In their marital disputes their temperamental variation is an apple of discord. Roll after roll they feel existential anguish in terms of sense of alienation, anxiety, nothingness and meaninglessness. Desai presents the individual's quest for meaning and values, freedom and truth that provide spiritual nourishment to the enstranged self in a chaotic and meaningless world. Yet to live this absurd life authentically is the only solution. Regarding Anita Desai's concept of existential dilemma Suresh Singhal rightly remarks:

"Thus Anita Desai's concept of existential dilemma involves man's quest for a meaningful pattern in the face of existential reality. The entire body of her fiction constitutes a life long inquiry into the nature of human existence in terms of the past, the future and necessarily the crucial present leading to the stage of recognition, reconsideration and acceptance. That way the contradiction in the life of her protagonists are resolved and they achieve meaning and wholeness of being not in isolation but in accommodation, not in rejection but in acceptance, not in negation but in affirmation." 11

_Cry, the Peacock_ is Anita Desai's first novel deals with the existential predicament of its protagonist Maya, who is a victim of marital disharmony. Temperamental difference between Maya and her husband is the bone of contention of their marital discord. She is haunted by her childhood memory of an albino astrologer and his inauspicious prophecy of her fate, that after four years of her marriage either she or her husband would die.
Maya’s Life

Born as a motherless child

Suffers from father-fixation

Inauspicious prophecy of an albino astrologer

Marital disharmony

Husband’s murder.
The novelist presents Maya’s neurosis in all the three forms of growth, development and crisis. She is a victim of father-fixation and after her marriage; she finds Gautama a poor father substitute. The novelist unfolds the afflictions of an ill-fated wife, who is childishly innocent and foolishly mature. Maya is an existential character in the crystal clear description of Anita Desai. In this reference Neeru Tandon observes rightly:

"Anita Desai employs the stream of consciousness technique to depict Maya's moods, emotions, her existential despair, her search for identity and her dread of death. Maya is an existentialist character and world of feelings and emotions from the core of Maya's existence. Temperamentally Maya and Gautama represent the polarities of emotion and reason which govern human existence."  

Nothing is common between Maya and Gautama. Yet they simply maintain matrimonial bonds. Maya is sensitive, emotional and imaginative while Gautama is an insensitive and rigid in his nature. For Maya her pet Toto's death is cataclysmic where as for Gautama it is a natural incident. Before getting marry, Maya considered life as a happy game but soon discovered that freedom and satisfaction in conjugal love were, not easy to secure. Gautama never fulfils her desires as the following incident:

"In a sudden, impulsive longing to be with him, be close to him, I leapt up full of decisions to make haste in undressing, preparing myself, then joining him at last; so that we could go out into the garden, together, where the beds had been made for the night and were cooling in the moonlight. But when I went to rouse him from the couch, with a touch, I saw that he had closed his eyes not with mere tiredness, but in profound, invulnerable sleep, and was very far from any world of mine, however enticing. I hesitated, wishing to summon him to me, yet knowing he could never join me. It was of no use. After all I sighed-and, once more, was sad."  

50
Maya feels loss of identity and the meaninglessness of her existence. The novelist highlights the alienation between Maya and Gautama. In their temperaments and attitude they are diagonally opposed. This busy industrious lawyer has hardly any time to devote to his wife. Maya feels utterly lonely in the sprawling house, in which she lives with her husband. Her loneliness is always a cause of agony to Maya. When Maya mourns on the death of Toto, Gautama mocks the very idea of mourning, as an irrational pursuit after immortality and when Gautama considers death as a disappearance.

Maya is really an existential character that oscillates between illusions and realities. For a drastic turn in Maya's life the credit goes to her married life. Her inner demands of ideal love and free life compel her to reject the existence conventionally. She experiences a sense of absurd. Maya feels that she is living with her in-laws within the absurd wall of meaningless existence. Suresh Singhal rightly puts:

"The incongruency of temperament between her and Gautama, her husband, shakes the very foundations of her existence. Her existential crisis begins with the discovery of a little system, which continually appeared to advance upon her consciousness. Constant confrontation with such absurd situations complicates her predicament and she tends to become an introvert." 14

As there is no emotional rapport between Maya and Gautama, she suffers in her loneliness. Maya's nightmare points out her loneliness and the neurotic state of her mind. Later disillusionment with her friends, Leila and Pom bring Maya back to her dreadful present. The end of the cabaret makes her disillusioned about the false values of the human world. Her disillusionment is essentially existentialist.

Maya's life is really an existential one. Her statements are charged with disillusionment of an existentialist. Her marriage is an empty one. It is nothing but a failure.
Maya's existence is an absurd and uncertain and like an existentialist character, she is confronted with the duality of human condition that leads her into spiritual and existential crisis in the long run. Her rights of demands made unjustly upon her, which she cannot accept without giving up her struggle to exist. About existentialism in the present novel S.P. Swain rightly observes:

"Cry, the Peacock depicts existentialism in its deep-seated morbidity through the neurotic and hysterical self of Maya pining for companionship. Hers is an explosive life of incommunication her loneliness, her aching heart and the progressive disorientation of self makes her an existential character. "The loneliness corroding her heart and lacerating her psyche is existential in nature." 15

Maya wishes to discover her identity in her otherwise meaningless existence but she fails to find her existence, haunted by the fear of death. The prophecy of an albino astrologer becomes the source of her existential anxiety. Maya being a young and inexperienced, is not able to look at death as a fact of existence. Her existential afflictions lead her to utter desolation and she feels an absence of semblance of reason and order in her life:

"All order is gone out of my life, all formality. There is no plan, no peace, nothing to keep me within the pattern of the familiar everyday living and doing that becomes those whom God means to live on earth. Thoughts come, incidents occur, then they are scattered and disappear. Past, present, future. Truth and untruth. They shuttle back and forth; a shifting chiaroscuro of light and shade; of blood and ashes.... My body can no longer bear it.... Those are no longer my eyes, nor this my mouth. I cannot bear the heaving and wearing and pounding of the frantic tide that draws itself up to me, laps me more fiercely each day. The pattern for an order of lines and designs a symmetry... has deserted my own life.... strangers surround me." 16
Maya's decision to murder Gautama is a difficult choice for her in the existentialist sense. The philosophical detachment is another cause of Maya's existential dilemma. Maya, failing in her existential resolve, degenerates into an existential freak. She feels existential shame at confronting the other who would petrify her with gorgon like look. She desires to be loved by Gautama because she wants to give meaning to her existence. Maya feels her life meaningless, surrounded by her husband’s family:

"For they know I would not understand a matter so involved, and I knew it myself. They spoke to me... only when it had to do with babies, meals, shopping, marriages, for I was their toy, their indulgence, not to be taken seriously, and the world I came from was less than that it was a luxury they considered it a crime to suffer and so damned it with dismissal." 17

Maya comes to realise the meaninglessness of her life only after her existential awakening. She does not move away from a self-created trap where she opts for annihilation not existence. In fact Maya does understand human existence clearly as Suresh Singhal opines:

"The tragedy of Maya occurs because of hostile circumstances plus her inability to see clearly the reality of human existence." 18

Anita Desai's another novel Voices in the City is existential in character. All the three major characters are existential in nature. They ponder over the mystery of human existence and question the very purpose of life. Nirode, Monisha and Amla, all these three characters become victims of existential predicament. They realise that there is no reason of their existence and then also they move beyond it to find some meaning of their life. H.M. William aptly pictures the existential nature of this novel:

"It is an 'existential' novel that explores the inner climate of youth, despair, epitomized by the over-acutely self-conscious Nirode, that quoter of Camus, finding no meaning in his own life or in life at all. This
existential 'angst' is duplicated in Monisha, in whom it assumes a fatal rhythm from which Nirode was once narrowly saved but which in her reaches its inevitable end." 

Nirode is tortured by his hollow existence. He is a rootless character drifting directionless, shifting from one goal to another, finally feels existential affliction. Like a true existential hero he experiences with failure. This existential search of Nirode shows his intellectual inevitability engineered by emptiness.

As an existentialist Nirode wants to exercise his freedom of choice. He is an independent editor of a magazine, faces the problem of financial crisis and due to this reason his magazine becomes another failure of his life. In fact the seeds of his predicament were sown in his childhood. After his father's death he wants to be a husband substitute for her mother. He feels hatred for his mother because she has illicit relations with major Chadha. Being an existential character, throughout his life Nirode longs for identity and meaning in life.

Nirode is a typical Bengali youth, obsessed with failures in life as he says to David:

".... I want to fail quickly. Then I want to see if I have the spirit to start moving again, towards my next failure. I want to move from failure to failure, step by step to rock-bottom. I want to explore that depth. When you climb a ladder all you find at the top is space, all you can do is leap off, all to the bottom." 

About Nirode's existential dilemma Neeru Tandon rightly comments:

"He is a true existentialist. He moves from one failure to another in search of an abiding meaning in life. He is engaged in an unequal fight against the social and commercial values of life, which the city of Calcutta symbolises. Nirode recognises a lack of individuality and commitment to some higher purpose in life in all those who come and flatter him on the
success of his magazine. Nirode's quest for identity and meaning in life leads him to a point where he perceives the worthlessness of all art." 

Nirode's journey is an existential one in its predicament. He is a typical modern Indian youth-wayward and lost. He is keen to escape this mundane and meaningless world but it is an escape to nowhere. He wants to go away with relationships, responsibilities and duties and lead a bohemian existence. His anxiety neurosis is a result of his disintegrated personality. He cannot integrate the fragments of his personality to give meaning to his existence. He calls himself a leper:

"I am a leper.... leave me, do not come near. I am a leper, diseased with the loneliest disease of all." 

Nirode's frustration and disappointment with the superficial materialistic life is felt distinctly when contrasted with the romantic, gay and ease-loving life of Sonny and his Papa. Nirode is an angry young man, who is bright intelligent and sensitive but who has been an utter failure from the materialistic point of view. Throughout the novel Nirode tries to come out of his existential nullity. He gets existential shock at Monisha's death.

Nirode's tragedy involves neurosis and nihilistic passion and not positive attitude towards existential dilemma. It is only at the later stage of his existential dilemma that he succeeds to amend his illusive perception. Nirode believes in negative attitude, which is very deep as he quotes Camus:

"I have been reading Camus, you know. He says, 'In default of inexhaustible happiness, eternal suffering at least would give a destiny. But we do not have even that consolation, and out worse agonies come to an end one day.'" 

In the reference of Nirode's existential state Suresh Singhal observes:
"Since Nirode's journey of absurd existence has not come to an end, he wonders, if this was the climax of the failure and frustration, which he himself has imposed upon him."  

Monisha is another existential character in the novel. She is lost in her private concern of faith and rationality. Due to loneliness and lack of communication, her married life is shattered. She is a vacuum both inside and outside. She is in fact aware of her adverse circumstances and suffers from a nervous anxiety, which is certainly existentialist. Her life becomes a journey from nothingness to nothingness. She is not able to relate to the reality of her life. Anita Desai writes:

"To pretend to have forgotten, to pretend to believe in these trivialities, these pettiness of our mean existence, is that right? To sort the husk from the rice, to wash and iron and to talk and sleep, when this is not what one believes in at all? What force of will does it require to shed I believe my brother has, at least to an extent shed, the unnecessary, the diverting and live the clean... Death and mean existence and that surely is not difficult."  

Monisha is hyper sensitive and therefore she is not able to relate herself meaningfully to the external reality. She wants to reject her disharmonies of life. She seeks for attainment of a wholeness of being. She feels a total absence of the element of love in her life as Madhusudan Prasad puts:

"In her existential search, Monisha ultimately discovers that it is the 'absence' of 'the element of love that has made both brother and sister such objects rebels, such craven tragedians'. The insufferable cacophony of over-crowded, apathetic Calcutta, Monisha's claustrophobia and oppressive lack of privacy to bear a child, her total incommunication with her non-chalant husband, the absence of love in her life and the resultant fomenting loneliness within and the suspicion of her in-laws who look on her as a thief—all this terribly tortures her mentally and she shrieks in
agony. "There is no escape from it" and makes her feel the futility of her hollow existence and ultimately drives her to suicide."  

Monisha is a true existentialist character. Throughout her life she tries to find the real meaning of her life but ultimately she fails. Conjugal incompatibility between her and Jiban proves to be the biggest cause of her existential predicament. When her sister-in-law discusses ovaries and inspects her sari, Monisha's privacy is broken. Monisha's joint family is another cause of her existential dilemma. She cannot spare time for her self. She wants to read Kafka, Hopkins, Dostoyevsky and other but her interest is blocked by the dull routine of the family.

When Monisha is accused of stealing money from Jiban's wardrobe, she feels herself truly captured in an existentialist contingency. She is compelled to live in such a crowdie atmosphere of her husband's house. All the time she is busy in performing so many tasks and due to this she is unable to breathe in privacy. She thinks that she has to select one option between death and mean existence:

"But I have no faith, no alternative to my confused despair, there is nothing I can give myself to, and so I must say. The family here, and their surroundings, tells me such a life cannot be lived-a life dedicated to nothing-that this husk is a protection from death. Ah yes, yes, then it is a choice between death and mean existence, and that surely, is not a difficult choice."  

In this reference it is worth to quote the words of Suresh Singhal:

"Placed in the existentialist framework, Monisha is a sensitive and nervous lady, who comes to feel that her personality is disintegrated in the company of her husband, the members of the family of her in-laws and other people around her. She is a lady of very delicate sensibility which makes her feel shocked at the usual rough and crude facet of life."
Monisha's tragedy takes place because she is unable to synthesize the duality of life. Her suicide is a symbol for freedom and a meaningful existence. She can be pictured as an existential romantic, for whom, the traditional values do not exist; only the existential values exist.

Monisha leads a life of alienation, which is full of meaninglessness and futile existence. This nothingness of her life makes her an existential character. Apart from touch of love, she feels herself caught in a steel container:

"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. I am locked apart from all of them. They cannot touch me." 29

Anita Singh rightly sums up Monisha's existential dilemma:

"She (Monisha) fails to combine the idea of personal freedom, domestic duties and social responsibilities. As ill luck would have it, she is also denied by nature the chance to bear children. Thus, she seeks identity in the deepest darkness of the space.... Traceless, meaningless and uninvolved-such is a condition of non-existence." 30

Amla is another existential character in the novel. She has the vision that enables her to achieve an authentic existence. But Amla herself fails to obtain complete self-fulfillment in her life. She strives to find her identity, lost in the chaos of life. In fact Amla arrives in Calcutta to achieve a career as a commercial artist. But her search for an interesting career is transformed into an existentialist search.

Amla realizes that she is unable to achieve a wholeness of being through love and art. Her creativity of art is transformed by an ordinary and routine commercial art out of which she manages to survive. About her existential awakening Suresh Singhal comments:

"She (Amla) recognises the truth of human existence and accepts the fact that it is nothing but an absurd race that every human being has
to run. One who does not, he perishes to live, and to live meaningfully man has to struggle against the absurdities of life." 31

After Monisha's death, Amla chooses a life of compromise and remains an existentialist. Being an existential character also she does not escape from the problems of life but decides to continue her quest. She does not succumb to self-destruction like Maya or Monisha. Uniting all the causes of Amla's meaningless existence Neeru Tandon rightly opines:

"Her consciousness of the evil in life, her anxiety and anguish, her persuit of absolute love, her despair at her failure in the search—all these make her a character of existentialist proportion. In fact, she commits intellectual suicide, which is also a protest against the meaninglessness of existence." 32

In Bye-Bye Blackbird, Anita Desai presents cultural displacement, as a cause of deep existential concern. In this novel we encounter a sort of dislike of foreigners, which acts as a sort of xenophobia. Adit and Dev are Indian immigrants in London. Being an Indian, Adit has an English wife, Sarah. Adit and Dev feel existential predicament in foreign atmosphere. By marrying a brown Asian, Sarah has transgressed the social code of England. In this reference H.M. Prasad rightly puts:

"The experience of exile has assumed mythic proportions in commonwealth literature. It begins as a condition of living and intensifies itself as a condition of mind. Its broad sources are cultural displacement and cultural shock. Cultural displacement implies a co-presence of more than one culture, bi-culturalism or multi-culturalism. Multi-culturalism is now a world phenomenon, bi-culturalism, a shaping commonwealth reality." 33

Sarah is suffered from existential predicament. She has an Indian husband and therefore taunts are always thrown at her wherever she goes. She avoids making mention of her husband and his family among the English
people. Whenever her husband, Adit wants to visit her friends, not his, she always avoids visiting them. She is deeply embarrassed by the stinging comments about her Indian husband, made by her colleagues and students of the school, where she works as a clerk. She always keeps lonely paths but even strangers become apprehensive about her. Even the students taunt her:

"Hurry, hurry, Mrs. Scurry!"  
"Where's the fire, pussy cat?"

Sarah felt that she was playing roles, one in the morning in the school and another in the evening at home. In fact there had been some dreadful tea-breaks in the school, when her colleagues had compelled her to explain the various ways of cooking curry, when they had questioned her about her parent-in-law and there whereabouts. She has lost her identity and not able to decide to whom she is:

"Mrs. Sen who had been married in a red and gold Benares brocade sari one burning, bronzed day in September or Mrs. Sen, the Head's Secretary, who sent out the bills and took in the cheques, kept order in the school and was known for her efficiency?"

In spite of her precautions Sarah cannot escape the charade that has become now a part and parcel of her married life. The tension between appearance and reality, pretension and actuality, is always there and she begins to suffer from schizophrenia. She is not able to decide where she belongs. Her identity crisis is very severe for her and this leads her towards loneliness and detachment:

"....she had become nameless, she had shed her name as she had shed her ancestry and identity, and she sat there, staring, as though she watched them disappear.... Would a stranger have seen in her a lost maiden in search of her name that she seemed, with a sudden silver falling of the light of glamour, to an unusually subdued and thoughtful Adit?"
Sarah longs for a genuine identity and an authentic existence. She worries and wonders about her identity and two sides of her character. She is really an existential character, wrestling to get her real identity:

"Staring out of the window at the chimney pots and the clouds, she wondered if Sarah had any existence at all."  

Instead of going to the stores of the Laurel Lane, where she lives, Sarah prefers to visit the Supermarket. Here she can buy her Patna rice and pickles without acquiring a distinct personality. At the time when Adit decides to leave for India, she feels herself divided because she knows that she has to leave her English self:

"It was her English self that was receding, fading and dying, she knew, it was her English self to which she must say good-bye."  

Sarah cannot join Adit and his Indian company of friends. She is unable to follow them. She feels lonely due to her absurd existence, caused by having an Indian husband. Sarah's existential predicament has been shown with more tragic intensity. As a true existentialist Sarah faces the absurdity of existence. Her existential dilemma is more precarious than her husband Adit's. H.M. Prasad rightly describes Sarah's predicament:

"It begins as a condition of living and intensifies itself as a condition of mind."  

Suresh Singhal opines:

"The existential dilemma arises when she finds herself unable to cope with her own cultural traditions on the one hand and with the Indian cultural traditions on the other."  

Sarah feels herself existential because she does not have any personal identity. She is trapped between two worlds, having no command over either of them. She is obsessed with the fear of being insecure if Adit deserts her. She
becomes a victim of alienation due to inter-cultural factors as R.S. Sharma puts:

"Anita Desai treats Sarah with the sensitivity of a woman, always aware of those forces that change her destiny as a female." 42

The novelist has very faithfully recorded the absurdities of Dev's existence in England and its drab and meaningless life. He comes to London School of Economics. Dev's deep longing for variety and multiplicity remains unfulfilled. He seeks for a job but undergoes various severe experiences and cultural shocks. In a complete alien atmosphere Dev seeks for his identity as Hari Mohan Prasad comments:

"In totality, his character does not catch-up the dilemmas of alienation or identity unlike Kamala Markandaya's Sriniwas in the Nowhere Man .... His condition involves deep connotations. It is a quest for identity. He has settled in England and tries to assimilate the acquired culture into his life.... The alien remains the alien." 43

Being an Indian Dev is called wog and taunted by Britishers. He does not find his personal identity there. This crisis of identity revolves around him. He becomes a victim of cross-cultural conflicts.

Dev finds himself alienated and suffers spiritual agony through his hellish experiences in London. When Dev is insulted and humiliated, he feels angry. He is denied and rejected. Due to such a strange treatment Dev feels himself a rootless man. The strange behaviour of English people compels Dev to feel himself an outsider, a foreigner, and an immigrant:

"Down, down and further down-like Alice falling, falling down the rabbit hole, like a Kafka stranger wandering through the dark labyrinth of a prison. On the platform, with black lights glaring at the cold, white tiles all around, he stands fearfully with his fellow travellers and darts horrified glances at the strange looks of these people, who had seemed
Anita Singh observes:

"Dev is caught between acceptance and rejection, between nationalism and cosmopolitanism. He is tortured emotionally and intellectually." 45

When Dev came to know that London docks have three kinds of lavatories—Ladies, Gents and Asians, he feels insulted. The silence and emptiness of the houses and streets of London make Dev uneasy. He is unable to befriend with the silence and emptiness of the city. But in India, as Dev speaks:

"I would by now know all my neighbours even if I had never spoken to them I'd know their taste in music by the sound of their radios." 46

Dev feels himself in a state of exile, cut-off from his old roots. His existential predicament of loneliness and hollowness torments his inner self. He is unable to adjust and longs for his existence. He creates a sense of vacuum and emptiness, hatred and phobia, dissatisfaction and disillusionment. The novelist describes Dev's restlessness during his conversation with Adit Sen:

"I wouldn't live in a country where I was insulted and unwanted, he said grandly, 'No? why have you come then?' Still Adit's voice showed no hostility, only laziness: 47

'To study, you know that I will go back to India an 'England-returned' teacher. It's pity I have come all the way here for a proper education but there it is-I must." 48

Adit is the third existential character. He broods over his existential problems of loneliness and hollowness, adjustment and sense of belonging. He is terribly bewildered of the burden of living helplessly with absurd realities. Being an Indian, Adit has been settled in London having an English wife. He
suffers from existential predicament due to be an Indian immigrant living in London with an English wife, Sarah.

Through Adit's character portrayal Anita Desai mirrors his sense of exile and lack of adjustment, encountered by Indian immigrants in England. He is rejected and looked down upon like a Blackbird. In the beginning Adit feels happy even in an alien atmosphere but later on, he feels exiled, when a nostalgia for his homeland takes place in his mind. He feels suffocated in London. This fluctuation in Adit's mind can rightly be explained in the words of Madhusudan Prasad:

"In part three, Departure, of the novel, Adit's attitude towards England undergoes a sea-change. This Anglophobia gives way to a sudden, disturbing nostalgia for his home land, this nostalgia in him is engendered initially by his visit to his in-laws; the Roscommon James which was married by tactlessness, by insane misunderstanding, by land understanding of the basic disharmony of the situation, and is intensified later on considerably by the unexpected outbreak of the Indo-Pak war." 49

Adit feels exiled even in crowd. His hatred of the London life and his sense of alienation intensify his homesickness. When he came to know about the war between India and Pakistan, he realizes his Indianness and decides to go back to India:

"I've got to go home and start living a real life. I don't know what real life there will mean - whatever it is, it will be Indian, it will be my natural condition, my true circumstance... Sarah, you know I've loved England more than you, I've often felt myself, half-English, but it was only a pretence, Sally. Now it has to be the real thing." 50

In this reference Neeru Tandon rightly remarks:

"Adit's decision of returning to India is the decision of an existentialist. He makes his choice after coming to grips with the hard facts of his existence in London. His choice involves the subjectivity of an
suffers from existential predicament due to be an Indian immigrant living in London with an English wife, Sarah.

Through Adit's character portrayal Anita Desai mirrors his sense of exile and lack of adjustment, encountered by Indian immigrants in England. He is rejected and looked down upon like a Blackbird. In the beginning Adit feels happy even in an alien atmosphere but later on, he feels exiled, when a nostalgia for his homeland takes place in his mind. He feels suffocated in London. This fluctuation in Adit's mind can rightly be explained in the words of Madhusudan Prasad:

"In part three, Departure, of the novel, Adit's attitude towards England undergoes a sea-change. This Anglophobia gives way to a sudden, disturbing nostalgia for his homeland, this nostalgia in him is engendered initially by his visit to his in-laws; the Roscommon James which was married by tactlessness, by insane misunderstanding, by land understanding of the basic disharmony of the situation, and is intensified later on considerably by the unexpected outbreak of the Indo-Pak war." 49

Adit feels exiled even in crowd. His hatred of the London life and his sense of alienation intensify his homesickness. When he came to know about the war between India and Pakistan, he realizes his Indianness and decides to go back to India:

"I've got to go home and start living a real life. I don't know what real life there will mean - whatever it is, it will be Indian, it will be my natural condition, my true circumstance... Sarah, you know I've loved England more than you, I've often felt myself, half-English, but it was only a pretence, Sally. Now it has to be the real thing." 50

In this reference Neeru Tandon rightly remarks:

"Adit's decision of returning to India is the decision of an existentialist. He makes his choice after coming to grips with the hard facts of his existence in London. His choice involves the subjectivity of an
existentialist, because he is aware of the pain of separation that Sarah and her parents must experience as a result of her going away with him." 51

Adit undergoes drastic changes and begins longing for India and Indian things. He longs for the food, which his mother used to cook. He memorises Indian festivals like Diwali. At last he decides that he does not belong London and must go back to India:

"I can't live here any more. Our lives here - they've become so unreal, don't you feel it? Little India in London. All our records and lamb-curries and singsongs, it's all so unreal. It has no reality at all, we just pretend all the time." 52

In this reference M. Sivaramkrishna opines:

"The predicament transcends that of an immigrant in search of roots." 53

H.M. Prasad observes:

"He (Adit) learns through suffering and in the process he gets something of tragic intensity. He is awakened at it were." 54

About existential concern in Bye-Bye Blackbird S.P. Swain rightly remarks:

"In Bye-Bye Blackbird, we notice Desai's existential concern rooted in expatriate experience. Ostensibly concerned with the lives of Indian immigrants in England, the novel explores the existentialist problems of alienation, adjustment, rootlessness and the final decision in the lives of three major characters - Dev, Adit and Sarah. It is scattered in numerous symbols and images revealing Desai's ir-resistible existential musings." 55

Sita in Where Shall We Go This Summer? is suffered by existential predicament. She feels boredom and dullness in every individual. These are the greatest threats of her existence. She hangs between married life and her self-
fulfillment. She has grown tired of the life of dullness and disappointment of her family. The betrayals, treacheries, confusions and compromises lead her into intense suffering. In her interview with Ramesh Kumar Srivastava, Anita Desai throws light on Sita's miseries:

"It is a long story about a woman packing up, shutting the house and going off with her three children to spend a holiday in their shack of Manori. Her husband, busy with his own life, seems hardly to notice their departure, leaving her frozen with anger at her neglect and loneliness. On the Island, she wanders about the beach, sleeps under the eashrihas, concentrating upon this loneliness with such intensity that it burns away, burns her up leaving a cool, grey detachment like a flake of ash where her heart had been."

Suresh Singhal co-relates the title of the novel with the existential dilemma of the protagonist:

"The very question put in the title of the novel is suggestive of the existential concerns. The question-where shall we go this summer? - suggests as to where should a frustrated and alienated person escape? Can there by any alternative of this absurd existence? Can an alienated man achieve self-fulfillment? If the summer of life is oppressive, full of boredom and meaninglessness, what course is open to man? All these questions remain unanswered."

Sita feels that she does not belong anyone and suffers in her existential dilemma. She can either live a life governed by her own instincts and impulses or return to a life of compromise and dull routine. Sita's desperate escape to the idyllic environs of Manori Island is another exercise in futility. She feels anguish, born out of the absurdities of human existence. She confrontates with contrary pulls.

Sita faces the existential dilemma not only in her adult life but also in her childhood. She never got parental love. Her father's nature was
discriminative towards her. Sita remained a neglected child who is bound to feel the meaninglessness of her existence. She feels herself surrounded by strange people. She finds herself entrapped in an unusual life. Like an existentialist she feels the anguish of loneliness and a painful sense of meaninglessness. Absurdity dominates her personality at this stage of her existential dilemma. As she is in the grip of the horror of an absurd existence, she is very much worried about her fifth pregnancy. Sita is highly emotionally strung middle-aged woman, feels alienated from her husband and children. She feels frustrated, when unable to adjust in her husband's family:

"She could inwardly not accept that this was all there was to life, that life would continue thus, inside this small, enclosed area, where these few characters churning in this grey, dull-lit, empty shell." 58

Sita's loneliness and isolation increase and as time passes, she becomes more and more jittery. In course of time, Sita develops a strange persecution mania, in which she feels that not only her husband but also her children had nothing to do with her.

Sita learns that existence is possible only by synthesizing the illusion and the reality of life. She feels her identity fragmentated in the confinement of her husband's family. She is alienated because her subjective being has undergone certain distortions. About her existential problem the novelist writes:

"She behaved provocatively-it was there that she started smoking, a thing that had never been done in their household by any women and even by men only in secret and began to speak to sudden rushes of emotion, as though flinging dards at their smooth, unscarred faces." 59

Sita's existential predicament and her bruised life are beautifully pictured. At last in her existential dilemma, Sita compromises with her destiny.

Fire on the Mountain is a story of the existential predicaments of Nanda Kaul and Raka as G.C. Balaram Gupta observes that the novel presents the
theme of the absurdity of human existence and hence a sense of futility and meaninglessness. Even the title of the novel indicates its existentialist theme. Nanda Kaul suffers from existential dilemma in which the novelist describes Kaul's motherly feelings of humiliation and desolation for lifetime alienation. She desperately desires to avoid familiar obligations around her. She wants to free herself from all sifting and irritating involvements as she cries:

"Have I not done enough and had enough? I want no more. I want nothing. Can I not be left with nothing?"  

About Nanda Kaul's existential dilemma Suresh Singhal rightly remarks:

"A close observation of Nanda's character reveals that, she is a woman who faces the problem of emotional sterility. She is in constant search of love, love of her own busy husband, her children and others. She feels neglected by all the members of her family."  

Nanda Kaul's life is full of conflicts as on the one hand she wants to avoid disintegration of life and on the other hand to take part in the necessary drama of life. She is compelled to become a neurotic personality. She wants herself to be separated from the rest of the world, including her closest kith and kins. She finds no utility of such a sense of emotional vacuum and insecurity is developed. She can neither escape her past, nor help the present nor predict her future.

She is apparently all-alone. She tries to be unattached with the world but her past, including the memory of her husband's infidelity, keeps assaulting her. She becomes a woman with a sick soul to behave abnormally and feels negatively. She is alienated from her children. She has failed to establish a filial bond of maternal love. She feels so isolated and helpless that her masochistic tendencies make her emotionally fail and unassuming.

Nanda Kaul is one of Anita Desai's broken hearted characters, whose existentialist problems are unsolved. Although she tries her level best to manage the household duties with great skill, but still the irony is that she with
all her children, grandchildren and grand grandchildren, feels herself alienated even from her home. Overall Nanda Kaul is indeed an existential character who strives for her identity and meaning of her life.

Raka is another existentialist character. Raka also feels no less miserable. She feels like a caged bird, a wild animal tamed and domesticated. Raka's childhood had been like a nightmare. The marital dissonance between her father and mother resulted in her disaster. She becomes like a wrecked ship. She is a lonely and solitary character. Raka's indifference towards Nanda can be cleared by the following passage:

"Watching her wandering amongst the rocks and agaves of the ravine... Nanda Kaul wandered if she at all realized how solitary she was. She certainly never asked nor bothered to see if there were a letter for her, or news. Solitude never disturbed her. She was the only child. Nanda Kaul had ever known who preferred to stand apart go off and disappear to being loved, cared for and made the center of attention." \(^{62}\)

Raka becomes abnormal and indifferent towards all sorts of human relations and her own existence. She feels neglected due to her parents' carelessness and indifference. She gradually develops a feeling of frustration, distrust and violence. Anita Desai observes the aloneness of Raka and her grand mother.

She suffers several nervous breakdowns. She is a solitary but self sufficient girl who works like an explosive to set fire to the mountainside:

"If Nanda Kaul was recluse out of vengeance for a long life of duty and obligation, her great grand-daughter was a recluse by nature." \(^{63}\)

When Raka sets the forest on fire, which indicates her liberation from her childhood fears and violent realization of future. The poor Raka is bewildered when she finds her home completely shattered.
all her children, grandchildren and grand grandchildren, feels herself alienated even from her home. Overall Nanda Kaul is indeed an existential character who strives for her identity and meaning of her life.

Raka is another existentialist character. Raka also feels no less miserable. She feels like a caged bird, a wild animal tamed and domesticated. Raka's childhood had been like a nightmare. The marital dissonance between her father and mother resulted in her disaster. She becomes like a wrecked ship. She is a lonely and solitary character. Raka's indifference towards Nanda can be cleared by the following passage:

"Watching her wandering amongst the rocks and agaves of the ravine... Nanda Kaul wandered if she at all realized how solitary she was. She certainly never asked nor bothered to see if there were a letter for her, or news. Solitude never disturbed her. She was the only child. Nanda Kaul had ever known who preferred to stand apart go off and disappear to being loved, cared for and made the center of attention." 62

Raka becomes abnormal and indifferent towards all sorts of human relations and her own existence. She feels neglected due to her parents' carelessness and indifference. She gradually develops a feeling of frustration, distrust and violence. Anita Desai observes the aloneness of Raka and her grand mother.

She suffers several nervous breakdowns. She is a solitary but self sufficient girl who works like an explosive to set fire to the mountainside:

"If Nanda Kaul was recluse out of vengeance for a long life of duty and obligation, her great grand-daughter was a recluse by nature." 63

When Raka sets the forest on fire, which indicates her liberation from her childhood fears and voilent realization of future. The poor Raka is bewildered when she finds her home completely shattered.
Ila Das is another existentialist character. Being a piano teacher turned social worker; she is presented struggling against odds of life. She understands that misery and suffering are inevitable in life. She faces the afflictions of a lonely woman. She confronts with a difficult situation of survival. She tries to stop the disastrous marriage of Preet Singh's daughter. In this effort to protect and promote social welfare, she happens to loose her own welfare, when she is assaulted, raped and murdered by Preet Singh:

"....pinned her down into the dust and the goat droppings, and raped her. Crushed back, crushed down into the earth, she lay raped, broken, still and finished. Now it was dark." 64

The whole life of Ila Das remains a tragedy of predicaments. Right from the beginning she remains a solitary character. She suffers from identity crisis. She has to go from pillar to post, trying to earn fifty rupees here and fifty rupees there. The inharmonious family relations of Ila Das also contribute her existentialist dilemma:

"Her mother lay rooting in bad with a broken hip that would not mend, and her father was dead of a stroke. The family fortune divided amongst three drunken, dissolute sons as in a story, and not a penny of it to either of the two clever, hard-working daughters. Ila and Rima, was then quickly becoming a thing, of the past, no longer retrievable, barely believable." 65

Ila's death confirms the futility of human existence. She dies due to her concern for others. In actuality Ila is a woman unloved and discarded. She suffers from identity crisis. She is really an existential character who faces countless problems of survival. She suffers from rootlessness, shapelessness and meaninglessness.

In Clear Light of the Day, the quest for existentialist concerns has been Desai's primary purpose. Bim, Meera masi and Tara become the victims of existential predicaments. This novel is a sad tale about the growth of four
children in an absurd world. The life of Das children has been devoid of parental love. Bim and Tara have to care their mentally retarded brother Baba. They have to live in an absurd world of indifference, disease and irrationality. After their parents's death Tara gets married and goes to abroad. Raja settles down in Hyderabad by marrying Hyder Ali's daughter. Bim wants to escape from the mundane existance of a married woman. She becomes the victim of this struggle and feels existential dilemma. About Bim's existentialist condition Neeru Tandon opines:

"A character of truly existentialist proportion, Bim is the central figure in the novel. It is through her consciousness that the novelist reveals the impact of time on human relationship. Her growth from adolescence to adulthood brings her the experiences of anxiety, alienation, anguish and despair." 66

Bim feels herself unable to find the means, by which she can give a meaning to her meaningless existence. A sense of boredom and meaningfulness of her existence is very well informed to Bim. She gets her share of conflict in which she swings between past and present, between dream and reality, between affections and betrayals. Bim, being a Desai's personage, conflict is the basic ingredient of her existential dilemma. Her home atmosphere compels her to face boredom and despair. About Bim's identity and herself R.S. Sharma remarks:

".....the existential anxiety and the quest for self-hood that is pervasive in her earlier novels is transformed here in a new concept of self-hood. Bim achieves her identity and her 'self' not in isolation but in togetherness, not in rejection but in acceptance, not in withdrawal but in positive commitment." 67

When Raja leaves Bim she suffers from absurdity and futility of life. Bim tries to achieve something higher in respect of existential perspective. She has been caught in the whirlpool of the adverse circumstances. When she
compares her lot with that of Tara and Raja, she feels defeated, frustrated and alienated. Bimla strives for her existence. Emotion-ridden, she faces the tragedy of social perversion and the distraction of human trust. She craves for the recognition but she is shocked enough to realize the disinterestness of her brother and sister towards her. She becomes jealous of human relations. She becomes nostalgic in seeking relief from her nervous system. Everybody deserts her. She is disappointed when everyone is deserting her in her family. A trauma is created in Bim for her future existence aloneness. Alone is nucleus for the existence of Bim. In this novel Bimla expresses her solitude:

"I mean - I mean she's only five years younger than I am and she thinks I'm old. And she spies on me - she has been spying she is cruel. Tara is cold." 68

Bim suffers from heart-rending predicaments. She feels her life as an unsolved riddle. She is in constant search for an answer to her riddle of life. She memorizes a few lines of The Life of Aurangzeb:

"Alone he had lived and alone he made ready to die.... Life is transient and the lost moment never comes back.... Now I am going alone. Every torment I have inflicted, every scene I have committed every wrong I have done, I carry the consequences." 69

The dreams of Bim are shattered due to contrary circumstances in her family. She comes to realize the meaninglessness of life and futility of her dreams. She finds herself trapped in an unbearable human condition. She also notices like an existentialist, a sense of nothingness and an existential void, born out of the confrontation of contrary pulls. She no longer believes in involvement. She realizes that she has failed in resolving her existential dilemma. She expresses her sense of loneliness to Baba:

"So now there are just you and I left, Baba...Does the house seem empty to you? Everyone's gone now except you and I, they won't come back." 70
R.S. Sharma puts:

"Unlike other female protagonists of Anita Desai, Bim who is free from the trauma of a shattered childhood or an incompatible marriage is symbolic of forces that have sustained the foundation of all family life.... she goes beyond the existential nullity and anguish they torment her other fictional counter parts."  __71__

Bim is really an existential character. At last she remains alone showing the dark sight of human existence. She experiences an acute sense of alienation and anguish. Finally Bim succeeds in transcending her absurd predicament in terms of meaninglessness of existence.

Ultimately Bim is a thoroughly self-actualized character of Anita Desai, who achieves self fulfillment and a meaningful pattern of existence in the true sense of the concept involved.

Tara is another existential character in the novel. She is utterly disappointed to see the same old picture of home, which she has seen in her childhood. Tara is not able to recognise the impact of time and its existentialist significance. When she reads the letter written by Raja to Bim, she is hurt. She feels insulted and wounded as she speaks:

"But I still have it, Bim said sharply, staring out of the window as if she too saw pictures in the dark. I still keep it in my desk to remind me. Whenever I begin to wish to see Raja again, or wish he would come and see us then I take out the letter and read it again Oh, I can tell you, I would write him such an answer, he wouldn't forget for many years either."  __72__

Meera masi is another character of the novel who suffers from meaninglessness and shapelessness of existence. Throughout her life she seeks for love and attachment. Her husband deserted her. Her life is full of afflictions and predicaments, misery and sufferings. Unlike Bim she does not come out as an existentialist. Overall this novel is really an existential one.
The Village by the Sea is full of existential problems of an Indian family. Lila and Hari are presented as victims of existential dilemma. They struggle to survive, living in a family with a do-nothing type of father, who is jobless as well as drunkard. They both lead a miserable life. In this novel Anita Desai unfolds the destined sufferings of Hari and Lila. In this novel the causes of existential predicaments are not alienation and self-brooding but poverty and illness as Anita Singh observes:

"The story in this novel is the story of a family disintegrating under the pressures. It is not of alienation and self-brooding; it is poverty, illness and drunkenness. There is conscious presentation of childhood, adolescence and adulthood." 73

Due to domestic burden Hari and Lila leave their school. Their father is a drunkard who never paid any of his debts. He is in the habit of taking drink at night and drinking throughout the day. Their mother always remains ill. Another different aspect of this novel is that, in this novel the characters that face existential miseries are not grown up like Anita Desai's earlier novels, but children of a very low age. Hari is just twelve and his sister Lila is thirteen. Due to his father's carelessness he had stopped going to school.

Hari is an enterprisingly child who faces existential afflictions. Lack of parental care and love, poverty and financial crisis lead his existential problems. His ailing mother and two younger sisters to be married off are his other problems. He wants to earn money so that he can remove poverty and financial crisis of his family. Hari is always tormented by a sense of absurdity, because his dreams do not see to come true. He does not find favourable situation to do something for his family. He always tries to improve the fortune of his family. He dreams of getting a job in the factory to be built at Thul.

Hari's desire of getting job in this factory is destroyed when he comes to know about government's plan to take away the land of the people of Thul and build factories there. He knows that due incapability of the villagers, of
operating advanced technical machines; they can only get jobs like sweepers and coolies. Hari loves his sisters and like a responsible head of the family wants to marry them off one day. It was he only who would have to see it since his father would not. But he is not able to get job and happens to face the absurdity in his life. When he thinks about his sister's marriages, he is disturbed by the thought of dowry:

"The bridegroom might demand a dowry, a bicycle or even a scooter. Gold buttons, coins and jewelry, a cow or a buffalo, a piece of land. He had heard of the fantastic demands that bridegrooms made and that the parents had to meet. How could he ever meet them?"

Hari is seen obsessed with the sense of meaninglessness and despair. He feels that man's life is an absurd thing. He grows from disappointment to the perfect affirmation of existence. He feels himself frustrated. He feels that he does not belong to this world where everything belonged except for himself. His life remains full of crisis:

"... he walked in a circle round the pipes, almost as if he expected to see them move, but there was no movement except for a brown grasshopper that jumped out of a clump of grass into a pipe, and then off again. So throwing a pebble from one hand to the other and to whistle away his disappointment, he started walking up the hill to the temple on top, wondering what would become of it."

Hari is heavily burdened with domestic responsibilities. He reaches to Bombay for getting job. He suffers from a number of hardships in Bombay. In Bombay he becomes tired of walking along the black horse. He works as a cook in a hotel where he feels shocked and suffocated to see beggar-type customers. The city of Bombay makes him restless and nervous. He confronts with contrary pulls in terms of his illusion and reality. Hari's house in Thul speaks volumes of his family's squalid condition:
"The hut should have been re-thatched years ago, the old palm leaves were dry and tattered and slipping off the beams. The earthen walls were crumbling. The windows gaped, without any shutters. There was no smoke to be seen curling up from under a cooking pot on a fire, as in the other huts in the surrounding groves of coconut and banana."\(^76\)

Lila is another existential character in the novel. She is very responsible girl, struggles to save her family. She makes efforts to secure the future of her drunkard father and invalid mother. She had given up going to school long ago so that she could stay home and take care of her family. Lila expresses the poor conditions of her family:

"We don't go to school anymore, you and I. Only Bela and Kamla go-and next year we don't be able to buy them any new books. We hardly eat anything but this dry bread, or dry rice, every day. There's hardly ever any money to buy anything with in the Bazar-only when we sell our coconuts to the Malabarins. The only time we eat fish is when you go fishing. Father never does. And then, mother: how will mother get well if she never gets any medicine?"\(^77\)

Like Hari Lila also tries to improve the lot of her family. When Hari leaves for Bombay she has to suffer hard times. Then also she takes care of her family. She lives a life of sacrifice, as she wears cheap clothes:

"It was pink, and had a pattern of brown flowers on it, and a border of voilet. It was quite a cheap cotton sari but she wore it so seldom that it still looked fresh and new, and made her look so much younger and prettier than when she was dressed in an everyday sari which was either always dark green or dark purple, a single un-patterned colour, of thick cloth that stood much wear and tear."\(^78\)

Her life remains full of problems. Lila faces many dismal situations and suffers a lot. She is taunted, abused and insulted by her drunken neighbour, from whom her father had borrowed debt:
"Oh you, you child of a rascal", he roared at her, ...Where's that father of yours, that rascal?" "My father"? said Lila wildly, "He, he has gone out". "Gone out-or hiding under his wife's bed? Shall I come and drag him out?" "He's not here", she cried in a high pitched voice, "Don't come in—my mother is ill". "O very good, very good". He laughed maliciously,... mother ill—father out—little girls know nothing. "Do you at least know where he keeps money". He roared suddenly, like a lion, making Lila shrink back. "Money" she murmured, ...."we have no money". "No money—we have no money," he mocked her." very nice answer. Did he teach you to tell me that rogue, your father? Like father, like daughter. A family of liars, no goods. No money, no good all of you. But wait till I catch him. I will break his neck and "find the money all right."?9

Deven Sharma is explored as an existential character in In Custody. The novelist has tried to focus on the existential dilemma of this individual who is a temporary lecturer in Hindi at Lala Ramlal College in Mirpore. He has deep interest in Urdu poetry. He wife's name is Sarla and a son Nanu. He takes help of his friend Murad to meet his ideal Urdu poet, Nur Shahjahanabede. But his friend exploits him and a number of problems arise in his life. Another reason of his existential dilemma is his unsuccessful marriage with Sarla. Being a low salaried temporary lecturer, Deven is unable to provide a well-to-do life to his wife and son. The novel brings out the unfortunate experiences of Deven, who is deceived and trapped by a friend. He is like Hugo of Baumgartner's Bombay, a victim of strained relationship with society and with family. In both the cases, the barriers, and betrayals and his disillusionments with human company are beautifully depicted. Due to their identity crisis they feel themselves existential characters. They both feel themselves trapped.

In this novel the main intention of Anita Desai is to flash light on Deven's awareness of the meaninglessness of his existence and his keen desire to get name and fame in the world of Urdu poetry. Deven makes efforts to
transcend his entrapped existential situation. He always longs for higher values so that he can get freedom and the sense of meaning in life. He feels suffocated in his life which is for him not less than a cage. He tries to escape to the world of art to overcome his senses of leading an ordinary existence. He feels dissatisfied due to his present life of a temporary lecturer, devoid of artistic creativity. He feels that he can only get some meaning of his life in the world of creative art and artists.

When Deven encounters Nur he finds him laying on his bed, old and weak surrounded by sycophants and admirers, drinking and laughing. Deven is shocked by the worst condition of Nur's domestic life. He takes loan from college to pay a heavy amount to Nur's wife Safiya Begum. But when he learns that the cassette has only recorded the laughing sound of Nur and not his recital he feels frustrated and his dreams are shattered. The college authorities set up enquiry against him. He feels captured and trapped by each realisation in life. Deven is indeed one of those existentialist characters whose problems always remain unsolved. The dilemma of Deven's existence rests in the lap of art and poetry. He has mediocrity and empty dreams. He struggles everyday for survival, out of artistic involvements and concerns. After having several visits to Delhi Deven becomes able to face realities of life:

"A close familiarity with the poet had shown him that what he though as the wider world was an illusion to it was only a kind of zoo in which he could not hope to find freedom. He would only blunder into another cage inhibited by some other trapped animal.... cage, cage, trap, trap." ⁸⁰

Neeru Tandon rightly observes Deven's existential predicament:

"Deven by and large has strange childhood from when he develops a negative self-image and aversion. The immediate result is, his fragmented psyche to view world as a hostile place. For him the domestic life is not his world rather it is a trap where his individuality is endangered
and thus complete lack of interest and dissonance in his relationship bring solitary confinement and show his reluctance to face reality."  

Deven Sharma faces the predicaments of mean and dross existence. He feels frustrated due to his college routine, which is stereotype. He wants to overcome the debris of his ordinary existence. He leads a dull life having nothing extraordinary in terms of literary achievements. Due to his financial crisis, his relations with his wife always remain conflict-ridden. His middle-class family is also responsible for making him such a fragile person. The unfavourable circumstances become hurdles in his way to self-fulfillment. A feeling of depression and nothingness overpowers his sensibility and he has developed an attitude that he can do nothing in life. He has to pass through the crisis of consciousness and tolerate the resultant anguish. The novelist has presented a strange dilemma that there is a long gap between one's aspirations and their fulfillment. He faces the problem of passing the bills of the tap in his college. When his own persons deceive Deven he cries in anger:

"It was not my fault! I worked hard—I prepared for it and I worked—But I was fooled and cheated by everyone—the man who sold me the secondhand equipment, the technician who said he would do the recording but was completely inexperienced, by Murad who said he would pay and did not, by Nur who had never told me he wanted to be paid."  

Like Desai's other existential characters Deven feels himself chained into a narrow world. Deven's anxiety is projected in his search for identity and meaning. How absurd it is when he, with such soaring literary flights, lands in a world of darkness and of absurdities. He wishes to achieve superiority in terms of name, fame, money and reputation. Initially Deven's character is presented as a victim of conflict between his real self and idealised-self. His real self presents him as a weak man, always dependent on others. In Deven's mind the past lives, full of sinister interpretation, the present is a burden pregnant with fear; one that runs seeking loneliness is seeking the future. On all fronts he finds himself surrounded by the absurdities of life. Such a suffering
also makes him masochistic person who tolerates the insults for nothing. Deven's frustrated state is presented through the following passage:

"He watched the sky pale to gray, the feathery plumes of the pampas grass to mauve. He did not want the day to down. He had hoped to stretch the night endlessly by walking on and on. Day would bring with it the board meeting, an inquiry, an investigation, exposure and blame yes, and what else? The bills would be returned to him to pay. The tape would be played and declared a disaster, even a hoax. There would be criticism. Who was he to have been entrusted with such a project as well as college funds? He would be sent for he would have to appear before them, and plead for sympathy, for mercy, for acquittal. If it were not forthcoming, he would be construed, perhaps dismissed. O God, if he was, he would be ruined and Sarla and Nanu with him. He would have to pawn, even sell her jewellery to clear his debts, she would have to be sent back to her parents to his eternal disgrace, and the boy disgraceful, thoughtless, irresponsible and hopeless failure. Where would it all end? Why seeing it all so clearly, could he not halt it?" 83

Deven's married life also remains unsuccessful. Due to his financial crisis Deven is not able to fulfil his family's basic requirements. Both Sarla and Dev have an unhappy married life. Deven does not share her feelings due to his devotion to art. Both of them are frustrated in their own way but they are unable to do anything for each other. Marriage, his family responsibilities and his job placed him in a sort of cage. He is cheated and bullied with a project that ends in his disaster and ruin. Anita Desai pictures Deven Sharma as a trapped animal:

"And that was all he was a-trapped animal. In his youth he had the illusion of having free will, not knowing he was in a trap. Marriage, a family and 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." 84
The theme of existentialism occurs in Baumgartner's Bombay. The existential predicament of Hugo Baumgartner is presented. Hugo spent his childhood in Germany, arrives in Calcutta for his business. He is a wandering Jew in quest of roots. He moves from one existential dilemma to another. The causes of his afflictions are the bitterness of a neglected childhood, the horrors of being hunted and hounded out of his own country. His arrival on an alien land compels him to lead a life of an exile.

The entire life of Hugo Baumgartner from Berlin to Bombay unfolds his struggle in order to get meaning of his life. Came from a foreign country Hugo was of a different colour, spoke a different language, and had a different religion. He feels himself as an alien in a strange land. The firangi longs for human company and love:

"Accepting but not accepted, that was the story of his life, the one thread that ran through it all. In Germany, he had been dark—his darkness had marked him the Jew. In India he was fair and that marked him the 'firangi'. In both lands, the unacceptable." 85

In this reference it is worth to quote the words of S.P. Swain:

"Baumgartner's history is the cumulative and collective experience of diaspora. History has dispelled Hugo as an outsider, a marginal man whose centre of existence is everywhere—it is the east and also in the west. It is nowhere. Hence, Baumgartner belongs neither to the west nor to the east. Neither on the margins nor at the centre but straddling the spaces of west and east, Baumgartner can not feel at home. His marginality symbolises his historical and cultural entrapment." 86

The existence of Hugo Baumgartner is nothing but an absurd odyssey from nothingness to nothingness, from nowhere to nowhere. The existential problems of Hugo are attributed to his immigrant experiences. Due to his race he cannot return to his homeland. In India he is unaccepted and betrayed to the state of permanent refugee. His life in Germany turns out to running in circles.
Again and again he is made painfully aware of his difference in colour and language.

Hugo has been victimised again and again by different people in Germany and India. He is deceived and arrested. He undergoes social, racial and political pangs. In Bombay he is disillusioned for his mistaken identity. The identity of Hugo always swings between two polarities, German and Indian identities. Ultimately Hugo Baumgartner fails to have either:

"Their faces sneer'd 'firangi', foreigner however good naturally, however lacking malice. Still the world the name struck coldly winced; hunching his shoulder and trying to avoid the contact he knew they hated because contact contaminited." \(^{87}\)

Hugo always remains an outsider. He always strives for his identity. He always remains a solitary character:

"The habit of an only child, of an isolated youth in an, increasingly unsafe and the threatening land and then of a solitary foreigner in Indian had made Baumgartner hold to himself the fears he had about his mother, about what was happening in Germany, allowing it to become a dark monsters block." \(^{88}\)

Hugo is not accepted anywhere, neither in his country of birth, Nazi Germany, nor in his adopted country India. He is thrown out of his fatherland. In India he wants to be accepted but because of his colour, he is not to be taken as a native. He suffers from homelessness, rootlessness and meaninglessness. His colour betrays his identity. Even after passing a very long time in India Hugo finds himself an alien. He becomes a victim of political power and of perverted social values and biased attitude. He suffers from existential dilemma at the hands of Nazis, British and at last in independent India. He feels existential predicament when he becomes unable to understand that why do people of India not accept him? He thinks deeply over this matter:
"He had lived in this land for fifty years or if not fifty then so nearly as to make no difference—and it no longer seemed fantastic and exotic; it was more utterly familiar now than any other landscape on earth. Yet in the eyes of the people he was still strange and unfamiliar to them, and all said: Firangi, Foreigner. For the Indian such had not been good to his skin, it had not tanned and roasted him to the colour of a native."

Hugo Baumgartner tries his level best to accept Indian society but he is not accepted by it. He always remains the victim of society, of specific perverted social values. He finds no meaning of his existence. He always remains a displaced person. In Calcutta Hugo's life comes to a sudden jolt. During the outbreak of war he is arrested and imprisoned in a detention camp in Ahmednagar for six years. This period completely soaks his life spirit. In this camp Hugo suffers from the pillar to post. He feels himself in hot water. There is no way to escape from the oppressions of prison-life. Baumgartner has to sit idle in the camp because the Jews decline to work there. Every moment seems like eternity to him. He makes his level best efforts to establish his identity in an alien land. Hugo suffers a double alienation: from his native land Germany, and from India. Alienation from Germany does not only mean geographical and cultural isolation but also linguistic.

Hugo's quest ends in tragic isolation, frustration and failure. Hugo Baumgartner does not have any end of his existential dilemma, and his isolation leads him to his death. A young German murders him. He becomes a victim of social isolation but he does not choose, but it is imposed on him. The circumstances of history entrap a man of simple generosity, rendering him hopeless.

Anita Desai has portrayed alienated characters, for whom aloneness alone is the treasure. Most of them are women characters. They are explored as fragile introverts. The characters like Maya, Monisha, Nirode, Amla, Adit, Dev, Sarah, Sita, Nanda, Raka, Bim, Tara, Deven, Sarla and Hugo Baumgartner are explored as identity seekers. These portrayals are tormented
by existential predicaments. They are conscious of the reality around them, but they carry with them a sense of loneliness, alienation, rootlessness, homelessness and pessimism. The existential afflictions of the characters are presented through psychological modes.

As a creative artist Anita Desai's central preoccupation is with the exploration and evaluation of the subjective reality of human individual. She is concerned with the existentialist problems of modern men. In this reference Neeru Tandon observes:

"In her novels, she has ably dwelt upon such existentialist themes as maladjustment, alienation, absurdity of human existence, quest for the ultimate meaning in life. Decision, detachment, isolation and time as a fourth dimension focusing on how men and women in the contemporary urban milieu are bravely struggling against or helplessly submitting to the restless forces of absurd life."
References


2. Ibid. p.4.


17. Ibid. p.16.


23. Ibid. p.40.


35. Ibid. p.37.

36. Ibid. p.36.

37. Ibid. p.31.

38. Ibid. p.39.

39. Ibid. p.221.


42. Sharma, R.S. *Anita Desai*. (New Delhi: Arnold Heinemann, 1981) p.82.


47. Ibid. p.17.

48. Ibid. p.17.


59. Ibid. p.59.


63. Ibid. p.48.

64. Ibid. p.143.


69. Ibid. p.167.

70. Ibid. p.101.


75. Ibid. p.40.

76. Ibid. p.9.

77. Ibid. p.15.

78. Ibid. p.27.

79. Ibid. p.56.


83. Ibid. p.163.

84. Ibid. p.168.


88. Ibid. p.117.

89. Ibid. p.127.