A look at the detailed interpretation of the themes of Anita Desai's ten novels shows them to be varied in nature. In spite of this, however, it is seen that the common element underlying these themes is Anita Desai's concern for the human being as an individual.

In *Cry, the Peacock*, it can be said that a lonely and isolated Maya feels a denial of her individuality in not being able to lead life on her own terms. In *Voices in the City*, all three protagonists feel an erosion of their individuality under the impact of the city. In *Bye-Bye Blackbird*, the three protagonists are concerned with their identities and consequently, the retaining of their individualities. However, in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*, Anita Desai portrays the effects of an excessively intolerable situation on an individual's psyche. When such a situation occurs, the individual may suffer an aberration of the psyche and consequently, a change in personality. In *Fire on the Mountain*, again, Nanda and Ila are denied their individuality. However, little Raka is fiercely protective about her own individuality from being corroded.

*Clear Light of Day*, *In Custody* and *Journey to Ithaca* show a different angle in this preoccupation of Anita Desai with the individual.
Here, the protagonists reach a state of self-discovery and find themselves rejuvenated as individuals.

However, Baumgartner's Bombay once again reverts to that category of novels like Cry, the Peacock, Voices in the City and Fire on the Mountain as the displaced protagonist here faces an erosion of his individuality. Similarly, Fasting, Fasting too, shows the protagonists Uma, Arun and Melanie finding their individuality threatened to a certain extent.

In this pre-occupation with the individual, the novelist appears to present the gradual emergence of a pattern from self-destruction to self-discovery. Thus, Maya in Cry, the Peacock and Monisha in Voices in the City, face self-destruction. On the other hand, Nirode and Amla by having a new vision of life can be said to have acquired self-discovery as they realise the consequence of having a negative vision of life. The protagonists of Bye-Bye Blackbird can be said to be on the brink of self-discovery after the resolution of their identity-crises. Sita in Where Shall We Go This Summer? also shows a gradual coming away from the brink of self-destruction. In Fire on the Mountain, Ila is destroyed through murder. Although in Nanda Kaul's case, her physical fate is ambiguous, she faces emotional and psychological destruction. However, it is in Raka's rebellious act that the turning point of this pattern is reached. Raka refuses to face or accept self-destruction and hence, her rebellious act –
with symbolic overtones – of setting the forest on fire thereby destroying those forces that encourage self-destruction.

Thereafter, Bim in *Clear Light of Day* comes to recognize her own self. So does Deven in *In Custody*. The strain of self-discovery found in Amla and Nirode in *Voices in the City* is firmly established and carried forward now as there is the depiction of a growth in the individual’s psyche. Both Bim and Deven are shown as rejuvenated individuals ready to face any challenge.

Although *Baumgartner’s Bombay* shows the destruction of the protagonist, what is significant is that it is not due to the protagonist’s own psychological upheavals that he faces destruction like Maya and Monisha but due to an act of murder. So this time, it is not self-destruction but an external force that destroys the protagonist. Another significant point to be noted here, is that the protagonist is a German Jew. The novelist - herself of German lineage - might have been trying to portray some similar experience of displacement and its after effects here is this novel.

*Journey to Ithaca* again shows the main protagonists as having reached self-discovery. This time, Anita Desai depicts the spiritual growth of the protagonists. *Fasting, Feasting* on the other hand, shows neither self-destruction nor self-discovery. The theme instead depicts the necessity for acceptance of the individual for what he/she may be and is, without the need of either self-destruction or self-discovery.
This pattern from self-destruction to self-discovery is again established when we take the major women protagonists into account chronologically. Being a woman herself, Anita Desai perhaps finds it easier to delineate a woman's psyche. This might therefore be the reason why a majority of her novels have highly sensitive woman protagonists. This time also, there is the gradual development from isolation, loneliness, despondency and non-acceptance of one's situation in life to its acceptance through self-growth and reconciliation. Maya and Monisha both exhibit despondency and a non-acceptance of their situation in life. Consequently they face self-destruction. Unlike Monisha, Amla accepts her situation in life without facing either isolation or any acute despondency. Hence, there is exhibited in her some degree of self-development.

Overcoming despondency, Sarah comes next – on the threshold of experiencing doubt and hope simultaneously with regard to her situation in life. Sita thereafter opts for a reluctant compromise in life after overcoming to some extent her despondency. Even though Nanda Kaul is shattered, Raka is a rebel inspite of her inherent sense of loneliness. The trace of self-development found in Amla in *Voices in the City* is carried forward now in Bim in *Clear Light of Day*. Bim willingly accepts reconciliation and compromise in life thereby attaining a new self-awareness. Laila in *Journey to Ithaca* turns to spirituality which, in turn, leads to self-recognition. Finally, Uma in *Fasting, Feasting* – inspite of
many constraints – emerges a survivor, with no necessity either to compromise or to rebel but to just accept life and one's situation in it as it comes.

These protagonists of Anita Desai's fiction are complex characters. Anita Desai herself has said thus:

> I am interested in characters who are not average but have retreated or been driven into some extremity of despair and so turned against, or made a stand against, the general current. It is easy to flow with the current, it makes no demands … But those who … fight the current and struggle against it, they know what the demands are and what it costs to meet them.

It is to the novelist's credit that she has been able to unfold this pattern from self-destruction to self-growth and self-discovery through the presentation of such complex characters. Of course, novels like *Cry, the Peacock, Voices in the City, Where Shall We Go This Summer?*, *Fire on the Mountain* and *Baumgartner's Bombay* might convey the impression of the novelist having a negative vision of life. However, when the novels are taken in totality, it appears to be otherwise and the novelist's overall vision of life certainly does not appear negative. In fact, Anita Desai's latest novel, *Fasting, Feasting* – which projects the need for acceptance – can be said to be the literary culmination of the essence of Anita Desai's vision of life and man: that each human being is a unique individual
bearing his own uniqueness and singularities. This is true not just in India but in other cultures too, and hence, universally. Thus, even a retarded Baba in *Clear Light of Day* had been able to provide Bim with a new vision and understanding of herself. When this uniqueness of an individual is not recognized or accepted, it brings in a tragic end as in the case of Maya and Monisha.

This concept of the concern with the individual was not a familiar concept in the Indian tradition. In the words of Meenakshi Mukherjee:

> The fulfillment of oneself, however, desirable a goal according to the individualistic ideals of western society, has always been alien to Indian tradition, especially when it is achieved at the cost of duty to the family.

In the Indian social value-system, therefore, the individual is nearly always expected to subdue and repress his own self to that of the family and society. In this connection, Anita Desai’s consistent pre-occupation with the individual – depicting either his/her destruction, growth, discovery or simply conveying the need for the individual’s acceptance – throughout her novels from *Cry, the Peacock* onwards, has certainly widened the horizon of the Indian novel in English.

It is to suit her distinct thematic concerns that Anita Desai has shown a consistent innovativeness in evolving her fictional technique.
Hence, the same fictional devices of narration, characterization, structure, use of fluidity of time, use of memory and consciousness as well as the extensive use of symbols and images have been repeated in all her novels.

Since Anita Desai focuses on the exploration of the psyche, the projection of the thought-processes proves to be an appropriate device. It is only on occasions that the narrator intrudes into the narrative. Where the novelist wants the reader to experience first-hand the tumultuous thoughts of the characters, the first-person narrative is rendered in order to make it direct and also poignant.

As the novelist presents each individual as an “unsolved mystery”\(^3\), it is only appropriate that she uses for their projection the thought-processes of the characters as well as the points-of-view of either the narrator or the other characters. At times, the characters’ awareness is also delineated through imagery. There is therefore, no delineation of character in the traditional manner.

Similarly, structure too, has not been built up in the traditional manner. Rather, there is very often the use of a psychological structure, symbolic structure, the use of *leitmotif* or the creation of a pattern. Anita Desai, herself has said:

\[\ldots\text{I prefer the word ‘pattern’ to ‘plot’... One should have a pattern and then fit each piece in keeping with the others and so forming a balanced whole}^{4}\].\]
The action too, does not generally unfold in clock time. Time has been used very fluidly and has been related to memory and consciousness. Once again, this has been done to convey the impression of action taking place in the psyche. In novels like *In Custody, Journey to Ithaca* and *Fasting, Feasting*, where there is generally a linear development of action, this is combined with the use of flashbacks and a fluid handling of time. This linear development also does not take place chronologically covering all incidents in the mechanical time of the character's life. What is presented instead are the pictures of certain events. These pictures together constitute a composite whole.

These consistently innovative aspects of Anita Desai's technique mark her out as a skilled craftsman and this is a significant achievement for the Indian novel in English. N. R. Gopal's comment that Anita Desai "may not be a technical innovator" is therefore, not correct.

K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar says with regard to Anita Desai's style:

Since her preoccupation is with the inner world of sensibility ... she has tried to forge a style supple and suggestive enough to convey the fever and fretfulness ... of her principal characters. The intolerable grapple with thoughts, feeling and emotion is necessarily reflected in the language, syntax and imagery ...
R. K. Srivastava further adds that Anita Desai's use of the language of the interior requires "a delicate and subtle handling with hints and suggestions." Such a style for the expression of inner reality has led Anita Desai to use symbols and images. In fact, she has also made singular use of some of the titles of novels as well as epigraphs, poems and verse that she at times employs, as symbols. Anita Desai, herself comments on her use of symbols. What is important for her is:

... the movement of the wing one tries to capture, not the bird. That is, it is the image that matters, the symbol, the myth, the feat of associating them. of relating them, of constructing with them.

The use of symbols by Anita Desai therefore, forms an integral part of her novels. They have neither been imposed on nor appended to her works as it is a necessity for the type of work that she produces. As inner experience cannot be adequately expressed through functional language, she has to take recourse to the use of emotive expression.

Anita Desai uses these symbols "unconsciously" and spontaneously. To quote her own words:

I use them unconsciously. I mean I employ metaphors and images which acquire significance and suggest deeper meaning than they state i.e. turn into symbols.

Anita Desai further says that she employs symbols from real life and imparts significance to them by her repeated use of them.
The different symbols used to develop the different themes have already been mentioned in the respective chapters.

Like symbols, imagery is a "recurring literary device in Anita Desai's fiction and forms a significant aspect of her art". In the words of Madhusudan Prasad:

Anita Desai is indeed the only Indian-English novelist who exploits imagery to this extent and to such an artistic end. And certainly this is her unique achievement.

Like Virginia Woolf, Anita Desai tries to convey the intense existence of her characters through the use of these images. At the same time, her imagery helps to highlight both the emotion of the characters as well as the theme, to delineate character, establish the setting and to build up atmosphere. The effective manipulation of imagery imparts an element of sensuousness to her writing making it highly evocative. Consequently, her work often borders on the poetic. It is this poetic quality that helps her forge her "intensely individual and highly lyrical" style. Meenakshi Mukherjee also commends Anita Desai on her "distinctive style and intensely individual imagery" thus denoting a "strong individuality".

The later novels of Anita Desai show a restrained use of imagery. This however, in no way portends a decline in the artistic powers or craftsmanship of the novelist. Rather, it is in keeping with the presence
of more external action in the later novels like *In Custody, Baumgartner's Bombay, Journey to Ithaca and Fasting, Feasting*.

Anita Desai derives her imagery primarily from nature comprising both vegetable and plant life, birds, insects, animals and other natural phenomena. She also makes effective use of colour imagery. As Madhusudan Prasad observes:

... Desai’s imagery which is chiefly anticipatory, prefigurative or demonstrative in nature is always considerably functional. Her imagery, particularly botanical, zoological, meteorological and colour imagery, is central to her fictional strategy...

The use of imagery for depicting the different themes have already been mentioned in the respective chapters. However, there is the repeated occurrence of a few images in some of her novels. These are mentioned here. Generally birds, plants, and flowers denote positive sensations. However, the image of crows in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* and the city birds of *Voices in the City* are painted in negative colours. So, also are the cuckoos in *Fire on the Mountain* and pigeons in *In Custody*. Similarly, insects and reptiles are used to denote negative sensations. In *Baumgartner’s Bombay*, cats as pets are used to denote emotional security. There is the occurrence of the image of darkness in *Cry, the Peacock, Voices in the City* and *Where Shall We Go In This Summer?* It denotes isolation, madness, decay and stagnation.
Amongst her colour imagery, the colour grey is present in nearly all her novels. This is generally used to denote the drabness of life. Similarly, to denote stagnancy, the pond with its layer of green scum has been used in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* and *In Custody*. To reflect the sense of unreality felt by the protagonists as well as to denote the hollowness of a situation, images of the theatre have been used in *Bye-Bye Blackbird*, *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*, *Fire on the Mountain*, *Baumgartner's Bombay* and *Fasting, Feasting*. To depict the advancing insanity of both Maya, in *Cry, the Peacock* and Mira-mosi in *Clear Light of Day*, they are shown to suffer hallucinations of rats surrounding them. Dev in *Bye-Bye Blackbird* also has a hallucination which depicts his state of schizophrenia. The characters often suffer from a feeling of being hemmed in by the pressures of life and their inner turmoil. Thus, there are images of traps and captivity in *Cry, the Peacock*, *In Custody* and *Journey to Ithaca*.

The other oft-repeated image is the predator-prey image. This is found mainly in *Voices in the City*, *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*, *Fire on the Mountain* and to a certain extent in *In Custody* and *Journey to Ithaca*.

While these images denote the destructive aspect of man in the first three above-mentioned novels, in the later two, these images do not possess a destructive aspect. This has already been pointed out in the respective chapters.
Apart from imagery which provides a "sensuous richness" to her style, Meenakshi Mukherjee finds two more characteristics - "a high-strung sensitiveness and a love for the sound of words"\textsuperscript{16}.

While it is true that Anita Desai revels in the sound of words and rhythm of sentences, the nature of her work and the mode of her novels too, require the use of such a language. As she aims to delineate the inner flux and turmoil of her characters, the use of metaphorical prose appears appropriate. S. Indira puts it very aptly:

Most of Mrs. Desai's characters suffer from the stress of soul and their over-whelming emotions have to be expressed only in metaphorical prose\textsuperscript{17}.

However, in her later novels, Anita Desai has not adopted her earlier metaphorical style. In keeping with the characters of the later novels like \textit{In Custody}, \textit{Baumgartner's Bombay}, \textit{Journey to Ithaca} and \textit{Fasting, Feasting}, who do not undergo such intense inner turmoils, the language too, is somewhat subdued and toned down. But, we still see in this phase that there are flashes of her earlier style as in describing the Western landscape in \textit{Fasting, Feasting}.

In conclusion, Anita Desai's special thematic concerns of the inner reality which duly help to unfold her distinct vision of life and man have been aptly expressed by the technical innovations in themes and techniques. Like her characters who swim against "the general current", Anita Desai too, had deviated from the then current mode of fiction
displaying at the same time an exceptional ability while ushering in the modernist era to Indian English novels. This exceptional ability had initially marked her out amongst her contemporaries with her very first novel, *Cry, the Peacock*. From then onwards, it has continuously been in evidence right through to her latest novel *Fasting, Feasting*.

The consummate craftsmanship that she exhibits sets her apart in the realm of Indian English literature to which she has also added the modernist dimension. Anita Desai – the woman and the artist – is therefore as singularly distinct as the characters she has created.

Notes


7. Ramesh K. Srivastava, op. cit., p XLIII.


15. Madhusudan Prasad, op. cit., p 76.