Anita Desai's very first novel *Cry, the Peacock* (1963) was hailed in the country as a "significant achievement" in the fictional world of Indian writing in English portraying as it did the "psychic tumult" of the main protagonist.

As regards its theme, Ramesh K. Srivastava states that it deals with the "complexity of human relationships". Alongside this theme, he also mentions the theme of alienation. Darshan Singh Maini too, considers the main theme to be "husband-wife alienation". Similarly, N. R. Gopal views the theme of "disharmony between husband and wife relationship" to be the central theme.

While these critics have considered unfulfilled marital relationships or marital disharmony to be the main theme, this study has shown marital disharmony to be one of the factors contributing to the protagonist's sense of isolation which had already been conditioned before her marriage. Their marital disharmony only sets to aggravate the protagonist, Maya's, sense of isolation from the human society further. This in turn heightens her tragic predicament.
A thorough reading of the novel points to a feeling of isolation and an accompanying loneliness as the principal theme. This is established by the fact that the portrayal of "psychic tumult" with which the novel is concerned reverberates with Maya's agonized cries reflecting her sense of isolation and loneliness.

Whenever Maya interacts with people (apart from her father) — husband, brother, mother-in-law, sister-in-law and even her friends — one is made aware of her sense of isolation. She always finds herself to be alone, isolated and unable to relate to and identify with the ordinary human being. This sense of isolation is fuelled further by her pet dog's death, which in its turn gives rise within her to a haunting spectre of death stalking her.

The reaction of Gautama — Maya's husband — to the death of her pet dog leads Maya to say that he remained indifferent to her concerns. Seeing her tears he had, instead of comforting her, advised her a cup of tea. This apparent indifference makes Maya cry out in despair about Gautama's "coldness" towards her for this leads to her loneliness and sense of isolation from him.

As a balm for her estrangement Maya craves for the "peace that comes from companion life alone, from brother flesh, contact, relationship, communion..." but this peace always eludes her. Although Maya longs to seek Gautama's comfort after her pet's death, she realises at the same time the futility of such an attempt.
Another instance of Maya’s estrangement from Gautama occurs during the party Gautama holds for his friends. A lonely Maya is simply overcome by her sense of isolation and haunting fear of death. This makes her long for Gautama’s company and she rushes outside the house to join the men. However, she is driven indoors by Gautama’s indifference, which is like a blow being struck at her:

Was it so unforgiveable to wish to share in human friendliness? In companionship? ... In his world there were vast areas in which he would never permit me ...(104).

This inability of Maya to communicate with Gautama emotionally makes her admit her sense of loneliness.

Gautama’s brothers and sisters too, are unable to identify with her sensuous and romantic world. Being the pampered daughter of a widowed father, Maya yearns for her mother-in-law to hold her to her bosom. The very thought of her departure drives Maya to despair for that would again make the house empty and in that empty house her tortuous loneliness would be magnified.

Significantly, Maya’s memories of her brother Arjuna too, are “those of the distance” (135) between them. Maya had been highly contented in the “playpen of home”(141). Arjuna – realizing the meaninglessness of life if lived only for one’s pleasure – sought hard active work. For Maya however, the meaning of life lay in the singer’s
voice that she had heard as a child in her father’s house, and so never could understand why Arjuna had damned her father’s world of easy indolence. This shows that Maya was unaware of her isolation from the common man’s normal everyday world – a fact that Arjuna realised only too well.

Maya feels isolated from her two friends also because unlike her, they have reconciled themselves to life, especially Leila, who tends to a long suffering tubercular husband. Thus, the feeling overcome her that there was no friend who could “act as an anchor anymore”(64). Being thus overwhelmed by isolation, she whimpers out “I was alone, yes.....it is that I am alone” (9). She seeks an anchor for mental stability in vain and her anguished cry of isolation is pathetic “Father! Brother! Husband! Who is my saviour? I am in need of one”(98).

Although, certain factors had contributed to instil a sense of alienation in Maya, the one incident that highlights it to her is the death of her pet dog. This incident in turn revives haunting memories of a childhood prophecy of death and this activates in Maya an all – pervasive despair and anxiety of impending death at a time when she is desperately “in love with living” (98).

Maya’s obsessive anxiety over the impending spectre of death and the resultant despair may be termed as akin to the existentialist predicament. M Sivaramkrishna states that the “prime impulse” behind Mrs. Desai’s fiction is the “existential predicament rooted in the awareness
of death as the ultimate fact of life". In this connection, it is worth taking into account the views of the existentialist philosopher, Martin Heidegger who states that the recognition by a human being of his mortality entails the consequent recognition of the truth of his future non-existence. This genuine acceptance of his future non-existence is the:

... first step towards the "authentic" way of life. In accepting it, the human being recognises that he is alone ... no longer able to turn for support to people in general. He must die his own death, by himself ...

Authenticity consists in a realization of one's position in the world, one's isolation and one's inevitable orientation towards one's death. Before this realization can be complete, one has to experience oneself ... suspended over a void. Things in the world must lose ... ( ... their attraction and apparent importance) ...

Although Maya doesn't experience a loss in the attraction or importance of the things in the world – for her the world is "full" (118) – she does suffer the existentialist predicament that is rooted in the awareness of death as the ultimate fact of life. It is because of this awareness that her sense of isolation and alienation is heightened and the resultant growth within her to a panic tenacity to life.
The other factors that contribute to Maya’s sense of isolation are three-fold. First, the estrangement of Maya from Gautama. Their diverse temperaments bring about their estrangement. Maya is a “creature of instinct” (16) for whom appropriately the basic things in life are “passion and revenge, murder and exciting things like that” (20). Again, life for her is “vivid, explosive and mobile” (92) and she rejoices in the world of “sounds, senses, movements, odours, colours, tunes” (92). In contrast to her acutely sensitive, passionate and romantic nature, her successful lawyer-husband, Gautama is all intellect and logic. In fact, his equanimity and demeanour reminds Maya of the Buddha. Gautama disdains her acute sense of attachment to life and preaches her the Gita’s ideal of detachment in order to secure equanimity. Maya bitterly counters Gautama’s espousal of the Gita by calling them “lines of ... an inhuman dry stick” (112).

Gautama’s general attitude to her is one of indifference to her needs. That is why Gautama’s inability to provide Maya with understanding after her pet’s death is viewed by Maya as his failure to understand that relationship which was like that of “a woman and her child” (10). Tortured by the recollection of the albino’s prophecy of death, Maya longs for “communion”, of the “contact that goes deeper than flesh – that of thought” (104) but an indifferent Gautama hardly realises her longing.
Contemplating her face once in the mirror, Maya is filled with the realization that hers was not the face to be loved by a man like Gautama. Hers was the face that might divert or charm him temporarily but if at all a "fleshly face" could capture him entirely it would have to be one of "an intellectual ... bereft of the weakness of impulses" (105). This shows Maya’s awareness of the basic difference in their natures, which brings in their estrangement.

Inspite of this realization, Maya still unconsciously craves for Gautama’s love and response. Maya cites only two instances of Gautama showing something akin to understanding though very briefly but these moments are far between. In spite of her efforts to reach out to him, she finally realises that Gautama would always remain away from her.

Like Gautama, his family too, is interested in fame, money and success – aspects of life which are considered “dreary” by Maya. She is left out of the talk of the siblings and is spoken to only when the talk turns to “babies, meals, shopping, marriages” (49). It is significant that Maya is indentified with mundane topics of living and life and not with topics that centre around the intellect. Maya feels her isolation when she realizes that she was “their toy ... not to be taken seriously” (49).

Thus, isolation from the ordinary human being, the unfulfillment of her yearning for love and understanding from a detached husband and the incessant haunting of the albino’s prophecy of death
propel Maya into gradual neurosis. Maya is roused once, by the vitality of her mother-in-law and sister-in-law. As Maya apprehends her growing insanity, she feels that the sanity of both of them who were more “human” than Gautama might help her from becoming insane. While Maya’s condition appears to be a “fever” to Gautama, his mother is able to comprehend its cause and advises her on the need of “human company … young, gay people with plenty of ideas and ambitions and occupations” (158). To Maya, her mother-in-law becomes a “pillar of life and living” (116) much more so than her son. As she stands for the world with whom Maya is slowly losing contact, longing overcomes her to be a part of her mother-in-law’s safe and peaceful world. Maya’s alienation from the ordinary human being’s life of joy and sorrow is accentuated in the background of the mother-in-law whose work for the deprived gives her fulfilment and yet the deprivation she sees causes a shadow to engulf her face. Inspite of old age and in contrast to a detached son, she seems to Maya to be “a figure of fire and energy” (157).

This detachment of Gautama finally leads Maya to consider the possibility of his death. Maya’s growing neurosis inspite of giving her hallucinations still presents a few moments of sanity when there is a growing awareness that her estrangement is leading to the annihilation of either herself or Gautama. She tries to justify her right to live by her being “in love with living” (98). As Gautama had no “contact” (175) with the world, Maya believes that his death would not in any way matter.
However, she also says in parentheses that had Gautama been more understanding and demonstrative she might have been saved from insanity and his murder.

The extreme diversity of their temperaments thus serves to further increase Maya’s sense of isolation and loneliness and ultimately leads to her destruction.

The second factor in Maya’s isolation is psychological – her electra complex. Gautama himself points this out to her – “you have a very obvious father-obsession – which is also the reason why you married me, a man so much older than yourself”(146). At moments of anguish and terrible loneliness, Maya’s mind always moves back to the comforting presence of her father. When Gautama sees to her pet’s burial, Maya thinks of him as her “guardian” and “protector”(11) – words reminiscent of her father’s attitude to her in her childhood. Maya recalls people saying that she had been spoilt and could get anything out of her father and so she grows up a petulant child always wanting her own way.

Her father’s world was one of flowers, garden-parties, drinks at the club, badminton and poetry. Gautama’s world was not to be so. To her father, reciting from a book of ghajals, no language seemed more “evocative” and “aristocratic”(100). In stark contrast to this is Gautama who at a party for his friends “damns”(101) Urdu poetry with his cynical words. To Maya, Gautama’s lack of the sensuous and expressive feeling always brings into sharp focus her father. Brought up on such pampered
love she expects the same sort of love from her detached and intellectual husband. When her insistence on the importance of love elicits only a rebuke from Gautama, she turns hysterical. Gautama then squarely blames her father for her “neurotic behaviour”(155). Life for Maya, says Gautama is a “fairy tale” still and she is a stranger to the “realities of common human existence, not love and romance but living and dying and working” – aspects that constitute life for the ordinary human being. Thus, her father’s over-indulgence serves to give rise to a sense of isolation within Maya – both from Gautama as well as from the reality of life itself.

Where previously Maya had always longed for her father’s comforting presence during times of uncertainty and loneliness, now, after the recollection of the albino’s prophecy Maya realises sub-consciously that her faith in her father is shaken, for with his resigned acceptance of fate, her father would be unable to save her after all. This realization in no way lessens her sense of isolation for she has already slipped into neurosis and gradual insanity.

Thus, Maya’s father-obsession prohibits her from accepting Gautama on his own terms and grounds. There is always an inner inhibition arising out of the sub-conscious comparison. By the time her complex is revealed to her by Gautama it becomes too late for her both to change or to lessen her feelings of isolation.

Finally, the third factor that serves to contribute to her predicament is the environment of her upbringing. The limited, unnatural
and warped environment of her childhood isolates her from the reality of the everyday life of the ordinary human being. This is said so by Gautama himself when he destroys Maya’s claims of having the happiest childhood by saying that all she ever knew was happiness and that was a “delusion”. Hence she grows up “capable of seeing nothing but delusions, imagining them to be real”(115). In fact, it appeared to Maya that the world was “like a toy specially made for me, painted in my favourite colours, set moving to my favourite tunes”(36).

As a child even a breakfast with her father in the garden became “a party, as good as a revel of elves and fairies ...”(43). Her father tolerated her every whim and thus she grows up a high-strung and wayward child, permitted to have no anxieties or excitements. Even the sight of a bear dancing gives her a nightmare and the doctor has to administer a little morphine to quieten her down. Maya recalls in parentheses that her “childhood was one in which much was excluded, which grew steadily more restricted, unnatural even” and she lived on as a “toy princess in a toy world”(89). Having been brought up in such circumstances it is no wonder that Maya remains isolated from the realities of the everyday world of existence and is unable to face pain and any sort of uncertainty. Maya fails to realize that joy, happiness, pain and sorrow are various aspects of life. Instead, in adulthood also she yearns for a life engrossed with the self and devoid of any kind of pain or uncertainty. Unfortunately, she fails to realize that such a life is illusory.
Thus, while the environment serves to make the feeling of isolation an integral part of Maya's personality and mental make-up, the other two factors aggravate it. Finally, the haunting spectre of death completely unhinges her, leading to her total insanity and subsequent murder of Gautama.

A secondary concern of the novelist here that is linked to the main theme is the ideal of attachment and detachment embodied in Maya and Gautama respectively. Jasbir Jain states that Maya's life follows on the lines quoted from the *Gita*:

> From attachment arises longing and from longing anger is born. From anger arises delusion, from delusion, loss of memory is caused. From loss of memory, the discriminative faculty is ruined and from the ruin of discrimination, he perishes.

M. Rajeshwar too, has made a similar observation about this novel for he believes that the "*Gita* philosophy permeates the entire novel". Maya has excessive attachment for things close to her heart – for life in all its sensuous aspects, for sense objects, nature and so on. Unfortunately, Maya mistakes her attachment for love. Although this is pointed out to her by Gautama, she refuses to believe it. It is only towards the end that she has a realization of the "true nature" of her attachment:

... I loved too much, too many. Loved? Was attached

... It was a chain of attachment, not fate, that hauled
me ... down ... to the pit where knowledge lay (185-186).

This excessive attachment to life on her own terms leads Maya to isolation, neurosis, insanity and then murder.

M. Rajeshwar further says that Gautama is “often accused of preaching without practicing and without regard to Maya’s feelings.”¹² However, by following the Gita’s philosophy, he explains this away by saying that “emotionality and passion” being “signs of weakness” do not fit into Gautama’s “image as a karmayogi”¹³. M. Rajeshwar also adds that Gautama is “programmed to act the way he does to fulfill certain artistic obligations of the author”¹⁴.

It should be noted here that while Gautama preaches to Maya selfless detachment, he confines this only to his relationships. For although he talks to Maya of having a vocation and the “risk in coveting”¹¹(116) the fruits of one’s actions, he confesses in the same breath to be an “egoist” working for “fame, name, money”¹¹(117). Thus, although Gautama claims to have acquired a “certain amount of serenity”¹¹(117), it is clear that he has not really mastered the Gita’s precept of true detachment.

It is also worth noting what M. Rajeshwar has to say about Maya’s act of “murder”.

Parenthetically it may be observed that Maya’s killing of Gautama marks the triumph of the untamed
instinctual forces of the prakriti and its gunas over the artificial and prescriptive scriptural wisdom imposed on humanity ostensibly for its own good.15

While this may be true, what is to be noted is that Maya is also destroyed for she too loses her sanity. It is in this context that the role of the mother-in-law assumes significance. While expressing concern for her family she is involved with the underprivileged. Her work is however selfless involvement unlike Maya’s acute attachment for the gratification of her own needs and wishes. At the same time, she is not detached from either her family or life with its joys and sorrows. It therefore, appears that Anita Desai is perhaps implying a middle course that seeks to harmonise the two extremes of attachment and detachment in the figure of the mother-in-law.

The fictional technique of Anita Desai in this novel has been viewed by B. Ramchandra Rao as “something of a technical triumph”16. The novel has been divided into three parts. Part I and Part III are narrated by the omniscient narrator while Part II – which constitutes the body of the novel – is narrated by Maya herself. So, while Parts I and III reflect the omniscient narrative technique, Part II uses the technique of interior monologue.

Part I is just three pages long and the omniscient narrator’s voice describes the scene of the death of Maya’s pet. However, the reader
is encouraged to see and experience the whole episode mostly through Maya’s eyes and senses. For instance, in the opening lines –

All day the body lay rotting in the sun. It could not be moved onto the veranda for, in that April heat, the reek of dead flesh was overpowering and would soon have penetrated the rooms. So she moved the little string bed on which it lay under the lime trees … (5).

Maya knows that the reeking smell would pervade the house and reacts accordingly. This thought and consequent action is however narrated by the omniscient narrator. Similarly –

Crows sat in a circle around the corpse, and crows will eat anything – entrails, eyes, anything. Flies began to hum amidst the limes, driving away the gentle bees and the unthinking butterflies. She thought she saw the evil glint of a bluebottle and grew hysterical (5).

Here, the first two sentences are obviously the narrator’s especially the adjectives ‘gentle’ and ‘unthinking’. However, in the third sentence where Maya thinks she has seen a bluebottle, it is the image of the bluebottle that links it to the preceding two sentences as bluebottles will appear along with crows around the corpse. So, the statement “… crows will eat anything …” might have been part of Maya’s thought-
process or perspective that is narrated by the narrator. So also, the image of the evening sun is narrated from Maya’s perspective:

Later in the evening, when the sun hung pendent from the topmost branches of the tree – swelling visible like – she thought – a purulent boil, until it was ripe to drop, her husband came home(6).

But the image of the drive-way and the glance from the corner of Maya’s eye is in the narrator’s voice. Thus, the narrative technique of Part–I shows the intermingling of both the narrator’s voice and perspective and Maya’s perspective.

In Part–III, it is once again the omniscient narrator’s voice speaking. However, it shifts sometimes to give Nila’s perspective also. For instance:

Yet, when she looked across at her mother, she realised that that woman’s occupation was no pretence and no shield ... Nila noticed how her large, hard hands were absolutely under control ... She held her figure erect, yet it was lifeless, weary ... (210 – 211).

This is the picture of the mother as viewed by Nila.

Part II uses the first-person narrative where generally, it is Maya’s point-of-view that prevails. Maya’s narrative presents and describes her emotions and thought-processes. Thus, the action is mostly
on the psychological level. Whatever external action there is – the Lal’s party and the consequent cabaret dance, the shopping with her mother-in-law, the visit to the railway station – is narrated by Maya from her point-of-view. The emphasis once again, is not on the events themselves but on the psychological impact that they have on Maya. For instance, the following passage is very revealing and will suffice as an illustration.

When Maya sees the caged monkeys at the railway station, she becomes very upset and starts crying. Maya runs away from Gautama searching for her father amongst the passengers in the train till Gautama takes her away. However, when Gautama leads her away from the platform, she suffers a hallucination:

> And Gautama came, took my arm, and led me into one of the cages and bolted the door behind me. There I was amongst them ... one of those who clung, clung to the bars till they cut into my flesh, and rattled them ... crying ... ‘let me out! ... Gautama, I want to live!’ (156).

This is followed by Maya’s stream-of-consciousness:

> ... Ah, gentle, large-hearted ... friends, send me a message now to calm me ... why will you not stay? Stop, wait for me. ... Are you not afraid? I would be, I am, as I follow you ... towards our destiny ... you have left me, deserted ... (156).
In reality, Maya’s haunting fear of death seems to imprison her and hence, she identifies herself with the caged monkeys.

The use of the stream-of-consciousness technique was a marked feature of modernists like Virginia Woolf and James Joyce, Anita Desai too, uses it very ably to convey the mental condition of Maya. For instance:

Rats will suckle their young ... and the god who leaps and whirs by torchlight ... even clears his throat and spits ... I knew of snakes that coil themselves around the sweet-smelling sandalwood tree ... And the rats with their young ... But what of the dangers? ... of the lizards ... albinos ... Be careful ... Perish one must ... Hide, hide ... (126 – 128).

S. R. Jamkhandi states that because the dramatic (Part 1) and omniscient (Part III) points-of-view “limit our appreciation of Maya’s predicament and her personality”, the first-person point-of-view in Part II enables us “to witness the workings”17 of her mind. As Anita Desai is interested in the psychic portrayal of Maya, it therefore appears justified to use both the first and third person narrative.

Another fictional device used by Anita Desai which shows affinity with the modernists is in her use of time and memory. The novel has a very loose plot with no real beginning, middle or end like the traditional novel. Part I begins with the death of Maya’s pet dog but sets in
motion a chain of recollection and so the entire action of Part II fluctuates between the past and the present. There is no linear development in time. The continuity of the action is maintained through the use of images which serve as links. For instance, chapter 2 of Part II begins with the present spring time. This spring brings to memory Maya’s spring of her childhood. This juxtaposition of the present and past seasons of spring serves to illuminate Maya’s corresponding states of mind in the past and present. The present is “charged with restlessness” (35) unlike the “idyllic”(36) past.

Chapter 5 of Part II is another fine example of this intermingling of the past and present thereby illuminating both character and their mental states. While reading Arjuna’s letter, Maya fluctuates between the past and present. At the same time, her memory takes her back to the relationship of Arjuna with herself and her father. What is revealed is the difference in the mental make-up of both the siblings as well as the pampered life that Maya had been brought up in.

As far as characterization is concerned, characters are revealed mainly through the use of point-of-view and the use of imagery. It is to be noted here that whereas Maya, the protagonist’s character is built up not only with other’s point-of-view but her own thought-processes also, the other characters are built up with their observer’s points-of-view only.
Regarding characterization, N. R. Gopal states that Anita Desai creates "contrasting characters to highlight the main character". Thus, Maya's friends Pom and Leila as well as Gautama act as "foils" to Maya's character.

The novel's lack of an external structure is made up for by the repeated use of certain symbols that serve as leitmotifs which in turn, lend unity to the novel by creating a certain pattern. This is another notable device used by the modernists and ably adopted by Anita Desai.

The activity of dance has been used by Anita Desai here, as a symbol. In fact, it can be regarded as a leitmotif — an example of the modernist technique of repetition with variation. Maya's recollection of the albino's prophecy of death is associated by her with the "mad demon of kathakali ballets, masked, with heavy skirts swirling, feet stamping ..."(28). So, dance is used to herald the coming of death. The cabaret dance similarly symbolises a threat of impending danger making Maya recall the dance of a bear that she had witnessed as a child. That sight of the dancing bear had given her a nightmare too. After witnessing this cabaret dance, Maya's intuition, that it symbolises impending danger, is fortified further by hearing the cry of the peacocks and recalling their dance.

The peacock in legend waits through the long summer for the rains. However its frenzied dance for a mate during the monsoon rains is also a portent of its own impending death — "'Pia, Pia', they cry."
'Lover, Lover. Mio, mio, - I die, I die …’ their dance of joy is the dance of death”(95). This dance therefore symbolises death-in-life – “living, they are aware of death, dying, they are in love with life”(96). Therin lies the significance of the novel’s title “Cry, the Peacock”. The peacock’s cry for the rains and their dance symbolize Maya’s own mental condition. Maya identifies herself completely with the peacocks and hears her own fate in their agonizing call for love and death:

… the thousand eyes upon their shimmering feathers
gazing … upon … Death. I heard their cry and echoed it. I felt their thirst … their passion … the mortal agony of their cry for lover and for death. (96).

The albino astrologer’s haunting presence – which is always at the back of Maya’s mind – is associated by her with a dancer – “And the dancer, too and from a distance, a maniac albino. His shadow lapped me”(161).

Along with the arrival of the dust-storm Maya’s demented mind also reaches a resolution – that it is she who will live and Gautama who will die. Having made this decision, Maya feels liberated and wants to be the dancer now. Her dance would be one of joy. S. Indira comments on this dance of Maya as “the dance of joy, celebrating her release from bondage … fate … death … It is she, now the dancer, passing the judgment of death to Gautama”19.
Finally, just before Gautama's death, when Maya leads him to the terrace, she catches a glimpse of the dancing bronze statue of Shiva. The dance of the peacocks symbolizing death thus merges at the end of the novel with the destructive dance image of Shiva dancing the 'Tandava' which is a famous Indian myth and which also symbolises death. To Maya's tortured psyche, the one, raised leg of Shiva appeared to be raised into a "symbol of liberation"(203). This makes her feel as if her resolve to murder Gautama has got Shiva's sanction and moments later she kills Gautama. Thus the dominant mood of death that is established right in the beginning with the pet's death is re-inforced by the symbolic use of dance with its different variants.

B. Ramachandra Rao comments that in the case of Maya the symbol of the dancer is "dynamic" as it "signifies and even initiates a decisive change in her". The threat of impending danger symbolised by dance in the initial stages becomes also "a way out of her predicament". In short, "the dance of death is also the dance of life"20.

Another symbol that has a close association with the dance-symbol is that of the beating of drums. Since drums are an integral part of dance, Anita Desai has very effectively used the two in close conjunction to subtly portray the pattern of a neurotic consciousness. While the repeated use of dance in its various forms symbolises death, the consequence of this haunting obsession with death which is mounting
insanity is symbolised by the drumbeats. The first “demoniac creature” is therefore accompanied by a “deafening roar of silent drums”(28).

As Maya wonders if she is slowly losing sanity, the drums continue to beat in her psyche – “But who, what is insane? I myself?... the drums quivered ...” (145). Even the sound of the crushed bottles and posies between her fingers turns into an ‘echo’ that is transformed into a rhythmic drumbeat that grows in volume. During her fevered state Maya is haunted by the kathakali drums. Even her headache begins to “throb” like a ceaseless drum. These drumbeats reflect Maya’s growing neurosis. In her sane moments, Maya wonders about the existence of those drums for their “slow”, “persistent” and “uneven” rhythm appear to be “funeral rather than festive or ominous ...”(151-152).

Thus, what pursues her endlessly are the “shadows and drums”(153) – the haunting spectre of death and accompanying insanity. After Maya reaches her insane resolution, the drum-beats stop thereby symbolising the end of her sanity although outwardly she still appears sane.

Another significant symbol commented on by the novelist herself is the death of Maya’s pet. In the words of Anita Desai, the pet’s death is a symbol of “death, annihilation and the destruction of the vulnerable and the unprotected”21. Although in the form of a variant, this is the first instance of the predator-prey images that are carried on in
subsequent novels like *Voices in the City, Where Shall We Go This Summer?* and *Fire on the Mountain*.

Two other significant symbols are the moon and the dust-storm. The moon is shown initially to be a symbol of evil and death because the “vast and ghost-white” moon is a “demoniac creature” (28) bringing back to her mind the albino’s prophecy of death. From then on, the moon assumes a ghastly quality that makes Maya feel stifled and suffocated beneath its gaze. Later, when Maya transfers mentally the prophecy of death onto Gautama, the ghost-like moon disappears in her consciousness. This change is reflected in the loving way that she looks at the “pale... glow of rising moon “(208) and walks towards it in fascination to worship its ethereal beauty.

The other significant symbol that shows the action progressing is the dust-storm. Maya’s frenzied mental state and pent-up emotions correspond to the external pervasively still pent-up heat. As a symbolic correspondence the moment of the blazing heat breaking into the dust storm and thereafter into the first cooling drops of rain, is also the moment of her realisation about her right to life. So, when the storm blows away the dead, parched leaves and flowers, her fear and despair too seem to be swept away, “… it was mine, mine, this life was mine”(188).

The most noteworthy feature of Anita Desai’s fictional technique here is her use of highly evocative language. Darshan Singh Maini rightly places this novel next to Raja Rao’s, *The Serpent and the*
Rope as being “the most poetic and evocative Indo-Anglian novel”\textsuperscript{22}. This is possible through her effective use of imagery. Characters are also delineated through the help of imagery. As Darshan Singh again comments, it is “through simile, metaphor and symbol” that the “two spouses are evoked ...”\textsuperscript{23}.

Anita Desai’s main sources of imagery here are nature, birds, reptiles and colours. S. Indira rightly states that Desai’s most important source is “nature” and she has drawn her images from “vegetable and plant life, birds, animals and other natural phenomena”. She further adds that imagery also helps to establish the “setting” and build up the “atmosphere”\textsuperscript{24}.

Maya thinks of herself as “a partridge plump and content” while Arjuna is a “young hawk” (134). Gautama is a “meticulous tortoise” (208) whose calmness reminds her of “the meditator beneath the \textit{Sal} tree” (8). Maya fondly recalls that her father’s hair “gleamed soft and white as a bird’s wing in mist and shadow” (53) whereas his life is as “formal as a Moghul garden, gracious and exact” (45). The highly sensuous description of spring where Maya waxes eloquent over “every sound, sight, smell, movement and colour in nature”\textsuperscript{25} reveals her intensely romantic nature:

... the bougainvillea arbour, where the light turns from lilac to mauve to purple, from peach to orange to crimson ... all the world is tinted like sweet sherbet ... (36).
Maya associates her happy sensations and emotions with birds, plants, flowers, fruits and poetry. Her sense of foreboding and fear of death are associated with animals and insects. For instance, the death of her pet makes her experience an acute physical sensation of "snakes coiling and uncoiling their moist lengths" (13) about her while the albino is associated with images of the lizard and rat.

Maya's advancing insanity and psychic fragmentation are revealed in many passages filled with her dreams and hallucinations wherein she sees lizards, rats, snakes and iguanas leading her to ruin.

Anita Desai's use of colours as a source of imagery has been commented by S. Indira as forming a "symbolic pattern" of imagery. Darkness is associated by Maya with isolation, madness and death. The colour white has both positive and negative aspects being present in the "cooling menthol" of moonlight and the white corpse of the pet dog respectively. While the albino astrologer looks like a "white worm" (28), rats and lizards appear "bleached" to Maya's disturbed mind. Gautama with his insensitivity is associated with the colour grey while Maya's passionate love for life is associated mainly with the colour red. At the same time, the colour red is also indicative of Maya's inner rage and latent violence — "a thousand ruby-red hammer-heads showered across my vision, blinding me with a fury" (65). It is only after she screams at Gautama that the "red volcano"(65) within her subsides.
To show the constant flux of Maya's mind, Anita Desai makes use of repetition as well as one-line paragraphs consisting of associative images. For instance: “shooting-star, rocket, comet, great fountain of light, light, diamond, brilliant, sapphire light. Darkness, chaos – gone” (23).

To reflect the incoherent jerky movements of Maya's growing insanity, the language too is disjointed. For example:

I am in a fever then, and it is not a rat ... my father ... sweetly crying “Have a lichee! ...” No, no. His voice is not such a squawk. That must be the peacock ... the rat's young ... their furry, fleshy bodies slithering over mine ... I sail higher and higher ... and ... the kathakali drums begin to beat (147-148).

Anita Desai's use of a number of Indian words serves to add colour to the context. For instance, words like Zulph, mehtab, Paimana and Tamanna serve to create the proper ambience for a night of ghazals. The Milky way is designated as Akash-Ganga (26). Even the flowers are given their Indian names – chameli, champa, bela, gol-mohurs as well as neem.

Finally, another fictional device adopted by Anita Desai here is related to its ending. The modernist novel generally has an open ending in contrast to the traditional novel's closed ending. That is, the ending is usually ambiguous leaving doubt about the character's final destiny. In
this novel too, the ending is ambiguous, leaving the reader in doubt about Maya’s final tragic destiny – does Maya kill herself or does she go to the asylum as planned? There is no certain resolution:

... she stopped and watched the heavy white figure go towards the bright, frantic one on the balcony, screaming. They met for an instance, there was silence, and then both disappeared into the dark quiet.
All around the dark was quiet then(218).

Notes


11. ibid., p 18

12. ibid., p 20.


15. ibid., p 22.


23. ibid., p 121.


26. ibid., p 17.