CHAPTER 3
FEMINISM IN SELECTED NOVELS OF ANITA DESAI

1. Cry, the Peacock (1963)

Anita Desai's first novel Cry, the Peacock sets the pattern for other novels to be followed with the central theme of marital discord and its impact, particularly on women. The theme of marital discord and rupture has been depicted by the novelist in a very poignant manner. The novelist has adopted the first person narrative in bringing out this theme. Gautama and Maya are the main protagonists in the novel who reveal this problem with emphasis and poignancy all around them & other couples are also the victims of this self-created tragedy. Anita Desai portrays Maya as the psychic tumult of a young and sensitive married girl Maya who is haunted by a childhood prophecy of a fatal disaster. It gives expression to the long-smothered wail of a lacerated psyche, the harrowing tale of blunted human relationship being told by the chief protagonist herself. She is the daughter of a rich advocate in Lucknow. Being alone in the family, her mother being dead, and brother having gone to America to carve his own independent destiny, she gets the most of her father’s affection and attention and in her moments of affliction exclaims to herself: “No one, no one else, loves me as my father does.” The excessive love Maya gets from her father makes her have a lop-sided view of life. She feels the world to be toy made especially for her, painted in her favorite colours, and set moving according to her tunes. Having lived, thus, a careless life under the indulgent attentions of her loving father, Maya desires to have similar attentions from her husband Gautama, a father surrogate.

Maya’s marriage with Gautama was more or less a marriage of convenience. Gautama and Maya’s father were friends to each other! They have similar way of thinking. Gautama used to come to Maya’s father:

“Coming slowly up on his bicycle, in the evenings, it was my father Gautama used to come to call upon and had it not been for the quickening passion with which I met, half way, my father's proposal that I marry this tall, stooped and knowledgeable friend of his, one might have said that our marriage was grounded upon the friendship
of the two men, and the mutual respect in which they held each other, rather than anything else.”¹ (CP 40)

It was a match between two different temperaments with not even a single link in the strain of their physical and mental outlooks to bring them to a close tie.

The married life of Maya and Gautama results in a rupture because the two are not only temperamentally different, but mutually opposed. Maya is full of life, of élan, vital and she wants to enjoy life to the utmost. Gautama and Maya are the main characters who reveal this problem with emphasis and poignancy all around them & other couples are also the victims of this self-created tragedy. It was a match between two different temperaments with not even a single link in the strain of their physical and mental outlooks to bring them to a close tie.

As the two have different temperaments, they drift apart through the very process of their living together. Had they followed the usual procedure of an ordinary marriage that turns the partners into weary strangers in course of time, there would have been nothing amiss but a Desai heroine cannot succumb to such circumstances, she tries to preserve the deep, torturous love for Gautama with childish pleadings,

“Is there nothing,” I whispered, “is there nothing in you that should be touched ever so slightly, if I told you, I live my life for you?”

(CP.114)

This involvement in her and the complete lack of it in Gautama is the basis, of the maladjustment that creates the fear-complex in Maya. From an ordinary pampered hypersensitive child-bride, Maya is transformed within four years of married life into a neurotic, homicidal maniac, through the grinding process of mindless compromise with her marriage which was doomed to fail, right from the beginning. The drum beats claim her at last, to thrust her young life into the twilight hours of insanity, within the black bars of an asylum! Married at an early age to Gautama, a friend of her father and leading lawyer, who is of twice her age, Maya seems destined to suffer from emotional starvation especially since she is childless.

“The first emotional crisis she faces arises at the death of her pet dog, Toto, on whom she has been lavishing all her affection The opening chapter detailing it reports how Maya first could not stand the sight of
her beloved dead dog and that she rushed to “the garden tap to wash the vision from her eyes” Maya thinks that “she saw the evil glint of a blue bottle” and grows hysterical and finds the setting sun “swelling visibly like... a purulent boil” (CP 5-6).

Her condition is aggravated by Gautama's casual and unfeeling remarks:“It is all over, come and drink your tea and stop crying. You mustn’t cry” (CP. 7).

Further, instead of consoling her in her grief at the loss of her Toto, he leaves her to meet a visitor who has come to see him and forgets all about the dead dog. Gautama returns from office and very efficient, precisely disposes off the matter: “I sent it away to be cremated. ... It is all over. Come, won’t you pour out my tea?”(CP.6)

As she tries to do so, she spills the tea into the sugar-pot, tea-strainer topples into a cup, the lemons slip to the floor and there is chaos. Just then the servant announces a visitor and the husband escapes, “ordering tea to be sent to the study;forgetting her, forgetting her woes altogether.”(CP.6)

Here is description of quite a routine situation familiar in every Indian household. The myth of the Indian woman as a strong, self sacrificing bastion is not for Anita Desai: the isolation an insecurity that her characters suffer from is human. Maya is sensitive and her moments of illumination throw light on fossilized ways of being, but she lacks the knowledge and the strength to overcome her alienation and despondency.

“Something slipped into my tear-hazed vision, a shadowy something that prodded me into admitting that it was not my pet’s death alone that I mourned today, but another sorrow, unremembered, perhaps as yet not even experienced, and filled me with this despair.”(CP.7)

This incident brings out the contrast between Maya, who is highly sensitive and imaginative and of a neurotic sensibility, and Gautama, who is unimaginative and pragmatic and unsentimental—a contrast accentuated by communication gap on account of his being wrapped up in his professional preoccupations.
The tragedy happens without any ill-intention on the part of either Gautama or Maya. Gautama had been a dutiful, clear headed provider. In his own way, he loved Maya, even though he was exasperated with her childish tantrums:

“Maya,” he said, patiently, “Do sit down. You look so hot and worn out. You need a cup of tea.” (CP.7) “Lying here in the dark?” he said, “and drew a finger down my cheek.” (CP.11) “Come, come,” he said, and took out the handkerchief again, more stained than ever. “Do get up,” he said. “the servants are coming to take the beds out for the night, and, really, it is much pleasanter outside. Wipe your face, and we’ll go out, Maya.” (CP.11)

Her heart soared with that ecstatic pain of all-consuming love.

Maya, the chief female protagonist, is obsessed almost from the beginning of the novel with awesome prophecy of an albino astrologer. According to the prophecy, she or her husband would die during the fourth year of her marriage. Her neurotic condition has worsened by her recollection of a prediction by an albino astrologer in her childhood:

“My child, I would not speak of it if I saw it on your face alone. But look, look at the horoscope. Stars do not lie. And it is best to warn you, prepare you, prepare you Death to one of you. When you are married — and you shall be married young… Death — an early one — by unnatural causes” (CP 33).

Obsessed with the albino astrologer’s ominous prediction, Maya muses:

“It must be a mark on my forehead, which had been so clear to the opaque eye of the albino who had detected it, upon which the stars now hurled themselves vengefully, and which prophesied relentless and fatal competition between myself and Gautama. I tried to define the mark, give it a name, a ‘locality’. Was it an arrow? A coffin? A star? Was it between the eyes? At the temple? Was it dark? Was it pale? And what made the gods reach out and
touch it with their cold fingers, as they considered the prospect of a murder?” (CP 122)

Further, she is aware of her being confined to her private hell:

“Torture, guilt, dread, imprisonment — these were the four walls of my private hell, one that no one could survive in long. Death was certain” (CP 117).

Her obsession with death reinforced by the death of her pet dog plunges her into a state of insanity of which she is uncannily conscious as she herself observes:

“Yes, I am going insane. I am moving further and further from all wisdom, all calm, and I shall soon be mad, if I am not that already. Perhaps it is my madness that leads me to imagine that horoscope that encounter with the albino, his prediction, my fate? Perhaps it is only a phenomenon of insanity” (CP 124)?

Maya is convinced that she is becoming insane as she herself remarks:

“This is not natural, I told myself, and this cannot be natural. There is something weird about me now, wherever I go, whatever I see, whatever I listen to has this unnaturalness to it. This is insanity. But who, what is insane? I myself? Or the world ground me (CP 167)?”

In her insane condition she becomes all the more obsessed with death, which makes her think that “it was now to be either Gautama, or I.”(CP 125)

Faced with such a terrible choice she decides that Gautama has to die as he is detached from and indifferent to what makes life livable.

Maya is constantly obsessed with the prediction by the albino astrologer of death either for her or her husband with four years of their marriage. The utter lack of communication between the husband and the wife adds to her inner suffering and she becomes habituated to brooding over her miserable condition.
“Being intensely in love with life she turns hysterical over the creeping fear of death: “Am I gone insane? Father: Brother: Husband: Who is my saviour? I am in need of one. I am dying, and I am dying. God, let me sleep, forget, rest. But no, I’ll never sleep, again. There is no rest any more—only death and waiting.”

It is interesting to note that Maya unknowingly relates the prediction to herself and not to Gautama.

Maya’s marriage to Gautama with the lack of emotional attachment is in contrast to her joyous childhood. Those past memories overshadow her present with gloom. She can establish no effective communication with her husband. Maya’s life is woven to her instincts and longs for emotional and physical satisfaction in marital life but both these are denied to her, one by Gautama’s intellectuality and indifference and the other by his age. Further, Maya’s sensuous thrills and excitements are dampened by the non-attachment philosophy of the Bhagwad Gita. She is childless which accentuates her isolation and this frustration becomes total when she murders her husband in a fit of insane fury. Maya seeks communion of the kind the peacock seeks and makes intense mating calls. Through Maya’s tragic end, Desai tries to emphasize the great yearning of the woman to be understood by her male partner.

Their married life is punctuated all along by “matrimonial silences” (CP. 12) and Gautama’s “hardness... his coldness and incessant talk of cups of tea and philosophy.” (CP 9) What pains Maya most is her utter “loneliness in this house”. “I was alone,” she complains. “Yes, I whimpered, it is that I am alone.” (CP.9). She fails to understand the total lack of communication on the part of Gautama:

“How little he knew of my suffering or of how to comfort me.... Telling to go to sleep while worked at his papers, he did not give another thought to me, to either the soft, willing body, or the lonely, wanting mind that waited near his bed” (CP. 9).

We become fully aware of Maya’s hypersensitive and nightly disturbed state of mind when we see her, in the very beginning of the novel, reacting to the untimely death of her pet dog. She rushes to “the garden tap to wash the vision from her eyes”, (CP. 15) but her husband remains undisturbed. His attitude agonizes her. An ever-widening gap in communication between the
husband and wife is felt throughout the novel. She muses: “Had there been a bond between us, he would have felt its pull... but, of course, there was none... There was no bond, no love—hardly any love.” A restlessness always boils within her and the strainedness holds them apart. She feels “defenseless and utterly alone” in the company of the “bleak, comfortless figure” passing as her husband. The alienation of Maya is rooted essentially in Gautama’s philosophical detachment, his imperviousness to the “beautiful yet tremulous” beauty of the natural world and his gross unconcern over the basics of life”. Gautama would shrug Maya’s words off as superfluous, trivial”, (CP. 19) This “gaunt, sarcastically silent intellectual” was ever “eager to pursue the thread of logic to its end, slowly and steadily as a meticulous tortoise(CP. 74,208) In a different situation, Gautama would have proved to be a remarkably successful husband. But he and Maya are irreconcilables. Their union is likely to ruin each other’s life and happiness. Maya’s rootlessness keeps on increasing everyday culminates in a kind of schizophrenia—a body without a heart, a heart without a body.” (CP. 196)

Of all the contemporary Indian English novelists Anita Desai is, perhaps, the most perceptive and consistent explorer of the inner life, especially that of Indian women convulsed by an acute sense of helplessness in the face of the onslaughts of an unfeeling world and the resultant mental agony. Anita Desai attempts to escape the turbulent inner world of its protagonist, Maya, whose neurotic condition is brought about by a variety of factors including marital discord and barrenness and psychic disorder. Using a tripartite structure and third person narration, which affords opportunities for authorial comment, Anita Desai traces Maya’s gradual descent into a state of madness, impelled by her responses to the developments in her outer life as it were.

The novel is about Maya’s cries for love and understanding in her loveless marriage with Gautama; the peacock’s cry is symbolic of Maya’s agonized cry for love and life of involvement. Maya “rejoiced in the world of sounds, senses, movements, odours, colours, tunes.” She wanted to live passionately like peacocks which tore at each other before making love. She was “in love with living contact, relationship, communion; there would be the warm tender sensations in which she wanted to bask. Unfortunately, her involvement is opposed to Gautama’s philosophy of detachment. She would listen to him thinking sadly “how useless lies, words and opinion sounded in that palpitating night air, how petty and expendable under the gorgeous stars, poor Gautama, poor dear Gautama who was so intense and had never lived and would never live. Gautama could see no value in anything less than the ideas and theories born of human and
preferably male brains. She hungered for his companionship and spent sleepless nights consumed with his hunger. The thought which often oppressed her was that:

“his companionship was a necessity. I required his closest understanding. How was I to gain it? We did not even agree on which point, on what grounds this closeness of mind was necessary.”

He made no attempt to take any interest in things which interested her:

“Yes, Yes, he said already thinking of something else, having shrugged my words off as superfluous, trivial and there was no way I could make him believe that this, the night filled with these several scents, their varying essences and associations, their effects on me, on us, were all important—die very core of the night of our moods tonight.”

She hungered and hungered. And when this hunger was not satisfied what was she to do? Protest like her brother? That she was incapable of because her father had taught her to accept life. And accept she could not because it told upon her nerves. She would lie awake at night stifled by the hunger she felt not only for Gautama but for all that he represented she came to look upon her relationship with Gautama as a relationship with death. The albino is only a literary device used to manifest her hidden fear. Gautama “came between her and the worshipped moon, his figure an ugly, crooked grey shadow that transgressed its sorrowing chastity.”

_Cry, the Peacock_ is one of the most poetic and evocative Indian novels in English. It gives expression to the long-smothered wail of a lacerated psyche, the harrowing tale of blunted human relationship being told by the chief protagonist herself. The novel presents the story of a young sensitive girl obsessed by a childhood prophecy of disaster, whose extreme sensitivity is rendered in terms of immeasurable loneliness. The very beginning of the novel highlights the husband-wife alienation theme by unfolding the relationship of Maya and Gautama. Maya, an introverted favourite daughter of a wealthy artistic father, is married to an older man, a detached, sober, industrious lawyer. In their temperaments and attitude to life, the two are completely opposite to each other. An average evening for Maya is hardly more than a “quiet, formal waiting.” (CP 7)
In *Cry, the Peacock* Anita Desai creates a small world which operates within a narrow framework of routine and domestic situations. It is the world of young couples, Maya and Gautama. It is also a world of contrasts characterised by the opposing forces of past and present, of bondage and freedom- of cognition and volition and above all of life and death. Ms. Desai uses the stream of consciousness mode to bring out these contrasts.

The main focus is on Maya and her growing neurosis which will finally take her towards annihilation. Here is a portrayal of a typical Anita Desai heroine: hypersensitive, Intuitive, governed by emotion rather than reason but also very intense. There are other qualities too: she is almost childlike, trying hard to retain the magic of her childhood world even as an adult. This unnatural desire also contributes to her disintegration.

We travel through Maya’s consciousness seeing her as a woman embroiled in situations and memories which work on her mind in a negative way. The novelist depicts her relationships with her father and her husband Gautama. The novel is essentially about her attachment to both of them and her final inability to establish a communion with them.

*Cry, the Peacock* opens with a tragic though not unusual event: the death of Maya’s pet dog Tito; Maya is shattered by the incident. It is her first direct contact with death. The climatic episode also exposes Maya’s highly-strung almost neurotic temperament for the first time in the novel. Her inner turmoil is indicated through the narrative:

> “All day the body lay rotting in the sun… So she moved the little stringbed on which it lay under the lime trees, where there was a cool, aqueous shade, saw its eyes open and staring still, screamed and rushed, to the garden tap to wash the vision from her eyes, continued to cry and ran, defeated, into the house…Flies began to hum amidst the limes, driving away gentle bees and the unthinking butterflies. She thought she saw the evil glint of a blue bottle and grew hysterical. The gardener sent his wife to take her into the house and keep her there.” (CP 10)

The external reality now takes on a new dimension. Maya cannot obliterate death, which is on her mind. She begins to associate everything around her in the outer world with death! The “rangoon creeper” seems to entwine the pillars of her house and climb the walls, spreading
trembling tendrils towards the roof” (CP.12); the beds of petunias “sentimental, irresolute flowers” seem to emit “piercing swoon of scent, a poignant half sweet, half sad fragrance” that is “so laden with wistful remembrance of the winter, a sense of all good things having come to an end” (CP.19) Even the moon’s white heat is like a balm, a “sharp, penetrating balm” which seems to pierce her body and surge through her veins so that her blood “ran to its calling, rose to…brain” (CP32) and she is in fever.

Her pain is refloated again and again in a sense of bitterness at this fate that seems so pointless. Tito’s death no doubt plunges her into deep sorrow, but also makes her feel the infallibility of fate. She cannot rationalise the prophecy and begins to believe in it:

“Something slipped into my tear-based vision, a shadowy something that prodded me into admitting that it was not my pet’s death alone that I mourned today, but another sorrow, unremembered, perhaps as yet not even experienced, and filled me with this despair.” (CP.8)

The prophecy, probably always part of her subconscious, had perhaps lain dormant during her early married life. Now however, she knows she cannot forget it. Haunted by it, the external world becomes threatening and she begins to seek ways of escape. The human mind tends to alienate itself from that which causes it pain. Almost always the mind strives to evade the unpleasant by withdrawing from conditions that foster it; it tries to superimpose something more pleasing, more idyllic on the actual reality.

As long as Maya remains part of this reality, the ubiquitous prediction will continue to trouble her. There are only two things she can do to keep her mind under control: retain her contact with the outer world by relating to Gautama completely, or escape into the inner world of her childhood. This last is an escape route she is familiar with.

Maya opts for the latter almost naturally. Inherently childlike, it is easy for her to recapture the happy moments spent with her indulging father. Nostalgia is a prominent theme in Ms. Desai’s novels. Maya reminisces:

“When with my father, even breakfast in the garden…becomes a party, as good as a revel of elves and fairies who feast on melons and syrups by moonlight.” (CP.43)
Or,

“When I play battledove and shuttlecock
using bright oranges… it is only from
me that he tolerates such things.” (CP.44)

The use of the present tense is significant. It clearly suggests that the past world of her childhood becomes a present reality which is more conducive to her mental state. It represents a world deftly managed by her father where nothing is prevaricating. It is a world unthreatened by death. It is as if Maya has never felt the need to grow up, to become independent-minded and acquire her own identity.

Maya is therefore untutored to shoulder responsibilities when her father marries her off to Gautama. Maya does not try to assert herself. She doesn’t have any definite aim in life and it is natural for her to be guided by Gautama now. Much older than her, he is mature, understanding, worldly-wise, almost paternal towards her. Maya therefore seeks the same gratifications in this relationship as with her father.

She even receives them to an extent. We notice this particularly in Gautama’s attempt to de-escalate the tension caused by Tito’s death. He is full of concern for Maya and she notices it:

“When he touched my hair, smoothing it down carefully as a nurse would, I was flooded with tenderness and gratitude, thought of him as my guardian, my protector, the one who had seen to the burial of my pet, and now came to wipe the strands of hair out of my wet eyes and speak to me softly.” (CP.11)

However, Maya’s incessant demand to be loved and cared for overwhelms Gautama, who is a rationalist. Though extremely accommodating, Gautama cannot comprehend Maya’s hysteria. After his entire world has no place for emotionalism. In his intellectual milieu, Maya fails to express herself logically. She, on the other hand, cannot accept the fact that Gautama though an “alter-ego” of her father, is not actually her father that she must shed her child-like petulance and be his wife. Obviously, with such antithesis in their temperaments they are bound to drift apart.

Anita Desai makes an in-depth study of this young couple who represent two, diametrically opposite worlds. Maya is as much a child of instinct as he is faithful to logic. She is a woman
who lives continually in her dreamlike world, while he is too rooted in reality. Judicious and
objective, he cannot always relate to her extreme sentimentalism, and is even indifferent to her
emotional outbursts at times.

It would be a total misreading of the character of Gautama to say that he is devoid of human
emotions. What perturbs Maya is his utter inability to relate to his wife. In the words of Maya,
Gautama “who lived so narrowly, so shallowly,” was a “harmless, guileless being, who walked
the fresh grass and did not know he touched it”. (CP.169) elsewhere she says: “But do not
presume, no one must presume, that our marriage was an empty one, a failure. Nor that Gautama
was no more than a figure of granite to me.” (173).What Gautama taught her was pain: “there
were countless nights-when I had been tortured by a humiliating sense of neglect, of loneliness,
of desperation that would not have existed had I not loved him so, had he not meant so much.”
(173) “Gautama is no tyrant to his wife”, “no Brahmin and no traditionalist,” the word fate quite
alien to him is a compelling example of a man absorbed in himself.

In her rare moments of lucidity Maya does see Gautama as an ally. But these feelings are quickly
overtaken by her awareness of his “detached” air. She knows he is intellectual, but emotionally
sterile. Her feelings of insecurity and anxiety grow. We witness the fervor, the insecurity, the
anxiety of a woman who needs explicit love. But whose husband is cool and reserved. For Maya
reason is ephemeral. Therefore, she cannot welcome Gautama’s rationality and matter-of-fact,
approach. This disparity in their natures augments the marital conflict which is rooted in two
largely opposed world-views. Thus, attempts to build a mutually reciprocal relationship fail. The
inability to identify with Gautama at any level cramps Maya’s mental growth. She does try to
acquire a sense of self-importance. She knows she is more aesthetically inclined than Gautama.
She consoles herself with the thought that if Gautama has his enunciations. She is also equipped
with delicate sensibilities which make her respond to nature in a way he never can.

Gautama can pick up a flower but fails to feel the smooth petals. He can quote eloquent Urdu
couplets but fails to feel the romance and the sensuousness in it. We also see that their lack of
communication on a mental level is compounded by their physical incompatibility. Maya begins
to feel the horror of incarceration in her marriage. The impassive Gautama is unable to respond
to her passion and she is bitter about it:
Giving me on opal ring to wear on my finger, he did not notice the translucent skin beneath the blue flashing veins that ran under and out of the bridge of gold ... telling me to go to sleep while he worked at his papers, he did not give other thought to me, to either the soft, willing body or the lonely, wanting mind that waited near his bed (CP.9).

“This total inability on Gautama’s part to reach out aggravates Maya’s sense of aloneness. She feels isolated as she struggles against the discordant strings in her marriage. Gautama takes little notice of her inner dilemma. He tries to preserve her from being hurt, but has to labour with forces too great for him. Maya cannot explain to him what she feels, and what really tortures her. Likewise he cannot get her to accept that her fears are baseless and her remorse unjustified. This only results in hastening Maya’s alienation.

This alienation is not just a consequence of Gautama’s taciturnity but also of his incapacity to understand Maya’s need for nostalgic dreams or her preference for the instinctual over the intellectual. A.R. Jamkhandi points out that Maya reduce the abstract to the tangible. According to him:

“It is Maya’s proclivity for the instinctual that helps her battle against her fate; it is this that conflicts against Gautama's inclinations to the intellectual it is this that dramatises her adherence to an accidental taste for life... It is her instinctual tastes again, that color her relationship with Gautama.”

Two factors contribute to the growing imbalance in Maya: her inability to obviate the past and rid herself of what we may term as father-fixation, and her failure to conform to Gautama’s sententious life. Maya becomes aware of the vast distance between herself and Gautama:

“The stars surged towards us, their whole diamond weight descending upon us. More and more stars rushed into our scope of vision. And yet no matter how many the enchanted eye gathered, there were still spaces of darkness in
between, above and around… Death
lurked in those spaces, the darkness
spoke of distance, separation, loneliness.” (CP.22).

One suspects that the marital discord is not only due to the incompatibility factor. It is also because of the fatalistic prophecy that is inexorably connected to the marriage. The image of the albino-astrologer pervades her entire existence. Maya cannot enjoy marital peace with the conscious feeling that death may strike at any time. Life becomes more and more nightmarish; and the need to escape from the abominations of the conscious reality grows more urgent “Wherever I laid myself, I could think only of the albino, the magician.”(CP. 34)

Maya is precariously poised on that fine line separating sanity from madness. She is prone to fierce headaches and hallucinations. These are symptomatic of her lack of security and her inability to find coherence in her existence. Her regression into childhood memories becomes frequent. Her collapse is accelerated by her obsessive engagement with the unreal world. Its magic becomes a symbol of some meaningful continuity. It almost replaces that outer world which seems arbitrary and opprobrious.

By retreating to this inner reality. However, Maya is only perpetuating her false self. Her real self forsaken, Maya’s neurosis begins to show. When the real self becomes weak the environment becomes more threatening. Psychoanalyst Karen Horney states that childhood experiences significantly determine conditions for neuroses, though they may not be the only factors. Familial, social and cultural exigencies are also responsible.

Gautama’s reticent and metaphysical temperament unnerves the sentient Maya. She feels trapped, strait-jacketed as Gautama goes through his sententious philosophies. His rationalist mind has definite limits. It cannot include intuition and sentimentality. Gautama goes through the rigmarole of career, books, philosophies but, ironically, is incapable responding to Maya’s nature which is continually, assailed by thoughts of love, emotion, fear, anxiety and insecurity. While Maya continues to be a “round faced child in a white petticoat gazing bleakly out of the silvered mirror” (CP.66), Gautamaemerges like a “meditator beneath the bo tree” (CP.113), readying himself for a vocation.
This polarity drives Maya to self estrangement. Working within his own limits of vision, Gautama tries to reason with her. But while his mind fuses and merges, Maya’s divides and holds apart. Asshe notices:

“In his world there were vast areas in which he would never permit me and he could not understand that I could even wish to enter them, foreign as they were for me.” (CP.104)

The contrast between past and present parallels the contrast between involvement and detachment Maya yearns to belong to Gautama’s adult world, to be a loving wife and companion. But it also urges her to be autonomous, while her father has taught her to conform and to accept. For Gautama involvement ends with the fulfillment of one’s tasks and responsibilities. For him, it is detachment which is the essence of life.

A philosopher soi-disant, he is affronted by the claims made on his emotional involvement. His philosophy is concerned, as it were with denials and abstinences. He quotes from the *Gita*:

“Thinking of sense objects, man becomes attached thereto. From attachment arises longing and from longing anger is born, from anger rises 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.” (CP.112).

Like ‘involvement’ reality too, has a different connotation for Gautama and Maya. For Gautama, reality is external reality, a continuum of birth, living, death, obligations and responsibilities - one which admits reasons, facts, organisation, and control. For Maya, reality is that private, inner realm of her creation, having no semblance to the reality outside. Though illusory to Gautama, it holds all the truth for her. It offers security and stability to her otherwise chaotic mind. Above all it helps to indemnify herself against the external world which grows more expendable. One is convinced by R.S. Sharma’s statement:

“The two fail to relate because Gautama is capable of making those distinctions in his own life that he elaborates on so assiduously before Maya. He harps on the “basics in life”, and yet, remains ignorant of those basic things which make man-woman relationship possible.
Obsessed with the fact city of life, he is unaware of the constant flow of life into our consciousness. Maya on the other hand is capable of this ‘absorption’ though she cannot organise it into a pattern”.³

Gautama’s pragmatic nature fails to comprehend the magnitude of Maya’s intense aesthetically stimulated responses to everything around her. He condemns Maya's passionate response to life. Here, Anita Desai indicates the ‘Ideal’ in life which is typical of Indian traditionalism. This is termed in the Gita as ‘stitha prajna’ It is a means to seek inner peace and achieve ‘nirvana’ or salvation. Meenakshi Mukherjee has defined this state as follows:

“(In the state of ‘stitha prajna’) man does not necessarily renounce the world. He could very well be a man living among the temptations of life and still be different internally. This is the fundamental and all pervasive ideal of Indian life, an ideal that cuts across the boundaries of language and culture”.⁴

We realise that the pedantic Gautama has misinterpreted this ‘state’ which is a means to seek salvation. This is a positive approach to life, while Gautama’s attitude, in rejecting love, both emotional and physical, and is negative.

It is seen that both Maya and Gautama fail to understand that their beliefs, though antithetical, may have their own validity. Maya’s passionate involvement in life is one of the many means towards the same ideal state. And Gautama’s need for disengagement from emotional bonds may be another means. All Gautama’s profundities cannot offer her anything solid and stable. At this point she suddenly realises that the void between them is irrevocable. All hope of meeting him halfway vanishes and Maya sinks further into the chasm of loneliness. She describes her state of loneliness as: “He was not on my side at all, but across a river, across a mountain, and would always remain so.” (CP.114)

Maya’s senses the futility of establishing a connection with both Gautama and his world. Alienating him from her thoughts, she now introspects about Fate and fatality, evil and mortality, death and destruction. She is unable to cope with these dichotomies and finally maulders on towards lunacy which is described as:
“I knew I should never again sleep in peace, For, God, now I was caught in the net of the inescapable... night... in that waiting silence, my memories came to life, were so vivid, so detailed, I knew them to be real, too real. Or is it madness? Am I gone insane? Father! Brother! Husband! who is my saviour? I am dying, and I am in love with living... There is no more rest anymore - only death and waiting.”

(CP.97-98)

Life, death, and waiting for death are central images in the novel. In some translucent moments of sanity, Maya is a different person: she wants to live, make friends, have a child. But as her alienation grows these exigencies are suppressed by chaotic inner fears about the prediction. She can now only wait for the prediction to come true. She even begins to think of death as something which will finally liberate her. Maya’s mental state further deteriorates as her morbid obsession with death grows:

“All ready we belonged to separated worlds and his seemed the earth I loved so... It was mine that was hell and that no one could survive in long. Death was certain.” (CP.102)

It may be observed that Maya’s neurosis is not just a consequence of the prophecy working on her mind. It may also have been born out of a sense of displacement when Maya moved out of her father’s house and into Gautama’s. In doing this, she has removed herself from everything that symbolises tranquility and harmony. Here, she was taught by her father to be a fatalist, to resign and ‘accept’.

“We have been taught for generations to believe that the merit of accepting one’s limitations and acting within them is greater than that of destroying them... one must... accept.” (CP.54-55).

Maya has come to depend on such paternal assurances and is discomposted without them. For this reason she even welcomes her mother-in-law and her sister-in-law Nila who patronise her. They mean shopping- sprees and conversations during meal times; even the headaches recede. And almost miraculously, the sight of the albino on the street is no longer threatening. As she herself confesses, “If they stayed a while, they might help me as my father could not, by teaching me some of that marvelous indifference to everything that was not vital, immediate and pleasant”
She enjoys a short respite from the oppressive outer reality. But this is not to be forever.

Normally, when a person suffers from alienation and withdrawal due to severe emotional stress, he/she constantly reaches out for a solid object to lean upon. Maya is rescued temporarily from a state of inertia by a letter from her beloved brother Arjun whom she had lost contact with. It serves as a stimulus to make her arrive at a point of self-actualisation. A non-conformist, Arjuna has been the only disturbing factor in the otherwise complacent world of her father. But Maya has always admired his individualism and courage to rebel. Her fondness for him is explicit in her comparisons.

“If I was a partridge, plump, content, he was a wild bird, a young hawk that could not be tamed, that fought for liberty” (CP.135).

And again

“Mine were awkward kites that never lost their earth-bound inclinations. Arjuna’s were birds – hawks, eagles, swallows - in the wind” (CP.135).

For Arjuna, his father’s world had seemed decadent. He had thereby set off to search for a meaning in life to acquire an identity independent of his father.

Arjuna’s letter therefore, symbolises freedom. The desire to liberate herself must have been, present within Maya, but suppressed by the overpowering influence of her father. Now, she can no longer hold back – she decides to reject all routine, denounce all logic. She too would stand alone. Earlier, memories of her father had served to prevent a feeling of total desolation. Not anymore.

Whether an invitation to freedom or not, we know that the letter acts as a catalyst to make her arrive at the realisation that she had been too involved in life, and too demanding. Now, she urgently seeks to escape, like Arjuna did years ago. One feels that Maya too sub-consciously wanted such a freedom from her domestic fetters but had always held back.

But, somewhere true to herself, Maya knows she cannot break off and liberate herself. Besides, escape either through regression or dreams, is only illusory. Hence, if there is no real escape death possibly is the only solution. Maya slips into stativity and silence:
“For the first time in my life I was defenseless and utterly alone. I said, ‘something has gone wrong’. But in silence only- I no longer dared speak aloud.” (CP.153)

Maya’s withdrawal from the outer world is now total. All inner coherence is also lost. Thus, she is disoriented and goes into a psychotic condition where her subjective and objective awareness is blurred. She herself realises that “all order is gone out of my life, all formality.” (CP.179)

Maya gets confused thinking about the approaching death. Her thought process becomes chaotic, disordered. Thoughts and incidents get jumbled up and past, present, future gets intermingled. She goes upstairs and from the roof-top looks at her garden which is in the process of decay: “The lawn is dying in irregular patches, yellow here, tawny there, green around the water-tap.” (CP.180)

The dust storm is followed by silence. Maya feels agitated and also humiliated by the thought of being neglected by Gautama. As both of them walk on the roof, Maya hears the ominous hooting of the owl. Gautama keeps silent and detaches himself completely into his “exclusive mind”. At the parapet’s edge, Maya makes him pause and his words are “lost” to her. She pushes him off the terrace and Gautama dies. Maya’s obsession with death from the very beginning thus culminates in her hysteric act of killing Gautama. Maya finally avenges the death of Toto with the strange hope of escaping from the experience of dying in life.

The headaches and hallucinations leave her inconsolable. She begins therefore to eliminate everything that will only increase her discomposure. She sees rejection as the only way out: she rejects the real, though arid world of Gautama and the unreal world of her father. The only thing she is unable to obliterate is the memory of the albino astrologer, whose image looms large. This sharpens her neurosis.

It is interesting to note that it is her state of neurosis that enables us to perceive Maya’s finer sensibilities and analyse her. It is also this neurosis that makes her arrive at the startling possibility that the prophecy was meant for her spouse, not her. It seems to her that Gautama qualifies better for death. With his denials, he is removed from the real sensations of living while Maya is passionately attached to life. She had sunk her teeth in life while Gautama “had never lived and never would”. (CP.203) This ultimate realisation comes in a kind of an epiphany. It is symbolised in the emerging dust-storm:
“The time of faded flowers of strangled lives, of parched vision, of hesitation and despair was over. Here was aturmoil, a wild chiaroscuro of oven hot colours… It revolved round me, about me, it was mine, mine, this life was mind... release from bondage, release from fate, from death and dreariness and unwanted dreams. Release and liberty.”
(CP.188-190)

The storm symbolises Maya's inner struggle between life and death, between attachment and detachment. However it also provides her with an answer: she must bring to an end this turbulent inner struggle between bondage and freedom. Like the dust-storm which violently and dispassionately sweeps away all that lies in its path, she can be freed only if she cleanses her life by doing away with factors that have kept her in contact with reality, like Gautama and her father. In the process, she also be released from the clutches of the prediction and may even learn to be dispassionate about it.

R.S. Sharma analyses Maya’s homicidal tendencies by quoting from H.W. Frink’s “Morbid Fears and Compulsions.” He says: “Compulsive neurotics... have a certain typical peculiarity with regard to superstition and the possibility of the death of other persons… (The thoughts of compulsive neurotics) are continually occupied in the possibility of the death of others...they need the possibility of death in the solutions of their yet unresolved conflicts... in each conflict they lie in wait for the death of someone significant to them usually a loved person, whether it be one of the parents, or a rival or one of the love objects between whom their inclination wavers”5

In the grip of lunacy, Maya suddenly pushes Gautama off the edge of her house terrace, merely because he blocks her view of the moon. This is how she describes the incident:

“And then Gautama made a mistake - the last, decisive one. In talking, gesturing, he moved in front of me, thus coming between me and the worshipped moon... ‘Gautama!’ I screamed in fury, and thrust out my arms towards him, into him and past him” (CP.208)

This does not only end the personal crisis in her marriage, but also fulfils the prophecy. Ironically, Maya is liberated from the prophecy thanks to her own perseverance.
At the end of the novel we see Maya totally insane. She has abjured the worlds of her father, Gautama, even Arjuna. She can now reside in perfect isolation. The feeling one has, however is that Maya fails to realise that continued existence in her private inner world is impossible. To preserve her sanity, it is necessary to make a connection with the real outer world.

It is ironical that Maya feels that her inner world will finally liberate her. On the contrary, it pushes her into the throes of destruction. Her tragedy is a result of this fact that she has opted for an alternative reality which is actually false and artificial.

In doing so, she has destroyed those who could help her to ‘connect’. Gautama was the only person who could nullify the irrational aspects of her personality. Without Gautama, she is totally disoriented. The fatal prophecy has taken toll of her very being. In this state of helplessness and complete isolation, Maya regresses for the last time:

“Then they (the mother-in-law and Nila) heard the patter of a child’s laughter cascading up and down the scales of some new delight - a brilliant peacock’s feather perhaps. Then it stopped suddenly and they heard a different voice, calling, shrilly and desperately, from some unimaginable realm of horror, calling out in great dread”. (CP.217-218)

This final passionate outburst is the swan-song which echoes her despair and ultimate flight from reality. She is in a state of mind in which suicide, far from being insane, becomes a natural, even understandable desire.

Ms. Desai’s distinctive style traces the marital incompatibility, Maya’s obsessive fears, and her final break-down, through a highly individualistic use of imagery. Her heroine’s states of mind are repeatedly mirrored in images in the external landscape. Here are some examples:

“The balm of darkness met me with a little shock, like a strong and effective medicine on a wound still fresh” (CP.11).

“The heat grew and expanded in that womb; an immobile foetus, breathless with expectation and horror of all that was to come”. (CP.130)
Similarly, the moon corresponds to the mutation in the relationship between Maya and Gautama. It represents the father. Maya, for that reason, always looks upon the moon with full adoration. It is the only ‘constant’ in her diffuse ‘chaotic world’.

“There was the moon. A great moon of hot, beaten copper of molten brass, livid throbbing like a bloody human organ” (CP.51).

Maya, therefore, destroys Gautama who had kept her away from that sphere which meant security and love. As she remarks, “He moved in front of me thus coming between me and the worshipped moon” (CP.208).

Anita Desai has used symbolic images which accentuate Maya’s dilemma. The novel's very title is a pointer to Maya’s anguished cry. The peacocks’ symbolise the inner conflict in Maya between life and death. We see Maya extolling the myth about the famous peacock dance, like the dance of Shiva, it is one of preservation and destruction. As she observes:

“I heard their cry and echoed it… with them. I trembled and panted… Agony, agony, the mortal agony of their cry for lover and for death”. (CP.96)

The peacocks reflect her inner dilemma. Living and finding coherence the external reality has been like death to her. Marriage and love have been equally threatening. Like the peahen she has loved, mated, fought, and killed. She realises that it is now her turn to die.

We also note the use of animal imagery to symbolise Maya’s states of mind of agony and ecstasy, of her sense of incarceration, and above all her alienation.

All these are present in the nightmare about a row of “frail footed bears”, which suddenly are transformed into “gibbering, cavorting human beings…” (CP.89); in the continuous sounding of the tribal drums. “Irrepressible” and “relentless”… (CP.157) in the caged monkeys on the railway platform, their “long furred bodies swarming upon each other… the elegant lives of their muscles contorted nightmarishly” (CP.154) in the myth of the dancers who were slow yet persistent, so that their dances were funereal rather than “festive”. (CP.152)

As Maya moves from a near neurotic stage to becoming a compulsive neurotic, we see a marked emphasis on violent images suckling rats, venomous soakers, wild horses. The birds are seen as immobile, “suspended in mid-air” (CP.172); while the flowers with their thorns “scratch upon the
bricks” and “screech, sigh and – sag” (CP.173). One must understand that these morbid, sometimes intolerably overwhelming images are responses from a woman who is on the edge of the precipice of insanity.

Anita Desai’s portrayal of marriage and marital relationships in this novel is generally pessimistic and bleak. Besides that of Gautama and Maya there are other relationships discussed. We have the case of Maya’s friend Leila. This teacher of Persian literature carries the strains of romanticism into her personal life. She marries a man dying of tuberculosis and, with him, “the fatality of his disease” (CP.57). Her marriage is a flight from a comfortable existence to a state of near-bondage. However, Leila looks at it all stoically. She says: “it was all written in my fate long ago” (CF.39). Her life of toil and denial seems to be a deliberate attempt at martyrdom. Maya recognises it:

“Leila was one of those who require a cross, cannot walk without one” (CP.53).

Another friend of Maya’s Pom is a foil to Leila. She is gregarious, even a little immature. She is married into a family that has all the trappings of an orthodox, traditional Indian home. When she fails to get pregnant early, she is subjected to the rigmarole of rituals, prayers and pilgrimages - all in the hope of getting a son. This marriage is a loveless one, the relationship definitely stagnant.

We see a similar disharmony between Gautama’s friends the Lals. Their apparently cosy domestic picture is flawed: there are chinks in the form of a dominating husband, a subjugated wife, and neglected children. Lack of compatibility has corroded this marriage too.

Ms. Desai is ambivalent in her portrayal of Maya’s mother-in-law and her family. The mother-in-law is seen more, in the roles of mother than wife. She loves, considerate, almost indulgent. Strangely though, none of this shows up in her role as wife. We see a lack of communication between her husband and herself. She responds positively to her overzealous children, even to Nila’s separation, but appears untouched by her husband’s travails.

These various relationships have nothing solid or positive to offer. They are sterile relationships. Yet there is no evidence of protest or compliant from the women, only complacency and acquiescence. We do not see these women, Maya included, as ever growing in any way. They
have no distinct identities. With the exception of Maya’s mother-in-law, the others do not even assert their independence.

These women belong to very different areas of life, yet their problem is common: all of them seem to be caught in a ‘no-exit’ situation within their respective marriages. Only Maya finds an escape route, ‘in death’.

Most of Desai’s characters that remain disintegrated and fragmented in the beginning attain integration and a harmonious wholeness towards the end. Maya, in *Cry, the Peacock* is torn between the inner and outer reality. Matrimonial silence and temperamental schisms bring about her despair. Smitten with the pangs of isolation, she retreats into her mythical world of fables and phantasies. Her initial absorption in death, desolation and violence symbolized by the dance image, the image of the albino and the dead Toto alienate her from life. Estranged, she begins to identify herself with caged birds, monkeys or bears, or, in a disturbed and agitated state, with the tempestuous dust-storm. But they soon fade away with her startling discovery that she loves life. It is her overwhelming desire to live, her spiritual identification with life that shifts the death sentence on to Gautama, and urges her to kill him. The Nataraj glimpsed at the end becomes a symbol of liberation and identification. She lives but only a fractured and a ramshackle of her former self, in insanity and penitence—the alienation of the individual leading to the annihilation of the self in its identification with death and violence. In the process of her individuation, Maya steps out of her isolated death dungeon and moves towards self-affirmation.

The novel, in delineating the ‘life-saving’ mechanisms adopted by Maya’s unbalanced mind, clearly demonstrates that no thinking individual can live by another’s rationale. All the forces conspired to push Maya towards certain death unresistingly, and she had to assert herself to save herself. Assertion of the self after introspection and self-analysis is considered by Anita Desai to be essential in confirming the individual’s mature and positive integration with life.

*Cry, the Peacock* highlights that the dualism inherent in life cannot be contained within a single, limiting theory, whether of attachment or detachment. Anita Desai achieves this objective by revealing different facets of this basic conflict, so that their strengths and weaknesses can be assessed. If too close an involvement and attachment can lead to a lack of proper, balanced perspective, as represented by Maya, too much emphasis on detachment also can lead to an equally biased view of all activities and relationships in life as manifested in Gautama.
2. *Voices in the City* (1965)

*Voices in the City*, Anita Desai’s second novel, is about the voices of young artists, who have stepped out of their secure homes to seek artistic expression and forge a creative world of their own, in the great city of Calcutta. The novel is about their individual journeys towards a meaningful destination. For all their seeming articulate self-confidence, they combine anticipation and disillusionment, apprehension and indifference hope and despair.

All the artists in the novel are romantic pessimist: the three siblings – Nirode, Monisha, and Amla and their friends Dharma, Jit, Sonny and David. They appear to be born to say the great ‘No’, to refuse when they are offered a ‘choice’ probably because they find themselves in an environment that is devoid of creativity.

The novel focuses on Nirode, Monisha and Amla; their search for an identity different from that offered by their mother. Equipped with artistic sensitiveness and individualism, they are destined to be doomed in a society that is emotionally sterile and holds no great prospects.

Though they arrive in Calcutta full of hope, disappointment follows their urban experience. This only leads them to alienation. *Voices in the City* thus, deals with their ‘angst’, their anxiety and isolation in this city of Calcutta.

The city is a significant motif in the novel. It is responsible for the well-being of its inhabitants and for their destruction too. Anita Desai traces the relationship between the city and those that it harbours, in a metaphorical manner. It is symbolic of all human activity with its “shadows, stillness and silence” on the one hand, and its “coagulated blaze of light and sound and odour” on the other.

The city is on the brink of decadence, the old aristocracy slowly replaced by the new materialistic elite. The young intellectuals are caught in this fray and struggle to surface in this “monster” city, that has “no normal, healthy, red-blooded life but one that is subterranean underlit, stealthy and odorous of mortality”.

Anita Desai has shown “different meandering ways and torturous lanes the artists of various shades and temperaments take and what relationship they have with society”.

The contrastive and paradoxical features of Calcutta are typical of the main characters - Nirode, Monisha and Amla. These features are also responsible for their withdrawal. But for all its duality, they cannot ignore its presence and its implosive reality:
“On all its sides the city pressed down, alight, aglow and stirring with its own marsh-bred monster life that, like an ogre, kept one eye open through sleep and waking. Calcutta, Calcutta… the very pulse beat in its people’s veined wrists.” (VC.41-42).

Nirode is attracted to the rhythmic heartbeats of the city and yet feels its tentacles envelop him and tie him down. Its colour and complexity reflects Nirode’s “loquaciousness, the… quick emotion and fluency… natural anarchism, his imbalance and inconsistencies” (VC.22).

Nirode suffers from all those traits characteristic of a bohemian artist - he is utterly sensitive pretending to be not, he feels nausea for the conventional society and its dogmatic residents, and above all is governed by the existential sense of hopelessness. He cannot, thus conform to the institution of the family. He does not acknowledge friendship, is devoid of filial bond of any kind and is in fact a stranger to all who know him refusing to be associated with the “family name, family money, family honour” (VC.156).

At home, he has been a loner, hardly living up to the expectations of his parents. In Calcutta, he cannot relate to his close friends, though it appears he needs them. We note his sense of condescension and arrogance, his air of superiority and pride towards them. We note his vitriolic outburst against his friend, Jit, for being a typical ‘boxwallah’. We are shocked to note his callous, almost insolent response to Professor Bose’s hospitality: “I’m not going to move in with you. Your wife’s cooking doesn’t agree with me…But, I need some cash...Beggarly Bose, the great Philanthropist” (VC.15-16).

Such acrimony and an almost vindictive disregard for all, probably arises from the fact that he knows he is a “congenital failure” (VC.85) He has failed as a son. He has failed to make a career in Calcutta first as a clerk in a newspaper office, later as the editor of his own magazine.

His overriding superiority is an attempt to disguise his insecurity. Though vulnerable as an “unshelled snail”, he declines the support of his friends; yet overlooks his own parasite-like dependence on them. It is amusing to see him downing Jit’s expensive liquor, while expostulating about the difference in their ideologies. He rejects the financial security his mother offers though he remains emotionally dependent on her. These contradictory traits make Nirode somewhat complex. We suspect that his antagonism exists for its own sake. Jit suggests as much.
“I represent the box-wallah class you prefer to loathe so much. You rant against us precisely because you realise our danger- we entice you.... You’re sowing your bright little wild oats... but always with a sense of that comforting background to which you could always return when things got too hot.” (VC.98)

It is ironical that Nirode’s artistic sensibility and objectivity fail to make him analyse the world more dispassionately. This inturn makes him dispirited. He experiences a lack of contact with the world and begins to see it as an absurd place where “nothing existed but this void in which all things appeared equally insignificant, equally worthless” (VC.63).

It is no surprise that his magazine VOICE, through which he had aspired to express his art and creativity, never takes off. He knows it will provide him the necessary freedom he desires, but fails to accept the fact that its success would mean interaction and communication with people. His intellectual presumptuousness finds people’s perseverance pedestrian:

“Nirode grew more and more wary of contact with them (relations) or with anyone. The intricacies of relationship - approach, recompense, and obligation - these aroused in him violent distaste and kept him on the fringe ofthe world.” (VC.62).

Nirode has all the trappings of an existentialist hero. A rebel and a failure, he suffers from all the eccentricities that are usual in an artist and a non-conformist. To him, social commitments are obstacles that hamper free development. Thus unable to comply with society and with the world at large, Nirode undergoes an acute sense of alienation akin to existential despair. These feelings are complemented by his melancholic temperament and inertia:

“He loathed the world that could offer him no crusade, no pilgrimage…There was only this endless waiting, hollowed out by an intrinsic knowledge that there was nothing to wait for.” (VC.63-64)

This waning faith in man and his sense of solitariness make Nirode withdraw from the external world and seek isolation. His behaviour underlines the existentialist’s maxim-‘I am born to die’. However, his fanaticism, his instability, his revolt cannot be explained in such simplistic terms.
At times, he does display an urge to meet his friends, to seek a vocation, to have an adventure, to participate. This ambiguous streak in his personality may be understood in the light of R.D. Laing's reasoning:

“If the individual cannot take, the realness, aliveness, autonomy, identity of himself and of others for granted, then he has to become absorbed in contriving ways of trying to be real, of keeping himself and others alive, of preserving his identity… Such an individual, for whom the elements of the world have come to have a different hierarchy of significance from that of the ordinary person, is beginning to live in a world of his own.” ⁸

What Nirode suffers from is an “ontological insecurity”.⁹ Disillusioned and isolated, Nirode lacks faith in himself and in others. He rejects all forms of kinship and communion. He looks for failure, not success, for denials not concordance. As he introspects:

“I want to move from failure to failure, step by step to rock bottom. I want to explore that depth…. I want to descend, quickly.” (VC.40).

We sense an innate drive in Nirode towards self abnegation and self-annihilation. Psychologists say that such instincts are primarily the expressions of hostility arising from unconscious or subversive emotional sources - maybe even from oedipal impulses. This may apply to Nirode because his diatribes against his mother grow as his personal failures grow. Though he cannot dissociate himself from her emotionally he feels the unreality and meaninglessness in short the deadness of their relationship. To love to belong, to perform seems inconsequential.

One feels there is no escape for Nirode. He is too ‘rootless’ to ever enjoy a sense of belonging anywhere. We can perhaps see him as a partial “middle class neurotic”¹⁰ characterised by a great potential hostility, by a readiness and capacity for hate not love, by emotional isolation and a tendency to be ego centric. Such an individual goes through a neurotic conflict between his wish to keep apart from others and to possess someone entirely, between “an extreme emphasis on self-sufficiency and parasitic desires, between a compulsion to be unobtrusive and wanting to be a genius.”¹¹ Nirode’s insecurity maybe the result of these factors.

Usha Bande has analysed Nirode’s personality lucidly. According to her,

“Nirode idealises himself in two images: one, that of an independent person. And second, that of a hero who would rise in spite of his
failures… By denying his past, his family name, he asserts his freedom. This disavowal is an attempt of the self to create its own identity with nothing but its own volition”. 12

Nirode’s philosophy of ‘defeatism’ has an existential quality to it. He is not unlike one of Satre’s heroes in forsaking the world that would offer him “no crusade, no pilgrimage”, and in detesting himself for “not having the true, unwavering spirit” (VC.64) within him. He feels the ‘angst’ as he quotes Camus: “In default of inexhaustible happiness, eternal suffering at least would give us a destiny” (VC.40). We also detect a Kafkaesque element in his nihilism. He is poetic, but sees love, marriage, family its corroding elements not stabilising ones.

In this, Nirode is essentially different in temperament from his two other artist friends, David and Dharma who are not ‘escapists’. They have a positive faith in their art and creativity. All of them are artists on a ‘quest’, waiting to be transformed by some alchemy of experience. But, while Nirode strives towards destroying his sensibilities, the other two aspire to explore these and to create.

Nowhere is the novel does Nirode emerge totally composed, self-confident and decisive. Rather otiose, he takes pride in the Baudelairean precept: “the right to contradict and the right to leave” (VC.71). Rather egocentric, he believes that such a precept helps in narcissistically binding the individual and his isolation. He goes through intense restlessness. This also makes him arrogant, rude, proud and angry. His decisive attitude towards one and all stems out of his neurotic pride.

In our effort to explain his eccentricity which at times is infuriating, we may say that he hates because he is envious and despises what he cannot have. But that is offering a simplistic explanation. One feels that he does not act because he does not wish to, and he does not love because he does not wish to. He has arranged for his own misery.

Nirode propagates an adversary culture which stands as an antithesis to one that has normally developed, due to the habitual responses to the stimulii in the environment. Nirode is not a typical rebel. His revolt does not rise from any social or political crisis. In fact, he rebels without any world-splitting cause and is disillusioned “even before he has experienced totally and intensely”. 13 Like &classical tragic hero, Nirode always sensitive, grows more detached, introspective and wary of contact.
Anita Desai explores the theme of alienation in the novel with reference to almost all the characters present in the fiction. Each character finds him in a state of isolation. Dharma, Jit, David, even Dharma's wife Geeta Devi, Aunt Lila and her daughter go through an inner conflict between the personal or intimate, and the social. They all hope to seek some form of escape. Their failure to do so leads to more suffering.

Another theme relevant to the novel is death and the confrontation between death and existence. The motif of death pervades the novel. It is evident in the marriages of Dharma, Jit and Monisha; in the closure of Nirode’s magazine; even in the city of Calcutta which was "as much a haunting ghost of the past as a frenzied death even with happiness.(VC.42). Even the central characters go through a ‘death-life’ condition. While Nirode romanticises death, Monisha succumbs to it; only Amla transcends it due to her positive approach.

The theme of death is explored in the character of Monisha from the very day she arrives in Calcutta; she is governed by the condition of non-living rather than the condition of living. Moreover the absolute orthodoxy of Calcutta and its people, their unequivocal refusal to change their repudiation of “outsiders who seek to enter into their mainstream - all are factors which do not help to change this condition.”

It is the same with her conventional husband Jiban and her dogmatic in-laws. In her very first meeting with her family, she perceives their endemic demands.

“On either side of it (the house), the reception arranged by the heads of this many-headed family. In the small of my back, I feel a surreptitious push from Jiban and I am propelled forward into the embrace of his mother…who, while placing her hand on my head in blessing, also pushes a little harder than I think necessary.”(VC.109).

Monisha’s life in Calcutta starts and ends in a nightmare. She is dented privacy and shrinks further into her incarcerated state, to withdraw from this oppressive outer world. Like Nirode, Monisha is ‘whole’ only when she is alone.

In the character of Monisha, Anita Desai also explores the theme of marital disharmony. Her intense suffering creates an impact on the reader as she writes in an epistolary mode.
Monisha is an extremely sensitive woman, with an acute sense of observation, responding to everything with great intensity and passion. She identifies herself with those countless women who, in silent acquiescence, spend their lives “waiting on men, self-centered and indifferent and hungry and demanding and critical” (VC.120). Monisha’s tragedy is similar to Maya’s (*Cry, The Peacock*). Like Maya, she is incapable of relating to the dull prolixity of her husband Jiban.

Monisha is overpowered by a feeling of claustrophobia which increases by the day, not just in the “over-populated burrows” (VC 116) of Calcutta, but even within the “metal railings” and “thick iron bars” (VC 109) of her house. This only drives her to rejecting her in-laws willfully and maintaining an indifferent silence towards Jiban.

Monisha’s rebellious nature might have stemmed out of an unhappy childhood. She has been a victim of the incompatibility between the parents. Neglected and thereby segregated, her sense of otherness makes her withdraw into a world of silence. As daughter, wife and daughter-in-law she maintains stance of non-attachment and non-emotion. She is a passive onlooker who has decided to use ‘silence’ as her weapon.

We are aware of the role that ‘silence’ plays in literature. It has become a forceful image in feminist literary criticism too. Its aesthetic power has been known to permeate tragedies. As Herbert Marcusa states, “Noise is everywhere the companion of organised aggression... silence as medium of communication (is used) as break with the familiar, it is used not only at some place or time reserved for contemplation, but as a whole dimension which is there without being used.”

This dimension is what Monisha obviously has in mind when she writes in her diary:

> “Accept insignificance, accept solitude, a truer gift than any communication, any art, any faith or delusion in the world.... My silence, I find, has powers upon others, if not on me.” (VC128-130)

In their denial of ‘relationships’ Nirode and Monisha are alike. Both recoil from serious commitments, and “fear and avoid” (VC.136) love which they believe is binding. They could well be soul-mates. As Monisha says, “I suffer his fever so deeply, because it is mine” (VC.130). Finally, lifeNirode, Monisha feels she is born to stand alone, “to stand back, apart... not to take part.” (VC.136)
But there is a difference: Though Nirode revels in his ‘uniqueness’ and displays an artistic profundity, he is unable to accept people on their terms. His inability to understand his mother more deeply is evidence enough. On the other hand, Monisha can be detached about her relationships with her mother and with Jiban their temperamental differences are responsible for her inability to be close especially to her mother. Moreover, she is aesthetically responsive, Unlike Nirode, she even recognises, the possibility of ‘love’ on a different levels:

“If only love existed that is not binding, that is free of rules, obligations, complicity and all strivings of mind or conscience, then - but there is no such love.” (VC.135)

Monisha knows that such a ‘love’ does not exist -at least in her marital relationship. She feels totally inescapably trapped. She knows now, that she has to preserve her ‘autonomy’ instead. In the process, however she moves away from the external world in order to live in her own silent, inner world. She relentlessly pursues solitariness. In it, she thinks, she will find true liberation. Alienation and ‘separateness’ are the only two operative terms for her: “I find that I am alone. I find on this level, that solitude becomes me naturally.” (VC.136)

Montana’s alienation cannot be explained in the same terms as Nirode’s While Nirode declares a kind of nausea of the world in general, Monisha seems to have arrived at this state of alienation because of her inability to comply with the ways of her immediate society. Nirode could well be an alien in any society, but Montana might respond differently in a more congenial, aesthetically - stimulated society. Deprived of this, she moulds herself into the image of the silent martyr, though her suffering is real.

Usha Bande has traced a dichotomy in Montana’s personality. According to her, “The City of Calcutta has two faces: one rapacious, the other weary. Likewise, Monisha has two selves: one ‘glorified’ the other actual. Her actual self is weary, the glorified rapacious… physically, she is trapped behind these (selves); psychologically, her real self is shut behind the barred exigencies of her glorified self.”

Fragmented by this inner conflict between the two selves, Monisha loses all interest in life, and becomes morbidly obsessed with ‘death’. She sees the colour of death in the appurtenances around her, the city is ‘black’, her wardrobe is black, so are the minds of her family members- “starless and darkness.” (VC.139)
This morbid attachment to death reaches a climactic note when she is accused unjustly of theft. Her very integrity is threatened. Her stoic peace can no longer help preserve her sanity or obliterate the ignominy of the charge. Her withdrawal from the external reality is complete. She now seeks a communion only between her inner self and the dark emptiness of the Nights:

“I’ll have only the darkness - only the dark spaces between the stars, for they are the only things on earth that can comfort me.” (VC.138)

Monisha traverses every human response - anger, remorse, despair, anxiety to attain the state of ‘Stidha Prajna’ taking the Gita as her moral guides; “the self-subjugated attain peace and moves among the objects with the senses under control, free from any longing or aversion” (VC.129).

What Monisha fails to comprehend is the real message of the Gita - that man also has to experience and endure the demands of daily life, thereby performing his earthly duties. True salvation lies in experiencing life in its totality, not in killing all instincts and achieving an emotional vacuum.

It is ironical that it is the external world that she has forsaken which offers her the stimulus to awaken her dormant instincts. She is activated by a woman, a street performer, singing passionately to the beat of the accompanying drums, below her window. The street singer whose face appears to her like the face of the “Eternal Mother, the Mother Earth” (VC.237) acts as a catalyst to snap her out of her unreal state of inertia.

The woman’s powerful arresting face, her black eyes speaking apparently of an eternally unfulfilled promise of love her heart-rending song, all bring Monisha to the point of final realisation and self-actualization; she has beeninert too long. She must therefore ‘participate’.

Monisha makes a last flirting-contact with life in its entirety. To the frenzied beating of the drums, she swerves into action to perform her own private, ritualistic sacrifice. She sets herself on fire and responds to the flames that envelop her as she would to the embrace of a lover.

Monisha fails to understand that isolation can only destroy an individual. Homeless in the external world, and encumbered by her schizoid-selves, Monisha finally seeks a neurotic and violent route to final liberation and leaves all her innermost desires (as her name suggests) unfulfilled. She remains “hidden and apologetic” (VC.248) even in death.
The death of Monisha has a liberating effect on everyone close to her - Nirode, Jiban, her mother, and her sister Amla. It gives them an opportunity to introspect and finally arrive at a new awareness about life and their respective roles in it.

The effect of the death on Amla is worth noting. She is the youngest of the siblings, and arrives in Calcutta with stars in her eyes and a palette and brushes in her hands. She is all set to make a career as a commercial artist. Her sheer enthusiasm, vivacity, and exuberance come as a great relief from the acerbity of Nirode and the morbidity of Monisha.

Moreover, Amla has come to this city of her free will, to explore as well as to seek an identity. She has not escaped to it like Nirode or arrived here reluctantly like Monisha. She decides to enjoy her stay as she states optimistically, “Calcutta does not oppress me in the least.” (VC.142)

Anita Desai has portrayed Calcutta as ‘enchantress’ luring the young and the healthy, only to sap their energy, and finally consume them. Amla’s coming is therefore, inevitable and it is only her temperament - her exceptional positiveness, her drive, her ambition which will make her survive.

No sooner does she proclaim her faith in the city than she begins to perceive subtle hints about its indomitable nature. She sees its effect on Monisha. She is equally shocked to see the ‘ghost-like’ Nirode, his emaciated frame, his nicotine-stained fingers, his unkempt hair. Almost as quickly, Amla is filled with a sense of hollowness and futility, “despite all the stimulation of new experiences”. (VC.157) She exclaims: “this city of yours, it conspires against all who wish to enjoy it, doesn’t it?” (VC.157)

Amla has positive traits; she is essentially friendly and sociable. She willingly enters the whirlpool of social and official activities in order to understand the psyche of the city and its inhabitants. Yet, she is quick to detect the decadence in the city and the “rot” that has “set in” (VC.174). She even turns skeptical about her vocation. Her disenchantment begins.

There may be many reasons for this disillusionment. She has always narcissistically looked for ‘attention’. She has even received it. She is also secretly aware of the invincibility of her charm and beauty. Here, in Calcutta, she suddenly finds herself among countless faceless people. Nirode and Monisha don’t display eagerness to meet her. Her “idealized self” has been
hurt. Again the external world is totally absent of compassion, love, joy, energy all of which are so necessary for her nurturing.

“Did love exist here at all? Was it only a bitter force of extortion, like the willed mutilation of his hand by the desperate, mocking beggar?” (VC 175)

An extrovert and an optimist, she finds all those vital exigencies which are necessary for her growth missing. Like Nirode and Monisha she feels the need to withdraw. But this is more out of boredom and disappointment and not in order to disown the world.

Only on contemplation Amla realises that she has to make a positive choice. She must rid herself of her ‘narcissistic’ temperament and instead find satisfaction in ‘pure art’. Her self-affirmation and confidence help her make this choice.

Besides Amla understands that there is ‘compromise’ in life as there is ‘reciprocation’, every relationship. As she tells Monisha who is unable to accept this: “One must have someone who reciprocates who responds. One must have that reciprocation, I think” (VC.197).

Amla finds this love and reciprocation in Dharma. In his company her evolution is almost complete. Her struggle to connect, explore and find meaning comes to an end. She seeks fulfillment in Dharma’s art, his philosophy and his approach to life. They prove restorative in the disturbing and unreal universe of Nirode and Monisha. Her innermost sensibilities finally find expression and she goes through a kind of emotional and spiritual metamorphosis:

“In the hours she spent there, she became another Amla, a flowering Amla translucent with joy and overflowing with a sense of love and reward. Here she could talk... of things to which she scarcely gave a thought before, only because she knew Dharma would..., translate them into something that had both meaning and form.” (VC, 210-11).

It is. Amla's self-affirmation, her will-power, her need for progression which enable her to scrutinise her situation. She senses that life is a race in which the ‘outsider’, the ‘alienated’ one, the inconspicuous is annihilated ultimately.

Amla conforms to neither category of doomed helplessness nor to that of finding release. She remains an observer uninvolved in the ‘implosive’ world. She establishes a between Nitrode’s
reactionary outbursts and Monisha’s withdrawal. She is indeed a redeeming character in the novel. R.S. Singh has observed that Amla constitutes a bridge that connects Kalimpong to Calcutta, a bridge between “nature and civilization both of which tended to destroy human happiness and familial cohesion.”

Another factor helps Amla recover from her momentary ‘inertia’: Monisha’s suicide. It takes her away from the intangibility of her drawings and the illusory bliss of her love for Dharma, and makes her realise, the tangibility and permanence of death:

“She knew she would go through life with her feet primly shod...
Monisha had given her a glimpse of what lay on the other side of this stark uncompromising margin.” (VC.248)

Amla knows, like Nirode that Monisha had been shattered by the world’s callousness, indifference and lack of comprehension of her complex mind. Nirode too is transformed by Monisha’s death. It is ironical that it is in Monisha’s ashes that Nirode discovers the vitality and humaneness in life. He acquires a new tenderness. For the first time, Nirode expresses his desire to savour the joy received, due to sharing, sympathy, warmth, kindness and love.

In this new state, Nirode even looks forward to his mother’s arrival in Calcutta for Monisha’s funeral. So does Amla. They are too bound to their mother. Anita Desai offers an anti-stock ‘audience-response’ in introducing, the mother for the first time only at the end of the novel. All along, we get subjective, personalised opinions about her through her children. When she emerges for the first time, we are quick to comprehend the parallel between her and the city of Calcutta (with which Goddess Kali is synonymous) and also the fact that she was never absent from the novel. Omnipotent, she was always present, either in the consciousness of Nirode, Monisha, and Amla or evidently in the face of Calcutta.

The novel *Voices in the City*, has been operating with the two significant archetypes The Mother and The City. We see that the fate of her children is intrinsically linked with the mother. She has procreated, tended her offsprings, now she will embrace them in death.

“She was a woman fulfilled by the great tragedy of her daughter’s suicide - and, it was he saw, what she had always needed to fulfill her: Tragedy.” (VC.252)
The mother is also viewed by her children as some terrifying force - the final arbiter and judge. She becomes Goddess Kali - once radiating and maternal now cold and distanced, a figure of love and fear. As Nirode exclaims “she is Kali…Amla, I know her now. She is Kali, the goddess and demon are one” (VC.255).

Parallels between Mother Earth, Mother Goddess and the mother are well-documented in many myths and religious ideas. All three are known in human history as those in which opposites combine. They are ‘givers’ of life and ‘takers’ and in whom, thus promises are hollow and temporary, and ‘hope’ a mockery. Richard Cavendish points out, “The tension and the paradox, here, appear to be universal… Mankind’s worship of and reverence for the divine figure of the mother is a religious phenomenon far deeper than creeds, councils, dogmas. It refloats man’s profound need for security…reflects his own inadequacies and his own fears. In it can be seen tension between good things and evil, between the gift of life, and the fear of death personified in the goddess who creates and destroys, but who is never aloof or uninterested”. 17

For these reasons none of the children is able to erase their mother's image from their consciousness. After all, she symbolises security and shelter.Ironically it is the mother’s turn to be liberated of them, to sacrifice them. When Amla and Nirode try turning to her for solace and communion, she moves out of their orbit. They are shocked at this transmogrification. This cataclysmic change in her shatters Nirode. He knows that in seeking her he would be only seeking annihilation, because she has now emerged as the ‘destroyer’. Erich Fromm explains:

“If there is no way of being related to mother or her substitute by warm, enjoyable bonds, the relatedness to her and to the whole world must become one of final union in death.” 18

For Nirode the mother has been a symbol, a phantom rather than a real person. She has been a symbol of earth home, blood, race, nation of the deepest ground from which life emerges and to which it returns. But she has always been a symbol of chaos and destruction too:

“I see now that she is everything we have been fighting against, you and Monisha and… she is our consciousness and our unconsciousness.” (VC.256).
The fate of the other artists in the novel is similar. They are all caught in the web of the city which offers them no respite, no true love and no true freedom. But their futures seem to be inexorably bound to this city which will take them to their respective ends.

By focusing on the alienation of the characters and their inherent destructiveness Anita Desai probably wishes to convey the eternal dilemma in an artist, between aestheticism and materialism. She seems to suggest that between aesthetic and materialistic values the artist should aim at the former without totally ignoring the latter. Only Amla appears to have arrived closer to this point of realisation. The tragedy of Nirode and Monisha lies in their inability to compromise.

*Voices in the City* presents a strange and incongruous picture of a conjugal life through Nirode’s parents. It is a marriage of convenience. Nirode’s father prides himself on his family name and title, whereas his mother prides on her tea estates and a house. Both the partners in *Voices in the City* are capable of soul-destroying hatred and terrific fury towards each other. In Maya's case, the neurosis is uncontrolled and involuntary, with Nirode’s father; it is a process of deliberate physical and spiritual destruction. The marital disharmony transforms Nirode’s parents into mental monsters. The father turns into a drunkard, debased and dishonourable creature absolutely different from an easy-going, sports-loving and fond father. The mother is transformed from a sweet, sensitive, accomplished beauty into a coldly, practical and possessive woman having no human warmth and tenderness even for her own children. Amla’s observations about her parents’ disharmonious conjugal relationship are explicit. She tells Dharma, “I saw such terrible contempt and resentment in her eyes … when he came to Kalimpong … he never followed her. He used to lie back against his cushions, idle and contented—contented I think, in his malice.” (VC.207)

Monisha and Jiban have married having nothing in common in each other’s personality. It is the most pathetic illustration of maladjustment in marriage. Amla puts it very poignantly when she asks, “Aunt, why did they marry?” (198) This example presents an intense involvement and soul-crushing apathy. Monisha’s tortuous journey towards her horrible death presents her spiritual and physical transformation in black, mourning colours. Monisha is transformed from a quiet, sensitive, mild, self-centred, beautiful girl into a barren, neurotic, diary-writing woman “Her head . . . was like that of a stuffed rag doll with a very white face nodding insecurely on its neck its eyebrows and mouth painted unnaturally dark.”(160)
The questions that arise in our minds are: Does maladjustment in marriage mean such a great menace that everything is powerless before it? Does it then drive back all effort: to lead a free life and bring out the hidden quick-silver of oppression of human rights? When two souls come together through their marriage some sort of difference is bound to be there. But the marriages settled blindly and without considering the attitudes, feelings and outlooks of the brides and bridegrooms are bound to fail. Proper understanding of each other a sense of wisdom and love for each other can make their conjugal lives successful. But Indian male-dominated families expect women to adjust. Adverse attitudes of the family members, hostile social traditions and backgrounds make these maladjustments a great menace. Anita Desai has presented marital disharmonies as they exist in Indian male-dominated families. Aunt Leila hates men particularly her fat and self satisfied, long dead husband. Her daughter Rita has lived through a spectacularly short lived marriage. Sonny’s two sisters Lila and Rina present pathetic spectacles: “Lila had married for a title and lived now in squalid penury, in a crumbling house in which she took in paying guests who drank or wrote her insulting letters.” (84).

Monisha’s predicament in *Voices in the City* is similar to that of Maya. While Maya is obsessed with fear, Monisha is oppressed by a sense of suffocation. Her married life began with the reception arranged by the heads of the many-headed family where “feet before faces” was the manner of her initiation into the family used to the open and pure atmosphere of the mountains where she has lived all along; she found the very house to be intimidating to her. She longed to thrust her; head out of the window but the bars were too closely set. Besides, what was there to see but other walls and other bars? In the privacy of her room she was oppressed by a terrifying sound that repeated itself like the motif of a nightmare from which there seemed no escape. She was also oppressed by the “damp pressure of critical attention”. Sisters-in-law across her bed discussing her ovaries and tubes. The lack of privacy upset her. Alone she would have felt more “involved” but she never was left alone to read as she very much wanted to.

She was troubled at the pettiness of life she lived in that house, performing her duties “of serving fresh chapattis to uncles,” of listening to her mother-in-law as she told her the ways of cooking fish and of being Jiban's wife. If only she had religious faith! But she had no religious faith, no alternative to her confused despair, nothing she could give herself to. There seemed no escape for her, so she thought that she must accept insignificance, suppressing all memories, all longings, making herself into a sleepwalker which gave her an eerie unreality. But she did not
like it. As she said, “I am reduced to a woman who writes diary. ... I don't like a woman who writes diary”

Monisha's mean existence leads her to think that death is the only alternative to her agonised living, to her “confused despair”: “The family here, and their surroundings tell me such a life cannot be lived—a life dedicated to nothing—that this husk is a protection from death. Ah, yes, then it is a choice between death and mean existence, and that surely is not a difficult choice.” (122)

Monisha undergoes physical, moral and spiritual miseries in her in-laws’s house. Her in-laws talk about her impossible family, about her organs, the reasons she cannot have a child. She is accused of theft, of taking money out of her husband’s pocket. She thinks it would be better for her to live in solitude “a little beyond and below everyone else in exile”. Monisha reflects on the utter lack of conscience in the city of Calcutta: “Has this city a conscience at all, this Calcutta that holds its head between its knees and grins toothlessly up at me from beneath a bottom black with the dirt that it sits on.” (116)

The people of Calcutta represented by Monisha's in-laws are as cruel and rapacious as the city where there is no ethics except greed for money and fattening of human bodies: “Here they dwell, in these houses of cut-throats, eye for eye rapacity, of money greed and money ruthlessness to bless those who faten upon it, to bless them and not to forgive.” (VC 117)

There is torture outside and also inside the family. Jiban’s mother sniffs when she hears Monisha singing to Kalayani di’s baby in its cradle. Kalayani di thinks her “dangerous” and an “infidel” because she always remains silent; “they all distrust silence.” Like the crowd in the city of Calcutta, Monisha finds Jiban’s house crowded with people; family members, guests and relatives.

Monisha is offered a ticket for a music concert given by their South Indian neighbour to her senior aunts. Since no one has interest in music, the ticket is given to Monisha and the old poor relation on the roof-top is asked to escort her. The family members regard music as dangerous. Monisha thinks perhaps they are right. Music is very dangerous as it brings her “to the edge” and she is plunged down into something “too intense to be borne.”
The music players at the concert play different instruments and about everything; it seems to Monisha that there is nothing left unsaid: “There seems nothing left to say—not for human beings, city beings, body beings such as these, such as myself.” (125)

Monisha gets confused. Life seems to her “only a conundrum” which is to “brood over forever with” passion and pain and never to arrive at a solution.

Monisha receives a letter from her younger sister Amla informing her about Amla's coming to Calcutta. While thinking about Amla, who has a career and talents, she feels Amla growing larger and larger than herself. She feels herself growing smaller every day, “shrink and lose” more of her weight. She feels that her very existence is gradually becoming infusible and that it would reach the point of extinction one day: “I grow smaller every day, shrink and lose more and more of my weight, my appurtenances, and the symbols of my existence that used to establish me in the eyes of this world. I am already too small to be regarded much by anyone. I will be invisible yet.”(139)

Monisha alone in the family remains untouched by the world outside. She considers her life to be a waste; a life that is locked in a steel container. Like Maya, she has not given birth to a child. She has also not attended death. She runs through the door of the room inside its “barred enclosure.” A desire to be extinct envelops her. She wants to experience “feelings” and “desire” through fire; “to her astonishment the very first match struck fire” and the colour of the flame is golden and straight as a “promise kept.” Her kerosene-soaked saree and blouse responds to the flame “with a leap of recognition; two elements had met, and in their embrace she was caught.” (242) Monisha dies a cloistered death like her own cloistered life, “no ashes of that fire drifted over the city, no wind carried the smoke to inform others of the cloistered tragedy.” (242-43)

While Monisha finds escape from her mean existence by accepting death, Nirode remains a defeatist all through his life. He is frustrated, depressed and highly independent minded, who thinks it is impossible on his part to work under any men. He changes from one profession to another and does not find satisfaction in any job. After his repeated failures, he becomes obsessed with the idea of failure: “I want to move from failure to failure, step by step to rock bottom.” (40)
Because of his deep sense of failure and frustration, he wants to see beyond happiness and
suffering: “Happiness, suffering—I want to be done with them, disregard them, see beyond
them to the very end.” (40)

Nirode feels the sense of defeat and failure run in his blood. It is congenital, “I was born with
my heart emptied out,” says Nirode in utter disappointment. He is a shadowy cipher whose life
consists of “one’s dejection following another.” He is full of contempt and loathing for the
world “that could offer him no crusade, no pilgrimage.” He is also full of loathing for himself
for not having “the true, unwavering spirit of either within him.” His own existence is hollowed
out by an intrinsic knowledge that there is nothing to wait for but still there is no end to his
waiting.

Monisha, Nirode and Amla have a sort of “terrible destructiveness” in them. It forms an integral
part of their very personalities. They are basically pessimistic in their approach and attitude to
life. Jit reveals this trait in his conversation with Amla: “I don’t understand it— this terrible
destructiveness in all of you. You seem to worship it, shelter it inside yourself as though it were
essential to you. Nothing will persuade you to forego it—not you, not your brother nor that
strange sister of yours.”(175) Amla suspects that Jit finds them to be masochists. Jit observes that
they have a “dreadful attractiveness” in their dark ways of thinking: “You destroy—you destroy
yourselves and you destroy that part of others that gets so fatally involved in you. There is this—
this dreadful attractiveness in your dark ways of thinking and feeling through life towards
death.” (175)

Jit finds Amla, Nirode and Monisha drive themselves deliberately towards the “dead end”
where they think they will find “some divine solution”. But they do not know that in death there
is no solution as Jit has discovered in his own life: “but there is none, not in a life time all of us
discover that and we force ourselves to turn and take another road.”(176)

Monisha's death, Amla believes, has pointed the way for her and “would never allow her to lose
herself.” She is now prepared to accept the challenges of life, to go through life with her feet
“primly shod,” because Monisha has shown her a glimpse of what lies on the other side of the
“stark, uncompromising margin.” (248)

Nirode has been led into a greater realization of life by Monisha’s death. He wants to reassure
Amla and aunt that Monisha died from an “excess of caring” in a fire of care and conscience and
that “they too must accept, with a like intensity.” They should try to seize “each moment, each person, each fragment of the world, and reverence it with that acute care that had driven Monisha to her splendid death.” (248)

Amla is very different from Monisha and Nirode. She finds their silence and withdrawal mystifying, but she finds a sense of hollowness and futility. Her dream of love and involvement with Dharma is broken when she comes to know that he is a married man and has disowned his daughter. She bids farewell to his love which had begun to overpower her. Thus, she moves from revolt to conformity, to sense the atmosphere of desolation. Temperamentally, like Nirode and Monisha, she comes through love to surrender.

Arun's marriage to a British nurse in England, Monisha's suicide and Nirode's relentless efforts to obliterate self-identity make Amla apathetic and alienated from her mother. Through these three characters, Anita Desai succeeds in her portrayal of not only the individual human relationship against the backdrop of a cosmopolitan consciousness of a big city in India, but also the growth of individual consciousness from a cynical sense of loss of identity to the mystical realization of the meaning of existence.

Monisha’s death brings about a drastic change in Nirode. A searing realization dawns upon him. He comes to the conclusion that wisdom lies not in avoiding the expense but in making the journey worth the expense. Having realized this, he takes matters into his hands and begins to identify with the sufferings of others. When Monisha was alive, he watched her suffering with indifference but when she died, he insisted on taking her away, so that she could have before total annihilation a little respite of peace and solitude: “At that moment Nirode's silence broke and fell away. In a brief flash of comprehension, he realized what he must do. He must take Monisha away.” (246)

At intervals Nirode said, “Go to sleep, Amla, go to sleep. I will stay,” and to his aunt he would say, “Go to bed, aunt, you must, have some rest.” (248) He could never remain silent and callous. Filled with an immense care of the world, he reached out reiteratively, to touch Amla’s hand: “He pressed them to him with hunger and joy, as if he rejoiced in this sensation of touching other flesh, other’s pains, longed to make them mingle with his own, which till now had been agonizingly neglected.” (248)
Nirode is all agog to end his long estrangement with the mother—who stands alone and free, unmoved by the tragedy that has shattered the lives of her children. He reacts violently to her mother's sheer disinterest, her cool dispassionate movement and above all, her lack of emotion. He asserts that she is a woman satiated by tragedy. Hence, he identifies her with Kali—symbolic of both life and death of Nirode as well as Monisha—an identification which points to the stoic forbearance of the mother.

Monisha, too, like Nirode is trapped in the disgusting and cacophonous welter of voices in the monstrous city-. She too, longs for release. Her relationship with her husband is marked by loneliness, silence and discontent. Confused and dazed despair of a shallow and hollow life of trivialities and mean existence haunts her. Always “eager to get away and be alone,” (120) she falls a prey to claustrophobic and catastrophic sensations which precipitate her final and fatal identification with death. Between mean existence and death, she identifies herself with the latter, for it is death which delivers her from the ferocious assaults of existence.

A disgruntled and a rebellious self, Amla passes through variegated psychic situations till she establishes a contact with her real self and attains equipoise. Amla’s movement from revolt to conformity ends in surrender and resignation. To her, art becomes an exploration and a discovery of one’s identity, hence her emotional attachment to Dharma. Her inner emptiness and her disgust for the ugly and conspiring metropolis find its aesthetic identification in the paintings of Dharma. Isolated from the relentless pressure of the world around her, she struggles to connect herself with nature in order to feel whole and complete. Her attachment to Dharma gives a new meaning to her lonely life. In Dharma’s painting, she reckons her self-identity.

In *Voices in the City* (1965) the tension between attachment and detachment takes the shape of a conflict between idealism—an aspect of illusion—and reality, and concerns itself with the problems of communication, of disenchantment, of maturity and immaturity. The resolution of this tension leads to a positive affirmation by the protagonists of those very aspects of life that had been rejected earlier as being worthless and meaningless. In *Voices in the City* the tension between attachment and detachment takes the shape of a conflict between idealism—an aspect of illusion—and reality, and concerns itself with the problems of communication, of disenchantment, of maturity and immaturity. The resolution of this tension leads to a positive
affirmation by the protagonists of those very aspects of life that had been rejected earlier as being worthless and meaningless.

As opposed to Nirode’s intellectually-oriented detachment, Monisha’s detachment is instinctive, as the least demanding option in a world filled with dissatisfying and unfulfilling activities. Acutely dissatisfied in her personal relationships— with Jiban, with whom there is no love, only “loneliness and a desperate urge to succeed” (133); with her mother, who is self-sufficient according to Monisha's perception and requires no love, only “duty, honour and concern”(135); and even with her sister Amla, with whom there is not much sisterly attachment—she only admires and identifies with Nirode because of a similar temperaments and desires. Like her brother, whom she ironically endows with knowledge and wisdom, with decisiveness and intellectual choice, with ‘force of will’, she too seeks the meaning of life. But by choosing detachment as the path to this end, she too limits her experience, and withdraws from the pulsating reality of life, vividly and evocatively depicted by the author in the city of Calcutta.

3. Fire on the Mountain (1977)

*Fire on the Mountain,* published twelve years after *Voices in the City,* reveals greater control over style and matter. It is the most successful of her novels, stylistically. There is greater sensitivity and restraint in the portrayal of a theme that is common to all four of her novels. Nanda Kaul like her predecessors had done with relationships:

“She saw the postman slowly winding his way along the Upper Mall. She had not gone out to watch for him, did not want him to stop at Carignano, and had no wish for letters. . . . She asked to be left to the pines and cicadas alone.”[19] (FM1) This complete self-content, desirelessness, this seeming state of nirvana is, however, quite deceptive.

The house, Carignano, seems to Nanda Kaul so exactly right for her. What pleases and satisfies her at Carignano is its barrenness, its starkness. This clear, unobstructed mass of light and air defines her freedom. This history of Carignano, however, is quite depressing. Built in 1843 by a Colonel Macdougall for his wife and children, Carignano—so christened by its maker—was a deserted place after the entire Macdougall family found its way to the nearby cemetery in Sabathu. And after a succession of three occupants, all English, Kasauli went native in 1947. If was then that Nanda Kaul bought Carignano. It was a house that “satisfied her heart completely,”
a place where she finally belonged. This projection of herself onto the house enables her to relate more easily with the external landscape.

The novel is fascinating with these details of life and action around her. Thus, while caught in the process of waiting for the postman, Nanda Kaul notices Ram Lal (the Carignano cook) approaching the house slowly, “staring at his tennis shoes which were a size too large for him and sank into the white dust, marking a chain of craters for idle dogs to investigate,” (FM 10) or later “putting the letter down on her lap and gazing instead at the ripening apricots and the pair of bul-buls that quarrelled over them till they fell in a flurry of feathers to the ground, stirred up a small frenzy of dust, then shot off in opposite directions., scolding and abusing till a twist of worm distracted them.” (FM 13)

Anita Desai’s *Fire on the Mountain* brings out the problems of marital disharmony as a basic ingredient for disintegrating family life. Nanda Kaul rejoices at least at the beginning of her secluded, loveless, and attachment less life. She has accepted this after undergoing consistent mental Torturing and bitter experiences of a married life. She has a strong reason for her determination. The lifelong faithlessness of Mr. Kaul to Nanda Kaul and the hypocritical situation force her to accept this seclusion. This marriage was purely based on physical lust and circumstantial convenience for the man.

Anita Desai is a highly sensitive interpreter of the maladies of lonely individuals, women in particular. *Fire on the Mountain*, the Sahitya Akademi Award winner is the novel that gave her something closest to satisfaction' and in which she came closest to what she set out to do. Thematically the novel is an extension of Desai’s conviction that everyone in this world is solitary and that involvement in human relationships invariably leads to disaster. Its consciousness lies in the haunted house Carignano and contrast recluses Nanda and Raka.

The novel introduces us to Nanda Kaul, a lonesome figure in Kasauli Hills. Far from the humdrum affairs of her large family she is living in Carignano, an old bungalow. She is the widow of the Vice-Chancellor of Punjab University. The negligence of her offspring’s and her own preference for a calm and unclumsy life has brought her hitherto. All through her life she has been a non-entity, a rejected-dejected sort of person. She has received emotional setbacks from her unfaithful husband and also from her son-in-law- who tipped thrashed her daughter Asha.
So deep is the scar left on Nanda Kaul by her husband’s neglect of her and his affair with Miss David that even on her death-bed she is reminded of how her husband had only done enough to keep her quiet while he carried on a life-long affair with Miss David, whom he had loved all his life? She does not forget till the last moment of her life that her children were all alien to her and naturally she neither understood nor loved them. It is her cramping sense of loneliness even in the midst of a large family that compels her to retire to Carignano:

“She did not live here alone by choice—she lived here alone because that was what she was forced to do, reduced to nothing.” (FM 15)

Anita Desai is a highly sensitive interpreter of the maladies of lonely individuals, women in particular. *Fire on the Mountain* is the novel that gave her 'something closest to satisfaction and in which she came closest to what she set out to do. Thematically the novel is an extension of Desai's conviction that everyone in this world is solitary and that involvement in human relationships invariably leads to disaster. Its consciousness lies in the haunted house Carignano and contrast recluses Nanda and Raka.

Nanda Kaul is a typical Desaian figure: frustrated, forlorn and forsaken. The only difference in her case in the age much unlike her other counterparts-Maya (*Cry the Peacock*), Monisha (*Voices in the city,* etc)-Nanda is of riper years and has an extended family. On this verge of life, she is craving most for an impregnable isolation and is intolerant of any sort of social intercourse and relationship. She is averse to the idea of familial bondage to the extent that the mere glimpse of a bright hoopoe feeding her nestlings flings sorrows on her: “It was a sight that did not fill her with delight. Their screams were shrill and could madden.” (FM 4) “What pleases and satisfies her is the barrenness of Carignano, and pines and cicadas and she wants "no one and nothing else." (FM 3)

How long could one live by these fantasies and avoid the reality? The reality about her father and husband was quite different. Her husband had never loved or cherished her. He had carried on a lifelong affair with Miss David the mathematics teacher whom he had not married because she was a Christian but whom he had loved all his life. She was brought face to face with this reality when she was informed of her friend Ila Das’s rape and brutal murder. The fire on the mountain had destroyed everything for her. Thus we find that just as Maya’s anguish, or
Monisha’s forced detachment, in the same way Nanda Kaul’s spite or pretending did not help either.

Anita Desai’s Nanda Kaul having finally discharged all her responsibilities to her unloving husband and his world where life went swirling in an eddy, a whirlpool of which she was the still fixed eye in the centre. That life had not pleased her. Its crowding had stifled and shortage of privacy vexed her. This is better reflected in the following paragraph:

“She decided that she had at last earned the right to reject everyone and lead her life alone all by herself away from the "world of postmen and bags and letters, messages and demands, requests, promises and queried. She wanted to be done with them all . . . she wanted no one and nothing else. Whatever came and happened here, would be an unwelcome intrusion and distraction. . . . She fancied she could merge with the pine trees and be mistaken for one. To be a tree no more no less, a charred tree trunk which could harbour no irritation or annoyance . . . what pleased and satisfied her so at Carignano was its bareness. It was the place and time of the life that she had warped and prepared for all her life.”

The letter announces the arrival of Raka, her great-granddaughter. Nanda Kaul is distracted, unable to concentrate on the soothing scene of Kasauli:

“All she wanted was to be alone, to have Carignano to herself, in this period of her life when stillness and calm were all that she wished to entertain.” (FM 17)

Nanda Kaul’s desire for solitude, her absorption with herself in Carignano reflect on her past years which were not

“bare and shining as the plains below, but like the gorge, cluttered, choked and blackened with the heads of children and grandchildren, servants and .guests, all restlessly surging, clamouring about her.” (FM 17)
The wife of a Vice-Chancellor in the small university town in Punjab, she had managed the household affairs for her husband with great skill, like an empress, or so the cringing people around her said. But that house was never hers; it shared none of her characteristics with all its “dark furniture, all rosewood.” Her husband, Mr. Kaul, emerges as another of those efficient, successful, indifferent men. We do not even hear his name. The amount Nanda Kaul, we are told, has jettisoned from her life might have taken another’s breath away. Her children are distant, and then they do not relate to her. Tara’s letter indicates her motives for writing—Raka must be provided for, and Nanda Kaul has been an excellent provider in the past. She is caught in her own actions in the past, but now unable to accept it or transcend it:

“Now to converse again when it was silence she wished, to question and follow up and make sure of another’s life and comfort and order, to involve oneself, to involve another.” (FM 19)

All these activities need enterprise and the giving of oneself. It seemed hard on her now to re-enter such course. She had resigned from the business of living, of relating. Tired of all these relationships “Nanda Kaul lay on her bed, absolutely still. . . . She would imitate death, like a lizard.” (FM 23) The hopelessness of her wish is hinted in the fact that the parrots dare to arouse her. Nanda Kaul who instinctively held forth compassion for others needed to make a determined effort not to respond, to retain herself to herself. This was an art she had practised for years, but it was finally mastered at Carignano: “The care of others was a habit Nanda Kaul had mislaid. It had been a religious calling she had believed in till she found it fake. It had been a vocation that one day went dull and drought-struck as though its life-spring had dried up,” (FM 30). On her arrival at Carignano, she had drifted about the garden without asserting herself, her will. It is perfectly in place that she should be reading from The Pillow Book of Set Shonagon— “A Woman Lives Alone.” (FM 27)

She was full of resentment when she was asked to keep with, her, her great granddaughter Raka who was recovering from a near fatal attack of typhoid. “Can’t I be left with nothing?” was what she complained. She dreaded the prospect of Raka coming to stay with her because it meant “to question, to follow up and make sure of another’s life and comfort, an order, to involve oneself, to involve another.” It was hard and unfair, for all she wanted was silence!
Well, she had to accede to the request of her daughter. Raka arrived one day and when it was not possible to postpone the meeting any longer both moved a step closer to each other and embraced because they felt they must. There was a sound of bones colliding. Each felt how bony, angular and unaccommodating the other was and they quickly separated. Raka saw her great-grandmother as another pine tree in the garden of Carignano and Nanda Kaul regarded her as an intruder and outsider; each did her best to avoid the other.

From psychological point of view, Raka is an interesting creation. The first we hear of her is in Asha’s letter described in it as “one who looks like a ghost and hasn’t quite got over her typhoid yet.” (FM 15) As she enters the compound of Carignano, she appears to Nanda Kaul

“like one of those dark crickets that leap up in fright but do not sing, or a mosquito, minute and fine, on thin, precarious legs.”(FM.39)

Raka’s arrival, to Nanda Kaul, is an unwelcome intrusion. She was simply “an intruder, an outsider, a mosquito flown up from the plains to tease and worry.” (FM 40)

Raka, however, is no botheration to her great-grandmother. Drawn towards “the beauties and delights of the Himalayan hill-station,” she begins to listen “to the wind in the pines and the cicadas all shrilling incessantly in the sun with her unfortunately large and protruding ears, and thought she had never before heard the voice of silence.”

“Lizard-like, she clung to the rail” of the kitchen window, enjoying the beauty of “the serene, silent hillsides.” (FM.42, 57) “Secrecy” was the “essence” of her life, punctuated by “the jealous, guarded instincts of an explorer, a discoverer.” (FM 61) As a result, “she knew a Kasauli that neither summer visitors nor upright citizens of the town ever knew.” (p.63) Raka, being a child of solitude, heard only one voice and that was “the crepitation of silence.” (FM 75)

She and Carignano seem to have been made for each other:

“She had not come to Carignano to enslave herself again. She had come to Carignano to be alone. Stubbornly alone. She had not been asked to Carignano. Yet here she was, fitted in quietly and
unobtrusively as an uninvolved mouse or cricket. . . . Certainly it
belonged to no one else, had no meaning for anyone else. Raka alone
understood Carignano, knew what Carignano stood for—she alone
valued that.” (FM.80)

The novelist has ably delineated the initial hostility, nonchalance and rapport of Nanda Kaul and Raka. To her utter surprise, the former discovers that Raka is quite unlike other children.

Despite her loneliness she is getting on well till the interception of fate. She receives a letter from her daughter Asha. The letter is about the proposed visit of Raka, Nanda’s great-grand daughter. Due to some matrimonial incongeniality, Tara, the mother of Raka, had hardships to keep her with herself. And also, because of her ill-health, Raka was in need of a recuperative resort in hills. Asha, (Raka’s grandma) had an assumption that the company of Raka would fill up the vacuity in Nanda's house with gaiety and jubilation:

“And I know how happy it will make you to have your great-grandchild for company in that lonely house” (FM 16)

It is this excited plan of Asha that sets the events rolling.

Raka comes, and along with her numerous cares too come unawares, to Carignano. Quite unlike her name, Raka is not like full moon, round-faced, calm or radiant. Instead, she is “like one of those dark crickets that leap up in fright but do not sing, or a mosquito, minute and fine, on thin, precarious legs.”(FM 39) Nanda Kaul displays a blatant lack of warmth for her. Raka senses it. Both of them move “a step closer to each other and embraced because they felt they must. There was a sound of bones colliding. Each felt how bony, angular and unaccomodating the other was and they quickly separated.” (FM 40) To Nanda Kaul she is still “an intruder, an outsider, a mosquito flown up from the plains to tease and worry”. (FM 40) Her coming to Carignano dishevels the silence and stillness of Nanda obtained through lifetime exercise of avoidance and self-control.

Raka, unlike other children of her age, “preferred to stand apart and go off and disappear to being loved, cared for and made the centre of attention.” She ignored Nanda Kaul so calmly, so totally that it made her breathless. Her rejection was natural, instinctive and effortless as
compared with her own planned and wilful rejection of the child. “Raka seemed to enjoy and prefer the servant Ram Lal's company to that of her grandmother.”

Despite all her cautiousness to be drawn into the child’s real or imaginary world, she soon discovers that “the child had a gift for disappearing—suddenly, silently. She would be gone, totally, not to return for hours.” (FM 45) Nanda Kaul feels the child's absences, as well as presences perturbing and irksome. What disturbs her most is the unconcernedness in Raka's behaviour:

“She had to admit that Raka was not like any other child she had known, not like any of her own children or grandchildren. Amongst them, she appeared a freak by virtue of never making a demand. She appeared to have no needs.” (FM 47)

“She was the only child Nanda Kaul had ever known who preferred to stand apart and go off and disappears to being loved, cared for and made the centre of attention. The children Nanda Kaul had known had wanted only to be such centres: Raka alone did not.” (FM 79-80)

Raka prefers aloneness and is bitterly disdainful of any sort of censoriousness. She is opposed to all discipline, order and obedience and has the gift of avoiding what she regards as dispensable. She has her distinctly secret life. She ignores whatever she feels ignorable—doesn’t matter if it is a person like Nanda Kaul or Ila Das. Also, she is very selective about her listening.

As mentioned earlier, the novel is a tale of two contrast recluses: Nanda and Raka. The author herself has made this point clear: “If Nanda Kaul was a recluse out of vengeance for a long life of duty and obligation, her great-granddaughter was a recluse by nature, by instinct. She had not arrived at this condition by a long route of rejection and sacrifice—she was born to it simply.”(FM 48)

Raka constitutes the core charm of the novel. In the whole range of Desai’s fiction, there is none else like her. An intimate observation of her activities in the novel reveals mysterious dimensions of her personality. If Carignano is an abode of solitaries, the most fitting one
amongst them all is Raka. Until her arrival Carignano had been having the creditable status of discarding its inhabitants. It is Raka, who, for the first ever time in its history, totally discards it:

“Carignano had much to offer—yes, she admitted that readily, nodding her head like a berry—it was the best of places she’d lived in ever. Yet it had in its orderly austerity something she found confining, restricting. It was as dry and clean as a nut but she burst from its shell like an impatient kernel, small and explosive.” (FM 91)

Instead of Carignano she is drawn towards a burnt house on the top of another knoll:

“This hill, with its one destroyed house and one unbuilt one, on the ridge under the fire-singed pines, appealed to Raka with the strength of a strong sea current—pulling, dragging. There was something about it—illegitimate, uncompromising and lawless—that made her tingle.”(FM 90)

Raka dislikes being in Carignano. In fact, “Raka no more needed, or wanted, a house than a jackal did, or a cicada. She was a wild creature—wild, wild, wild...” (FM 103) Carignano fails to tame her, besiege her like couples of its previous inhabitants.

One more thing, quite distinct in her person is her capacity for finding fitting companions. Whereas Nanda Kaul is totally withdrawn from the world of “bags and letters, messages and demands, requests, promises and queries” (FM 3), and Ila Das looks like “last little broken bit of a crazy life, fluttering up over the gravel like a bit of crumpled paper” (FM 112), Raka hardly ever seems to sunken and desolate. She faces every event in her life with fortitude and forbearance. At Carignano, she befriends RamLal and listens to him with eagerness. Curiosity is the prominent feature in her person. Though a traumatic child, she is not altogether devoid of childlike awe, innocence and inquisitiveness. Like every child she is an Alice in her own wonderland—what though in her wonderland she

“sniffed the air and smelt cinders, smelt serum boiling, smelt chloroform and spirit, smelt the smell of dogs, brains boiled in vats, of guinea pigs’ guts’ of rabbits secreting fear in cages packed with coiled snakes, watched by doctors white”(FM 49).
Nanda Kaul’s frustration becomes very keen when her great granddaughter Raka does not show much interest in her. This young girl has never known what happiness is. Her mother’s ill-health and the father’s habit of excessive drinking have made her so bitter and soured that she has lost faith in all human relations. Deeply outraged by human relations, Raka turns to Nature; but what attract her to Nature is not its beauty or loveliness but dullness and desolation:

“It was the ravage, destroyed and barren spaces in Kasauli that drew her: the ravine where yellow snakes slept under grey rocks and agavas growing out of the dust and rubble, the skeletal pines that rattled in the wind, the wind-levelled hill-tops and the seared remains of the safe, cosy, civilized world in which Raka had no part and to which she owned no attachment.”(FM 50)

Though Raka is a small child, yet she has developed extraordinary love for solitude:

Raka wanted only one thing— to be alone and pursue her own secret life amongst the rocks and pines of Kasauli.

She realizes to the marrow of her bones that in the cosy, civilized world she has no part and consequently she has no attachment for it. She does not like even the company of other children. In Carignano she hears only one voice and that is the crepitation of silence:

She and Carignano seem to have been made for other: “Certainly it belonged to no one else, alone understood Carignano, knew what Carignano stood for—she alone valued that.”(FM 55)

Raka not only hated the society of human beings but avoided light and wanted to be lost in darkness. It was effort to make herself invisible, and this particular aspect her personality has been described by the novelist in words:

“How much friendlier she found darkness. She slid past the lighted windows into a tunnel of dark between the club wall and the hillside. Ferns brushed against her. A clutter hoes, spades and gardeners be tripped her. Then she was at the corner and saw she would have to cross the garden if she were to the ballroom at the other end of the
building, minute she contemplated retreat, then remembered what Ram Lal had told her about dress balls, how ladies dressed as queens and as princes, and drank sparkling spirit that made sing. So she made a quick convulsive dash, lowering her head and refusing to see people coming going, always in groups and clusters, all laughing and no one looked at her, it was as if the lumpy grey sweater she had pulled over her head had made invisible.” (FM 58)

A few critics have made a psychological analyse: Nanda Kaul’ personality Usha Bande has made the synoptic survey of Nanda Kaul’s life in the following manner: “All her life, Nanda lives in pretences. They are, by far, too many-she is the mistress of a happy family, she is always in the hub a busy social whirl, and she is the queen of the Vice-Chancellor’s house. These pretexts continue and stretch into her old lives in make-believe world to compensate for the reality.” In this context, it is relevant to quote the remarks of Shyam Asnani which bring out the typical predicament of a betrayed woman.

“The aged Nanda Kaul lives in a descrepit summer villa in the foothills of the Himalayas, retreated to her small house called Carignano after the death of her husband, a university vice-chancellor. One an important figure in society as well as in her vast family, Nanda Kaul is one of those intelligent, unsentimental Indian women with a built-in-streak of sardonic feminism who do not love their matriarchal role. Whereas she had previously tended to her children with pleasure and pride, entertained her husband's colleagues and students, looking sharply to see if the dark furniture, all rosewood, had been polished and the doors of the gigantic cupboards properly shut, she now has a different attitude toward her personal environment.”

Raka represents those numberless children who undergo relentless suffering for no faults of their own and are rendered mute, morose, and maladroit by the callous and self-indulgent parents. Through her, the novelist has slapped on the face of that civilized lot of humanity
where personal gratifications are given top priority and family and social responsibilities are kicked aside.

That was the second time that Nanda Kaul had to face rejection—first at the hands of her husband and then at the hands of her great granddaughter whom she herself had wanted to ignore and reject. Not only did this pain her, but also goaded her on to accept, it as a challenge. To plan to reject others out of spite is one thing, to face rejection at other’s hand is another? So she set about to captivate Raka’s attention and interest in herself by fabricating for her stories which she knew would interest the girl. She gave the girl “a slide-show, coloured and erratic” making out her father to be a discoverer and an explorer who explored Tibet and surrounding mountains, brought curious presents for his family staying at Kashmir and possessed, in his house, a private zoo of his own; making her husband out as a person who treated his wife like a queen. As it turned out “these graces and glories” with which she adorned her past were tranquillizers which helped her to sleep at night.

Ila Das is another important pathetic figure in the novel. Her arrival to and departure from Carignano cast a cursed gloom on the bungalow. It is she who drags Nanda Kaul into her past and in future becomes the cause of her death. Jasbir Jain writes in this regard as under:

“Nanda Kaul uses her memories to distance the past, while Ila Das welcomes her nostalgic memories for it is a little bit of the past come alive. They both view the past from entirely different points of view: Nanda Kaul resents the claims it had made on her, the curbs it had placed on her freedom, and the deceptions it had held, while Ila Das romanticizes it with her memories of the badminton game, the music and the jam, it is piece of heaven the memory of which renders her present tolerable.”

Ila Das’s arrival is the second shock to Nanda Kaul’s illusory world as it again reminds her of the stark realities which cannot be evaded by coming over to Kasauli. The visit of Ila Das reminds Nanda of her past, her school days. She opens the “unwilling gate” and invites Ila to enter:

Here she came, Ila Das, still little Ila Das, with what remained of the pig tail wound on top of her head like a tea-cosy, an egg-cosy, yellowed rather than whitened by age, and Nanda Kaul looked
down from her height having invited her to tea, having failed to put her away out of sight and mind. Here she was, that last little broken bit of a crazy life, fluttering up over the gravel like a bit of crumpled paper. (FM 112)

With the rape and murder of Ila Das, the illusory world of Nanda gets shattered to pieces and the fire that Raka sets suggests its ultimate consumption. The “fire” may be taken as the fire of love that Raka generates in the heart of Nanda Kaul. It may also be taken as the symbol of pyre—the funeral fire, and ultimate consumption of the fictive world of Nanda Kaul.

Ila Das is a spinster. Physically, she is repulsive—“a child-sized and time-shrivelled creature” (FM 137). She is the perpetrator of unholy sounds and her laughter rings “like a fire engine’s fatal bell.” (FM 113) She and Nanda Kaul are friends since childhood. They have played together children’s games like Oranges and Lemons and cooking doll’s meals under the golmohur trees, with scarlet blossoms and yellow pods for food. Nanda Kaul has always assisted Ila Das in her need. It was at Nanda Kaul’s recommendation to her Vice-Chancellor husband, that Ila Das got appointed in Home Science College as a lecturer. Later on she had to resign from this post as she couldn’t adjust with the humiliating ways of the new Vice-Chancellor. This post-resignation phase brought much unsettlement in her personal life. For a while she worked as a social worker in the Himalayan foothills amongst the peasants, wood cutters, road labour and gotheards. But her missionary zeal for eradicating some glaring flaws in the milieu only earned her frowns and furore of certain miscreants. One of them is a neem-hakeem priest who is responsible for untimely death and blindness of the poor superstitious folks. The other one is Preet Singh, who has a seven year daughter and has plans to marry her to an old widower having six children. Ila Das is against all this nonsense. Preet Singh, we see in the last pages of the novel, takes heinous revenge on Ila Das. He brutally rapes and strangulates her:

“quickly he left the ends of the scarf, tore at her clothes, tore them off her, in long, screeching rips, till he came to her, to the dry, shrivelled, starved stick inside the wrappings, and raped her, pinned her down into the dust and the goat raped, broken, still and finished” (FM 143).

The news of this gruesome act shatters Nanda completely. It is unbelievably shocking. It leaves her disillusioned than ever. It ruins her fabricated self-image kept intact so far, against all odds and ebttides of life. The agony can well be sensed in these lines:
“No, no, it is a lie! No, it cannot be. It was a lie-Ila was not raped, not dead. It was all a lie, all. She had lied to Raka, lied about everything. Her father had never been to Tibet-he had bought the little Buddha from a travelling pedlar. They had not had bears and leopards in their home, nothing but overfed dogs and bad-tempered parrots. Nor had her husband loved and cherished her and kept her like a queen-he had only done enough to keep her quiet while he carried on a lifelong affair with Miss David, the mathematics mistress, whom he had not married because she was a Christian but whom he had loved, all his life loved. And her children—the children were all alien to her nature. She neither understood nor loved them. She did not live here alone by choice—she lived here alone because that was what she was forced to do, reduce to doing. All those graces and glories with which she had tried to captivate Raka were only a fabrication: they helped her to sleep at night, they were tranquillizers, pills. She had lied to Raka. And Ila had lied, too. Ila, too, had lied, had tried. No, she wanted to cry, but could not make a sound. Instead, it choked and swelled inside her throat. She twisted her head, then hung it down, down, let it hang. (FM 145)

Carignano occupies the same place in *Fire on The Mountain* as Egdon Health in *The Return of The Native*. Like Maya’s dark house in *Cry, The Peacock* and Sita’s house in *Where shall we go This Summer*, Carignano in this novel is expressive of the nullity of Nanda Kaul’s life. It is a History House. Col. Macdougall, his wife Alice and their seven buried children; the pastor with all his barren efforts of growing apricots and his violent wife Mavis who “hated him too much to cook jam for him” and almost daily “made an attempt to kill him” (FM 7); Miss Appleby, who “not only thrashed the gardener for planting marigolds which she hated”—again, it was the smell she could not bear— but climbed onto his back and whipped him around the garden, yelling “No marigolds, understand? No marigolds in my garden.” (FM 7-8); Miss Jane Shrewsbury who “pocked a fork into her cook’s neck when he was choking on a mutton bone in the belief it would make an aperture for him to breathe through” (FM 9) etc., all constitute the history of this baneful bungalow.
Carignano is untamable. It is sickening, smothering, slaying: “Its windows were open—the ones facing north opened onto the blue waves of the Himalayas flowing out and up to the line of ice and snow sketched upon the sky, while those that faced south looked down the plunging cliff to the plain stretching out, flat and sere, to the blurred horizon” (4). Barrenness prevails in its “empty garden in which cicadas audibly sizzled as though the sun were frying them in its great golden pan” (FM 103) 

On her very first day here, Raka meets “a spider that groomed its hairs in a corner saw lizard’s eyes blinking out of a dark groove” (41). Below the window she sees stones in a heap, flowers that held no interest, a snail’s discarded shell. Over from its railings are noticeable—“shoals of rusted tins, bundles of stained paper, peels rags and bones, all snuggling in grooves, hollows, cracks and sometimes spilling. Pine trees with charred trunks and contorted branches, striking melodramatic attitudes as on stage. Rocks arrested in mid-roll, rearing up, dropping. Occasional tin rooftops, glinting.” (FM 41)

It stands invisibly at the Kasauli Ridge. In its vicinity is the Pasteur Institute that throws the bones and ashes of dead animals down into the ravine. Ram Lal, the house keeper, prevents Raka from going down there as they are quite harrowing:

“It’s a bad place. Don’t go there—

“Why?

“jackals come at night to chew the bones. Then they go mad and bite the village dogs. The mad dogs run around, biting people. Keep away from there, huh? Especially at night. At night you hear jackals howling and people have seen ghosts...The ghosts of people who have died of dog-bite and snake-bite roam on the hillsides. It isn't safe, hear?” (FM 44)

On the knoll close to it, there is the charred shell of a small stone cottage where demented birds “raved and beckoned Raka on to a land where there was no sound, only silence, no light, only shade, and skeletons kept in beds of ash on which the footprints of jackals flowered in grey” (FM 90).
In fact, at the very first glance, Carignano arouses the sense of stark desertion and devastation. It has nothing to console the afflicted and add sunshine to their dismal hours. On the contrary, it serves as a catalyst to quicken their grief and sharpen their agony. For instance Raka is sent here to recuperate. Ironically enough she turns more introvert, forlorn, and delinquent. Her act of setting the mountain on fire evidences it.

Anita Desai tells the story of a pronouncedly individual woman who yet emerges a representative figure with her brave though sad attempt to find an identity of her own. The narration, remarkable for its swift pace as well as care for small details, acquires its special mood by means of the never-ceasing dirge of pines and cicadas that presides over the story. The setting of the sun signifies the advent of death and dark is the accepted time for sinister happenings. From sociological viewpoint too, the novel is quite important. Nanda, Asha, Tara, Ila, Raka etc. represent various stages of womanhood in our society. The most notable feature in all these women is their utmost sincerity of purpose. All of them try to put their best in their respective roles. The anguish they are carrying within their breasts is fermented by atrocious males. It is in no way a part of their natural being. Through these women the novelist has put question marks on the status of women in contemporary society where marital, filial, social and communal relations have almost lost their true sense and where women are fated to live stunted life.

In *Fire on the Mountain*, Anita Desai gives us a positive message, very valuable in the context of our contemporary society. She gives us a chance to try to strike a balance between reality and illusion, and to make our lives more meaningful. Here she highlights the truth that a life of undiluted reality or undiluted illusion spells tragedy. Nanda Kaul and Ila Das are such characters whose existentialist problems are unsolved. Nanda Kaul feeds herself on illusion. For Nanda Kaul the past, the present and the future are all in ashes. She has tried to create a fantasy world from the past, a world of happy families, love, wealth and good humour.

Nanda Kaul’s attempt to detect the scheme of events in her existence seems to be an exercise in futility. She tries to unattached with the world, but the world sticks to her tenacious. She is sick of her part, and so she removes herself to a new heaven. But the past, including the memory of her husband’s infidelity, Raka assaulting her. She resents Raka but she cannot disown her wants to will away carignano to her but does not do so. She detects Ila Das’s voice but she cannot dismiss her. When she takes pity on her, she feels she should invite her to stay with her but fails
to do so. When Ila Das dies an unnatural death, Nanda Kaul succumbs to the shock of this news and Raka remains the sole survivor. The mountain fire, which has been so often alluded to in the novel, is symbolic of eternally impending danger that may engulf anyone anytime. We are not even sure if it will leave Raka untouched. Human existence is never safe, and never at the mercy of chance, and it cannot escape the truth that is death. Therefore, in brief, it is absurd, futile and meaningless.

The picture of life that Anita Desai presents in this novel is, no doubt, dismal, but it is the truth of life. Human life has so many facets, and there are different angles from which it can be viewed and reviewed. But the novelist has been successful in her presentation and has chosen her own angle of view. She has been able to diagram the absurdity of human existence, utter futility and meaninglessness.

Self-realisation is not the main thrust of fantasy in *Fire on the Mountain*; rather it is used in an entirely different way. It is not used as an escape route, it also does not border on hallucination. Two kinds of fantasy-worlds exist side-by-side one which is consciously and deliberately woven by Nanda Kaul to interest her great granddaughter Raka, and the other shared by Raka and Ram Lal, is based on Ram Lal’s belief in the supernatural. There is also a third world of fantasy of Raka’s imagination. It reflects her alienation from the disjointed world of her parents. There is no conscious awareness of the division or polarity between truth and falsehood, where Ram Lal is concerned. His belief in the supernatural is neither an escape nor an emotional prop. It is an integral part of his world and of his background. Raka accepts it because it has a certain authenticity and, with her wide-eyed wonder, she wants to know more about the *churails* and their intrusion into the human sphere. Ram Lal and Raka meet as equals, not as an adult and a child; they share the wonder that the existence of such beings is likely to arouse. When she chances to visit the club one evening, she is confronted by a total reversal of her expectations, and instead of ladies ‘dressed as queens and men as princes’ all that she finds is a group of mad men and rioters; chasing each other and appearing like monsters to her: Somewhere behind them, behind it all, was her father, home from a party, stumbling and crashing through the curtains of night, his mouth opening to let out a flood of rotten stretch, beating her mother with hammers and fists of abuse, harsh, filthy abuse and made Raka cower under the bedclothes and wet the mattress in fright....It is this fear which leads her to set the forest on fire. It is her liberation from her childhood-fears and violent realisation of future. For Nanda Kaul, it serves as mirror of the
hollow-self she has created. This also serves as a revaluation of her earlier values. She rejects her former roles completely at this stage of her life but this does not set her free. She finds herself going against the habit of a life-time. She is in her confrontation with reality and, thus, is pushed into an emptiness which signals an end.

In *Fire on the Mountain* the protagonist Nanda Kaul is no longer a young woman trying to find a place for herself in an adult setting or relate to a new family-structure. She is rather a woman of mature years who has experienced different situations and relationship and who has succeeded in fulfilling their claims. In worldly terms she has been a giver all her life holding back only the hour of stillness every afternoon. But with the children grown and settled, and her husband dead, she had moved to Carignano away from the activity of life. This withdrawal, however, is unnatural and therefore, inimical to the act of life.

Usha Bande rightly points out: “The need to reclaim Raka's love indicates Nanda’s unconscious longing to be loved.”

Thus Raka’s seclusion brings about Nanda’s self-realization. Shyam Asnani maintains:

“...The demented wandering of Raka and her complete identification with the place transforms Nanda: much that she comes to terms with the myths which shroude the hard realities of her bygone days as daughter, wife or mother.”

Both Nanda and Raka are “components of the bareness and stillness of the Carignano garden.” (FM 40) Nanda final revelation of tenderness and love for Raka is an emotional identification with her juvenile self of bygone days. She is the fragment of what Raka is a complete whole.

Anita Desai, unlike her contemporaries, deals with the chaos in the mind of her characters. Her preoccupation with the individuals and their inner sensibility makes her an existentialist novelist. Desai is hardly interested in social life, political events and the mundane aspects of her characters. She is concerned with the personal tragedy of individuals, and shapes their inner crisis. As a novelist of the human heart, Mrs. Desai’s main thrust is on the inner crisis of the characters and their razore-like sharp awareness of the futility of existence.

“I am interested in characters who are not average, but have retreated or been driven into some extremity or despair and so turned against, or made to stand against, the general current. It is
easy to flow with the current, it makes no demands, it costs no effort. But those who cannot flow in it, whose heart cries out the great ‘no’ who fight the current and struggle against it, they know what the demands are, and what it costs to meet them,” says Anita Desai in an interview. Unlike most of the other women writers she is more concerned with the exploration of the psyche of her protagonists—that of “thought, emotion and sensation” experienced by her characters who strive towards arriving at a more authentic way of life than the one which is available to them.

A perpetual quest for meaning and value of life, an attempt to grasp the incomprehensible and the external existential struggle of the individual who refuses to conform to the conventional norms form the pivot of Anita Desai’s novels.

Her protagonists are distinguished by the qualities of introspection, introversion and a refusal to surrender their individual selves. What one takes note of is a chain reaction of one leading to the other, with the emerging picture of battered and banished individuals who refuse to follow convention. Their refusal to compromise and surrender their inability to accept the perspective of their partners is result in isolation and loneliness.

Being one of those intelligent, unsentimental women with a built-in streak of feminism who do not love their matriarchal role, Nanda Kaul is able to fulfil her for non-attachment and non-involvement in the family; as the societal affairs, only after the demise of her husband; her marital relationship has never been a satisfactory one the result of which she never felt herself to be fully involved in his life.

But keeping in mind the writer’s unconventional and unsentimental presentation of characters, Nanda Kaul comes across as a harsh, no-nonsense woman, embittered by her excessive involvement in her earlier domestic routines. Her vehement desire of solitude strikes a significantly unconventional note, and through this the writer conveys subtly the suppressed tensions she has determinedly left behind. Her “cold and piercing stare” that discourages even a minimal social interaction, her “nostrils pinched and whitened with disapproval” (2) at the sight of the slowly-plodding postman approaching Carignano, her ‘enormous reluctance’ to open the letter delivered by him, and her anger and frustration at the intrusion of the letter that casually expects her to accede to its demands—all these details reverse the earlier impression created by the author. She is no elderly, fond mother or grandmother finding fulfilment in the bustling
intercourse of life. On the contrary, she “wanted no one or nothing else. Whatever else came or happened here would be an unwelcome intrusion” (FM 3).

The natural desire of withdrawal to recoup inner strength is subverted into an unnaturally fierce determination to guard her solitude against any violation. Her idea is to be remote and inaccessible, like the eagle soaring above the mountain, to be totally alone and still, “to be a tree, no more, no less, was all that she was prepared to undertake” (FM 4), not realising that stillness is synonymous with death. Impatience and restlessness underline her solitary existence, and are at an odd variance with her advanced age, normally associated with a steady temperament, objectivity and wisdom. The novelist by presenting this conflicting picture, subtly provokes our curiosity about the possible reason behind the intensity and vehemence of her withdrawal, which makes her resent the news of her great granddaughter’s impending arrival into her “pared and radiantly single existence”(31). She firmly establishes Nanda Kaul’s conscious connection between detachment and peace of mind in the first few pages of the novel, while by incorporating her restlessness at the subtextual level she conveys her dissatisfaction at her self-inflicted isolation. For Nanda Kaul, self-fulfillment consciously lies in avoidance of all contact, in cutting herself off from all stress-producing situations. As the novel reveals however, this only proves to be self-deluding and consequently self-destructive effort.

Anita Desai reveals how the desire to be alone is threatened by the gregarious human wish for acknowledgment and involvement. The short novel demonstrates that isolation is not the natural human condition or instinct even though the possibility of one individual totally understanding another is rare. The three divisions of the novel convey tellingly the self-engrossment of the three characters in their own mental constructs which preclude any penetration, either from inflexibility of attitude, or because of a deep-seated defeatism that makes a mockery of their efforts. The unnaturalness of Nanda Kaul’s determined unresponsiveness is counterbalanced by her inability to ignore Raka in spite of her firm resolve to do so. She realises that “it was not so simple to exist and yet appear not to exist” (FM 47). Partly from force of habit and partly out of pique because of Raka’s natural, instinctive and total rejection of her, she is, despite herself, drawn to the child who is as abnormal as her in her preference of solitude. The novel subtly traces the growth of the old lady’s involvement with the self-sufficient and aloof Raka—from her initial rejection, to her growing awareness and curiosity of the girl’s activities, her sly observation of her movements, her involuntary offer to
her of joining the boarding-school at Sanawar, her unconscious jealousy of Ram Lal the cook who is Raka’s friend, and ultimate, almost obsessive desire to have Raka constantly by her side, “Somehow she could not bear to let her slip away. It was as if Raka’s indifference was a goad, a challenge to her—the elusive fish, the golden catch” (99). This indifference pierces the facade of detachment that Nanda Kaul has chosen to hide her true self in and accelerates into a ‘storm of disintegration’ which explodes her persona of self-sufficiency and control. This disintegration is indicative of the conflicting pulls within her psyche between attachment and detachment and her lack of initiative in bringing this conflict to an end.

The violent culmination of the novel reveals the destructive impact of pent-up, negative emotions that prevent a larger, objective perspective and make impossible the modification or ‘constructive alternativism’, that, by allowing a different interpretation of facts and events, allow the positive reintegration with life.

Nanda Kaul’s preference of detachment and solitude is not entirely psychologically validated in the novel. It is chosen as a conscious weapon by her to protect herself against a world where her emotions and sentiments have been abused by her husband’s infidelity. It is a retaliatory action against her sense of betrayal and being unloved. That may account for her sympathy for Tara, Raka’s mother who is an emotionally abused wife. But what makes her unbalanced is her lack of attachment even to her children and grandchildren for no real explanation is offered by the novelist. It can only be understood as a crucial deficiency in her character, a lack of warmth and accommodation, symbolically revealed in her straight and stiff back even in her old age. Life has been a joyless affair for her—this much can be gathered from irritation and rejection of even her children’s claim on her. It has not been a matter of give and take, only of giving on her side. This is her perception of her demanding life and the rationale behind her ‘wanted and prepared for’ withdrawal Carignano. “She has led a mechanical life, dominated by nimity, the disorder and the fluctuating and unpredictable excess” (FM 29). This retreat is not inspired by any soaring idealism or a philosophical quest for meaning of life but is an act of vengeance. She has isolated herself in Carignano, whose blown and dour’ situation seems a perfect complement to her own desired temperament, free from all demands on her and energy. Emptying her mind of all thought she tries to cultivate an intellectual and spiritual dimension to existence. *The Pillow Book of Sei Shenogan* is her constant companion and freedom her avowed ideal. But her ideal of
stillness, silence is synonymous not with life, but death and her existence in Carignano akin to death-in-life.

In Anita Desai’s view, knowledge of oneself with all weaknesses and strengths, and knowledge of the work prerequisite for coming to some kind of understanding life-processes. But human beings have a remarkable cap for avoiding responsibility for their own acts, in direct opposition to the existential and humanistic urges to as responsibility for oneself. In Desai’s fiction, it is the world of the unconscious mind that the writer has always explored and sought to validate. Kelly too affirmed that rational not the only paradigm within which human personality behaviour can be contained. The inconsistent and per workings of the mind exert a powerful influence on individual That is the reason that Nanda Kaul is unable to find freedom or peace of mind in her mountain retreat. Her forced emotional vacuum is no safeguard against the instinctive need to relate to someone. In many ways she is presented as a cynical, embittered woman, disdainful and wary of conventional family bonds. But the self-fulfillment she hopes to find here is also not available to her because of her attempt to shut out contact and experience, necessary paths to knowledge.

4. Fasting, Feasting (1999)

Anita Desai’s novel Fasting, Feasting was nominated for the Booker Prize at the end of the last century. The novel is based on the criss-cross pattern of hope and despair in a woman’s life. In this mature, compelling and outstanding fiction, Desai returns to a world which is disappearing, and a milieu of which she is a peerless chronicler. It depicts the unexceptional lives of an unexceptional family, lived at different levels. It is the story of the defeated dreamers who are faced with failures, frustrations and rejections in the journey of then life. Fasting, Feasting is compartmentalised into two distinct sections, Part One dealing with family intrigues through socio-cultural and spiritual experiences in India, and Part Two describing (though not so extensively) familial existentialism in a small town in America weaving the main fabric of the plot around female characters.

The narrative shuttles between the two worlds, one of fasting signifying self denial and suppression of longings, represented by Uma, the daughter; the other world is of feasting which stands for self-indulgence and complete freedom, the world of Arun. One is the world of smothering, traditional family system; the other is the alien world of Maschussetts. Anita Desai
extricates ample opportunity for drawing up a rich comparison between the tradition-bound lifestyle of India and the abstemious, momentous and materialistic scenario of the West.

_Fasting, Feasting_ very vividly and realistically portrays a typical Indian family consisting of three children and their parents. Uma, the spinster daughter is trapped at home with her ‘Mama-Papa’, unlike her ambitious sister Aruna who brings off a ‘good marriage’, and brother Arun, the disappointing son and heir, who goes off to America to study. Uma is described in the beginning of the novel with “her grey hair frazzled, her myopic eyes glaring behind her spectacles.” \(^{25}\) (FF 5)

We are introduced to a couple known as MamaPapa throughout the novel—a unique manner of expressing their oneness, having three children—Uma, Aruna and Arun. We are introduced to a couple known as MamaPapa throughout the novel—a unique manner of expressing their oneness, having three children—Uma, Aruna and Arun. Apparently the family is: close-knit,

“It was hard to believe they had ever had separate existences that they had been separate entities and not MamaPapa in one breath” (FF 5).

But in reality the atmosphere at home is highly charged with surreptitious intrigues. When the father goes to work the mother indulges in all those clandestine activities which he volubly opposed and disapproved of such as playing cards with the neighbours and chewing betel leaves. Uma and Arun were quite like their mother in the sense that they obeyed their parents outwardly while nurturing contumacy in their hearts. Uma, the docile daughter would stifle her emotions merely to please Mama Papa while Aruna made no efforts whatsoever to conceal her rebelliousness.

The birth of Arun, the long awaited heir of the family sounded the death knell of Uma's academic pursuits. In spite of her keenness to be educated, Uma was repeatedly unsuccessful leading to the final discontinuation of her formal education, decision which suited Mama well for Arun had to be looked after by someone and the time was opportune to train Uma in a proper domestic life-style which apparently was her ultimate future Uma fails to come up to the expectations of her mother being clumsy and lacking confidence for either housework or babysitting.
The writer is critical of the family value system in which a son is always pampered and held in esteem in comparison to the daughter. More so, Uma being the eldest of the three children had to share the family responsibilities. Her own childhood was lost in changing the nappies and feeding her baby brother as was expected of her. Her only hope and joy lay in school. She loved going to school and looked forward to its reopening after the vacations. Her desire of going to a convent school was mercilessly crushed by her mother's conservative outlook. However, Desai does not fail to hint at the lack of will in Uma who could not prove her to be an intelligent student. She is not only the prisoner of circumstances, but also of her own aspirations. Her plight arouses both anguish and pity.

“There was not a thing Uma put her hand to that did not turn to failure over and over again she failed ...Her record book was marked red for failure. She wept with shame and frustration.” (FF 43)

The conflict between Uma and her parents gradually increases reaching to a stage which dissolves any impression of their being a close-knit unit of society. The parents make frantic efforts to marry Uma—perhaps the final goal destined for every Indian girl. Ultimately, a suitor is picked out but disaster and depression await in the wings when the boy's family visits Uma’s family and demands the hand of Aruna, the younger sister instead. Though Aruna was only thirteen years old yet she had developed the guile and the maturity of a grown up woman through conscious coquettishness.

There is a dismantling of illusion after illusion. Uma is the only one enmeshed in a quagmire of negations; her parents too are confronted with defeat of their dreams. All hopes of mama papa to marry off their daughter are shattered. All the efforts to see Uma happily settled fail, adding to the gloom of their lives. The suitable match does not exist. Papa does not hesitate to arrange the dowry for his daughter. Also, ornaments and clothes are bought for Uma. But lady luck refuses to smile, the dowry gone, Uma remains unwedded, leaving the hapless father fretting and fuming. The second attempt too, proves unsuccessful when immediately after marriage Uma discovers that her husband is already married with four children. She is brought back home to the utter disillusionment of her parents who could never overcome the loss of two dowries and kept blaming her. Papa’s resentment finds expression in his worlds:
“Never earned anything in her life, made me spend and spend on her dowry and her wedding. Oh, yes, spend till I am ruined, till I am a pauper.” (FF 147)

The parents, who are ready to send their son to America to study, deny Uma the smallest pleasures. In this novel, Desai has tried to picture the stifling social system with its conservative customs like dowry, arranged marriage, the gender bias and the dominating role of parents.

Meanwhile, another proposal comes for Uma in which the boy’s parents ask for a dowry under the pretext of using it to build a house for Uma and their son. After the engagement when negotiations began for the wedding, the prospective groom’s parents broke off the betrothal with the excuse that the boy was going in for higher education. There was, however, no question of returning the dowry as the money had been utilized in the construction of the house. Uma was a shattered girl when fuel was added to the fire in the form of numerous marriage proposals for the younger sister. Needless to mention the ugly comparison between Uma and Aruna; the latter was better in many ways — academically, in poise and even in fortune. Enhancing Uma’s misery and increasing her frustrations, Aruna would make backhanded pithy statements about the elder sister:

“... a certain mockery was creeping into her behaviour, a kind of goading, like that a sprightly little dog will subject a large dull ox to when it wants a little action.” (FF 86).

Ultimately somebody does agree to marry Uma. After the nuptial ceremony Uma notices very little enthusiasm in her in-laws’ home. Her husband leaves for Meerut soon after though it is discovered later that he was an already married man with a wife and four children hoodwinking Uma into marriage merely for dowry — the money was used to support his ailing business. Consequently Uma is brought back to her parents’ home as a divorcée compelling her to recede into the background while “she relinquished all her foolishly unrealistic hopes” (FF 87).

Through the experiences of Uma Anita Desai focusses on the utter failure and, at times on the impropriety of certain Indian traditions and customs. A girl’s life in India is that of subjugated — whether in her parents’ home or in her in-laws’ and she is educated merely to get a proper place in the marriage market Uma was overpowerered by a sense of failure in practically all areas of her
life; she, at times, seemed to lose faith in the structure of the Indian family life. To quote the novelist:

“The tightly knit fabric of family that had seemed so stifling and confining now revealed holes and gaps that were frightening—perhaps the fabric would not hold, perhaps it would not protect after all.” (FF 88).

The claustrophobic feminine existentialism has been exemplified through the character of Uma. After the attempt arranged marriages have ended in humiliation and disaster, Uma has nothing to look forward to, only that she is at the beck call of her parents, sometimes secretly adverting to her collection of bracelets and old Christmas cards for consolation. A moment of happiness dawns in Uma’s life when she accompanies the pious Mira-masi on a pilgrimage to an Ashram where manages to draw sufficient attention by succumbing to a fit which is interpreted as a possession by the Lord. Another such occasion arises when Uma nearly drowns in the Ganges during a religious ritual, getting saved just in time. Thus, Uma was considered ‘fated’ by all, only Mira-masi having words of consolation for her:

“She is blessed by the Lord. The Lord has rejected the men you chose for her because. He has chosen her for Himself.” (FF 97)

The look of concern on her parents’ faces compelled Uma to brood and to consider herself as an “outcaste” for she had not experienced the world of a married woman. Uma’s state of mind is narrated by Anita Desai adequately,

“...that she had not had their experiences, that hers was other: that of an outcaste from the world of marriage, the world which, all the murmuring and whispering and muttering implied, was all that mattered.

Retreating to her room, she sank down on the floor, against the wall, and put her arms around her knees and won what it would have been like to have the Lord Shiva husband, have Him put His arms around her.” (FF 99)
The sense of isolation and alienation grips Uma when her parents leave her alone at home on the occasion of a bridge game at the club.

Uma gets exasperated as she is neither permitted to visit Mrs. O’ Henry, the Baptist Missionary’s wife nor Mother Agnes of the nearby convent nor even friends and neighbours as the parents were apprehensive about the attempts Christians would make to ‘convert’ her. The frustrated girl desperately wished to be somebody else's daughter. When Moyna had gone to Delhi to pursue a career, Uma would plead with Mrs Joshi:

“Won’t you adopt me, Aunty! Won't you let me be your daughter, now Moyna is gone?” and Mrs. Joshi would reply, laughing, “Of course! Stay here, be my daughter”, then give her a gentle nudge in the direction of her own home, with a basket of mangoes or a jar of pickles for Mama.” (FF 134).

Many a time Uma too, thought of escape in the form of a career, she would soon slide into the world of dreams and hear Mira-masi’s consoling voice, “You are the Lord's child—I see His mark on you” (FF 135).

A faint ray of hope appears in Dr. Dutt’s offer of a job for Uma. The doctor put it plainly:

“So, you see, I thought of you, Uma. A young woman with no employment, who has been running the house for her parents for so long. I feel sure you would be right for the job” (FF 145).

Papa frowned at the very idea of a "working woman". How could Uma dare to enter his world? This was the end of her dream at getting freedom from the claustrophobic existence she had for almost forty three years.

Although perpetually cheated of opportunities—a benign doctor's attempt to give Uma a simple job is swiftly quashed by MamaPapa — Uma is not jealous of her siblings, exactly. When Arun receives his longed-for acceptance from an American university, Uma notices her brother's blank joylessness: “All the years of scholarly toil had worn down any distinguishing features Arun's face might once have had.” With a deft touch, Desai shows us that MamaPapa’s ambitions for Arun are as stilling as their lack of ambition for Uma, and that Uma’s brief spiritual ecstasies have given her moments of self-expression that Arun has yet to enjoy.
Anita Desai has taken into her purview other women too but Uma suffers a little more because she is rejected in the marriage market. The novelist provides a speculum into the world of married women as well posing a pertinent question if their marital status has given them more freedom. Uma's mother feels suffocated in the presence of her husband, tagging along with him to clubs and parties. On the other hand she enjoys slipping into the neighbour’s house in his absence. Aruna, Uma’s younger sister is married off in a jiffy. Being headstrong Aruna went against her parents’ wishes in choosing a groom, in insisting that the wedding reception should be held in the lobby of the Carlton Hotel with Tiny Lopez’s band playing dance music and also manipulating to persuade Papa to throw a cocktail party to welcome Arvind and his family the day before the wedding:

“This was to be an event so chic and untraditional—as she had never been witnessed before in the town, at least by the relatives.” (FF 101)

Arvind, Aruna's husband had a job in Bombay with a flat in Juhu facing the beach which Aruna described was like a dream'. Soon Aruna had two children Aisha and Dinesh brought up in a very different environment. Aruna too, was a changed woman,

“—every trace of her provincial roots was obliterated and overlaid by the bright sheen of the metropolis. It was they who could not keep up.” (FF 109).

Aruna was always on the lookout for perfection which Uma observed made her uneasy, agitated and discontented. Aruna tended to ostracise her middle class parents and uncouth sister. It is only when her in-laws wish to take a dip in the holy river that Aruna decides to come to her parents’ home. It comes to light that even with her husband Arvind she was punctilious termagant.

Aruna, though pretty, smart and ambitious is depicted a victim of her choices. Through marriage she has apparently moved up in life, but she is unhappy, with the dire need to keep up with the “Joneses”, simultaneously she is neurotically obsessed with the necessity of keeping her husband and children within her grip.

Aruna is a typical example of unsuccessful cultural hybridization because she consciously forfeits her own traditional Indian milieu and surrenders the conventional role of an Indian wife,
mother and daughter-in-law hoping to derive superior contentment in her Westernized lifestyle. Though her mother in law and her husband, even her own parents, so to say, apparently condescend to her whimsical, artificial and impractical neo-colonial life style, in the heart of their hearts they disapprove attempt at being ‘modern’, not in any useful manner but me by blindly adapting to the artifical post-colonial Western socio-cultural consciousness which results in a state of neurotic realize of failure by Aruna, and resultant claustrophobic schizophrenia ultimately transforms her into a zombie-like existence where she cannot even provide suitable guidance to her two children.

Gender discrimination is one of the prominent themes in Indian women's writing in English and in other Indian languages. Anita Desai’s *Fasting, Feasting* shows, apart from many other things, how women have to lead a life of suffocation and undeserved sufferings—both physical and mental in a male dominated patriarchal framework; how life in such a callous family trundles on at a slow pace under the prying eyes of the parents; how a girl child craves for parental affection but in the end gets nothing but frustration, isolation and unhomely treatment and, above all, how the neglected child slowly develops the horrible sense of trauma and other associated psychosomatic diseases. A thorough study of the persecution meted out to women in this novel reminds us of *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy, where the same discriminating attitude is found in the case of Ammu, Margaret Kochamma, Baby Kochamma (in her early childhood life) and Rahel. But while the protagonist, Uma in *Fasting, Feasting*, is a meek, docile and a passive sufferer, Ammu in *The God of Small Things*, jets her fury and resentment and breaks the age old rule of ethics: “Who should be loved, and how?And how much.”

Anita Desai is one of the most thought provoking creative novelists in the realm of Indian fiction in English. She has added a new and significant dimension to the fiction and to the portrayal of the sufferings of women. The thing which distinguishes Anita Desai from other novelists is her preoccupation with the study of the inner world of the individual, particularly the undeserved miseries and untold sufferings of the women who are ruthlessly persecuted and rendered vulnerable, alienated and helpless. Ruth Prawer Jhabvala deals with the social background; Kamala Markandaya stresses on the several contemporary problems—social, cultural, economic, political; Nayantara Sahgal is absolutely devoted to social and political problems, ‘the outer weather, the physical geography or the visible action’; but Anita Desai's main concern as a
novelist is to explore the unfathomable depths of the mind which is always deceptive and seldom presents in the action:

“Her fictional milieu is mostly overcast by shadows and half-shadows, mist and fog, a world half revealed and half concealed, partly real and partly fictitious. Her central theme is the existential predicament of an individual which is projected through incompatible couples—acutely sensitive wives, and dismal, callous, un-understanding, ill-chosen husbands.”

In other words, Desai prefers the inner reality to the outer, the insight to the sight. Her search for truth is related to the search for the soul—the inner life—and in the life of the body—the outer life. Her notion of life is richly influenced by Virginia Woolf who observes:

“Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end.”

The things which matter most in Anita Desai is her truthful portrayal of the women characters who are seen suffering from the sense of existential problems and passions. Women in her works are hypersensitive, solitary and helpless. They always show their mettle and possess all the virtues of a great character. But unfortunately, they are denigrated, isolated and tormented by the patriarchal domination. She maintains:

“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, it costs no effort. But those who cannot follow it, whose heart cries out ‘the great No’, who fight the current and struggle against it, they know what the demands are and what it costs to meet them.”

The novel, *Fasting, Feasting* deals with the story of two very different worlds—an extremely orthodox and domineering Indian family and an unusually idiosyncratic family in Massachusetts. Uma, the protagonist of the first part of the book represents the attitude of the author. Through
this woman character, Anita Desai wants to expose the hypocrisy, and male chauvinism in a particular conservative family. She shows how Uma bears the brunt of many insults and abuses flung by her own parents. Though she is the most neglected child of the family, yet she is needed at every time. In the very opening of the book, the author connotatively presents the luxurious life of the parents through the image of the ‘swinging sofa’. The opening passage is so rich in both matter and manner that it is enough to suggest the ensuing events and the discriminating attitude of the parents to their daughters.

“On the veranda overlooking the garden, the drive and the gate, they sit together on the creaking sofa-swing, suspended from its iron frame, dangling their legs so that the slippers on their feet hang loose. Before them, a low round table is covered with a faded cloth, embroidered in the centre with flowers. Behind them, a pedestal fan blows warm air at the backs of their heads and necks”

We find that there are certain words and phrases which are highly suggestive and are so beautifully placed that they point to the story as a whole. Sitting on the sofa-swing and dangling their legs back and forth, the parents are imagined as selfish and luxuriant characters doing nothing but giving only orders to the protagonist, Uma. The cacophonic sound prevails the whole passage and clearly suggests the intention of the sitting parents. The adjective ‘creaking’ before sofa-swing, heightens the effect: of the dominating parents whose hearts seem to mutter and grumble without any reason. Most probably, the reason of their frustration and stepmotherly treatment can be sought in the psychology of the parents—such parents who are more interested in a boy child than in a girl child. The phrase, ‘faded cloth’ again explicitly shows the faded and darkened attitude of the orthodox male society. The term ‘pedestal fan’ seems to show the ill-fated, frustrated Uma who went on working without any rest, blowing warm air to the family.

The family in which Uma is brought up is highly conservative traditional and bragging. Everything is in the direct control of the Mama Papa. Mama keeps ordering the cook through Uma from her swing throne. The parents don’t do anything in the house except visiting the coffee house and attending the clubs. Both their daughters are very submissive and so they
seldom rebel against the step-motherly conduct of the family. Mama once recalls her past days when she was a child in her parent's house. She remembers:

“In my day, girls in the family were not given sweets, nuts, good things to eat. If something special had been bought in the market, like sweets or nuts, it was given to the boys in the family.” (FF 5)

What Anita Desai observes through the point of view of Mama is not uncommon or surprising in Indian society. It is to be noted that woman has been the subject of great mystery and controversy in our history and traditions, myths and legends. She is allegedly charged with so many drawbacks mostly imaginary. It is said that she is temptation symbolized; more a fury than a fairy. Her charm is irresistible but they invariably spell ruin and disaster. She is wily like a serpent, domineering like a tiger and fickle like a weathercock. Moreover, her passion is unquenchable and she gets pleasure in casting her net on her victims. She is always conscious of her dress, jewels and frippery. But we should not forget that most of the charges cited above are mostly concocted. A woman is generally more emotional, sensitive and tender. She is also endowed with a greater power of endurance and patience. She can be viewed in numerous ways, but none of her facets is as overwhelming as the physical attraction she arouses in the heart of the male sex. She performs the role of a wife, a beloved and a mother. She forms the pivot and nucleus of family life. She may be less a jingoist than man, more prone to stay at one place and stick to a regulated pattern of existence.

Without the presence of woman, home is not home but a dreary desert. Anita Desai wants to stress this point in her novels. She thinks that women should be given proper respect and equal treatment. Then only the chariot of the family may move smoothly. Her attitude is very close to Anees Jung:

“In this complete pantheon of diversities, the Indian woman remains the point of unity, unveiling through each single experience a collective consciousness prized by a society that is locked in mortal combat with the power and weakness of age and time. She remains the still centre, like the centre in a potter's wheel, circling to create new forms, unfolding the continuity of a racial life, which in turn has encircled and helped her acquire a quality of concentration.” 30
But in reality the atmosphere at home is highly charged with surreptitious intrigues. When the father goes to work the mother indulges in all those clandestine activities which he volubly opposed and disapproved of such as playing cards with the neighbours and chewing betel leaves. Uma and Arun were quit like their mother in the sense that they obeyed their parents outwardly while nurturing contumacy in their hearts. Uma, the docile daughter would stifle her emotions merely to please Mama Papa while Aruna made no efforts whatsoever to conceal her rebelliousness.

Well, a cyclonic wave comes to sweep off the remaining affection, when Uma’s mother becomes pregnant for the third time. She gives birth to a son. The birth of a son as against daughter in conservative family in India is generally a matter of great enthusiasm and enjoyment. The author observes:

“Arriving home, however, he (Papa) sprang out of the car, raced into the house and shouted the news to whoever was there to hear.” (FF 17).

When Mama came home, weak, exhausted and short tempered, she tried to teach Uma the correct way of folding nappies, of preparing watered milk, of rocking the screaming infant to sleep. As she goes out to do her homework, all of sudden comes a call of Mama to leave all the homework. She snapped her and asked her to do at first the works related to the infant. To crown the effect, Uma was prevented from going school and told mercilessly to stay at home to help Arun. Mama used to say:

“You know you failed your exams again. You’re not being moved up. What is the use of going back to school? Stay at home and look after your baby brother.”(FF 22)

What a great irony! Arun, the baby brother of Uma, was sent to America for higher education; but Uma is prevented from taking education of even the matriculation. It reminds us Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* in which Chacko, brother of Ammu, is sent to Oxford for higher education. But, the other hand, Ammu is prevented from getting even the school education up to matriculation.
Uma gets shocks after shocks. But she, like a fruity tree bears the blow of the brick thrown by a naughty boy and in return gives the sweet fruit to him. She undergoes two traumatic experiences related to matrimony. Her sister is married to a rich man. Though Uma was married to Harish, a man of fatherly age, he didn’t behave like a husband. It was revealed when Uma wrote letters to her parents telling that Harish was away in Meerut on work and had not returned. Papa, later on, learnt the fact that they had been duped. Actually, Harish was already married. He had a wife and four children in Meerut where he ran an ailing pharmaceutical factory. To save it he needed another dowry. Perhaps this is why he married Uma. In course of time, her marriage was somehow cancelled.

The novel presents a fine contrast. The title of the book is itself oxymoronic. There are some characters who are feasting with joy. But the book has also some characters whose lives are meant for fasting only and that too both physically and spiritually. The daughters, Uma and Aruna long for parental affection, but they are seldom given proper affection and care.

On the other hand, Mama and Papa are feasting and enjoying the zenith of peace and happiness. Aruna feasts on Mama and Papa and also on Uma. But as time rolls on, he wants to enjoy freedom. In the second part of the book, Melanie, a little child, is deprived of parental care and sympathy. She is so much neglected that she develops an aberrant and un-understanding attitude to everyone of the house. In a fit of anger she bursts out:

“I won’t eat anything you cook. You can give it to the cook. Give it to him. She points dramatically to Aruna. I am not going to eat any of that poison. Everything you cook is—poison. She howls, and blunders out of the room, leaving her mother white with amazement.” (FF 210)

As a matter of fact a child’s mind is very soft and sensitive. It must be tackled with love and care. It is a psychological truth that the mind of a child is so sensitive that when his innocence comes in contact with experience, it begins to bleed and consequently it is haunted by these nightmarish experiences all through its life. And this is what we see in the life of little Melanie.

It is to be noted that Anita Desai is one of the great champions of woman’s cause and her identity crisis in a male dominated societal framework. She also favours the quest of the ‘free’ woman of the world particularly in the Asian Diaspora. She strongly stresses the need of woman's activity in every field of life. She holds the view:
“Privacy and silence are unnatural conditions to Indian women, intensely social as they are. Without silence and privacy, no two consecutive and comprehensible lines can be written. The social system, from long having been opposed to independent work and intellectual exercise by women. Why do not we have an Indian Mrs. Carlyle or a Scishonagan or a lady Murasaki? There was a literary tradition at all that women writers could follow even if only as camp followers.”

The portrayal of Anamika, Uma's cousin exemplifies a deep-rooted evil rampant in the traditional Indian society. The story of Anamika in this book is equally significant to study the gender discrimination in the indifferent, harsh and cold male-dominated atmosphere. She is simply lovely

“as a flower is lovely, soft, petal-skinned, bumblebee-eyed, pink-lipped, always on the verge of bubbling dove-like laughter, loving smiles, and with a good nature like a radiance about her. Wherever she was, there was peace, contentment, well being.” (FF 68)

She was not only pretty and good but an outstanding student as well. She did so brilliantly in her final exams that she won a scholarship to Oxford—a place where only the most favoured and privileged could ever hope to go. But unfortunately her parents are so conservative and possessive that they didn't allow the girl to go to Oxford to study. The letter of acceptance from Oxford was locked by the parents in a steel cupboard in their flat and whenever visitors came they show the paper of acceptance to them with pride. It shows their backwardness, hypocrisy and ostentation. The parents wanted to give the hands of their daughter to only that man who has qualification equal to her.

Apparently she was happily married but her marital existence is an indescribable tragic affair. Due to Anamika’s pleasant demeanour and smart demure, her parents succeed in getting her married in a ‘good family’, failing to realize that he was

“…much older than Anamika, so grim-faced and conscious of his own superiority to everyone else present: those very degrees and medals had made him insufferably proud and kept everyone at a distance. The
children saw that straight away: there would be no bridegroom jokes played at this wedding, no little gifts and bribes from him to them. In fact, he barely noticed them; he barely seemed to notice Anamika. The children saw that too—that she was marrying that one person who was totally impervious to Anamika's beauty and grace and superiority. He raised his chin and nose—which was long and sharp as a needle—and seemed to look over the top of her head as they exchanged heavy garlands of rose and jasmine, then sat before the ceremonial fire.” (FF 70-71).

She was married to a man, much older than her, grim-faced and conscious of his own superiority to everyone else: “He seemed most unenthusiastic about marriage. Those very degrees and medals had made him insufferably proud and kept everyone at a distance.” (FF 70)

As for Anamika, she,

“...was simply an interloper, someone brought in because it was the custom and because she would, by marrying him enhance his superiority to other men. So they had to tolerate her.” (FF 70).

On the marriage day, no bridegroom jokes were played at the wedding, no little gifts were given to him. In fact, he didn’t like all these things. He barely seemed to notice Anamika even at the wedding day. All the scholarship, distinction, beauty and good behaviour of Anamika fall flat when she goes to the house of her husband. There she was treated worse than animals; she was beaten regularly by her mother-in-law as if it was her routine life to beat her. To crown the effect, while she was beaten black and blue, her husband stood by and approved. He did not object to this inhuman treatment meted out to the lonesome, isolated woman. Anamika spent her entire time in the kitchen—doing all sorts of work. She had to cook for the whole family. The family was so large that meals were eaten in shifts—“first the men, then the children, finally the women.” (FF 71)

She has to eat the remains in the pots before scouring them. If the pots were not thoroughly rubbed and cleaned, her mother-in-law threw them on the ground and made her do them again. She was also forced to do the massaging of the lady’s feet, a practice even today present in the remote illiterate village surroundings. Moreover, she never went out of the house except to the
temple with other women. This piteous plight of Anamika amazed Aruna and she wondered “what Anamika did with all the fine clothes and jewellery she had been given at her wedding” (FF 72).

Constant beating led to a miscarriage, thereby permanently disabling her from having children.

One day news arrives that Anamika was dead. According to the details she had poured kerosene oil over her body in the early hours and set herself ablaze. All this happened after twenty-five years of married life. The entire blame was laid on Anamika while her parents accepted her death saying, “…that it was fate, God had willed it and it was Anamika’s destiny.” (FF 151)

Anamika was the first tender lamb of the family to be meekly surrendered at the altar of marriage.

Thus, Anita Desai, a great observer of men and manners aptly shows the constant urge of woman's freedom in *Fasting, Feasting*. She seems to give a good retort to the dictum prevalent in society that woman should be judged and perceived as object and not as subject. Woman is not a mere tradition-tossed toy in the hands of conservative society. She is not a spineless, wooden creature subjected to male authority. Anita Desai's treatment of feminism is different in the sense that her protagonists are generally not rebellious in nature rather they suffer and suffer only to learn how to encounter with the harsh realities of life. Like the tragic heroes of William Shakespeare, her female characters learn by suffering. It is suffering which purifies the ‘dross of desire’ in the characters. K. R. S. Iyengar is of the opinion that in Anita Desai:

> “the inner climate, the climate of sensibility that lours or clears or rumbles like thunder or suddenly blazes forth like lightning is more compelling than the outer weather, the physical geography or the visible action.”

Moreover, her feminist outlook is not vague, partial and monotonous but is always suffused with poetic exuberances and moral imagination.

The women in *Fasting, Feasting* depicted so far—Uma, Aruna, their mother and Anamika are in one way or the other victims of the age old traditions and customs of India's social set up. In Part Two of the novel Anita Desai has portrayed two other female characters—Mrs. Pattons and her daughter Melanie, both feeling suffocated in the modernized but highly impersonal Western
lifestyle. Mrs Pattons, obsessed with the idea of food, makes frantic trips to the market only to ensure that her kitchen cabinets are well stocked with edible goods. In the company of Arun she has become a vegetarian while her husband, Mr. Pattons still relishes non-vegetarian food which he laboriously prepares himself.

Mrs. Pattons’ bulimic daughter, Melanie, shuns company. Her description is a truthful, tragic commentary on the loneliness of the affluent:

“… sitting on the bottom stair, dressed in denim shorts and a faded pink T-shirt, holding a party-sized bag of salted peanuts into which she reaches and from which she draws out a fistful. She sits in the gloom of the unlit staircase, munching the nuts with a mulish obstinacy, regarding him (Arun) with eyes that are slits of pink-rimmed green. Has she been crying? She looks sullen rather than tearful. It is her habitual expression.” (FF 164).

Melanie is averse to converse with anyone including people of her own age group. Once Arun tried to help her when she was lying engulfed in her own sputum. She sternly vituperated him away. In order to overcome her sense of loneliness and desperation she would over eat candy.

Both Mrs. Pattons and Melanie find the Western environment to be stifling and phlegmatic. The excessive freedom in the West had induced the over dosage, and then the ultimate repulsion led to another kind of suffocating environment. Anita Desai stipulates that just as the women of the East fail to emancipate themselves from the shackles of their traditional life style, similarly the women in the West feel burdened by the excesses of their own society.

Mira-masi is, perhaps, the only woman character who feels emancipated though in a different sense. A devout maternal aunt of the family, Mira-masi has denounced the material world pilgrimages were the sole source of comfort for her. To quote the novelist:

“Mira-masi’s pilgrimages were less the holiday excursions they had been, visiting relatives on the way, carrying family gossip from one to the other, staying on for weddings or a pleasant spell of weather. Now she seemed to storm through the country, stamping along the pilgrim
routes, her back bowed a staff in her hands, her large feet plodding grimly and determinedly the worn earth of those paths.” (FF 54).

Once or twice Uma accompanied Mira-masi on pilgrimages. Uma had never been more unsupervised or happier in her life. She had realized the uniqueness of Mira-masi’s freedom. Late in the night Uma lay silently listening to the barking of dogs: “That was what Uma felt her own life to have been—full of barks, howls, messages, and now—silence.” (FF 61).

Mira-masi is the only emancipated female character having compromised with the traditional family ritual of eating and surrendering her gastronimical desires, going on pilgrimage, maintaining austerity and praying intensely for achieving higher goal of spiritual gnosis, living contentedly on a bland diet of uncooked food.

Mira-masi is on a spiritual quest and knows the real value and meaning of freedom. One is born dependent and is influenced by the social surroundings which is essential at the initial stage but later in life realizes the dependence and the limitations of treading on the path of freedom. True freedom does not mean the dismissal of these external factors; rather it is the inner freedom which has to be realized and both have to be coordinated to have a congenial social existence. Mira-masi does not denounce her familial relationships, in fact she relishes gossiping and carrying tales from one family to the other yet she does not neglect the spiritual side of her life. Thus by renouncing materialism, ignoring the covetous attraction of the material and the social commitments and yet not completely surrendering her interaction with the external world, she has gained inner freedom and tranquillity.

Desai’s *Fasting, Feasting* reveals a greater economy of time, exercising a better control over episodes thereby extending the novel a forceful dramatic anticlimax. The entire story is structured around the marriage of Uma’s parents to a period extended to almost four and a half decades, beginning in India and culminating in a small town in America. However, the time of action is confined to the period of sending a parcel to Arun and his receiving it in America. Uma is engaged in packing and addressing the parcel containing a shawl and a packet of tea when the novel begins. When Arun receives this parcel and presents it as his parents’ gift to Mrs. Pattons, the novel suddenly ends. The rest of the story is a sort of mixed recollection of Uma and her mother through retrospective rumination in Part One of the novel. Part Two is a complete
narrative situated in America dealing with the lives of Arun in his hostel and later in the household of the Pattons.

Though the novel is distinctly divided into two parts, yet the narrative does not project any indication of being disjointed. Episodes are dexterously correlated, characters are realistically delineated and reminiscences are meticulously interwoven into a single fabric of a fine narrative. The novel is a poignant study of a woman’s woes and agonies. *Fasting, Feasting*, like many other novels reinforces the theme of loneliness, withdrawal, and isolation.

*Fasting, Feasting* highlights the theme of rootlessness and alienation. Whether fasting or feasting, a sense of loss always haunts its characters. Any sense of happiness deludes them. For Arun, though, life has many openings, unlike Uma, his life with the Patton family in Massachusetts is bewildering. He finds that the alien culture of freedom is, paradoxically both self-denying and self-indulging. For with freedom also comes a feeling of non-existence. Part II of the novel heightens the sense of loneliness in a foreign country. His Indian sensibility is greatly offended by the life style there. His disillusionment is brought out in his distaste for the food. In Desai’s fictional world a very ordinary incident can assume highly symbolic significance. Though he is more privileged than his sister to get the opportunity to go abroad; Arun’s dream of a better life in soon shattered. He realizes the futility of his enterprise and disappointment of a journey to an unknown promising land. His Indian sensibility is greatly offended by the life style there. His disillusionment is brought out in his distaste for the food. In Desai’s fictional world a very ordinary incident can assume highly symbolic significance. Though he is more privileged than his sister to get the opportunity to go abroad; Arun’s dream of a better life in soon shattered. He realizes the futility of his enterprise and disappointment of a journey to an unknown promising land. His only joy is to receive letters and presents from home. Here he is without a past, family or a country of his own. It is his first time away from home, mama-papa, sisters and neighbours. He nostalgically recalls the old bungalows with dusty gardens in his home town. He experienced a “total freedom of anonymity, the total absence of relations, of demands, needs, requests ties, responsibilities”.

Desai presents a panorama of life lived at different levels by the members of a close-knit family. But her main focus is the unjust and underserved failures in Uma’s life, and the experiences of the growth of Uma from childhood to middle aged spinsterhood. She is a victim of society and her fate. Also, it is her own passive endurance, non-rebellions attitude and lack of action which fill her life with despair. Her decisions are taken by others. She wants to escape from her dull and dreary existence in the metropolitan city of Bombay where her younger sister Aruna is married. But her request is turned down by her overbearing father and dominating sister. She is left choking with anger and humiliation. She has to be content with taking dictation from ‘papa’ to
write letters to Arun in America, and thus live a life without any hope for a better future. She has to still her emotions and train them to submit. Here is a typical middle class family system of India in which a son is allowed freedom whereas a daughter is always taught to exercise restraint and denial.
REFERENCES

1. Desai Anita, *Cry, the Peacock*, Orient Paperbacks, Ravindra Printing Press, New Delhi, 2012, p 40 (All subsequent references indicated parenthetically are to this edition of the novel, abbreviated as CP)


6. Desai, Anita, *Voices in the City*, OrientPaperbacks, New Delhi, 1982, p, 150 (All subsequent references indicated parenthetically are to this edition of the novel, abbreviated as VC).


9. Note Laing “An individual may experience his own being as real, wholeas differentiated from the rest of the world, so clearly that his identity and autonomy are never in questions. On the other hand, the individual in the ordinary circumstances of living may feel more unreal than real, more dead than alive, precariously differentiated from the rest of the world…for him, relatedness to other persons will be seen to have a radically different significance and function - This is ontological insecurity, pp. 43-44.


25. Desai Anita: *Fasting, Feasting,* Random House India, 2008 p5 (All subsequent references indicated parenthetically are to this edition of the novel, abbreviated as FF).


29. Desai Anita In an Interview, *The Times of India,* New Delhi, April 29, 1979
