CHAPTER IV

STYLE AND NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE

Primarily interested in exploring the psychic depths of her female characters, Anita Desai portrays them as individuals facing single-handed, the ferocious assaults of existence. Carefully avoiding being associated with any Feminist movement, she makes it clear that her concern as an artist is with the individual men and women. Sincere to her convictions as an artist, Anita Desai, in her novels, seizes upon that incomplete and seemingly meaningless mass of reality around her and tries to discover the significance by plunging below the surface and plumbing the depths then illuminating those depths till they become a more lucid, brilliant and explicable reflection of the visible world. The aspects of theme and technique in Anita Desai’s novels are not isolated elements. They are inter-related at many levels of structure and texture. The theme serves as the skeleton incorporating the whole life-perspective of the novelist through situations and scenes that are peculiar to her alone.

Anita Desai’s novel, Fire on the Mountain, divided into three sections, portrays three main women characters. In respect of the treatment of theme and setting, it closely approximates Cry, the Peacock and Where Shall We Go This Summer?. These three novels portray the female protagonists who are not average but have retreated, or have been driven into some extremity of despair and so are turned against or are made to stand against, the general current. Withdrawn into a life of seclusion and loneliness, their material wants are taken care of by affluence of wealth
and servants, but their emotional needs are utterly ignored. It is interesting to note that Anita Desai is perhaps the only Indo-English novelist who lays stress on the landscape and correlates it with the psychic state of her protagonists. The novelist employs various devices such as flashes, asides and painting landscape scenes. Her technique is the natural outcome of her preoccupation with the individual psychology combined with her painter’s eye, her vivid awareness of the external world. She is always primarily occupied with the subjective experience of her people, their sensation in the presence of one another, but at the same time she is aware of how they look from the outside of their tone and manner, the setting in which they play their parts, what they think, say and do; of all that gives them objective reality. It is, therefore, impossible for her to maintain strictly the point of view of any characters, keeping to the subjective aspect of things. The novelist can be seen passing back and forth between subjective and objective, within the sentence. The following is an example which shows how the novelist uses human gestures and feelings with equal skill in her novel ‘Fire on the Mountain’. Raka hears the call of the cuckoos, but “instead of beautiful domestic birds”, they are demented birds that rave and beckon Raka onto a land where there is “no sound, only silence, no light, only shade and skeletons (kept) in beds of ash on which the footprints of jackals (flower) in grey.” (Fire on the Mountain, 90)

The scene of devastation and failure draws her, inspires her. It is the ravaged, destroyed and barren spaces in Kasauli that keep on attracting Raka:
“the ravine where yellow snakes slept under grey rocks
an growing out of the dust and rubble, the skeletal pines
that rattled in the wind, the wind-leveled hill-tops and
the seared remains of the safe, cozy, civilized world in
which Raka had no part and to which she owed no
attachment.” (Fire on the Mountain, 91)

The total seclusion of Raka brings a sort of self-realization and metamorphosis in Nanda’s attitude. She gets sick of her emptiness beneath the seeming facade of fulfillment, whereas the tortured childhood in Raka’s case has blunted the spontaneous growth of her soul. It is, therefore, natural that she remains “totally unaware of her dependence” and that “solitude never disturbs her.” (Fire on the Mountain, 79) Realizing that what Raka lacks in the tender care and love, Nanda’s attitude changes slowly and she begins to woo Raka with long stories about her imaginary childhood trying to make contact by hooking Raka’s curiosity. The nostalgic memories of pleasant childhood awake maternal instincts in Nanda and in her attempt to evade her self-imposed exile Nanda involves herself so much in Raka’s life that she has to come out with these flattering words:

“Raka, you really are a great-grandchild of mine, aren’t you? You are more like me than any of my grandchildren. You are exactly like me, Raka.” (Fire on the Mountain, 64)
The demented wandering of Raka and her complete identification with the place transforms Nanda so much that she comes to terms with the myths which shrouded the hard realities of her bygone days as daughter, wife, and mother. Nanda views Raka as fitted in quietly and unobtrusively as an uninvited mouse or cricket” to Carignano. Later it is revealed that Nanda thinks of making a will, but the thought appears distasteful. ‘She wished no one to go either – certainly not Raka’. Nanda Kaul came to Carignano to be lonely. She did not want Carignano to enslave herself again. She thought of Raka. She began to murmur thus.

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,

Nanda Kaul knew. (Fire on the Mountain, 80)

The Fire on the Mountain also assumes symbolic significance. It stands for the funeral pyre that ultimately consumes and annihilates everything. The dark and dismal fictional world is consumed by the ultimate reality that eludes average human sensibility. It is in making the reader acutely conscious of this reality where Anita Desai’s greatest strength as a mature artist lies. The imagery used by the novelist in this novel highlights Nanda’s longing for seclusion and stillness. Her desire for absolute stillness is likened to be a charred tree trunk in the forest, a broken pillar of marble in the desert, a lizard on a stone wall.

“A tree trunk could not harbour irritation, nor a pillar annoyance. She would imitate death, like a lizard, no
one would dare rouse her …….” (Fire on the Mountain, 23).

Cry, the Peacock, is a novel dealing with the theme of incompatible marriage, with the focus on the heroine’s psyche. Since Maya, the protagonist of the novel is a childless woman married to an unsympathetic, rational, down-to-earth man, it is but natural that she is lost in her own world, seeking solace in her childhood memories and recollecting her secured, cozy and pampered childhood. It is also a psychological novel, probing the workings of Maya’s psyche, and the narrative is not chronologically straight. There is a constant to and fro movement between the past and the present in the mind of Maya. The novel begins with the death of her pet dog Toto but thereafter the reader is taken from the present of the novel to the past of the heroine’s life. Because of her lonely existence, childlessness, emotional deprivation, and want of reciprocity of feelings, she is almost on the verge of neurotic breakdown. She does it by making use of the weird animal imagery which suggests her disturbed state of mind.

The novel Voices in the City, makes use of symbolism specially in the context of the city of Calcutta and how it affects the lives of the characters. Monisha, like many of Anita Desai’s heroines, is sensitive and a victim of ill-matched marriage. She is an intellectual and fond of reading, but nobody in the joint family, including her husband, appreciates her tastes, nor does she get privacy. She is an example of a maladjusted woman who is introvert by nature. Anita Desai’s novel Bye–Bye, Black Bird, is about Indian immigrants in London, focusing attention on three characters.
'Dev, “Adit”, and ‘Sarah’. The title of the novel refers to Adit’s final farewell to Asian immigrants in England when he leaves England for India for good. In this novel it is her descriptive prose and use of rhetoric that is significant from the point of view of technique. Dev’s harangue, when he is proselytizing about the reversal of the historical fact of cultural colonisation, is an example of Anita Desai’s rhetorical use of language. The conversation among Dev, Sarah and Adit illustrates this point:

‘Churchill!’ screamed Dev, leaping half across the room in frenzy. ‘Don’t you mention Churchill to me or I’ll vomit. I’ll spit. That – that ’…How dare you even speak of Churchill?’ Dev interrupted her. ‘Have you forgotten how he treated Gandhi? Gandhi – he was probably another incarnation of Jesus Christ – and Churchill sneered at his clothes, called him a “naked fakir.” Why, Sarah, he – he’s the man that ordered the miners of Tonypandy to be shot. He had no heart. He was no human. He was a statue – a statue made of tobacco. If anyone tells me I should admire Churchill. I’ll just, I’ll-

(Bye-Bye Blackbird, 160-61)

Where Shall We Go This Summer?, is once again a novel centered on a family focusing on Sita, a housewife who is pregnant but hates to deliver the baby. She is hypersensitive and is emotionally so charged and so irrational that she becomes a burden and a source of annoyance to her children. Sita is not able to come out of the
fantasy world of her childhood. The island city dichotomy is symbolic of the world of fantasy and reality. The novel also makes use of poetry in a very significant manner. Fire on the Mountain, is also a domestic novel and the focus is on Nanda Kaul, the widow of a Vice-Chancellor, through whose point of view primarily the story has been narrated. The novel also makes use of poetry though not in a very significant manner. Interestingly, the title of the novel refers to the last act of Raka when she sets the forest on fire.

Clear Light of Day, is also a story about a family covering two generations of Das family but mainly dealing with the second generation that is of the children – Bim, Tara, Raja and Baba. The novel covers two historical periods of India, one freedom struggle and another of independence. The story is primarily narrated from Bim’s point of view that is the most important character in the novel.

A significant technique employed in the novel is the use of poetry in the context of Raja and Bim. In Raja’s case it is natural since he is very fond of Urdu poetry. At the end of the novel when two couplets of Iqbal, set to music, provide the ultimate vision of the novel and by implication this is the Clear, Light of the Day, that dawns upon Bim making her way clear, dispelling all her confusion and giving her a philosophy of life. Besides the use of poetry, music to which it is set makes it more effective.

Almost all the titles of the novels of Anita Desai have their own significance. The novel Cry, the Peacock, might be a reference to a woman’s longing for conjugal love and happiness. The title Voices in the City, might be a reference to the voices of
city dwellers - a story of a brother and his sister caught in the cross-currents of changing social values. Bye- Bye Blackbird, explores the lives of the outsiders seeking to forge a new identity in an alien land. In Custody has its implications. There are authorial comments about the title meaning that Nur’s poetry would be in safe custody of Deven but the irony is that he in the custody of Nur’s personality and his unending irrational demands as though Deven were responsible for every trouble in Nur’s life. The novel also makes use of poetry but ironically none of the poem is quoted by Nur. The novel has an open ending which suggests the eternal troubles in the life of this insignificant teacher.

Her latest novel Baumgartner’s Bombay, has the theme of the plight of a displaced person. Hugo Baumgartner, the protagonist of the novel is a Jew who is advised to leave Germany at the rise of Nazism and he comes to the British India before the Second World War to begin his new life. The title of the novel refers to the experiences of the protagonist in Bombay. The novel covers a long period of time beginning from Baumgartner’s childhood in Berlin and coming down to his murder in Circa, the late 60s or early 70s. The novel uses the flashback technique through which we are informed of his childhood. There are several German songs and poems used in the novel justifiably since he is a German. Some of these poems belong to his childhood days which he recollects with nostalgia. But the German patriotic song, sung by German citizens imprisoned with him, has greater significance in that even though he is a victim of Nazi Germany yet he has to sing along with others. On linguistic level the novel effectively transcribes different varieties of English as
spoken by Indians, and British. Certain Hindi words are also used in the novel to give a realistic effect, for example when he is being taken on a train to Ahmed Nagar we hear the calls of “Garam Chai”. The novel has an epigraph from T. S. Eliot’s poem “East Coker” which signifies the rise and the fall of families.

Anita Desai is not interested so much in registering surface realities as in the probing of inner truths lying under the surface level. In order to present this submerged psychic truth she employs various linguistic devices. Carefully chosen clusters of images, symbols and myths figure most prominently amongst the devices deployed by her. Apart from them quite often she makes use of fresh collocations, deviations and parallelisms to render the uniqueness of the psyche of her characters. She exploits even phonological patterns like alliteration, assonance, consonance and rhyme, sometimes different levels of semantic interpretation and they become significant for the presentation of her characters.

In the hands of the novelist imagery becomes a very powerful mode to represent the perception of a character. The following lines illustrate this:

In this din, a tonga had driven up and disgorge a flurry of guests in their visiting saris, all to flap their palm-leaf-hand-fans as they sat in a ring about her – the wives and daughters of the lecturers and professors over whom her husband ruled ….her eyes flashed when she heard, like a pair of back blades, wanting to cut them,
crawling grey bugs about her fastidious feet. (Fire on the Mountain, 18)

Expressions like “disgorged”, “crawling grey bugs” and “eyes flashed … like a pair of black blades” give a specific shade to the image and suggest Nanda’s withdrawal which is based on hatred and awareness of meaningless of the so called normal routine life. (The Novels of Anita Desai-Critical Study, 257)

He had been – large or small? I cannot remember but his eyes I do; they were pale, opaque, and gave him an appearance of morbidity, as though he had lived like a sluggish white worm, indoors always; in his dark room at the temple gates, where the central ‘lingam’ was painted bright, vicious red, as though plunged in sacrificial blood, and light burned in a single lamp from which oil spilled into a large spreading pool. (Cry, The Peacock, 28-29)

It is a typical Indian scene of a temple with a red painted ‘lingam’ at the centre, an oil lamp and a foreteller examining the horoscope of a young girl still to be married. But these referential details have been given hardly any significance in comparison to the depiction of the impression of these objects on Maya’s psyche. There are a great number of adjectival and adverbial phrases portraying not so much the objects themselves as the subjective way Maya views them. (The Novels of Anita Desai-Critical Study, 257)
When the novelist presents Maya’s psychic disintegration, she moulds images in such a way that the objects get increasingly blurred and confused. In the beginning only the edges of the images are mixed e.g., the tail of the rat gets merged with father and the father’s voice becomes the voice of the peacock, yet they are recognizable. Later, they all get mixed up leading to an imagistic disorder which sets forth effectively the chaos of Maya’s psychic. Symbols also have a vital role to play in displaying different states. Generally the symbols used by Anita Desai are a part of the circumstantial details of the narrative. They acquire significance because of the appropriate correlation between the object and its symbolical meaning.

The houses in *Fire on the Mountain*, *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* and *In Custody* are an essential part of the created world, giving to the world of the novel a “solidity and specification.” Their symbolical meanings are only semantic extra positions. Yet they are capable of objectifying the inner psychic layers of characters in a powerful way. The house Sita comes to live in at Manori, after a gap of twenty years, in the novel *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* is evocative of her desertion of normal routine life and objectifies the fear that is harbored in her heart. In Anita Desai’s novels at times, very minor objects seem to attain symbolical overtones and effectively outlay a particular shade of mind or a psychic tension. ‘Tea’, generally associated with normal, practical day-to-day life and get-togetherness, is rightly associated with Gautama disposes Toto’s body, “it is all over” for him, so he says to Maya: “Come and drink your tea and stop crying” (*Cry, the Peacock*, 8). Gautama’s readiness to have tea is clearly symbolical of his getting over Toto’s death which
becomes an obsession for Maya. In *Bye-Bye Black Bird* this symbol is judiciously related to Sarah. When Adit for the first time announces his decision to leave England and declares that his son will be born in India, Sarah finds her in a psychic turmoil, but soon having overpowered the storm in heart she announces: “Let’s have a cup of tea” (*Bye-Bye Black Bird*, 204). If symbols, generally through their extra semantic impositions, help the novelist to objectify the nuances of a character’s subjective world, at times, also by only half revealing the truth they enable the novelist to delineate the psychological depth of the characters. For instance, in *Cry, the Peacock*, Anita Desai suggests the subconscious decision of Maya to murder Gautama through the dust symbol. As this decision never comes to the surface of Maya’s consciousness, Anita Desai cannot state it in clear palpable terms. Therefore, it is through the highly cautious employment of the ‘dust storm’ that the novelist suggests the preceding psychic turmoil and the following peace. The decision remains only as something vaguely and dimly felt – never defined. Had the decision been explicitly stated through clear denotative terms, Maya instead of being the loved and sympathized protagonist would have been a murderous villainess, and the tour de force of the novel a fiasco.

Some of the traditional symbols have been reinterpreted by the novelist for the sake of rendering highly individualized psyche. In *Cry, the Peacock*, the repeated references to a peacock as a “brain fever bird,” “a reminder of death” and “ill-fated lover” are contrary to the traditionally popular image of the peacock. Its dancing image in the rainy season has been associated with love, romance and beauty and not
with fighting, mating and dying. By presenting the peacock in her arbitrary symbolical colours, Anita Desai is making an attempt to depict Maya’s mental predicament – a profound love for life with a sure knowledge of death to follow.

Myths have also been deployed by Anita Desai, which with all their religious and traditional associations lay out the psychological depths of characters. They serve as powerful instruments to suggest what cannot be expressed denotatively. To cite an example, the mythological Sita, though not presented directly in Where Shall We Go This Summer?, yet owing to the identity of her name with that of the protagonist of this novel, reveals the ironical shades of the portrayal of the protagonist who suffers in her exile not from the memories of intense love for her husband, but from alienation.

At times a gap between two semantic levels of interpretation of one statement also becomes functional in revealing the inner world. In Where Shall We Go This Summer?, pregnant for the fifth time, Sita declares, “I don’t want to have the baby”. (Where Shall We Go This Summer?, 34). It is indicative of her metaphysical desire not to commit an act of violence by giving birth to a child who is now so safely contained in her womb into a world to which is full of violence and destruction. Raman interprets her declaration as her will to have an abortion. The metaphysical level at which Sita lives is far beyond Raman’s reasoning which is confined to material commonsense.

A character’s speech is highly effective in throwing light on his temperament. In Anita Desai’s hands it becomes a powerful instrument. For example, in Voices in
the City, when Amla comes to Calcutta she invites Jiban and Monisha to tea at her aunt’s place; the few sentences that Jiban speaks at this informal, intimate gathering are highly suggestive of his formal, unfeeling personality, and of highlighting the cause of his alienation from Monisha who is a highly sensitive, emotional and sincere person.

While going home back he tells his niece Bun, “I trust you have thanked your aunt and great aunt for this most enjoyable evening spent under their auspices”. (Voices in the City, 198). The highly formal tone in this informal gathering shows that Jiban has learnt only one role to play in his life and that is of the formal, rigid, apathetic officer. It is no wonder than that he miserably fails in his relationship with Monisha. In Custody when Sarla, ridden by Indian social tradition, cannot utter any word to vent her anger against her husband and just sulks and retires to her kitchen, the writer says: “It was only when she had disappeared into this narrow, cluttered fastness of hers and could be heard freely rattling and clattering there that it occurred to Deven….” (In Custody, 127). It is through the repetition of the harsh sounds /k/, /t/, and /d/ Anita Desai expresses the turmoil in the heart of Sarla – her anger and bitterness against her husband.

To take one more example we can see the following extract and this, expresses Nanda’s attitude to Ila, which she shares with her late husband and probably also with the novelist: “Ila Das came, bobbing and bouncing, in button boots, her umbrella wildly swirling to tea” (Fire on the Mountain, 22). By emphasizing the words involved, alliteration enhances the ludicrous nature of Ila who has been presented as
rather a ridiculous person for being too involved in life which is ultimately absurd. Anita Desai is remarkably successful in portraying the psyche of her sensitive, emotional and sensuous characters. Anita Desai speaks to us not only of the tumult of the human soul but also of its depth, its poetry and pathos, its beauty and compassions. It is through “the quality of mind and soul alone” (Iyengar 1962: 343), that Anita Desai’s novels would be a major contribution to literature. That is why the existential predicament in her novels has the unique touch of the universal. Dealing with the thoughts, emotions, and sensations at various levels of consciousness, Anita Desai found the technique used by D. H. Lawrence, Virginia Woolf and William Faulkner quite suitable for her purpose of character delineation. Hence we have the use of flashbacks and the stream of consciousness technique in some of her novels, particulars, in her first novel, *Cry, the Peacock*. R. S. Sharma, comments that this is “the first step in the direction of psychological fiction in English” (Anita Desai, 127). Very few Indo-Anglian novelists have paid so much attention to form and technique. Prof. Srinivasa Iyengar rightly observes:

> Since her preoccupation with the inner world of sensibility rather than the outer world of action, she has tried to forge a style supple and suggestive enough to convey the fever and fretfulness of the stream-of-consciousness of her principal characters (Indian Writing in English, 16).

This inner world of sensibility rendered through splendid poetic prose gives a “peculiar poetic quality” (Sharma 1981: 14) to the novels of Anita Desai.
Alienation is basically a western concept and to Anita Desai alienation is more related to the emotional and mental moods and attitudes of her characters than to their spiritual, moral or ethical temperaments. The alienated self in Anita Desai experiences the pangs of emotional isolation, not any spiritual or intellectual angst. The struggle of the alienated self in Anita Desai is more similar to the Kafka protagonist than to the Camus hero. Anita Desai’s protagonists never dodge the harsh reality of existence. They encounter it single-handedly and delight in despair. Nirode in *Voices in the City*, longs to move from failure to failure. The Anita Desai protagonist is not an instance of bureaucratic alienation of Kafka’s “K”.

Alienation in Nathaniel Hawthorne suggests not only physical isolation but also psychic imperviousness. To him alienation is insulation. But in Anita Desai, alienation seldom manifests in imperviousness. Like the Kafka protagonist, the protagonists of Anita Desai too, encounter the distressing conflict between external and internal obligations. Maya’s conflict in *Cry, the Peacock* is between her obligations to the dead Toto and her biological obligations to her husband; Nanda’s in *Fire on the Mountain* is between her filial obligations to Raka, her grand-daughter and to her unrequited psycho-emotional urges for self-isolation; Sita’s in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* is between her external life on the island and her emotional life as a housewife. The alienated self as portrayed in the novels of Anita Desai is not an instance of total alienation.

Anita Desai’s women characters do not cut themselves off from the familial and social ties but remain within these orbits and protest against monotony, injustice
and humiliation. Woman in her novels is not an angel but a self-actualizing and self-realizing individual. Surprisingly, the names of her women characters like Maya, Sita and Raka are suggestive of their epic and mythic parallels. Maya says:

“As a child, I enjoyed, prices like, a sumptuous fare of
the fantasies of the Arabian Nights …. Indian
mythology …. lovely English and Irish fairy tales ……”

(Cry, the Peacock, 89).

Even Nirode’s attitudes are also partly governed by the Greek Myths and contemporary Western philosophy. Thus, Anita Desai imparts a fancifully mythopoeia colouring to the alienation of her characters. To Raja Rao, myth is a legend, to Narayan it is a social reality, but to Anita Desai, it is a psycho-emotional reality. Unlike Raja Rao and R. K. Narayan but like Arun Joshi, Anita Desai resorts to the stream-of-consciousness technique which serves as an experience of the private inner world. Anita Desai adopts the special narrative technique of setting apart from the main fictional narrative, the fragmentary passages which imply the theme of alienation.

In Bharati Mukherjee and V.S. Naipaul, it is this sense of “exile” that leads to the alienation of the characters. But in Anita Desai, it is not so. Her novels do not deal with the theme of exile: “….exile has never been my theme” (Desai Interviewed, 69) says Anita Desai. Her main thematic concern is how people cope with society, alien or not alien, without losing their sense of self-identity and individuality. In Mukherjee, it is people and cultures in collision but in Anita Desai, it is people and
people in collision, in Mukherjee, it is cultural confrontation but in Anita Desai, it is psychic confrontation. The protagonists of Anita Desai are emotional by nature. Emotionally maimed, they hail from fractured families.

Delineating the pitiable and awful plight of the alienated self in her novels, especially of housewives, facing single-handed the torments and tortures of their insensitive and temperamentally callous husbands; Anita Desai has shown her feministic concerns and rendered a new dimension to Indo-Anglian fiction. This is further enlivened by her unconventional concern with the inner reality of the characters and their psychic topography. It is interesting to observe the novelist’s statement of the shaping of her imagination. Anita Desai denies the importance of theories in the shaping of artistic imagination. According to her a work of art should grow from within, from the writer’s inner beckoning and compulsions:

I think theories of the novel are held by those of an academic or critical turn of mind, not the creative. A writer does not create a novel by observing a given set of theories … he follows flashes of individual vision, and relies on a kind of instinct that tells him what to follow and what to avoid, how to veer away from what would be destructive to his vision. It is these flashes of vision, and a kind of trained instinct that leads him … not any theories (An Interview with Anita Desai, 100).
Unlike R.K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand and Bhabani Bhattacharya, Anita Desai is chiefly concerned with the portrayal of inward or psychic reality of the characters. To use her own words, not “the one-tenth visible section of the ice-berg that one sees above the surface of the ocean…” (Replies to the Questionnaire, 1). She “probes deep into the inner recesses of the psyche of the character and delves deeper in a character or a scene rather than going round about it” (Desai Interviewed, 68). For her, literature is neither a means of escaping reality nor a vehicle for parading political, social, religious and moral ideas. It is an exploration and an enquiry. Anita Desai imparts no messages, preaches no morals. Yet her novels have intensity, though not variety. Shobha De more or less holds the same view. Like Anita Desai, Shobha De is also interested in dealing with the life of an individual, her problems, and dilemmas and struggles to face the harsh realities of life. She is neither a satirist nor a social reformer. Since Anita Desai believes that literature should deal with the most enduring matters, less temporary and less temporal than politics, she is opposed to the art of delineating contemporary or documenting socio-economic situations. Only in Clear Light of Day, there is a reference to the partition riots and the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi.

In dealing with the problem of the alienated self, Anita Desai has adopted a realistic mode of writing. Dr. Madhusudan Prasad attributes alienation in Anita Desai’s novels to temperamental incompatibility of the characters. But the feeling of alienation in most of her characters is psychotic and psycho-neurotic. It is neither the alienation of Savitri in R.K. Narayan’s The Dark Room nor that of Madeleine in Raja
Rao’s *The Serpent and the Rope*. It is the alienation of a psychically malformed character in quest of an authentic selfhood. Unlike Narayan and Malgonkar, Anita Desai does not believe in a pre-conceived plot. This is true of Shobha De also. Anita Desai does not believe in its linear movement in terms of exposition, conflict and resolution. For her, the plot is just an idea occupying one’s subconscious mind, a fragment of her imagination and a flash or her vision. In *Cry, the Peacock*, it is the character of Maya and in *Voices in the City*, the voice of the metropolis, Calcutta that smothers other voices and lend an organic unity to the novel and sensitivity to the isolation of the characters. Anand, Narayan and Bhattacharya are writers with social consciousness, and hence they chose characters from amongst the socio-economic strata of life. Anita Desai, on the other hand, is concerned with the delineation of psychological reality, and hence prefers such characters that are peculiar and eccentric rather than general and commonplace. Most of her major characters do not have fixed personalities. They are either entirely imaginary or an amalgam of several different characters. Anita Desai conceives each character as a riddle to unravel this mystery. Her characters are almost sick of life and listless playthings of their morbid psychic longings. Most of her female protagonists are abnormally sensitive and unusually solitary to the point of being neurotic. Maya in *Cry, the Peacock*, Monisha in *Voices in the City*, Sita in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* and Nanda in *Fire on the Mountain* are such women. This is conveyed through her stream of consciousness technique, her use of flashbacks and lyrical language.
The treatment of violence and death in Anita Desai’s novels is quite different. Anita Desai’s protagonists are moved by the muffled whisper of individuals, leaking of taps, creaking of shoes, chattering of birds, ticking of clocks, rattle of vehicles and the thumping of pedestrians. Right from Cry, the Peacock, this violence has persisted and permeated in her works as a kind of inevitability… metaphysical or psychological significance, not yet explored or analyzed” (Anita Desai, p.167). This violence is psychical and clinical. Cry, the Peacock begins with the death of Toto, the pet dog and ends with the death of Gautama. She associates herself with the peacocks and their knowledge of life and death. She is obsessed by death and her death-wish issues out of her frustrations and dejections in life.

In Voices in the City, violence and death are largely due to the ‘demoniac’ and ‘death city’ of Calcutta. Violence has been poetically and symbolically represented through the images of birds and animals who act as prey and predators. In Bye-Bye, Blackbird, violence has been sarcastically portrayed through jeers, taunts, sarcasms and aspersions of the white towards the blackbirds. Sarah, for instance, is the victim of individual and social violence, the victim of derisions of her countrymen for having married an Indian. In Where Shall We Go This Summer?, Sita is so much horrified by the violence rampant in our society that she is reluctant to deliver her fifth child. She undergoes fits or depression in her lone struggle to assert her identity. She is a split self and it is her desire to ‘stay whole’ (Where Shall We Go This Summer?, 107-108) that evokes in her the urge to escape to the island of Manori. She looks at the raucous and greedy crows attacking a young eagle and reflects: “There was much black drama
in this crow theatre …. murder, infanticide, incest, theft and robbery” (Where Shall We Go This Summer?, 38). Nanda Kaul in Fire on the Mountain, withdraws into the secluded world of Carignano for peace and tranquility but is upset by the rape and murder of Ila Das – a scene too horrific and ghastly to bear. In keeping with her theme and technique, Anita Desai makes a liberal use of symbols, though instinctively and subconsciously. The reiterative use of symbols not only enriches her work of art, it elevates it to aesthetic and transcendental heights. Her symbols lend docility, flexibility, richness and pliability to her works. They add to their mythopoeia beauty.

For the first time in Indian writing in English, Anita Desai makes an associative use of landscapes and myths, symbols and images (esp. of birds and animals) for characterization. This animal imagery shows that we still retain in our nature a portion of that primitive animal identity. In the words of Dr. B. Ramachandra Rao, “Anita Desai evokes the necessary mood and elicits the right emotion from the reader through a series of objective descriptions” (The Novels of Anita Desai, 10). Her feminine and domestic sensibility seldom strays beyond the narrow confines of family life. Working on such a limited canvas, she has been able to create masterpieces in Indo-Anglian literature that have won her the coveted Sahitya Academy Award. She records the psychic oscillations and tensions of her near-neurotic characters and articulates them through hints and suggestions, symbols and images. In Anita Desai’s novels, imagery lends a poetic, lyrical colouring to the problems of the estranged self and project reality through “artistic parallels more powerful and eloquent than common collocation of words” (Prasad 1984:54). Besides
enriching the artistic and aesthetic value of the novels, images in Anita Desai, enlarge the critical and interpretative horizon of her art. They suggest the protagonist’s totality of experience and build up the overall tonality of the novels.

Images in Anita Desai are not confined to the world of art only. There are scientific images too. Both these images produce aesthetic effects and impart a tangible shape to stir up emotional states of the alienated self. To Anita Desai, “it is the image that matters, the symbol, the myth” (Srivastava 1984:04). There is in her a persistent search for the most appropriate symbols and images in the expression of the subterranean and subconscious. Anita Desai’s mastery over words is manifested in her felicitous use of images. Her imagery is always in character which suits the lone plight of her characters. In Anita Desai’s novels, the struggle of the alienated self takes place through dialectic of images, through an intricate pattern of imagery. The core images of alienation are found enmeshed with the other images arising out of it. Each image holds within it the seeds of the self’s own destruction and Anita Desai’s dialectical method is a constant building up and splitting down of the images that come out of the character’s alienation experience. The images do not conflict with or contradict each other but are in perfect harmony and accord with the nature of the character’s alienation. Anita Desai does not make use of the scientific and the Biblical imagery in her novels. Through imagery, she achieves the polarization of the opposites. In her novels there are a number of symbols which have a contextual significance. In her novels characters are found to be ‘thinking in images’, i.e. images which strike the mind as the projection of other minds in immediate context with
social realities. Thus Maya’s character is projected through Monisha, Monisha’s through Sita’s and so on.

Anita Desai uses symbolic and functional imagery as the sole ingredient of her art. Her images are literal, metaphorical and frequently symbolical. Imagery in Anita Desai may be considered to constitute the poles of an axis on which her fictional world revolves. The symbolic world of her fiction, the themes of despair, death, desolation and socio-psychic fragmentation have been picturesquely presented through telling and tantalizing images. Imagery in her novels, besides articulating the estranged sensibility and the changing moods of her introverted characters, reflect their mental isolation. Botanical, zoological, meteorological and colour images add to the aesthetic beauty of her novels. Besides these primary images, she employs certain stray images which move along the periphery of her works but are nonetheless important to the theme of alienation. Of all the contemporary Indian English novelists, Anita Desai is avowedly the most powerful imagist novelist in whom images give a poetic and lyrical colouring to the problem of the alienated self.

Her novel, Cry, the Peacock, has striking images illuminating the dark and shadowy realms of Maya’s consciousness and her deteriorating psychic states. The botanical image of the “sapless and sere neem tree” and the image of “the silk-cotton trees” whose “huge, scarlet blooms” were “squashed into soft yellowish miasma” (Cry, the Peacock, 34), symbolically project the inner void and isolation of a childless housewife. To Maya, Gautama’s hand appears as cool and dry as the bark of an old and shady tree.
“The blossoms of the lemon tree were different, quite
different: of much stronger, crisper character, they
seemed cut out of hard moon shells, but a sharp knife of
mother-of-pearls, into curving scimitar petals that
guarded the heart of fragrance” . (Cry, the Peacock, 19).

For Maya, Gautama is a repelling, not a refreshing presence. The lines
reveal the flagging love-life of Maya and Gautama, an ill-assorted
couple languishing in silence. In Fire on the Mountain, Nanda wants to
withdraw from the milieu and distraction. She longs for the privacy,
seclusion, tranquility and solidity of trees:

“She stepped, backwards into the garden and the wind
suddenly billowed up and threw the pine branches about
as though to curtain her” (Fire on the Mountain, 3).

The image of the “yellow rose-creeper” that “had blossomed so youthfully last month
but was now reduced to an exhausted mass of grey creaks and groans again” (Fire on
the Mountain, 17), symbolizes the wilting and withering of her hope for a cloistered
life. In Baumgartner’s Bombay, Hugo’s isolation during his infancy is portrayed
through the image of the ‘fir-tree’: ….. he did not belong to the picture-book world of
the fir-tree….” (Baumgartner’s Bombay, 36). Botanical and zoological images occur
in clusters to denote the isolation of Nanda. Residing in the mute and desolate milieu
of Carignano, she seeks an identity, different from all bewildering passions, the
identity of “a charred tree trunk in the forest, a broken pillar of marble in the desert, a
lizard on a stone wall. A tree trunk could not harbour irritation, nor a pillar annoyance. She would imitate death, like a lizard. No one would dare rouse her. Who would dare. The parrots dared.” (Fire on the Mountain, 23).

In Voices in the City, Anita Desai uses the image of the ‘weed’ to portray the dehumanization of Nirode. He is “a dripping gargoyl, grotesque, offensive, comic emblem of the black and powerful magical rites of the city” (Voices in the City, 54). Nirode is wearied by his own incertitude in which “he swept back and forth like a long weed undulating under water, a weed that could live only in aqueous gloom, would never rise and sprout into clear day light....” (Voices in the City, 63-64).

Of the various kinds of images, zoological imagery insistently impinges on the reader’s consciousness in Cry, the Peacock, Where Shall We Go this Summer?, and Fire on the Mountain. The image of dead Toto, besides introducing the death motif in Cry, the Peacock, serves as the symbol of an abandoned self doomed to loneliness:

All day the body lay rotting in the sun. It could not be moved onto the verandah for, in that April heat, the reek of dead flesh was overpowering and would soon have penetrated the rooms….. Crows sat in a circle around the corpse, and crows will eat anything, entrails, eyes, anything. Flies began to hum amidst the limes, driving away the gentle bees and the unthinking butterflies. (Cry, the Peacock, 5).
Gautama, the fly, is driving away the gentle bees like Maya and the dead Toto, to utter desolation and isolation. The image of dead Toto is projected in different forms to describe Maya’s psychic derangement and her obsession with death. Several disturbing and horrifying images of slimy, creeping, crawling creatures such as rats, snakes, lizards and iguanas figure in close succession in a crescendo till Maya pushes Gautama over the parapet. The image of rats suckling their young symbolizes Maya’s harrowing obsession with her childlessness: “Rats will suckle their young most tenderly. I know this, as now I lived quite near one, with seven young ones nestling between her legs….” (Cry, the Peacock, 145-46). The image of the domestic cat is metamorphosed into the horrifying iguanas. On seeing it, she wails out:

‘Iguanas’ My blood ran cold, and I heard the slither of
its dragging tail even now, in white day light. Get off – I
tell you, get off Go (Cry, the Peacock, 147).

Maya stands for the domestic cat that under pressure goes wild and neurotic like the iguanas. The iguanas suggest her neurosis and melancholy. The animal images in Maya’s mind indicate her submerged instinctive drives. The image of the caged monkeys on the railway platform stirs and excites her agony. She too is caged within her nostalgic remembrances. It signifies her loss of privacy, her isolated life, a life of domestic imprisonment. The monkeys boisterously struggling inside the cage for liberation reminds Maya of her own alienation and estrangement. She is sensitively prone to self-reflection which dismantles her emotional stability and self-identity. The image of the peacock and its anguished shriek for mating call “Piya, Piya” reaches out
to Maya. She responds woefully to it, but not Gautama: ‘Can you hear them, Gautama? Do you…?’ ‘Hear what?’ (Cry, the Peacock, 175)

Gautama remains mute to the cry. He is isolated from the milieu. He has no sexual urge. Maya the ‘pea-hen’ fails to get a response from Gautama, the ‘peacock’. In Voices in the City, the prey-predator image forms an integral part of the zoological imagery. Amla’s longing to flee is expressed through the image of the horses bursting forth to release themselves from the massed impatience and the lust of the mob. The horses symbolize the possibility of isolation and escape from the pressures of conformity. The prey-and-predator image occurs in the race-course scene in which a horse, while running fast, falls on the ground hurt, and then a flock of hungry birds swoops down. We remember the abandoned corpse of Toto, encircled by crows and rotting in the sun. The tumult and chaos in Sita’s mind has also been symbolically projected through the image of the monsoon wind in Where Shall We Go This Summer?:

I wanted the book to follow the pattern of the monsoon to gather darkly and threateningly, to pour down wildly and passionately, then withdraw quietly and calmly (Desai Interviewed, 97-98).

Again in Fire on the Mountain, we have an image of the whirlpool pointing to Nanda Kaul’s incarceration and stativity: “….. life would swirl on again, in an eddy, a whirlpool of which she was the still, fixed eye in the centre” (Fire on the Mountain, 24). The imagery of urban squalor, soulless pursuit of the characters for material
prosperity and mundane pleasures create a cumulative impression of alienation. Spiritually alienated, they are doomed to rave and roam for ever in the desert of desolation, disturbed infrequently by vague forebodings and apprehensions. In Bye-Bye, Blackbird, the image of the city occurs in a different perspective. It points to the void of existence, which is mutely repulsive and incomprehensively cold. The silence and emptiness of the houses and streets of London make Dev uneasy. The hollowness of the city bewilders him:

“…. the houses and blocks of flats, streets and squares and crescents – the English habit of keeping all doors and windows tightly shut – of guarding their privacy – It remains incomprehensible to him. It never fails to make Dev uneasy to walk down a street he knows to be heavily populated and yet finds it utterly silent, deserted – a cold wasteland of brick and tile” (Bye-Bye Blackbird, 70).

Anita Desai emblematically delineates the conflict in Sita’s life through the image of a crowd of crows attacking an eagle, “wounded or else too young to fly” (Where Shall We Go this Summer?, 38). This trivial incident serves as an apt objective correlative to Sita’s alienation from her husband. Sita’s identification with the jelly fish only suggests her castaway and shipwrecked self, an image which is repeated in Baumgartner’s Bombay, in the depiction of the alien plight to Hugo Baumgartner. In Fire on the Mountain, Raka is “mosquito flown up from the plains to tease and worry”
(Fire on the Mountain, 40). Raka (literally means the moon) is ironically likened to one of “those dark crickets that leap in fright but do not sing” (Fire on the Mountain, 39). She is “lizard-like” (Fire on the Mountain, 42), “a pet insect” (Fire on the Mountain, 54), “higher than the eagles” (Fire on the Mountain, 61), or “a mosquito, minute and fine” (Fire on the Mountain, 39). Raka moves about in Kasauli like a ‘soundless moth’, solitary and isolated.

In Cry, the Peacock, the isolation between Maya and Gautama is brought out by the image of the horse, a symbol of animal blindness and apathy to the splendour of nature. In Clear Light of Day, the despair and isolation of Bim is projected through the image of the mosquito:

They had come like mosquitoes – Tara and Bakul, and behind them the Misras, and somewhere in the distance
Raja and Benazir – only to torment her and mosquito-like sip her blood. All of them fed on her blood – Now when they were full, they rose in swarms, humming away, turning their backs upon her (Clear Light of Day, 153).

The zoological image of a snail, slowly, resignedly making its way from under the flower up a clod of earth only to tumble off the top onto its side – “an eternal, miniature Sisyphus” (Clear Light of Day, 2), symbolically illuminates the character of Bim in Clear Light of Day, who withdraws herself from the El Dorado of life to shoulder all alone the responsibility of looking after her mentally retarded, dumb
brother, Baba, and her widowed Aunt Mira. In Baumgartner’s Bombay, we see the loneliness and destitution of Hugo shivering on a hot summer night “as abjectly as a dog who senses he is about to be turned out into the street …” (Baumgartner’s Bombay, 133). Baumgartner’s rootlessness, his sense of not belonging, his terrifying loneliness have been articulated through the image of the dog. Feline and canine images, a part of the zoological imagery, play a crucial role in crystallizing the predicament of the self living in closed and sequestered worlds.

Auditory image in Desai is a part of the synaesthetic imagery. The sounds produce anticipatory sensations. In Fire on the Mountain, Raka hears the call of the cuckoos, but instead of dutiful domestic birds, they emerge as symbols of demented birds that rave and beckon Raka on to fairy lands forlorn where there is “no sound, only silence, no light, only shade”. In Voices in the City, there are allusions to large Victorian houses “screened by royal palms” (Voices in the City, 125) and “old Georgian houses lined still” (Voices in the City, 142) which indicate gloomy and dejected mind, languishing in self-isolation and solitary confinement.

“The houses here have aged with grace, and faintly lit by low gas lamps glowing a pale blue in the foliage …. grown very old and deserted long ago to the vicissitudes of soot-black rain and plaster peeling sun” (Voices in the City, 125).

Nirode fears his isolation from his own past, his childhood home. The image of the house is projected through the symbol of a “shell”. Nirode is caged in his
“small shrunken shell” (Voices in the City, 110). But he steps out of it for self-expression. There is a curious merging where the body becomes the house and it is often referred to as a ‘shell’ or a cage’. The house, to Monisha, is nothing but a prison. But to her husband, the house is a symbol of safety and shelter. The four tiered balances with metal railings were so intricately crises-crossed that one could not so much thrust one’s head through them. “Enclosing shadows like stagnant well water” (Voices in the City, 109), is an indication of her depression.

With the view of conveying her theme of the essential loneliness of modern man, Anita Desai presents the flow of consciousness of her characters, mixing it, however, with the third person narrative. Her narrative technique is a blend of the conventional and the unconventional elements. The narrator, we can say, very often goes inside the characters to probe their sensitive thought currents. It is in these parts where the outside narrator goes inside that we get a highly innovative and rewarding narrative form. It rises to poetic heights to express the highly complex mental processes of Nirode, Amla and others.

In the second section of this novel Anita Desai resorts to a familiar technique of telling a story through entries from a diary. The narrative then is done in the first person, selecting only Monisha’s impressions and subjective reactions to events and persons in her life. Even as this technique lacks objectivity and also lacks the immediacy of the stream-of-consciousness technique, it gives an air of intensity and personal complexities to the story. Monisha’s despair and frustrations are revealed through her diary entries. It enhances the tragic effect of Monisha’s story. On the
whole her narrative technique is in keeping with the introspective, meandering and serious mood of the novel. It prepares the reader for a plunge into the stream-of-consciousness of the main characters. More than anything, it is perfectly suited to the theme of the novel.

In *Clear Light of Day*, Bim’s emotional estrangement is projected through the image of a flock of mynahs and the dog who serve as a foil to her isolation:

> Bim said nothing. In the small silence, a flock of mynahs suddenly burst out of the green domes of the trees and, in a loud commotion of yellow beaks and brown wings disappeared into the sun. While their shrieks and cackles still rang in the air, they heard another sound, one that made Bim stop and stare and the dog lift his head, prick up his ears and then charge madly across to the eucalyptus trees that grew in cluster by the wall … bellowed in that magnificent voice (*Clear Light of Day*, 6).

In *Baumgartner’s Bombay*, Anita Desai has portrayed the alienation of Hugo through the image of the curtain:

> He felt his life blur, turn grey, like a curtain wrapping him in its dusty felt. If he became aware from time to time, that the world beyond the curtain was growing steadily more crowded, more clamorous, and the lives
of others more hectic, more chaotic, then he felt only relief that his had never been a part of the mainstream (Desai 1989:211).

In Clear Light of Day, the image of the morning sun is unlike the one painted in Bye-Bye, Blackbird. Tara bows her head to “the morning sun that came slicing down, like a blade of steel on to the beck of her neck” (Bye-Bye, Blackbird, 1). The morning sun here is not homely but alien that acquires a brutal and harsh nature through the use of words such as ‘slicing down’ and blade of steel’. It is not a playful and cheerful sun, it is formidable and intimidating. It triggers off the feel of alienation in Tara, who drops the screen and remains isolated from its ghastly sight:

She actually got up and went to the door and lifted the bamboo serene that hung there, but the blank white glare of afternoon slanted in and slashed at her with its flashing knives so that she quickly dropped the screen (Bye-Bye, Blackbird, 21).

In Cry, the Peacock, Maya’s psychic estrangement is described in terms of the light pouring in from her window:

The light from the open window was too bight: it hurt my eyes like a giant red thumb pressed into the sockets of my eyes, end bit up Gautama’s face luridly (Cry, the Peacock, 144).
In *Clear Light of Day*, Anita Desai evokes, through Tara’s reactions to the light of the full moon, a sense of the eerie: “Like snow, its touch was cold, marmoreal and made Tara shiver ….. She could not free herself of them, of this shabby old house” (*Clear Light of Day*, 158-59). The most striking and powerful image -- projecting isolation and estrangement is the image of the cow drowned in the well in *Clear Light of Day*. The cow was drowned but was never taken out. It becomes the symbol of nausea, nausea generating isolation: “That looked like a tomb in the moonlight, a white-washed tomb rising in the midst of the inky shadows of trees and hedges, so silent – everyone asleep, or stunned by moonlight” (*Clear Light of Day*, 159). Again, in *Clear Light of Day*, the children, unlike their mother, who continually broke apart into violent eruptions of emotion, seemed rigid, like larvae in stiff-spun cocoons.

In Anita Desai’s novels, one comes across a symbolic link between different images, which form an interface, a common bond. Imagery is primarily used to capture and crystallize a wide range of experiences. It lends clarity and vividness to the situation she describes, events she documents and characters she delineates. Most of the images are so sharply condensed and chiseled that they resemble a piece of painting. The characters in Anita Desai’s fictional world are victims of alienation. They experience a fragmentation and disintegration which is conveyed through images. Words like ‘tunnel’, ‘net’, ‘cobweb’, ‘snare’, ‘hedge’, ‘cage’, ‘tomb’, evoke a sense of incarceration and isolation in which the characters live.

The images of isolation, at times, overlap adding to the lyrical and rhythmic splendor of her novels. They are simple but histrionically powerful. Highly functional,
they form an integral part of the fiction. Seldom decorative or ornamental, they reveal a world inside, a world of the inner weather. “These images”, observes Amina Amin, “look contrived and far-fetched, a striving after effect for its own sake, without relevance to the emotions felt or the situations described” (Littcrit, 36). But in the words of Madhusudan Prasad, “Anita Desai’s imagery which is always considerably functional ….. Lusciously lyrical, her image patterns are singularized by interrelatedness and continuity” (Perspectives on Anita Desai, 76).

Nanda Kaul in Fire on the Mountain longs to be “a tree, no more and no less”, and this sort of isolation leads the protagonist into a state of silent alienation. The images of destruction and violence portray the plight of the protagonists inexorably driven towards self-effacement and self-alienation and struggling for self-identification. The simple but dramatically powerful images in the novels of Anita Desai trace the growth of the self from a state of seething discontent and despair to a state of psychic submission and spiritual consolation. Images of anguish in the external of sights and sounds mature to images of spiritual identification of the inner world of the psyche. Rhythmically condensed, subtly chiseled images are rightly woven into the characters to point out the emotional disturbances through successive stages of alienation leading to self-identification.

The title of the novel Fasting, Feasting is oxymoronic and the use of the coma makes it quite unusual. It applies to various levels of the theme. On the one hand, it is fasting at the emotional level and feasting at another level. This paradox runs through the novel. The girls Uma and Aruna are craving for parental affection and love. But
Mama and Papa are basking and feasting in each other’s company. Arun has a young and lovely girl and finds his own way of feasting. Marriage for Uma comes as fasting. The Patton family story revolves around the two concepts of feasting and fasting.

Mrs. Patton and Melanie are literally fasting where as Mr. Patton is virtually feasting. Then there is Melanie who—for want of sympathy on the part of her parents—is starving for attention. The title indicates two different states of mind and the theme moves and unravels through two worlds.

Food, both in India and in America is merely an uninteresting ritual, more of a hasty formality. Inner peace is the prerequisite to enjoying good food. In India Uma’s father made cooking and eating an elaborate ritual which the family did not like it. Similarly, in America Mr. Patton’s barbecue fails to attract the members of his family. The failure of Uma’s father and Mr. Patton to attract the other members of their respective communities in their extensive food-ritual symbolizes the crumbling down of patriarchal superiority in the changed scenario where woman have proved their worth by rising out of erstwhile servility due to an intelligent compromise between the domesticity and their social duties. The polity of food is viewed at large from a social and cultural point of view and the food habits reflect religious background of the family. (Three Women Novelists, 92).

Her counterpart Shobha De adopts her own novelistic technique to narrate her story in her novels. Though one can find similarities in their art there are striking differences in their style. In the use of language, Shobha De seems to be breaking new grounds. Mulk Raj Anand has already shown in his writings how Punjabi abusive
‘Kya cheez thi’, thereby adding another dimension to Indian English. The list is not exhaustive.

Virginia Woolf once complained that the range of language available to James Joyce, in other words, a man’s language if used by a woman writer would be objectionable, was not available to her. The woman writer, especially in a highly conservative society as the Indian, would think twice before a kind of language that would brand her as vulgar and obscene. But Shobha De breaks the shackles of linguistic discipline by boldly employing what would normally be considered highly objectionable language, thereby liberating the language also from the male hegemony. For example she uses words like ‘fuck you’, ‘Chickening out’, ‘Holy shit’, etc to establish her stance. On the other hand Anita Desai does not use such words in her novels. Shobha De’s use of language including creation of new idioms from Indian languages to English adds to the charm of the novel. The narrative holds our breath for sensuous opulence and subtlety of variation and the result is the novel becomes popular. Another interesting feature of her novels is she employs liberally Indian English constructions particularly; the present continuous form where a simple present tense is needed.

I’m knowing everyone in the industry. What is your good name? Is your beti knowing dancing? Actually I’m knowing everybody – dance directors, music directors, cameramen . . all big big producers, hero-log, heroines, everybody. These days demand is good. South
Indian girls are good. Nokhit-pit, no faltu nakhras. In Bombay all are like South Indian girls too much, maybe I can get a baby role. . . (Starry Nights, 12)

Shobha De’s ironical description of her characters in her novels is interesting and arresting.

Even before their honeymoon was over Akshay had betrayed her trust at least half-a-dozen times. He was an indiscriminating womanizer. And a champion hypocrite. (Starry Nights, 68)

Malini hated sex. Or perhaps she hated sex with Akshay who did tend to have a sadistic streak.

. . . . Now that she had done the considerate Indian-wife thing and given him two male children she felt freed of all conjugal responsibility. . . . Akshay loved watching Swedish blue films – especially the more sado-masochistic variety. She knew Akshay often masturbated in bed and even that put her off. What was he-some kind of insatiable monster? Could he think of nothing but sex? (Starry Nights, 71-72)

Suddenly she noticed Sudha standing on the stair case . . she looked almost pretty. Nice figure, Lovely eyes.
Lustrous hair. And fairer than her. Much fairer . . .

(Starry Nights, 122)

Aasha Rani’s hatred for her mechanical life is revealed in the following lines:

‘Money, money, money. That’s all you think of. Well,
I’m fed up of being your money machine. I’ve done
enough for everybody-you, Sudha and the others – now,
I want to live for myself and enjoy life.’ Amma glared
at her, eyes blazing, ‘Ungrateful wretch!’ (Starry Nights,
183-84)

The birth of her daughter gives her rays of hope:

Sasha was born on a beautiful spring morning with Jay
holding Aasha Rani’s hand. ‘She is like a lovely little
primrose,’ Jay said tenderly, stroking Aasha Rani’s hair.

(Starry Nights, 220)

Shobha De uses the city, Calcutta as a metaphor for freedom in her novel Second Thoughts. It is interesting to note that all the titles of the novels of Shobha De begin with the letter ‘S’ (Socialite Evenings, Selective Memory, Sultry Days, Sisters, Snapshots, Starry Nights, Second Thoughts, Strange Obsession, Surviving Men). It might be accidental, without any design or the phoneme /s/ in the beginning of the titles of her novels seems to correspond with her name. The novel Sultry Days is autobiographical to some extent and the entire story is told by the heroine-narrator Nisha. What emerges is a multiplicity of points of view. The novelist has faithfully
portrayed the diversity of characters, both male and female, and their individual approaches to life and the challenges. The narrator in Shobha De’s novel not only delineates the plights of all other important characters, which she closely knows and most of whom confide in her, but also voices occasionally the views and philosophy of the novelist herself. Over the years, Shobha De, the bete noire of the contemporary Indian literary circle, has become synonymous with an enviable appeal and an undeniable charm. The time-tested populist ingredient of sex and a tempestuous style go to make her one of the most popular writers today. Her mélange of themes, variety of characters, startlingly captivating thoughts, all forcefully and bluntly expressed, lend a fascination for her readers. Also there is a lot that is amusing, outrageous, thought-provoking, even shocking. She has developed for her use a curious brand of English, which may be called Shobha De’s ‘Hinglish,’ which helps her immensely in presenting her narrative with an unsparing transparency.

Notwithstanding all the achievements, Shobha De remains a ‘popular’ writer though she frequently uses abusive words and uninhibited employment of salacious details. There is no such accusation against Anita Desai. Still some may object to the pornographic ingredients in her fiction. A.G. Khan’s very strong criticism, “In fact I would regard her entire acrobatics as an attempt to reduce ‘fiction’ to ‘fucktion,’” (Fiction of the Nineties, quoted by Madhumalati Adhikari, 284) seems to be true. But, the novelist has viewed the conflicts and contradictions of human existence from multiple angles. Pornography in her novels becomes a major symbol of the female’s defiance against sexual harassment. The pornographic ingredients, in fact, are meant
to bring out the exploitation of women in the male dominated society. Though the
details seem to be shocking they reveal the stark reality. Her women characters are
generally devoid of genuine love and affection from their husbands and they face a
hostile society with, guilt and resentment. Under these circumstances the women
characters of Shobha De are forced to cast off the conventional sense of morality and
sometimes reveal in the erotic celebration of the body. Just because the novelist
indulges in pornographic details, where they are needed in her novels she cannot be
denigrated as a vulgar novelist. Born of her startling imagination, that often appears
fertile to the youth and fetid to the old; her female protagonists like Karuna and Anjali
in Socialite Evenings and Aasha Rani in Starry Nights unabashedly unleash an attack
on the male-chauvinism. The sexual taboos tumble haplessly like a pack of cards as
and when her women walk. With a disconcerting penchant for the pornographic
details in her fiction, Shobha De futuristically foreshadows the form of feminism in
the India of the twenty-first century. Her novels have often evoked hostile reviews, in
spite of their grand sales. Her novels might indicate the arrival of Indian woman in
society with a rebellious defiance against the well-entrenched moral and orthodoxy of
the patriarchal social system.