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FEMININE PSYCHE IN THE NOVELS OF ANITA DESAI

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Abstract: Feminine psyche constitutes a major part of Anita Desai's fictional material. Women writers of all ages have a natural preference for writing about women characters. Anita Desai is no exception in so far as she has written, by and large, about women characters; and no wonder, most of her novels move around women characters. By 'Psyche' Jung means:

“Not only what we generally call 'soul' but the totality of all psychic processes, conscious as well as unconscious, hence something broader and more comprehensive than the soul”.

To understand 'Feminine', just as we cannot confuse female and feminist, we also cannot presume that anything and everything written by women, will be 'feminine'. To quote Toril Moi:

“It has long been an established practice among most feminists to use 'Feminine' (and Masculine) to represent social constructs . . . and to reserve 'Female' and 'Male' for the purely biological aspects of sexual difference. Thus, 'feminine' represents nurture, and 'female' - nature in this usage . . . Seen in this perspective, patriarchal oppression consists of imposing certain social standards of femininity on all biological women in order precisely to make us believe that the chosen standards for 'femininity' are natural. Thus, a woman who refuses to conform can be labelled both unfeminine and unnatural . . . Patriarchy, in other words, wants us to believe that there is such a thing as an essence of femaleness, called femininity. Feminists must therefore always insist that though women undoubtedly are female, this in no way guarantees that they will be feminine”.

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The word 'Feminine', as used in the title of this chapter, is not meant to denote 'an essence of femaleness' but rather a mode of characterizing females in fiction. The novels of Anita Desai revolve around the women protagonists, who mirror the persisting grip of the culturally imposed 'Feminine', upon their female conscious and unconscious. Thus, it is implied that the author's understanding of what constitutes 'Femininity' in behavior and thought, is intermingled with the creation of female characters who define themselves according to the socially prescribed norms for a woman. It is also informed by a feminist's awareness about the kind of limitations inevitably faced by the 'feminine' self that is at the centre of their novels and is explored through the female protagonists.

The present study is aimed at examining the commonly recurring image of the lonely woman protagonists in the novels of Anita Desai, chiefly to explore the female psyche in the different stages of a woman's life, particularly the influences that shaped the females psyche that makes it conform to rigid patriarchal structures; and to analyse the different thought patterns that emerge from the different experiences portrayed in the novels with reference of the main characters.

These thought patterns emerge from the battle-ground of life itself with relation

to the main characters in the novels. Even though a lot has been written about women by both men and women in the past, yet scientific studies on women have shown an increase only in the recent decades. In our country, most of the studies on women have been undertaken by sociologists, economists, historians, political scientists and educationists, besides medical practitioners.

Psyche has always been woven into political and realistic writings. Psyche describes the realms of the unconscious and the world of imagination. Among Indian writers in English, too, this theme has been dealt with extensively. Mulk Raj Anand, Kamala Markandeya, Nayantara Sahgal, Shashi Deshpande, Anita Desai are to name a few writers who have dealt with this theme in their novels in one or the other form. As Eric Rabkin in *The Fantastic in Literature*, expresses the view that the fantastic is nearly allied to "disexpected" than unexpected. The important thing is that it takes the readers by surprise. He also points out that fantastic is comprehensible only in relation to reality. It gives a greater degree of experimentation on any level - the level of event or plot, of characters, language and thought. It has also taken various forms. Fantasy takes the form of 'utopia' or 'dystopia' as in Sunita Namjoshi's *Mothers of Maya Diip*. In R. K. Narayan's *The Painter of Signs* and *The Vender of Sweets*, it incorporates with a fable. It also incorporates itself with myth and religion, as in Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* and Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel*. In the novels of Anita Desai there is a willing suspension of disbelief.

Anita Desai, in her novels, mainly explores the emotional world of women, revealing a rare imaginative awareness of various deeper forces at work and a profound understanding of feminine sensibility as well as psychology. She sets herself to voice the mute miseries and helplessness of millions of married women tormented by existentialist problems and predicaments. She is concerned with the problems faced by her protagonists. Her serious concern is the "journey within", her central characters mostly being women. The recurring theme in her novels is the trauma of existence in a hostile, male-dominated society that is conservative and taboo-ridden. She portrays the inner conflicts of her characters and also underlines their individuality and quest for freedom.

Nature is not merely a matter of heredity. It is also a matter of inclination and tendency of the different combinations of instinct, feeling and thought, of the surfacing or otherwise of the unconscious and the subconscious. The unconscious itself is determined by various factors, dominant among them being a character's relationship with others, which itself is governed by the unconscious. But the self, in order to grow towards harmony, to move towards wholeness, needs to attain some measure of distance from the central being, to reach a position of being self-critical, in order to be able to analyse the ramifications.

In psychological terms, it is convenient to talk of the conscious and the sub-conscious layers, of the extrovert and the introvert types; but in ordinary terms, it would be the equivalent of stepping out of oneself. One of the ways to do this is by questioning one's motive and situations, another by going through the process of recollecting the past. These are not foolproof methods, for, whether they lead to sanity or insanity, distancing or self-glory and self-pity depends on the initial point - why the person is motivated to go through the past! But no matter in which direction it leads, the process is excruciatingly painful and violent. This mechanism then acts more and more actively to face the anxious situation that tends to build up tensions in human minds. Coleman has commented in *Abnormal Psychology and Modern life*, "Strong emotions make

maximum energy resources available to the organism for meeting such emergencies". It has been proved that philosophers and writers were the first to discover the 'unconscious'. As Usha Bande expresses it:

"Freud, during his studies, often maintained that the credit of discovering the unconscious goes to the poets and philosophers before him, and that, he simply discovered the scientific method by which the unconscious could be studied".

The normal or abnormal behaviour of a person expresses or reflects conflicts and complexes of a person. These constitute the inner-nature and if it is "suppressed, one gets sick; if it is encouraged it leads to healthy personality" When inner nature is suppressed it gives rise to frustrations. This fact has been illuminated by Coleman also:

"Frustration results when our motives are thwarted either by some obstacle that blocks or impedes our progress towards a desirable goal, or by the absence of an appropriate goal. Frustration may be minor or they may be serious threats to our welfare, they may arise from outer or inner sources".

In the characters of Desai's novels many internal frustrations arise out of psychological barriers. When these barriers, in the form of reality and ethical restraints, break down her characters get involved in self-recrimination and a feeling of guilt. Her characters suffer from loneliness which gives rise to insecurity. There is tension in their mind which results in their strained relationships. They react vehemently and emotionally to these situations. Because of feelings of insecurity, her characters do suffer and also cause suffering for others. In this connection Coleman has observed:

"Feelings of insecurity may have widely differing effects on behaviour, but typically they lead to a restriction in activities, to fearfulness and apprehension and a failure to participate fully in one's world."

Such psychological problems leave a restraining effect on their mutual relationship. Anita Desai, almost all in her novels, portrays female protagonists who are hyper-sensitive, solitary and retrospective. Maya, Monisha, Sita are obsessed with the idea of death. They are aware that they are living on the edge and show a marked tendency towards neurotic behaviour. Desai is interested in peculiar and eccentric characters. In an interview to Yashodhara Dalmia she told:

"I am interested in characters who are not average but have retreated or been driven into some extremity of despair and so turned against general current. It is easy to flow with the current: it makes no demands; it casts 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 emotional needs of these women remain unsatisfied, with the result, they are withdrawn into a life of seclusion and loneliness. These women seem to live in closed, sequestered limbo of private suffering which is real, though different from the material suffering of rural female characters in the earlier novels of Markandaya, or the suffering of females due to marital disharmony in the novels of Nayantara Sahgal. According to Yashodhara Dalmia, "Only the individual, the solitary being, is of true interest."

The novels of Anita Desai present characters undergoing psycho-logical turbulence arising out of a conflict between reality and illusion that the characters build up for themselves. In psychological terms, this types of psychic nature in called 'semiotics' and 'regression'. We find both kinds of psychic nature in her novels, but mainly 'semiotics' - Maya in *Cry The Peacock*, Nirode and Monisha in *Voices In The City*, Nanda Kaul in *Fire On The Mountain*, Sita in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*, Sarah in *Bye-Bye, Blackbird* and Sarla and Deven in *In Custody*. We find all characters clinging to imagination or belief as they are unable to relate to reality. It is a kind of temporary compromise with the immediate environment. The resulting complicity increases as it persists in a given frame-work in which the characters operate, as has been rightly pointed out by Jasbir Jain in Desai's novels :

"Fantasy is never a total structure as in the world of fairy tale and it does not necessitate a complete shifting of perspective but is always a part of the total structure and is constantly juxtaposed with other worlds and does, at some point, merge with the normative, commonly accepted world view".

In the novels of Anita Desai, we also find characters suffering from loneliness, unfulfilling relationship and psychic disorders. This void in their lives is, at times, filled by illusions. Being hypersensitive to these inadequacies in their lives, they turn to romanticize these with their imagination, by weaving a happy world for themselves. As N. R. Gopal has pointed out:

"Characters in the novels of Mrs. Anita Desai are generally neurotic females, highly sensitive but sequestered in a surrounding as a consequence of their failure or unwillingness to adjust with the reality. They often differ in their opinion from others and embark on a long voyage of contemplation in order to find the meaning of their existence".

This search for identity by these characters often leads to escapism. Imagination may be a desire to escape for adventure or for freedom from the bondages of life. Julia Segal, in *Phantasy In Every Day Life*, develops the aspects of liberating experience:

"In some ways the word fantasy seems to give me a similar freedom as a child gains when he learns the concept of 'Pretend'. What is 'Pretend' can be subjected to different laws from what is real. As a result, the child is free to play and to experiment in a way that it could not do if it did not make the distinction."

But there is no permanent relief for them in illusion. The objective world, consisting of other human beings, acts upon them and shatters them. It becomes difficult for them to grapple with reality without these beliefs which had sustained them so far. This anxiety leads to a conflict between their belief and objective reality. As a result, they contemplate their own identity. They realize that their failure stems from their inability to come in terms with objective reality and inability to move beyond their self-created belief:

“The true identity of characters lies in their attempt to reconcile their subjective vision with the objective world and its demands, thus achieving an openness, enabling them to look at things as they really are”.

These beliefs objectify themselves in many ways, as hallucinations and nightmares, as wishful thinking and personal aspirations or as obsession or a psychological fear. Anita Desai has used imagination as a narrative technique in *Cry the Peacock* to explore the interior world of Maya's fears. She uses it as a means of reinterpreting reality in *Where Shall We Go This Summer? And Clear Light of Day*. In *Fire on the Mountain* she projects belief as a part of the total structure to enable the characters to relate to each other. Imagination creates an alternate reality.

In *Cry, The Peacock*, imagination and fantasy are used to expose Maya's inability to grow out of the confines of her world in order to merge with the larger world. She clings to fantasy as she is unable to relate to reality. Anita Desai has probed into the consciousness of the central character, Maya, to bring out this conflict between reality and illusion. Maya and Gautama represent the conflict between objective reality and self-nurtured belief. One is that of intellectual detachment, personified in the mythic figure of Gautama and the other is the world of belief personified in Maya. Their very names suggest their nature: 'Maya' means belief and 'Gautama' evokes the figure of Gautama, the Buddha, who perceived the world of belief and by renunciation brought an end to sorrow.

Maya's relationship with reality passes through three phases. The first is that of her childhood when she is brought up within a limited world. The second is her life with Gautama when she makes abortive attempts to recede into her past and equally abortive ones to reach out to others. The third and final phase is, her total surrender to the world of her fears and to insanity.

In the very beginning of the novel we find this conflict in the mind of Maya. She is unable to accept the death of her pet dog, Toto. When Maya looked upon Toto's dead body she, "screamed and rushed to the garden top to wash the vision from her eyes, continued to cry and ran, defeated, into the house". The sorrow of the death and detached behavior of Gautama towards this incident make her lonely and pushes her back into her childhood memories, as they are like a gentle, poignant lullaby. Memories of her childhood are pleasant and happy. That world was "like a toy, especially made for me, painted into my favourite colours, set moving to my favourite tunes." Maya longs for the leisurely breakfast in the garden with her father.

“She enjoyed the sumptuous fare of the fantasies of the Arabian Nights, the glories and bravado of Indian mythology, long and astounding tales of princes and regal queens, jackal and tigers, and, being my father's daughter, of the lovely English and Irish fairy tales as well”

Maya lived in this fantastic world of beauty and luxury. The toys and their world was more real to her than the real world. She herself realises later on that her childhood was one in which much was excluded, ‘Which grew steadily more restricted, unnatural even.’ But her encounter with reality is horrifying which disturbs her. She has been brought up by her father like a princess, preventing her from seeing the ugliness and sorrow of the world. She becomes so sensitive that she identifies herself with natural objects and animals but not with human beings. The incident of bear and bear-trainer makes it clear. She gets ‘lavish pleasure’ watching the bear dance, but is also anxious that trainer probably does not give much food to the bear, and this haunts her so much that on that night she dreams of hungry bears ‘grabbing and gesticulating,’ and falls ill. This shows that Maya had a partial vision of the world, a world devoid of human beings and perceived only through senses. Meena Belliappa observes that the ‘world of childhood . . . to Maya stood for a state of grace’. Her childhood has been carefree, perhaps more so in memory than in reality. She had been free to romp with pets or smell flowers. She is almost as free, now years later, except for two constraints - Gautama and the astrologer's prediction. She cannot deal with them rationally. Maya descends into her childhood days. She feels comfortable for a little while, but when reality looms large over her inner fears, she is nagged by feelings of unease:

“Its presence was very real and truly physical – shadows cast by trees, split across the leaves and grasses towards me, with horrifying swiftness . . . I leapt from my chair in terror, overcome by a sensation of snakes coiling and unlocking their moist lengths about me, of evil descending from an overhanging branch, of an insane death, unprepared for, heralded by deafening drum beats.”

Maya loves nature and finds peace and contentment in the beauty of nature. It is as if she is running away from the horror of death, unable to face the facts of life to the lap of mother nature. She has a beautiful garden, with many flowers. She recognises each and every flower with their perfume. The end of the flowering season means:

“a sense of all good things coming to an end and only the long, weary summer to look forward to . . . a Sunday evening sense that precedes each tedious Monday”.

Maya wants the same understanding about nature from her husband, but he does not notice anything. Maya is looking for a total understanding and love from her husband, which, when she lacks, plunges her into the abyss of depression and melancholy. She is soothed by contact, relationship, communion as they soothe her till the disturbed murmurs of agitation get clamour.

The growing distance between Maya and her husband, Gautama, hurls her into the abyss of nightmares, which is greatly enhanced by the constant reminder of the prophecy of albino priest. At times, Maya tries to get out of her ghastly nightmares by going out and meeting her friends. It was as if she was getting "more aware of a world that lay beyond the enclosed one which Gautama and I, and recently, the smart shadow of the pale albino, inhabited."

But her meetings with her friends, Pom and Leila, are unsatisfactory for her. She is disturbed by their problems, and it affects her greatly, as she gets emotionally involved with them. She is in great need of support and understanding of Gautama which she is denied, with the result that she closes herself in a private world. But this, too, is incapable of transforming into an anchor she perceives the transience of her dreams and changing into nightmares. She is so obsessed with the predicted disaster that every trivial thing becomes an intimidation of the forthcoming disaster, and she is frightened by the prospects of death. She is in love with life, with the idea of death looming large on her mind. Maya lives in this 'mortal agony' in the quality of life and death, illusion and reality, and she fails to reconcile them. This duality of Maya's existence continues till the end of the novel. Her contact establishes a contrast between her world of belief and the human world of action and business. But Maya is not ready to compromise. She refuses to participate in the world of others. Due to the constant conflict between reality and belief, Maya loses her sanity completely and she kills Gautama by pushing him off the roof, and she herself descends irrevocably into the world of past.

There is also a clash between the two philosophical levels represented by Maya and Gautama. Gautama explains the teachings of The Bhagvat Gita. He points out the deficiency in her outlook towards life as she lacks detachment:

"Life is a fairy tale to you still. What have you learnt of realities? The realities of common human existence, not love and romance, but living and dying and working, all that constitutes life for the ordinary man".

But Maya is fully satisfied with her world, which is complete for her. She tells Gautama:

"I don't care to detach myself into any other world than this. It isn't boring for me . . .

the world is full-full, Gautama. Do you know what that means? I am not bored with

it that I should need to hunt another one!"

Yet, this detachment from the external world and her absorption into the inner world does not offer any freedom but merely enslaves her. The novel, thus, questions the nature of reality. In this connection, Jasbir Jain has posed the query

"who is involved and who is detached in the true sense? Gautama who needs to keep himself busy and engaged in actively, or, Maya, whose inner being creates a full life? Who is more wise of the two - Gautama who dreads passion; or Maya who is lost in emotion?"

This mental retrogression suggests that Maya has not been able to adjust herself in the world of reality, and after killing her husband, she mentally goes back to her protected and pampered childhood, the best part

of her life. Thus, in the character of Maya, Anita Desai has presented the feminine psyche of both, a girl and a woman.

Anita Desai's second novel, *Voice in The City*, has received adequate critical response. The title of the novel has made critics to debate on the point whether Nirode or the city of Calcutta may be called the hero of the novel. Desai's skillful handling invests the city with a character. Nirode's sketch on the other hand is rather insipid.

It is true that the city of Calcutta is the locale for most of the actions of the novel, and serves as a background, and it influences and affects all the major characters in the novel. But the novel itself is primarily a family drama around which the story revolves. Even the blurb of the novel says that the novel describes the corrosive effects of the city life upon the Indian family. The whole novel is divided into four sections - 'Nirode', 'Monisha', 'Amla' and 'Mother'. This chapter-division tells us that in spite of the city of Calcutta, the novel is more concerned with the characters than with the background. Although this section-division refers to four characters only, yet, primarily, it is the story of Nirode.

In the novel again we find the conflict between belief and reality in the two characters - Monisha and Amla. As in the earlier novel, this conflict leads to suicide and disillusionment. Monisha lives in terrible isolation in the utter darkness of her life without any communication. She, too, suffers from lacks of understanding and love from her husband, Jiban. This results in her living in illusion, enclosed in locked container. Monisha is unable to face the realities of life that she has to change herself according to the new atmosphere of her husband's home. She withdraws herself and is afraid of involvement. Monisha lives her life without a touch of love or hate or warmth. She is frightened to find that she is unable to be affected by the music of the street singers, whereas, others are moved by it. She feels that even a terrible cyclone would not touch her. She is greatly disturbed with the charge of the theft made on her. It makes her realise her position in the family whence she has to pick herself up unsupported by her husband. This reality is too demanding on her and she commits suicide by burning herself.

Amla, the young vivacious sister of Monisha who comes to Calcutta, also faces the same conflict. Amla plunges into parties, on reaching Calcutta, trying to escape the suffocating realities of life. She is disillusioned by the superficialities of society and feels suffocated. She meets Dharma, a middle aged, married painter, and thinks she is in love with him. It is almost a case of love at first sight. It brings a conspicuous change in both of them. Dharma changes into "chivalrous, tender, subtle and prophetic", and asks Amla to be his model for paintings. Amla too feels a change in herself. "She felt herself being torn, torn with excruciating slowness and without anaesthesia, from the Amla of a day, an afternoon ago." This relationship is not accepted by Monisha, Nirode and Aunt Lila. Amla is advised against such involvement by Monisha but she is unable to resist Dharma's charm and is drawn to him again and again.

In the novel one sees that Dharma is inspired by Amla and that she had enabled him to see

"What the subconscious does to an impressionable creature,

how much more power it has on them than sun and circumstances

put together."

Dharma's development as an artist and a rediscovery of himself due to the inspiration provided by Amla is evident in the novel. A similar kind of change is seen in Amla. Earlier she had a frivolous approach to life and glorifies it in her peak. 'Season' of love and enjoyment. She matures with Dharma's 'measured talk and serene appearance.' In spite of all this inspiration and understanding, a strain is there in their relationship, which is not well-defined to either of them. She wishes to connive at Dharma's allegiance to his wife and the social propriety and impropriety of maintaining his relationship with her. Such relationships are still unacceptable in the society; but Amla can not dissociate herself from these facts. It is the balanced reality and hallucination. Both of them face a conflict in their minds. Dharma expresses it in his paintings; whereas, in Amla it is symbolised in her dreams. There seems no way out of this situation. As soon as Amla learns about Dharma's daughter, she reacts instantly and decides to break free of him. As Usha Bande has concluded, "love, which could be an active force in their minds, has a different effect, as it is not love. What their conscious minds construe as love is an illusion, created unconsciously, though, to relieve them of their isolation".

Thus, an attempt to escape from the realities of life is misconstrued as lure and leads to disillusionment in the case of Amla.

Their brother Nirode, is also running away from reality. He is obsessed with the thought of her mother's affair with Major Chadha in Kalimpong. He wants to forget himself in the hustle-bustle of the Calcutta. He does not want to have any relation with his mother. Even a letter from her is like

"It was sinking his teeth through a sweet mulberry to bite into a caterpillar's entrails."

Nirode calls her an old she-cannibal. His running away his past, trying to forget by getting over-busy with the publication of his magazine, Voice. His mother's offer of her sending money to him fills him with anger.

"Raising himself on an elbow which shakes and trembles with the pressure of his shrunken body, he speaks with ferocity."

Nirode has only hatred for his mother and he spits the venom of his thoughts to Amla, about his mother. He questions Amla.

"Ask her about the love that made her swallow father whole, like a cobra swallows a fat, petrified rat, then spews him out in one flabby yellow mess".

Amla sees him as insane, pale, bony, monster who seemed to live on his venom alone. She is repulsed with these thoughts of Nirode and inquires, "What do you know of mother? or her relationship with father? What do you know of Major Chadha? She accuses Nirode of living in his foul hole, away from the world, imagining it to be so depraved. "It is you, it is you who are depraved, who makes love into something ugly

and degenerate."

In the end, after the death of Monisha, the detachment of the mother disturbs Nirode and Amla. He says, she is not merely good, she is not merely evil, she is good and she is evil. She is our knowledge and our ignorance. She is everything to which we are attached; she is everything from which we will always be detached. She is reality and illusion, she is the world and she is Maya.

This vision of his mother is analogous to the representation of Shakti or Kali. Nirode, too, swings between reality and illusion and it results in the sense of escapism which is predominant in the novel.

In this novel also Anita Desai has portrayed feminine psyche mainly through the character of Monisha, although there are other women characters in the novel. Monisha is similar to Maya of *Cry, the Peacock*, in that she is also childless, sensitive and a victim of ill-matched marriage. If Maya is lonely in her family because it is a nuclear family with no one except her husband, Monisha's family has too many people, since it is a joint family. Through Monisha, Anita Desai has portrayed the psyche of a sensitive intellectual woman who is suffocated in uncongenial atmosphere of her in-laws house.

In the next novel, *Bye-Bye Blackbird*, the characters, Adit and Sarah, travel through the world of fantasy to come to terms with the reality of their situation. They make adjustments with the external reality by shedding their beliefs and myths. Adit, an Indian immigrant in England, lives in the illusion of belonging to the foreign land. He scoffs at Dev for his idea of not being accepted by the Englishmen and their country, and is ready to undergo any amount of humiliation flung at him. He is ready to ignore them. England is the land of opportunities for him; and he hardly notices any drawback there. India symbolises poverty, dirt and boredom for him. It seems that Adit is trying to escape them and live in the illusion of an Elysian world in England. Adit seems perfectly happy with his life in England. He enjoys the prosperity of the land. Even Dev's derogatory comments on the immigrants cannot move him. He says, "I see gold, everywhere gold, like Sarah's golden hair. Its my favourite colour."

"Pack up all my cares and woe

Here I go, Singing low,

Bye-Bye, Blackbird.

Where somebody cares for me,

sugar is sweet and so is she,

Bye-Bye, Blackbird".

This is the favourite song of Adit. He is nicely adjusted in England with its life. He cannot tolerate the laziness of Indians, the unpunctuality, dirt and heat, a common feature in India. He longs to go back to England, to the nice put and 'Pick up a glass of Gin and eye the girls and be happy again'. His philosophy is 'live for the moment, don't think and don't worry'. But Adit feels an unknown anxiety and abstract pain on return to London from a weekend at his in-laws place. He grows nostalgic about India. The lush green countryside of Hampshire do not please him, instead, they remind him of the landscape of India, "the vast moonscape of dust, rock and baren earth" having mud houses and dead trees. The river Thames reminds him

of shameful little Jamuna, the slush and mud of Ganges'. Adit longs to see an Indian sunset with its wild conflagration, rose and orange flamingo pink and lemon:

“It was as though some black magician had placed an evil pair of spectacles on his eyes which led him to see, not what was before him, but what the black magician wished him to see, distorted and terrifying.”

Adit behaves strangely with his wife, at his work. He makes everything very difficult for Sarah to understand. It was as if

“the lot of yearning shut up and enclosed inside him for so long, releasing it now like a dam that releases its water when it is full to bursting.”

The placidity and munificence and ease of England prove too much for him, and he undergoes a conflict between illusion and reality. Anita Desai has projected the conflict in his mind between illusion and reality. Adit is haunted by nostalgia after his stay in his in-laws house. He begins to see the reality from which he was running away. Now Adit wants to escape from this world of illusion into the world where he would "pack up all my cares and woe." He is reminded of the 'wild, wild grandeur, its supreme grandeur, its loneliness and black, glittering enhancement,' of India when he sees the Hampshire landscape:

“The truth was that his disenchantment with England had begun sometime before he read the news in the papers, but this he stowed away in his subconscious and it was the myth he lived by and acted on”.

He cannot bear the show of fakery and falsehood of being happy in England by the Indians. They display an unnatural strain. He makes it evident to everyone that is stifling, always to be aware of who you are and where you are. Adit is a changed person and realises that his country, India, guarantees him love, respect, care, security which he will not get in England. He resolves his conflict and decides to return to his country. Adit realises that his life in England was unreal. It was little India in England. “It has no reality at all, we just pretend all the time . . . Now it has to be the real thing. I must go.”

Sarah, the English wife of Adit, also faces the dilemma of this conflict. She has lost her identity by marrying an Indian. She fluctuates between reality and unreality. There is split within herself as she cannot understand where she truly belongs to. She is constantly under tension which makes her life unreal; and that is why she is affected by anxiety and insecurity. The future is unknown and dark and the harmony of her life is broken by her contact with Adit. “To her closed eyes the darkness moved in a tumult of black shapes that would not settle. Her dreams too were in pieces.”

She faces the dilemma of up rootedness, and so, it is deeper and darker. To escape it, Sarah creates a world of illusions of her own. Her love for India and its customs is shown when she is with Miss Moffit, admiring everything Indian. She longs to go to India and is fascinated by the number of relatives there. When asked by Adit whether she could leave her country for India, she replies willingly and promptly, ‘I could,

when I think of all the Millers of England, I could leave at once.’ Sarah has come to realise that she will have to face the reality of leaving her country. When she decides to accompany Adit for India, she knows she is bidding farewell to her English self:

“It was her English-self that was receding and fading and dying. She knew it was her English-self to which she must say goodbye. That was what hurt” . . .

She, however, musters courage to live only in her Indian-self by settling in India. Though the question of her acceptance in India still looms large on her mind, Sarah tries to overcome the conflict in her mind with a positive attitude towards life and her future.

The novels of Anita Desai are eloquent commentary on the predicament of man trapped in the human condition he cannot remedy. In her next novel *Where Shall We Go In This Summer?* We find that the protagonist, Sita, is bored and frustrated by the aimless and meaningless life. She is unable to accept that:

“This was all there is to life, that life would continue thus, inside this small enclosed area, with these few characters, churning around and then past her, leaving her always in this grey, dull-lit, empty shell”.

Sita develops certain complexes which turn her into an alienated and morose character, unable to adjust with the people around her. She cannot face the realities of her life boldly. As this ordinary life and the everyday world grows insufferable to her, she desires to escape and take refuge in the magic island of Manori, where her father is believed to have performed many miracles:

“If reality were not to be born, then illusion was the only alternative. She saw that island illusion as a refuge, a protection. It would hold her body safely unborn, by magic”.

Sita's irony lies in the fact that she constantly dangles between selfrealisation and self-delusion, consciousness and anguish. She falls prey to anguish and struggles to fill it by imagining herself object-like and helpless when she is ready to fathom the mystery of life. Sita is the daughter of a political celebrity, a freedom fighter. After independence, her father comes to settle in the lonely island of Manori. He presided over Manori like a saint or more exactly like a magician. She cannot decide whether he was a charlatan or a genuine mystic. Sita is obsessed with the memory of her childhood days on the island. She retreats there as into a womb, with an obsessive desire to recapture once again the childhood innocence and purity.

Her own frustration with her life in Bombay drives her to the island. Also, there is her desire to provide her unborn infant with a world that is uncorrupt. This illusion of Sita does not last for long. She soon realises that her retreat to the island is madness. The island, after an interval of twenty years, is half-paradise and halfurban reality. She tempers her memories of childhood by reconciling to the realities of present actualities of the half dilapidated buildings and the run-down life that she finds there.

By believing into magic, instead of delving deep into her own self, to find an existential fissure in her being, she deceives herself. She refuses to accept her responsibilities because it is difficult for her to govern herself. She is looking for love, which would 'stay whole'. She cannot find this in reality and so she seeks it somewhere else. By escaping from her familial duties and responsibilities, she wonders whether it is courage or cowardice:

“She had escaped from duties and responsibilities, from order and routine, from life and city, to the unlovable island. She had refused to give birth to a child in a world not fit to receive the child. She had the imagination to offer it an alternative, a life unlived, a life bewitched. She had cried out her great ‘No’ but now the time had come for her epitaph to be written -
Che free per viltate it gran rifiute.”

Raman tries to disillusion her about the ‘contraries’ in life by saying ‘other people put up with it - it's not so-so insufferable.’

Anita Desai has portrayed, through the character of Sita, that life, in spite of its contraries, has to be lived. Sita realises the truth that Raman too has suffered from anxiety for her and the unborn child. In travelling to herself, she has revealed the agonies of the journey as transparently as the jelly fish does its self. Her desire to run away, all are captured in the hope of “the slumberous egg as it labours under the shell. Patiently to divide and subdivide, asks to be hidden and wishes nothing to tell.”

While walking on the beach, she begins to trail behind Raman, ‘follow the footsteps he had laid out for her.’ She realises, instead of living of life of primitive reality on the island, she was ‘to return to a life of retirement, off stage.’ Sita realises the difference between the necessity and the wish between what a man wants and what he is compelled to do.

In Anita Desai's next novel, *Fire On the Mountain*, fantasy plays a major role in the life of the protagonist, Nanda Kaul. It is a novel about the loneliness of this old woman and the way fantasy becomes her life. The conflict arises when fantasy overtakes reality to such an extent that ultimately reality has to assert its position and Nanda Kaul is made to acknowledge reality. In this novel, fantasy is a means to escape loneliness. Nanda Kaul lives a lonely life in the mountain retreat, Caregnano. Her retreat to the mountain is by no means ‘withdrawal’ but is a ‘forced’ seclusion. She has been ‘reduced’ to live for the rest of her life alone in Kasauli. She had a very busy past life, full of responsibilities. Being the wife of a Vice-Chancellor, she had to fulfil various social duties as well as domestic duties; with a house full of children. But in spite of all this, we find Nanda lonely within herself. She could not get mentally involved with all these activities but merely did them as part of her routine. She does not have a natural motherly attachment with her children, a weakness we find in the mothers of Anita Desai's novels. So it is quite natural that in her old age she is not looked after well by her children, ‘Discharge me,’ she groaned,

“I have discharged all my duties Discharge.”

Nand Kaul resents Raka's intrusion because it awakens in her the past memories of her children. She can neither love nor understand them. Her relationship with her husband was nothing beyond the duties and obligations they had for each other. Her husband's affair with another woman is a scar on her heart which she is trying to forget with her withdrawal into the world of fantasy. Her rejection of the outside world can be seen as a retaliation of her own rejection:

“To sustain this meagre present, she resorts to fantasy which eventually replaces reality. Withdrawal becomes a necessity to nourish all illusions. Being alone is ‘a moment of private triumph, cold and proud’ for her. It proves an armour against hurts and betrayals. It is an escape route from responsibilities, demands and obligations that she detests. The emotional frigidity that she wears at times is a mask, at times very much a part of her because of regular wear.”

In the beginning, Nanda Kaul hates the intrusion in her peaceful and lonely life in the form of Raka, her great grand daughter. She hates to prepare menu for her and does not even go to the taxi stand to receive her. Raka is a highly perceptive child. For her, withdrawal is her nature. She keeps away from Nanda and wanders the whole day in the desolate and wild surroundings.

Slowly one sees a gradual change in the attitude of Nanda. Raka wears loneliness with ease, as it is her choice, but it bothers Nanda, as it is thrust upon her. She needs the company and attention of Raka as if she is a ‘good, a challenge to her - the illusive fish, the golden catch.’ She resorts to tales of fantasy to win over Raka. It is a desperate attempt to come to terms with the reality of the present by modifying the past. Nanda Kaul creates a world of illusion which centres around herself. She weaves stories about her childhood with thing of varied interest, as, apple orchards, bears, leopard, cats, peacocks, tortises and pangolins, things which are bound to interest the fantasy of a child. But Raka is a not normal child. She remains indifferent to all this:

“She would have to break out into freedom again. She could not bear to be confined to the old lady's fantasy world when the reality outside appealed so strongly And here she was hedged, smothered, stifled inside the old lady's words, dreams and more words”.

Even Ila Das creates a world of make-believe about Nanda Kaul's youth “always in pearls and emeralds” for Raka, but of no use. At this moment Nanda realises that her world of lies was like the ‘tranquillisers’ necessary for her to continue the act of living in her abandoned state. Thus, Raka becomes a agent to help an adult review her life and confront reality. Nanda Kaul has to face the reality of her being different from Raka and of her unhappy past life. Raka, however, shares a world with Ram Lal, the servant. As Jabir Jain points out,

“Ram Lal and Raka meet as equals, not as an adult and child, and share the wonder and the awe that the existence of such beings is likely to arouse. Ram Lal's belief in the supernatural is neither an escape nor an emotional prop. It is integral part of his world and of his background. Raka accepts it unquestioningly because it has a certain authenticity and cohesion”.

Raka has a world of fantasy of her own, different from Nanda Kaul's and Ram Lal's. She roams in the desolate surroundings. Her fantasy finds expression in thinking the Pasteur Institute as a "Square dragon" and Ram Lal's kitchen as "a blackened, fire-blasted cave in which one fiery inflamed eye glowed and smouldered by itself." Raka is also running away from the gruesome reality of human relationships. She has been a spectator of her father beating her mother, which has a negative effect on her psyche. It is this fear which makes her put that forest on fire. It is perhaps an irrepressible urge to destroy all falsities.

When Nanda is face to face with reality, she has to admit all the falsities to herself. But she is not able to bear it and dies. Jasbir Jain sums up the entire philosophy of the novel as, "withdrawal, which does not come naturally to her, takes her nowhere and involvement is equally meaningless." Death is the ultimate reality of life whereas life is a painful process:

“Thus, we see, fantasy is an escape from reality, a way of life, a survival strategy to deal with the present. It is fantasy with a purpose - first to make her solitary life bearable and then to win Raka over. Both invariably lead to self-deception. When the past and the present are, thus, built on and of lies, one has to pay the price, and the price, in Nanda's case, is confrontation with reality”.

In Anita Desai's next novel *Clear Light of Day*, there is a conflict between the four brothers and sisters who have gone their own way as they have grown old. In this process of pursuit of their destinies, they find a loss of a wider base - there is a sense of uprootedness in them. They look back in anger and guilt, wanting a recovery of a sense of fullness and closeness that they have lost.

The two sisters, Tara and Bim, face the conflict between reality and illusion, though in different manners. Both have to overcome the illusions to come to terms with reality and life. Tara the younger sister is an incurable romantic who wishes for a bright and happy carefree world. She reads Lorna Doone and *Gone with the Wind*, as she grows old and lives in a world of imagination and fantasy. She enjoys the fairy tales narrated by Aunt Mira. She picks up the snails in the hope of finding a pearl even when she is grown up; which shows her fanciful ideas and beliefs. As Tara grows up, she goes out in the company of Misra sisters. She prefers the Misra home to her home as they don't keep up appearances and are sure of their middle class status. The Dases, on the other hand, played bridge and neglected their children. Tara tries to escape the

dreariness and oppressive atmosphere of the house by going to the Misra house and finally by marrying Bakul, a Foreign Service diplomat. Still, Tara likes to come home, as she is afraid to lose contact with India. She recalls her childhood days and becomes a child again as she roams in the garden, trying to steal a guava when her husband is not watching. She enjoys being home after such a long time, yet at times, questions its stagnant atmosphere. She asks, “Why had nothing changed? She had changed - why it did not keep up with her?”

Tara faces the conflict of accepting the reality of her past and present. She is guilty of abandoning her sister Bim. She undergoes the agonies when recollecting her childhood troubles. Though her marriage seems an escape, it liberates her only superficially. When she returns, she is more confident and socially poised, yet she slips into her old groves of meanness. She doesn't wish to go out of the house with her husband. This inertia shows that Tara had become aware sharply of what she had left Bim to cope with. But Tara is worried about Bim and realises that she is not different from Bim. “We're not really. We may seem to be, but we have everything in common. That makes us one.”

Unlike Tara and Raja, Bim has a realistic and practical temperament. She also escapes from the dreary and desolate atmosphere of the home by reading history. Her preference for cold, hard facts pervades her whole life. She gets more and more involved in the life that she had inherited after the escape of Tara and Raja. Bim is left with Baba, who is mentally retarded, and is totally dependent on her. Though Bim seems to be a realist, yet we see that she has deliberately constructed a barrier around herself. Bim nurses a grudge against Raja for abandoning her:

“Her love for Raja has too much of a battering, she had felt herself so humiliated by his going away and leaving her, by his reversal of role from brother to landlord, that it had never recovered and become the tall shining thing it had been once”.

Bim does not escape like Raja and Tara, which appears more to be a matter of compulsion rather than of choice. Having staged, she sees her action as a sacrifice. Naturally, she too feels hemmed in and she is full of anger, 'her anger was as raw as a rash of prickly heat that she compulsively scratched and made worse.' This conflict in her mind makes her give vent to her 'swelling, bulging and glinting anger on Baba. But Bim soon realises her mistake and sees the reality that:

“They were really all parts of her - inseparable, so many aspects of her as she was of them, so that the anger or the disappointment she felt at herself. Whatever hurt they felt. She felt . . . Bim could see well as by the clear light of the day that these gashes and wounds in her side that bled, then it was only because her love was imperfect and did not encompass them thoroughly enough and because it had flaws and inadequacies and did not extend to all equally”.

Bim's anger paves the way for a compromise with reality. Thus, when the cloud of illusion clears her mind she sees the reality in a new perspective and realises that only she can bind the family into one.

In the next novel *In custody*, we find Deven and Nur, the great Urdu poet, caught up in the world of illusions. Anita Desai explores how their life has no meaning and it is absurd at its core. Deven, a lecturer in a private college in Mirpore, is an ardent fan of the great Urdu poet, Nur, and is also striving to be a poet and a critic. Deven fails as an artist because he is alienated from the realities of life. He considers art to be separate from life. He believes that life with its indignities and impediments cannot meet his artistic sensibility.

“He had not found a way to reconcile the meanness of his physical existence with the purity and immensity of his literary yearning”.

Deven places poetry on a remote plane above life, 'above any reality':

“That, he saw, was the glory of the poets - that they could distance events and emotions, place them where perspective made it possible to view things clearly and calmly. He realised that he loved poetry not because it made things immediate but it removed them to a position where they become bearable”.

Deven had a flair for poetry and it is evident when Murad asks him about sending something for his special number on Urdu poetry, he feels, “a glow creep through him at the thought of writing.” Murad's suggestion of interviewing Nur creates a romantic illusion. Deven feels that Nur exists in a higher sphere; where ‘his god dwelt, the domain of poetry, beauty and illumination.’ He climbed the stairs of his house ‘as if sloughing off and casting away the meanness and dross of his past existence and steadily approaching a new and wonderously illuminated era.’ But these illusions are shattered on his encounter with the old poet. Deven finds Nur's life messy, distorted and disintegrated and he wonders "how, out of all this hubbub, the poet drew the threads and wove his poetry of philosophy" Deven is repulsed on seeing the private and public life of the poet; his loutish company, the unemployed parasites who lived on the fantasy of being poets and surrounded him. Nur seems to enjoy their company and blatant talk. He broke into curse and abuses on account of the piles that he is suffering from. Deven is scandalised at his excessive drinking and eating large amount of biryani, kababs and pulav in an unsightly manner. He had:

“Pictured him living either surrounded by elderly, sage and dignified literates or else entirely alone in divine isolation. What else are these clowns and jokers and jugglers doing around him or he with them?”

While interviewing Nur and after meeting him several times Deven realises the full significance of the poet's relationship with life. Nur identifies with life completely by willing acceptance of the realities. Deven also realizes the inadequacy of his own romantic conception of art. But still he is tormented with the conflict between reality and illusion as he is unable to relate it to his life. The realisation that his pursuit of art had not only disillusioned him of all his lofty idealism but driven him to the depth of disaster and disturbs him so

much that he cannot sleep the whole night. He realises that it is not he alone who was living in a trap, but Nur himself was living in a kind of cage, like some trapped animal:

“The unexpected friendship had given him the illusion that the doors of the trap had opened and he could escape, after all, into a wider world that lay outside but a closer familiarity with the poet had shown him that what he thought of as the ‘wider world’ was an illusion too – it was only a kind of zoo in which he would not hope to find freedom. He would only blunder into another cage, inhabited by some other trapped animal”.

Deven does get an answer to reality provided by art through self-examination. He realises the inevitability of mundane realities and their role in fulfilling his aspiration as an artist. With this acceptance, Deven moves on to greater realisation of the truth that ‘There is no release or escape’. His final run, after stopping for a while, affirms the ultimate convergence into his self, embling him to go for a prospective search.

The novel Baumgartner’s Bombay is about the isolated life of an uprooted Jew. It is a novel about his alienation. Hugo Baumgartner is forced to leave his motherland, Germany due to anti-semitic activities. He takes refuge in British India before Second World War for a better future, but, is not accepted by the Indian society for being fair-skinned. This tragedy is his homelessness and rootlessness. As Usha Bande rightly points out, the characters of Baumgartner’s Bombay are “lost personages, pathetic in their loneliness, unable to find their cosmos.” Hugo Baumgartner is trapped in situations beyond his control. He knows that he would be unable to rectify them, so he accepts them as they are. This makes him a pathetic figure and the readers pity him for his sorry state. Hugo is unable to belong to anyone except his mother. In his school, he was always aware of his being a Jew. This feeling isolated him from the rest of the children. It fills him with shame that "he did not belong to the picture-book world of Fir trees, the gift and celebration" of Christmas.

He could not belong to the Jewish children too. He keeps himself alienated from them, happy in his home, his dream-land. But his happy state does not last for long and he has to leave for the East. We see for a moment that Hugo could relate to the surroundings of Venice, where East and West meet. He is nostalgic about his brief sojourn in Venice and hopes to go back there. But Hugo is misfit in India. He cannot relate to this new land and its people. He always remains a ‘*firangi*’, a ‘*malechha*’. This makes him withdraw into himself and keep himself aloof from the outside hustle-bustle.

Baumgartner is not friendless in India. He has some Indian and German friends. But the distance is never paved. He maintains a distance with everyone. He is unable to share his troubles, his fears about his mother with anyone. There is always a shell within which he finds himself secure, like a turtle. His desire to withdraw and remain uninvolved is echoed in his thoughts when he feels relieved that he is not a part of the chaos he sees around him:

“He felts his life turn grey, like a curtain wrapping him in his dusty felt. If he became aware, from time to time, that the world beyond the curtain was growing steadily more crowded, more clamorous and lives of others more hectic, more chaotic, then he felt only relief that he had never been a part of the mainstream. Always, somehow, he had escaped the mainstream”.

These are the thoughts of a man satisfied with a life, devoid of any entanglements. But this is an isolated world of make believes. Hugo cannot face the reality of loneliness, so he keeps himself surrounded with cats. He fills his home and life with stray cats. He goes out of his room only to collect leftover food for the cats from the nearby cafe. Baumgartner eased the pain of loneliness by keeping himself in the illusion of his past days in Germany. The memories of his mother and his days in Germany give him sustenance to bear his lonely life in India:

“It was as if his mind were trying to construct a wall against history, a wall behind which he could crouch and hide, holding him to a desperate wish that Germany were still what he had known as a child and that in that dream country his mother continued to live the life they had lived there together.”

Lotte, a friend of Hugo, also suffers from isolation. She, too, cannot accept India. These outsiders sustain themselves by illusion and make believe situations. Lotte and Lily forget themselves in the world of dance, drinks and other frivolities. Lotte tries to escape her loneliness by marrying a *Marwari* businessman, Kantilal Sethia. Her loneliness increases after the death of Kantilal; and when she is turned out of his house, Baumgartner and Lotte cling to each other, as they are victims of the same situations. In the uttermost sense of loneliness they talk of going back. When asked by Julius, "Oh, Hugo. Why did we not go back?" His answer reflects his disillusionment, 'Go back? Where?' Talking of going back to their country and returning to their past explains their realisation of reality and their disillusionment.

As a novelist Desai succeeds in revealing the subtle and intense expositions of human psyche, first in *Clear Light of Day*, then in *In Custody*, and in Baumgartner's *Bombay*. The last novel prepares the foreground for *Journey to Ithaca* by revealing a super-sensitive mental state of the protagonist. The central issue in *Journey to Ithaca* is not the search for identity of existence, but a “search for truth, ultimate reality, beauty, joy, ecstasy or whatever form truth has”

Laila - the ‘Mother’; and Sophie - the wife of Matteo; the two female characters in *Journey to Ithaca*, are in India as the seekers after truth. Laila, as is revealed by Sophie's ceaseless efforts for discovering her past, in fact a Muslim by birth, rebels against the traditional code of Muslim religion and leaves her home in search of her spiritual existence. As a rebellious daughter of Alma and Hameed, Laila exhibits ‘an amber of curiosity’. Since her early childhood, her curious nature makes her to give up “all orthodox religions”. She is

sent away from home to further her academics. At Cairo, superficially she pursues her studies with all diligence. From “her appearance and studious demeanor they never suspected that Laila might have secret life, a night life”.

In fact, Laila is in search of freedom. Her friend, Fatima, is not aware of the upheaval going on in Laila’s mind. Her escapes into the maze of lanes in the Khan-el-Khalili sound strange ever to her parents. In her search for freedom, she is unable to control her mind and her senses are like unmanageable horses. At the Al Azhar University, her yearning for freedom is perceptible when she addresses her fellow students : “better to go to prison than live as slaves”. Laila as a revolutionary student becomes a source of affliction to her parents. Even at her seventeen, she determines to break off the traditional custom which snares her like the coil of a serpent. Her parents now decide to send Laila to Paris for further studies. She is not at all pleased with the idea of going to Paris because by now her inner self is able to give directions to her religious quest.

At Aunt Francoise’s place, Laila behaves in a very uncivilized manner. She finds her Aunt’s household disgusting as the glass windows are always screened with lace curtains which are never drawn aside. She has the temperament of a free wanderer and the rich surroundings of her aunt’s house eclipse her vision of spirituality. She wants to keep herself away from the materialistic pursuits of life and to achieve this she is quite capable of unpredictable behaviour. Her stay at Paris upsets her aunt Francoise and uncle Bertrand by the rebellious thoughts. When her uncle asks her to eat the meat, she refuses it and confesses: “I am a vegetarian. No one will make me eat the flesh of slaughtered animals”. In Paris, instead of purchasing Islamic books, she purchases the books of the Oriental philosophy. Above all, as luck would have it, she meets a troupe of Krishna Lila and joins this troupe for learning the Oriental art of dance. She learns the classical art of dance from Krishnaji, but the art of dance does not bind her for a long time and she gives it up for realizing the higher vision of God. As a dancer, she fails, but as a seeker after truth, she succeeds in fulfilling the final goal of her life. As ‘Mother’, Laila refuses to accept any kind of formalism for the realization of ultimate truth. She, as a Muslim girl, does not hold back to be initiated by a Hindu saint. She remarks about the futility of all religions thus :

“This is no church, my friends, this is no temple or mosque or Vihara. We have no religion. Religion? Like the black crows up in the tree caw-caw-caw, scolding, scolding! But, do they crow at us now? No, they are silent! We have silenced them . . . Religion makes one ashamed, makes one guilty, makes one fearful. The Master has told you not to feel guilty not to feel ashamed, not to be afraid”.

The image of “the black crow” in the above passage brings forth the hollowness and emptiness of all religions. The sound of the crow - “caw-caw caw” is linked with the meaningless sound of different religions which have nothing to do with the absolute reality.

The Mother thus exemplifies an ideal life of high attributes while teaching her disciples :

“You must know I mean honey made from spiritual nectar, to nourish your souls. All organizations are useless, Matteo, useless and dry and empty, if they do not contain the nectar of the spirit. I want it to be rich, rich, rich with this nectar”.

The “nectar” here symbolizes the essence of life.

Sophie, as a young wife with the western-oriented approach to life, desires to fulfill the dream of her womanhood but this is not possible in an unruly and stuffily arranged life of the ashram. She feels neglected among the other pilgrims in the ashram:

“She scrambled to her feet and returned to eat some bread from the night before and drink a tumbler of tea given to her, and even smoked a cigarette furtively behind a hut . . . feeling both guilty and grateful to be excluded”.

The smoking of cigarette “furtively” becomes symbolic of two things:

First, she breaks the code of the ashram; and secondly, she relieves herself momentarily from her tense nervous system due to an inferiority complex as an ashramite. Again, the smoking of Sophie brings forth the apparent contradictions of her mind: the guilt and gratefulness. She feels guilty, for she smokes furtively as an ashramite and feels grateful as she does not like to develop any association and reconciliation with any of the pilgrims in the ashram. As an expatriate, she experiences the dilemma of her identity. The sense of belongingness so vexes and overpowers her that she questions her husband: “Couldn’t we stay in our own country? To die there?” Disenchanted as an ashramite, even the very mention of the word ‘ashram’ baffles her so much that she longs for her home. Weeping like a child she cries, “I want to go home”.

Earlier, when Sophie and Matteo come to this *ashram* at Himalayan region which is run by a beautiful young woman who is known as the Mother, Sophie suspects the spiritual authority of the Mother: “It sounds as if she gets up on a stage and hypnotises you all like a magician”. Sophie with her womanly emotions becomes jealous of the Mother and regards her “a monster spider who had spun this web to catch these silly flies.” The jealousy of a woman makes her enquire all about the past of the Mother. Her inquisitiveness leads her to discover her arrival in India as a dancer, “looking for a rich somebody to pick her up”.

Like Sita in *Where Shall We Go This Summer*, Sophie becomes rebellious against the forced decision of her husband. With her future anxieties of a mother, she leaves the company of her husband and comes back to Italy to her parents. In Italy, she tries to fill the absence of Matteo in the company of another gentleman, Paolo whom she meets in a party. He also finds this mature woman quite fascinating. But Sophie still experiences the over-powering effect of the Matteo-consciousness on her: “Her life with Matteo had spoilt her life with a man like Paolo; it was no longer possible”. Anita Desai thus upholds sanctity of the relations between husband and wife.

The second character who becomes rebellious like other heroines of Anita Desai for her spiritual quest is Laila, who later becomes the “Mother”, in the novel. Spending her childhood in Alexandria, she is educated in Paris and Venice and finally comes to India for her spiritual emancipation. Laila, as a Muslim girl, revolts against her parental religion, and endures the panics of life in her search for godhead, first in Paris and then in India.

These are two women, Sophie and Laila, revolt in this novel against their surroundings. Sophie longs for worldly freedom while Laila aspires for spiritual freedom.

As the novelist analyses the psychic depth of the characters, her language tends to be situational and contextual. Sophie expresses her contempt towards other people in the ashram through non-verbal language. She does not like to give up her European identity among the ashramites in India. So, she does not try to understand the mystical yet the false language of the people at the ashram.

She excludes herself from the environment of the ashram due to the lack of the language. She rather tries to understand the language of birds and animals through their gestures and motions, but ignores willingly to understand the language of people at the ashram.

Although Anita Desai is known for her delineation of women characters who are the victims of society, the depressed lot, who either react to their situations or fall as victims, but in her *Fasting, Feasting*, she does not present such characters. The protagonist, Uma does not appear a depressed girl. Uma is made to appear a victim of her circumstances, a victim of her fate and as such she accepts her destiny quietly, ungrudgingly and tries to live like the dumb driven cattle. But that does not mean that she is completely insensible and unthinkable. On the contrary, Uma is full of tender feelings; she has her wishes and desires, imagination and expectation, which she is unable to express. There is a sense of agony, a sense of irreparable loss and permanent shock in her which she deliberately hides in order to remain true to her nature. It is significant to note that Uma has been delineated in altogether a different way from all the other heroines of Desai. She is neither a psychic case nor a violent rebellion in the society; neither assertive nor demanding and yet she is a thinking, feeling human being. Unlike her sister, Aruna, she cannot express nor can she register her thoughts and yet she appears to suffer under the circumstances against which she can make no resistance. Here she becomes the traditional archetypal woman who is born to live and suffer.

In *Fasting, Feasting*, it may be observed that, unlike her other novels, Anita Desai has made an attempt to present Uma as a girl who has to live in the society accepting all the humiliations, injustices, sufferings and miseries without raising any voice or making resistance. Like the traditional Indian woman, Uma suffers quietly only to prove her great sense of endurance and stoic acceptance. After her tragic withdrawal from her husband Harish, Aruna, the younger sister, whispers to her in the dark and silences, “Uma, Uma Didi - did he touch you?” Uma burries her head in her pillow and howls - “No, No.” There could not be a more tragic situation than the one that Uma faces! Who could explain the cause or the justification of such a situation?

Anita Desai’s latest novel, *The Zigzag way*, is a word map of her long established creative acumen. With this new arrival, she has added a cultural bridge in order to relocate Mexican cultural in its own recognizable way. Here she is a new voice in providing space for the marginalised in an alien culture, her new home. *The Zigzag Way* is an impressive tag of a cultural creative hybrid. With her long established confident

voice she makes an analytic and interpretative exploration into the life and views of a distinct civilization with its recognizable historicity striking a neat balance between skillfully worked art and rhythmic life.

The Zigzag way, is the story of twentieth century Mexico, through the turbulence of the revolution and personal calamity; of the exploitation of the Mexican Indians, and their dubious saviours, such as the formidable Dona Vera. Known as the "Queen of the Sierra," Dona Vera is the widow of a mining baron who has dedicated her fortune to preserving the Huichol culture. But her formidable presence belies a dubious past. Dona Vera, whose quetzal-coloured kimono conceals "layers of worn and lumpish grey flannel", is unveiled as one of Desai's unctuous charlatans, like the decadent Urdu poet of *In Custody*, having fled not the Nazis, but her family's Nazi past, sloughing it off to emerge "like some sly and secretive snake in its new skin". Though she houses local Indians, Eric notes that she "never speaks to them, only of them". Yet her private mourning for a Huichol boy whom she adopted may hint at a deeper grief and guilt. Drones of US university researchers charting the pre-Columbian past and peyote-fuelled visions are meanwhile likened to missionaries harvesting souls.

Thus it may be concluded that in her different novels Anita Desai has portrayed different facets of human feminine psyche. Her range is quite wide. Her characters cover women of almost all age groups. In *Fire on The Mountain*, in *Raka* we have a child going to girlhood; in *Cry*, *The Peacock*, Maya a married woman; in *Baumgartner's Bombay*, Lotte is a middle-aged woman and Nanda Kaul, and Ila Das old women. Not only there are women of different age groups but they are also of different types and characters. In *Voices In the City*, if Monisha is an intellectual type, Maya is hypersensitive, we have Sarla in *In Custody* who cannot look beyond the four walls of her house. Even though the wife of a Hindi lecturer she has absolutely no interest in literature, or her husband's profession. She is so ignorant that she concludes her husband's frequent visits to Delhi to interview the poet as a ruse for meeting his girlfriend.

In *Voice in the City*, one also finds subtle suggestions of adultery between the widow mother of Monisha and the retired Major Chaddha. Thus these novels embody explorations of the human & feminine psyche by the Anita Desai, who has presented a variety of characters facing identity crisis in different situations and attempting a reconciliation between illusion and reality, sometimes successfully; but often succumbing to the strain and yielding to suicide and death.