

CHAPTER TWO

PHILOSOPHICAL DIMENSIONS

We see the fragments mixed together
Yet it is not a piece of patchwork
Influences may give the impression
Reflections can be traced there
Yet the self is more than mimicry
Above reflections and reminiscences
Life is more than all
The philosophers have ever argued
And the seers have eternally seen
Beyond labelling, above discussion
It is a unique work of art
From the unfathomable mind of the Master

SECTION ONE

Meaning of Alienation

An exploration into the diverse influences on the writings of Anita Desai will be very helpful in course of this study. While analysing the themes of alienation and survival in her novels, various echoes like the modernist predicament and search for modern roots, existential malaise and quest for the self, postcolonial dilemma and search for balance and harmony reverberate quite and often. The Indian and Western concepts and personalities may also be seen as various intertextual incidences in her writings. An analysis of such influences will be helpful in bringing out the concepts of alienation and survival in brighter perspective.

Desai discloses the spiritual crisis of modern man and woman under various situations. She studies the theme of alienation as one of the central problems of modern life. As the sense of alienation seems to touch the deepest level of man, the sense of otherness, the feeling of an island, anguish and strange malaise corrodes his life from diverse quarters. He suffers in spirit by the feeling of disintegration, displacement and confusion. Isolated from another person, he seems to be doomed to a feeling of alienation that dominates

his sensibility. Unable to find himself as part of any group, he considers himself as 'other' in every sense. Alienation and isolation, both emotional and physical, shape the fictional world of Desai.

Various writers and thinkers have used the term alienation since a long time. In the past, the term alienation was used with reference to an insane person. As Fromm points out; "aliene in French, alienado in Spanish, are older words for the psychotic" (Sane Society, 120). Albert William Levi writes that the Latin term *alienatio* has a long and distinguished history. Cognate with the verb *alieno* (to alienate, to sell, to estrange, to become apostate, to become insane) and with the adjective *alienus-a-um* (foreign, contrary, hostile, adverse, distracted), it appears characteristically in the works of Caesar, Cicero, and Seneca. Its French derivative *alienation* appears as early as Calvin's *Institutes* ("We excuse his confession through the alienation of his spirit, caused by wine") and during the reign of Louis XIV in the memoirs of St. Simon, and throughout the eighteenth-century in the three analogous meanings, which are also to be distinguished in its Latin ancestor: (1) the transfer or conveyance of property to another; (2) estrangement or loss; and (3) madness, lunacy, mental derangement (1967, 244).

Of these three meanings of the term alienation, it is clearly the second that constitutes its philosophical significance. Wycliff in 1388 says that alienation from God is to man wickedness (Levi, 244). Burton in 1621 speaks of Macedon; "Alexander saw alienation in his subjects' hearts." Burke in 1770 speaking of the American colonies writes: "They grow every day into alienation from this country". As Levi puts in, the German equivalent, the verb *Entfremden*, with a similar meaning appears in the writings of Luther, Goethe and Wieland. It is the German ambivalence of the first half of the nineteenth century, which has fixed once and for all the resonance of the term 'alienation' that enters into the vocabulary of the existentialists and in the social criticism of the twentieth century.

For Hegel alienation is a term, referring to metaphysical condition. His account of metaphysical alienation can be understood in two sections: The Unhappy Consciousness and The Self-estranged Spirit. The first examines what it means to be a self. The second explores the phenomenology of the self as a developmental entity. For him, the self is free insofar as it maintains its identity, keeps solely touched with itself, and maintains the undivided unity of its self-existence. But this purity is compromised internally, for consciousness itself is a thoroughgoing dialectical restlessness, a fortuitous imbroglio, the giddy world

of a perpetually self-creating disorder. Thus we have here 'that dualizing of self-consciousness within itself, which lies essentially in the notion of mind; not yet present. This brings forth the *Unhappy Consciousness* or the alienated soul, which is the consciousness of self as a divided nature, a doubled and merely contradictory being (Levi, 245-246). An individual removed from the metaphysical universe suffers from both the unhappy consciousness and estranged spirit. Hegel thinks of alienation as the Spirit's estrangement from itself in a subjective sense or as an affair confined within the realm of mind.

Marx on the other hand considers alienation as the state of mind due to the productive relations into which human beings are classified. He views that the basic form of alienation is economic, rooted in the capitalist mode of production. When labour is treated as a marketable commodity, man becomes dehumanised and a separation between man-as-man and man-as-labour begins to grow. For him, it is only in the communist mode of production that alienation could be overcome. 'It is through praxis, revolutionary praxis, trying to break the class barriers, which sustain the capitalist mode of production, that man can hope to get rid of the economic alienation' (Roy, 167).

In his discussion of Modernist literature, Hawthorn writes that the term alienation has come to be

used in a rather more general sense to characterize the sense of non-belonging, exclusion and loneliness typical of the modern vision of life (1982, 6). It also refers to man's failure to realize his identity and his inability to recognize himself in the product of his labour. According to Levi, Fragmentation, Mechanization and Distantiation constitute the core meaning of the term (1967, 264). The term *other* implies space as well as otherness signifying implicit wisdom innate in human language and sensitivity and the term *self* indicates the real nature of the inner-man of an individual. As Hawthorn writes, 'to characterize a person, group, or institution as 'other' is to place them outside the system of normality or CONVENTION to which one belongs oneself.' "If woman is other, then that which is particular to the experience of being a woman is irrelevant to 'how things are' to the defining conditions by which one lives. If members of a given racial group are collectively seen as other, then how they are treated is irrelevant to what humanity demands - because they are other and not human" (1994, 208).

The term alienation, as we interpret in connection with the novels of Anita Desai, implies the condition of man being an alien to the universe and society as well. It is a state of detachment of a person in terms of feeling or affection. Unlike loneliness, it is rather a permanent structure of human experience, an unalterable inner crisis of man that cannot be overcome

easily. It is distance or division between two or more entities. This also refers to the process of separation or estrangement of somebody or something from something else. As a state of isolation or separation, as a special form of distance or sense of non-belonging or completely different dividing-self, it can also be taken as feeling of having no connection with anyone around.

Self-alienation may be understood as loss of contact of an individual with the prevailing social patterns that are not in agreement. As a result of this, the individual is forced to feel incapable of controlling his actions. It has worse effects on the individual than social alienation. It is a more basic form of rootlessness that can foil his mental and psychic development in a distressing manner. It forms the subject of many psychological and philosophical studies. Spiritual alienation may refer to a gap or separation between the finite self and the infinite one. Man's reason and intellect alienates him from God and his intuition helps him to come to contact with his deity.

Although alienation seems deep-seated in the very being of man, yet it cannot be denied the responsible factors that create an alienating atmosphere in socio-cultural conditions. Alienation as experienced by the characters of Anita Desai seems basically created by an

identity crisis. Various reasons may be credited for such identity crisis among which lack of healthy and heart to heart communication is the primary one. When such communication is broken 'the other' becomes an object and alien to the individual. The breach of communication is brought into existence through various agencies. It is also broken by man created division in gender relation and consideration of woman as an inferior sex. Nature's wilderness and its indifference is another cause of man's alienation which can be studied in her novels. The other factors that alienate Desai's characters are the individual's subordinate position under socio-political systems, the east-west cultural conflict resulting in identity crisis, and also the disparity of an individual with social, cultural and intellectual values that surround him.

Modern predicament and human quest for modern roots finds its substantial air in the writings of Anita Desai. It seems that the feeling of alienation is ever present in the being of man. A sense of sterility runs through the socio-political and cultural disruption of present generation. Desai tries to reveal the spiritual crisis of modern man and woman under chaotic situations of contemporary life. Her fictional milieu looks pregnant with a sense of disbelief in objective reality, an anxiety with the industrial atmosphere and hastening change in modern life. Moreover, she presents her characters as being in

desperate search for modern roots. She is also concerned with a sense of lost values, an interest with the unconscious, a desire to discover significant artistic structure in increasing chaos. She also deals with the problems of an individual whose life is dominated by indeterminacy and uncertainties. Most of her novels reflect personal disintegration and the cultural displacement of modern man.

The influence of Freud may be considered as a significant element in analysing the modern predicament. He turned the attention of many writers inward, towards subjective experience rather than the objective world. His study of human psyche as Pleasure principle (Id) and Reality principle (Superego) has helped in shaping the modernist ideals (Hawthorn, 180). Human instincts are either repressed or sublimated in search of reality through institutionalisation. This results in neurosis that finds air in abnormality including hostility and violence. It is because of this suppression that there is always tension between individual and society.

The suppression of human instincts in the name of so-called institutions or systems resulting in neurosis or abnormality can be studied in the novels of Anita Desai. Although gifted, most of her characters suffer from extreme introversion. They seem obsessed with various manias generating from various sources such as

lack of emotional communion, disharmonious family background and cultural discrepancy. Her characters are aliens in some way or the other, who are unable to establish a lasting rapport between their inner visions and outer realities.

Anita Desai also makes an attempt to study human psyche marked by an increasing self-awareness. In the shift from common sense to personal sense, her emphasis is altered in favour of rendering the refinements of individual sensibility rather than collective experience. The pursuit of knowledge resulting in a radical distress, an alienation of the human freedom from its former image, and breakdown of traditional standards are few of the indexes in her writing. The sense of cultural crisis being central to her art, most of her novels are open ended. She presents her characters as alienated, yet engaged in the quest for modern roots and self-dignity.

SECTION TWO

Alienation and Survival: Existential Dimension

Anita Desai's depiction of the theme of alienation and survival finds its sufficient philosophical foundation in the existential writings of the twentieth century. She denies the dominance of objective values stressing instead the reality and significance of human freedom and experience. Her novels hold the existential view that an individual is free and responsible in determining his own development through the act of independent choice. She also denies the existence of objective values stressing instead the reality and significance of human freedom and experience. The question of individual selection or freedom of choice is often brought into picture in her writing.

Existentialism can be viewed as a modernist thought based on the belief that "existence comes before essence" (Sartre, 1963, 26). Generally it is conceived as "a philosophical theory emphasizing the existence of the individual person as a free and responsible agent determining his or her own development through acts of his will" (Pearsall 491). It also professes that the problems of real importance for man are not solved by thought alone, but by the act of free choice on the level of existence. It inquires

to reject the existence of objective values, stressing instead the importance of free will and experience. Philip Mairet considers it as an outcome of "intellectual disorder between the two great wars" (1963, 8). It recognizes the intensity of man's anxiety to feel and know that he exists, and that this is the root of all his anxiety. When Kierkegaard said 'I am, therefore I think', he did not simply alter the Cartesian view, 'I think, therefore I am (*cogito ergo sum*)', but also invited a tremendous revolution in the course of human thought. It is opposed to abstract philosophising and is concerned with the meaning and problems of existence. The main emphasis lies on the predominance of existence over essence.

As inspired by the existential writers, Anita Desai often deals with the question of human existence on earth. Traditionally human existence is conceived as actuality or *is-ness*. An individual manifests himself only in those attributes that are his essence. But the existentialists do not seem ready to equal *is-ness* with existence. Existence is not a state, but activity: a category relating to the free individual. To exist refers to realization of the self through free choice between alternatives, through self-commitment. Copleston thinks that to exist means becoming more and more an individual, and less and less a mere member of a group. It also means transcending universality in favour of individuality (1965, 114). Thus,

transcendence of possibility is an important tenet of existentialism. It refers to the freedom of becoming, which belongs only to the individual.

The process of becoming and realization of the self is often dealt with by Anita Desai in her novels. She deals with the belief that the existence of the self precedes the essence of objects. She seems to be more concerned with the individualization of the characters. She projects her characters as recognizing the truth of their existence through involvement and quest. Most of her characters show such existential notion of alienation and the quest of the self. Her second novel, *Voices in the City* amply reflects her existential notion of freedom of choice and freedom of becoming. The main issue of the book lies in depicting the theme of existential freedom in the lives of the main characters, viz. Nirode, Monisha and Amla. Nirode as a true existential character is shown as in search of total freedom all his life, rejecting everything that he possesses; his past, ancestry, heritage and even security. Such notion of existential freedom can be observed even in *Journey to Ithaca*, where Matteo is portrayed as seeking after total freedom from all material blessings in his quest for spiritual fulfilment in the mystic land of India.

Most of the existential writers discuss about the alienated condition of man and quest for true identity.

These writers identify the term alienation with "inauthentic life". 'While Marx desires dis-alienation, the existentialists crave for an "authentic life", writes one critic. The concept of an authentic as opposed to an in-authentic life is one of the most original and important contributions of existentialism, precisely because it provides ethical norms generally rooted in human ontology (Johari, 509). Such shift from inauthentic life to authentic is often dealt with by Anita Desai.

Kierkegaard thinks that man's separation from God makes him finite and despondent. According to him when man conforms to the familial or social personalities or obligations there is every possibility of losing his sense of identity. He suggests man's inevitable return to God as an essential solution for his alienation. For him man's realization of the self as an inseparable entity from God is the true remedy from the torments of alienation. For him, existence is a synthesis of the finite and the infinite, and man is both infinite and finite. The act of existing is striving and the striving is infinite. Man for him is 'existing individual' who possesses great potentiality of becoming. He argues that an existing individual is in process of becoming, and in existence the watchword is always to proceed forward. Existence is the child that is born of the infinite and the finite, the eternal and the temporal, and is therefore a consequent striving.

He believes that every man is a mixture of the finite and the infinite. Considered to be finite, he is separated from God, alienated from Him. Considered as infinite, man is not indeed God, but he is a movement towards God, the movement of the spirit (Copleston, 114).

Nietzsche on the other hand considers man in the process of becoming. He relies on the individual's self-potentiality of overcoming such predicament. As he prefers life to knowledge, he takes this world as will to power and individual as this Will to Power. The world for him is not a mere appearance of a metaphysical unity or an illusion. The reality is of becoming and the individual is the one who turns it into being, imposing stable patterns on the Will to Power. As he replaces the religion by God's Death, he also replaces the myth of immortality of soul by *Eternal Return*, and slave morality by *Superman*. For him 'not humanity, but Superman is the goal'. But it is not a question of man evolving into Superman by a process of natural selection. For him, *The Eternal Recurrence* as the highest formula of the yea-saying attitude to life can ever be attained. He thinks that man is something, which must be surpassed; man is a bridge and not a goal. Man is a rope stretched between animal and superman - a rope over an abyss (Copleston, 188).

A feeling of alienation is also intensified by the individual's inability to make his free choice in the way of his existence. Although man possesses tremendous potentialities of becoming through the act of free choice, his very freedom is obstructed by various external agencies. These agencies are responsible for dividing and alienating man from other man, from the universe and also from his faith in both the subjective truth and objective reality. Sometimes it also gives rise to the feelings of absurd or irrational making whole universe look indifferent or hostile. The individuals, bereaved by the torment of alienation, also suffer from a deep conviction of their inability to create their own values and failure to alter their hopeless state.

Philip Mairet writes that Nietzsche's *Superman* and Kierkegaard's *Knight of Faith* are both examples of the transcendence of passion and intellectualism through the power of some purely inward integrity, though the one is an integrity of mastery and the other of obedience (1963, 9). It would therefore be very improper to assume that the existentialists have taken the notion of alienation only as a negative feeling. The sense of alienation also appears to be an essential element in recognizing the true self of an individual. Alienation is a crisis and like every crisis, it gives rise to the feeling of rootlessness and placelessness. It is only by the potentiality of human soul that an

individual becomes able to transcend the torment of alienation. An awakened soul can withstand the loss, can reconstruct and survive with a new insight, new meaning and new mechanism of living.

One of the basic problems that the protagonists of Desai face is the problem of individual choice or freedom of becoming. They are seen as fighting to overcome the obstructing elements in the way of their becoming. Maya in *Cry*, the Peacock fights back the indifferent situation at the cost of her becoming insane; Bim in *Clear Light of Day* tries to keep her individual values till her last. Deven in *Voices in the City* fights the absurd and inimical world around him. We find her characters trying to survive by creating means and mechanisms of survival and also by attempting to individualize themselves by the acts of their free choices. When they realize that they exist as different entities from the rest they grow and develop from within. They do not seem satisfied with what they are. Rather they seem trying to transcend their ordinary condition of life. Desai shows them as attempting to be more than the ordinary. Some of them opt for the infinite as their survival strategies while some others try to seek a lasting relationship between the finite and infinite, temporal and eternal.

The theme of alienation and realization as experienced and achieved by her characters through the

act of free choice links Anita Desai with these thinkers. The primacy of personal experience over abstraction, emphasis on individual choice, firm faith in human potentialities and supremacy of man over objects can be studied in the writings of Anita Desai. She not only deals with the wretched condition of man under the sun, but also tries to explore the unexplored realms of human psyche and tremendous human potentialities of becoming through the act of individual selection. As we find, Desai attempts to gather all the elements of human reality into a total picture of man.

SECTION THREE

Alienation and Survival: Postcolonial Scene

An impact of the postcolonial dilemma and quest cannot be overlooked while analysing the themes of alienation and survival in the novels of Anita Desai. We find an ample mixture of cultural and mythical influences in her writings. Native cultural representation and quest for identity can be studied as primary motives in her novels. Along with the theme of self-cultural dependency and a belief in self-sufficiency in indigenous writing, the allied themes of journey, loss, search for community and the arrival of the stranger can be studied as postcolonial images embodied in the writings of Anita Desai.

A process of decolonisation follows the Second World War as an expression of new local realities and the new international political order. It is reflected in the rapid evolution of literature in the erstwhile colonies and the Third World. Post-colonialism does not merely mean post-independence or after-colonialism. Rather it refers to a shift from the patriotic to the individualistic approach of life. The conflict between tradition and modernity, multiculturalism, an attempt to create a space are some of the essential features of such new writings. Bruce King writes that the

international literature of post-colonialism is based on the conflict between what is perceived as the traditional culture of the past and incorporation into a global modern culture" (1998, 7).

Alienation in colonial situations may be interpreted as the experience of the colonised against the colonizers. Since a colonizer has an urge to dominate, he considers the colonized as inferior and even having dependence complex. The very concepts of superiority or inferiority can be taken as the agencies that divide colonizer from the colonized. It has alienated the blacks from the whites in Africa and the cultured from the subalterns in India. History shows that the Europeans have considered the Africans next only to apes in reason and intellect. Colour was identified with intellect. Such falsification was also supported by the fact that Africans were an enslaved race and they had no formal written literature as well. The British called Indians *subaltern* or *sub-cultured* meaning subordinate or inferior, and by implication possessing an inferior mode of knowledge.

Such racial differentiation or colour complex has produced tremendous hatred and jealousy between the Europeans and the Africans, imperial British and the Indians. This has not only separated them from each other politically, but also fermented rebellion and change by creating a great spiritual distance and

division in between. The novels of Anita Desai also echo such kind of racial and political division in human relationships. A kind of hatred and jealousy between the British and the Indians can be observed in *Bye-Bye, Blackbird*, the victims being English Sarah and Indian Adit. Baumgartner's *Bombay* also reflects tremendous hatred and jealousy among the Germans and the Jews, the Indians and the Europeans, the coloured and the whites in their varied forms.

By postcolonial alienation, it may be understood that man is alienated in his own land and from his own people. It is a special kind of alienation when man suffers from a kind of rootlessness, a feeling of otherness and a mood of estrangement. Such alienation is experienced when the native's cultural or literary roots are overthrown or discarded. In the case of many new writers, including Anita Desai, postcolonial alienation plays a dominant role. It forms the individual's quest for native cultural roots or national background.

A major feature of postcolonial literature is concerned with place and displacement. As Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin point out; it is here that the special postcolonial crisis of identity comes into being, the concern with the development of recovery of an effective identifying relationship between self and place (1989, 8-9). Elleke Boehmer also thinks that it

is the writing which foregrounds and celebrates a national or historical rootlessness sometimes accentuated by political cynicism (1995, 240). Sense of the self may have been eroded by dislocation or cultural denigration. It may have also been disturbed by the conscious and unconscious oppression of the indigenous personality and culture by a supposedly superior racial or cultural model. Postcolonial study 'seeks to re-establish the balance of knowledge by demonstrating that the 'inferior' is made so through discourses of power and politics' (Devy, 117). Beyond historical and cultural differences, place and displacement, the writers make an attempt at presenting human reality and spirit of newly ascended quest in their writings.

The crisis like departure from the colonial culture and loss of the self therefore forms the first principle of postcolonial Indian writing. As the writers face a kind of rootlessness after independence, they are prompted to make a quest for identity and also develop some survival strategies. The second phase deals with the quest for national identity. Bruce King writes that during the first phase national political and cultural liberation was the goal. In the second phase cultural and economic liberation became the ideal for groups and movements within and across national boundaries, including Black Nationalism, feminism, and recent immigrants, each of which claimed its own

literature (1998, 3). Survival of the native or realization of the self forms the third phase.

Postcolonial alienation and quest play a dominant role in the fictional setting of Anita Desai. As she started her writing career after the independence, she suggests a gradual process of de-colonization, which provides a fresh attitude towards life leading to a new movement in literature. Unlike colonial writers, she does not merely rely on intellectual and cultural conflict between the ruler and the ruled but tries to expose the total picture of the individual under the postcolonial situation. Her characters are not only alienated under the new situations; they are also inspired to make a search for self-cultural or national identity. She can be related to the third phase of the postcolonial Indian writing.

Lament over disintegration of trusted tradition along with identity crisis is also evident in the writings of Anita Desai. As the problem of identity is increased in a technologically advanced society, the emphasis is given to individual consciousness that leads to the quest for identity. Her writing identifies its mission as making a theory of consciousness rather than a theory of mere change. She frequently hints at the postcolonial alienation of the individuals accompanied by human quest for modern roots. She concerns herself with the postcolonial dilemma of

modern man, whose ideology is marred by a taboo-ridden traditional society. A typical postcolonial anxiety like the conflict between old morality and new consciousness also constitutes the hub of many of her novels. Afzal-Khan considers her a postcolonial writer with realistic preoccupations. He thinks that Anita Desai has opted to remain within history, despite its ravages and cruelties. He writes that:

Anita Desai has shown in novel after novel her moral disapproval of a stance that refuses to shoulder responsibility for the past and present and chooses to withdraw from a painful present reality into a romantic or mythicized past. Yet the lure of myth is great, especially as an aesthetic form, and Desai deals with this dilemma by letting her writing and many of her characters take on the formal qualities of mythic fiction (for example, the poetic lyricism of her prose, the proneness to solitude and to the extraordinary in her characters). In matters of message, however, Desai is clearly on the side of realism, so she chooses to view myth and its attractions from, and ultimately to subordinate it (or at least balance it) within, the critical realist perspective" (1993, 96).

Postcolonial Indian novel is a Quest Novel, and its quest ranges all through cultural, racial and linguistic encounters. Culture may also be studied as a quest, which is not always mutually understandable. But it is not good if the quest is not a free choice. The themes of quest and choice are the two ingredients of culture. Cultural concepts are ancient and contemporary, traditional as well as modern. The cultural and linguistic roots pierce deep into the human consciousness and are therefore, difficult to separate. Such replacement creates a certain rootlessness and spuriousness. This very cultural rootlessness magnifies the torment of alienation in the lives of Adit and Sarah in *Bye-Bye, Blackbird*, Hugo Baumgartner in *Baumgartner's Bombay*. Desai amply deals with the sorrow of broken cultural lineages, which results in crisis of identity. She presents cultural crisis in man with the theme of East-West enchantments and disenchantments. Motivated by a bright prospect of national and racial survival, her characters also create a sense of quest for identity.

Desai's views on culture and tradition may be viewed as 'trans-national and trans-cultural'. Traditions are yesterday's changes. The cultural is always intercultural. The intercultural should be seen from the inside, as part of a society's creative adaptation and synthesis, rather than an alien imposition (King, 23-24). Culture changes and it must

change. Otherwise it becomes static. Her novels can also be studied as products of change. Her characters seem nostalgic for the past when they were supposedly complete in themselves. But they do not believe in the value of the rituals of the past. Culture is also influenced by technology. Her novel *Village Bye the Sea* shows such change brought about by technology and modernization of a village to an industrial belt, which creates a great change in the lives of the individuals.

Along with the postcolonial crisis of alienation and quest, her novels also echo the anxiety of vagueness, uncertainty and indeterminacy. Her characters suffer from the anxiety of increasing fragmentation and of human powerlessness. She delights in being the creator of her fictional universe and leaves no opportunity to drive home this fact. Equally startling is the precipitate self-consciousness about the act of writing. An urge for individualism can be observed as one of the major traits in her fictional settings. Her novels also breed question about the nature of reality. She often searches for alternatives to formal revolution as the only effective way of communicating a subversive meaning in her quest of the true nature of reality.

Section Four

Gender Alienation and Androgynous Consciousness

A reader often comes across gender isolation and female sensibility in the novels of Anita Desai. She explores the problems of alienation, quest and survival of modern Indian women in her novels. Her women characters are often considered as inessential others, devoid of intellect and inferior entity by the male dominated society. But Desai also portrays them struggling to discover their own identity by adopting various means and methods of survival. Her novels also deal with many aspects of female sensibilities like the social censure of infertility in *Cry, the Peacock* or *Voices in the City*, joy and burdens of motherhood as in *Where Shall We go this Summer*, family bonds as wife or as single woman as in *Voices in the City*, *Clear Light of Day* and *Fasting, Feasting*. A shift from male-female alienation to a quest of balance in gender relationships can be well traced in her novels.

Feminism can be studied as the result of increasing division and distance in gender relationship. The very concept of feminism is born out of the sexual injustice. Women in many societies have been demoted to the position of the other. Patricia Waugh comments that female identity has been repressed throughout the history. Society has considered women as

culturally inferior. It has often functioned to reinforce their desire to please, to serve others and seek definition through them, internalising masochistically any essential femininity (1991, 358). Such dominance of modern Indian women by male dominated world aggravates their sense of alienation. Desai confesses that women and their problems interest her. Being herself a woman she can well identify herself with female sensibility. She seems to be aware of the strange dilemma and search for identity of modern Indian women. The primary quest of women in her fiction is concerned with determining their place in society. She portrays her women characters as seeking to establish their identity as intelligent beings instead of mere pleasure objects. In this way, quest for women identity becomes one of the prime attentions of Anita Desai.

The idea of feminism that we find in the novels of Desai is directly related to the postcolonial identity crisis and quest for the self that her female characters are engaged with. She seems more concerned about psychical suppression than the physical one. Her women characters suffer from psychic depression as their creativity is misunderstood. They are given protection but not freedom; they are given companion but not communion. Since their very quest for self-dignity and individuality is unfulfilled, these women feel discontented. It gives way to frustration,

irritation and fear. In the novels of Desai, the self of a woman is lost sometimes in the east-west cultural encounter, sometimes in the husband's supremacy and sometimes in parental protection. The identity of Maya, Monisha, Sarah or Sita is lost in their husbands' domineering selves and Uma is utterly dominated by her parents. Her novels hint at this lost identity of the woman.

The feminist views of Anita Desai can be related to what Showalter calls the third phase or the phase of self-discovery. Her novels portray her private vision which captures the long afflicted wail of a wounded psyche focusing on the complex tale of human relationships. Her female characters long for spiritual relationship between themselves and their partners. They also rebel against the norms of a patriarchal mode of society. Most of her novels are characterized by a fine feminine sensibility and the central consciousness is that of a woman. The evolution of her sensitivity shows that her gendered subjectivity is very strong in her earlier novels, especially *Cry, the Peacock*, *Voices in the City* and *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* This phase reflects some very feminist thoughts rooted in male-female binaries. Desai also displays an ambivalent attitude towards sex.

To the discontent of radical feminists Anita Desai emerges as an androgynous artist. The principal idea

behind her feminist view is that unless there is a healthy coexistence of the male and female principles, the artistic mind is incomplete and, therefore, artistic creation is not possible. Her androgynous consciousness is rooted in a humanistic and altruistic vision of life and art. She rejects the binary gender opposition posited by the radical feminists. In her view a sense of division and mutual exclusion between male-female relationships creates resentment and seclusion. But this can be overcome by developing a healthy communication and mutual understanding between the two. Gender alienation can be transcended also by helping each other to realize their individual potentiality as creative beings.

Desai's idea of independence of women and their freedom from patriarchal conventions is heralded by Aunt Lila in *Voices in the City*. She thinks that women can be themselves only when they discover their own spirits. She expresses her sentiments: "Women place themselves in bondage to men, whether in marriage or out. All their joy and ambition is channelled that way, while they go parched themselves" (221). Desai does not resent male but considers the female as capable of overcoming male myth. She is interested in exploring female identity by way of overcoming the torment of alienation in the context of family or society.

As Showalter writes, without an understanding of the framework of the female substructure, we can miss or misinterpret the themes and structure of women's literature, and fail to make necessary connections within a tradition (1979, 97). Female structure does not include only ascribed status and the internalised constructs of femininity but also the occupations, interactions and consciousness of women. According to Jungian psychology human personality has both male and female aspects: animus and the anima. Gender is at the level of behavioural traits and the male-female aspects often become inseparable in human personality. It may also be one of the grounds of the rejection of the male-female binaries. This results in the mutual neutralization of the two principles during artistic creation. Thus gender becomes only a matter of individual voice and style.

Desai's sense of feminism covers a broader area. She tries to explore and evaluate every form of human degradation and quest. Her female characters resent dominant and oppressive patriarchal structures of power, which creates a profound sense of alienation in them. They are engaged in transcending the alienation created by gender. The creative consciousness of Anita Desai reveals her androgynous and even trans-sexual character despite her feminist idiom. Her novels represent incessant quest for love and identity that is misplaced and misunderstood. Such a view of feminism

posits her as a third world feminist with postmodernist leanings.

Though various feminist interpretations can be entertained with regard to the works of Desai, we should remember that this is only one of her many voices. In an interview with Atma Ram she states that not only women but also men and children are injured. She confesses that her concerns in writing are metaphysical rather than sociological. In a question as to whether the struggle of her women characters is for establishing a separate identity as an individual, she responds that she would "reject such interpretation as being childishly simple". Considering gender isolation as a metaphysical condition, she confesses: "I see it in the context of the human struggle from which I exclude no one... If I write chiefly about women, it is simply because I know and understand them best. I do not for a minute consider woman as *abla*" (1996, 96). The themes on which her books are based on employ both male and female characters and they are seen to have 'much the same struggle and problems'. Indeed according to her, alienation is common to both man and woman. It sometimes transcends sexual barriers. She explains:

I should be a poor novelist if I allowed my readers to forget that my characters are women, or ignore what they have suffered. I would attach exactly the same comment to my

male characters - and the children - their sufferings. I write about human conditions - not the male/female condition (1996, 96).

The novels of Anita Desai can be interpreted as attempts to study human consciousness governed by a sense of loss, personal disintegration, and also by an increasing self-consciousness. Desai hints to a shift from common sense to personal sense. Her emphasis is laid in favour of rendering individual sensibility rather than collective experience. She tries to seize the reality of human existence through individual consciousness. Her sensibility is upheld by a disdain for authority, a feeling of urgency to break new ground, and also an examination of harmony. It is further manifested in her desire to reduce worn out standards, to modify the human notion of alienation and to recognize individual awareness, and finally to stress on the principle of change as an essential motif. She aims at investigating the crisis of alienation and struggle for survival uniquely and explicitly.