

CHAPTER THREE

ALIENATED SELF

By alienation is meant a mode of experience in which a person experiences himself alien. He has become, one might say, estranged from himself. He does not experience himself as the centre of his world, as the creator of his own acts [...] The alienated person is out of touch with himself as he is out of touch with any other person. He, like the others, is experienced as things are experienced; with the senses and with common sense, but at the same time, without being related to oneself and the world outside productivity.

(Erich Fromm. *The Sane Society*, 1966, 120)

A major portion of the novels of Anita Desai can be studied as investigations on the sense of alienation experienced by contemporary man. Feeling of alienation in her novels manifests itself variously in the form of generation gap, integrity loss, and fragmentation of persona. It is also intensified by the obstruction of personal development and dearth of meaning. She not only presents man as an alienated being, but also shows the various factors that intensify the torment of alienation. As she discloses the spiritual crisis of modern life under various situations, the central theme in most of her novels becomes the existential dilemma of modern man as an individual. In her novels, man suffers not only from war, persecution, famine and ruin, but also from an inner conviction of isolation, uncertainty and futility in his way of existence.

The earlier novels of Anita Desai can be viewed as studies in alienation between husband and wife. She projects this crisis through perceptive wives and dutiful yet insensitive husbands. Distance and division in emotional relationship forms the basic issue in these novels. The female figures are portrayed as unable to create an effective heart to heart communication with their husbands. This generates in them a sense of non-belonging not only to their husbands but also with reference to the whole society. The male figures in her novels fail to recognize what

Jung calls anima or the female principle, 'the inherited collective image of women lying in man's unconscious' (Nayak 11).

Desai makes an attempt to deal with such alienation in her very first novel, *Cry the Peacock*. She draws a pen-picture of Maya, whose life is marked by postcolonial feminist dilemma. Since her ardent longing for her husband becomes only a dream, the possibility of finding a meaning in love has been destroyed. Her views on life, thoughts on love and indulgence in pleasures are termed as sheer attachment by her husband. She fails to establish an effective relationship with her husband, which leads her to inner frustration and psychic disintegration. But Gautama does not give proper attention to her emotions. This adds to a spiritual distance between the two.

Maya's sense of alienation is increased by various factors such as her excessive sentimentality, Gautama's cold intellectualism and a lack of mutual concern between the two. When she was still unmarried, an albino-eyed astrologer had prophesied the predictable death of one of the couple within four years of her marriage. Three years had already been passed when the novel began. The prophecy acts upon her like the prophecy of the three witches upon Macbeth. The fear of death of any one of the couple casts its shadow upon

her married life since the very beginning. This also interrupts the free flow of love between the two.

The early death of her mother induces in her a special affection for her father who also feeds her superstition. In response to the prophecy he says: "If one can do nothing about them, why not accept" (54). He would make her a daddy's girl rather than a practical and mature lady. He is evidently unconcerned towards her education. His domineering protection and fatalistic philosophy of life turns Maya into an introvert and impractical girl. Instead of considering her choice, he matches her with Gautama, allowing for his age and intelligence. He only hopes that Gautama would give her good protection.

But Gautama fails to satisfy both her emotional and physical needs. It makes her regard his house as a lonely tomb. "I sat as in a tomb" (129) she contemplates. She complains his indifference and lack of tender feelings:

Telling me to go to sleep while he worked at his papers, he did not give another thought to me to either the soft willing body or the lonely, wanting mind that waited rear his bed..

'Yes,' I cried, 'yes, it is his hardness - no, no, not hardness, but the distance he coldly

keeps from me. His coldness, his coldness, and incessant talk of cups of tea and philosophy in order not to hear me talk, and talking, reveal myself. It is that - my loneliness in this house' (9).

Maya needs some change, some vacation, but Gautama has no time to spare. The memory of the prophecy deeply unsettles her. He remains sarcastic when she needs his affection and assurance. In her anxiety, she wishes to visit her father for comfort. But when she confesses her desire to Gautama: "I wish I could see father again. It always helps" (53), she is shocked at his reply: 'Helps what? Whom'? At such reaction, she reflects:

Without realizing what he had done, Gautama had laid his finger and forced mine upon the fatal vulnerability of what I had believed in like a fond fool. My father, with his quiet words, would have done nothing to allay my fears or dispel my conviction, but merely underlined their power by asking me, however sadly, to 'accept for it must be so.' In his words, 'It must be so.' If he saw disaster he saw it as being inevitable, and if he saw rebellion, he saw it as being hopeless (54).

Gautama has based his life on the tradition of Gita, which advocates a life of meaningful detachment. Such a detachment is a kind of nausea to an acutely sensitive woman like Maya. He calls her a 'third rate poetess' (133), 'neurotic' and "spoilt baby" (115), disallowing her poetic heart and imagination. When she is termed as 'overbearing woman', she replies that all she wanted was to be outside with him, near him; but he made her go away (110-111). It seems to her that the avoidance of her loneliness is impossible. Her reflection reveals her frustration at this loneliness:

And then those fierce headaches began, frightening in their intensity, clenching in their steel jaws my entire brow, then shifting a torturous weight to a point between my eyes—the albino astrologer had touched me, just there, had he not? —Then to one side of my head, till only that seemed to exist and I became a half-headed ogre then slipped across my scalp and down to my neck, throbbing like a drum. The drums never ceased (151).

Such distress is caused by her deep frustration in her marriage. Even after three years of marriage, she is still childless. The stillness of the house frightens her to the core of her being. She feels that she is neglected by all the family members of the house. It creates a great anguish in her. She remarks:

"I had been tortured by a humiliating sense of neglect of loneliness, of desperation that would not have existed if I had not loved him so, had he not meant so much" (201). She feels sorry for herself as she finds her love unfulfilled and dreams shattered. Emotional alienation thus becomes the central problem of her life. Lack of contact and communion, inadequate mating and insufficient emotional support magnify her sense of alienation. Her reflection provides ample evidence for her divided self:

Yes I am going insane. I am moving further from all wisdom, all calm, and I shall soon be mad, if I am not already. Perhaps it is my madness that leads me to imagine that horoscope that encounter with the albino, his predictions, my fate? Perhaps it is only a phenomenon of insanity (108).

I am torn between two worlds - the receding one of grace, the approaching one of madness. My body breaks in the battle (177).

Maya longs for the world of her father, a world of flowers and poetry. She seeks her father in Gautama, but does not find any one. Her father was a gentle father for whom she used to long "with fiercest desire" (52) whenever she was in need of reassurance and love. She had loved him ardently as her decision-maker,

guide, protector and nurse at the cost of her growth into maturity and independence. But she is shocked when he gives her in marriage just to unburden himself. After her marriage, her father becomes indifferent to her. He does not even write her any letter. This makes her irritable. She complains: "'Nobody!' I shouted, flinging myself down on the chair under the futile fan. 'Nobody writes to me. Not even father - and I'm waiting to hear from him about his plans for the summer. He knows I'm waiting'" (129). But her waiting is never satisfied by her father or by her husband.

Gautama sees only the upper surface of her life. He oversimplifies her personality as spoilt by the pampering of her father. He considers her as living in an unreal atmosphere of fairy tale and being cut off from the life of 'ordinary man'. He is cold to her inside feelings and affections. There is mutual withering of affection between the two. Instead of being her lover he becomes an adversary to her. He says to her, "Life is a fairy tale to you still. What have you learnt of realities" (115)? He also perceives that Maya is an Electra but he cannot help her come out of the inconsistency. He does not try to bring her to her present moment of reality. Instead he says to his wife:

You have a very obvious father-obsession, which is also the reason why you married me, a man so much older than yourself. It is a

complex that, unless you mature rapidly, you will not be able to deal with [...] it will probably destroy itself in the end, since passion of this sort is almost always self-consuming, having no object within its range that it can safely consume. Any little setback destroys it, leads it closer to its termination (146).

Such an allegation aggravates her disintegrating sanity instead of creating a balanced relationship. She feels that Gautama neither understands nor satisfies her needs, physical as well as emotional. She finds in him a cold intellect and disinterested realism which makes him neglect her sentiments, fantasies, fears and longings. He fails to meet her emotional demands with his pragmatic attitude. This makes her conscious of the massive distance between them. She feels that her marriage is a fiasco broken repeatedly so that the pieces were picked up and put together (45). For her Gautama becomes so near, yet so far away. This leads her to such a point where she can neither express nor repress herself. She thinks of only one escape - doing away with her husband.

The communication gap between husband and wife is felt throughout the novel. Their marriage becomes neither true nor lasting, for it is forced on them from outside. As one critic comments, the novel becomes a

fascinating psychological study of neurotic fears and anxieties caused by marital disharmony and compounded by age-old superstitions (Kumar, 3).

The agony of alienation is also presented in *Voices in the City*. The novel can be studied as a tragic exploration of personal suffering of Monisha, an educated Indian woman. Her relationship with her husband Jiban is distinguished only by loneliness and lack of communication. She feels that he is an immature, awkward and a boring man who fails to meet her emotional needs. His half-literate family-members misread her creativity. She feels that all of them are insensitive and dull-witted towards her.

Like Maya in *Cry, the Peacock*, Monisha is a young wife unable to meet the demands of marriage. She fails to adjust as part of a joint family that never gives her any privacy. She becomes tired of the lack of conscience in the family. It makes her secretive and silent. Her inability to procreate further alienates her from the family. Out of compassion and loathing, she is forced to accept the latter. Although she has a higher sensibility than ordinary women, yet she considers her life as a big problem. In her utter anguish of her married life, she complains:

Is this what life is then, my life? Only a conundrum that I shall brood over forever with

passion and pain, never to arrive at a solution? Only a conundrum - is that, then, life? (124-125)

There is absolutely no light thrown on her love for her husband. It can be said that finer love feelings in her are nipped in the bud. There develops an emotional gulf between her and the entire world. For her, fear becomes the inspiring force of life instead of love. Such a monotonous life makes her existence bizarre. Shocked at unproductive activities of the women around her, she questions: "Why are lives such as these lived? At their conclusion, what solution, what truth falls into the waiting palm of one's hand, the still pit of one's heart" (121)? The pettiness of their existence makes her feel persecuted. She believes that most women survive by pretending to forget this emptiness of their stifling existence.

Monisha feels that the household members not only lead a futile life, they also mistrust her creativity and intellectual aspirations. They constantly keep a watch on her, suspiciously and doubtfully. Even when her sister Amla visits her, she is not left alone with her. She wants to be free but freedom seems a far-fetched dream. Her longings for silence and solitude, love and understanding become impossible to her. The image of a caged tiger, the 'proud, glorious beast' in

the zoo is suggestive of her predicament. In her sheer frustration she utters:

Alone I could work better and I should feel more whole... Only I wish I were given some task that I could do alone, in privacy, away from the aunts and uncles, and cousins and nieces and nephews. I should feel more - whole. But less and less there is privacy (115-116).

Monisha has no choice except to stay in the joint family, nor does she have the ability to attain detachment. Had she been religious, there would have been a chance for her to renounce the world. She has no alternatives even in spiritual life. As she reflects: "If I had religious faith... I could easily renounce all this. But I have no faith, no alternative to my confused despair. There is nothing I can give myself to, and so I must stay. The family here, and their surroundings, tells me such a life cannot be lived - a life dedicated to nothing - that this husk is a protection from death" (122). But she does not find any alternative to replace her estrangement.

Absence of love resulting in husband-wife alienation becomes a strong factor of her dilemma. Jiban is neither kind nor considerate towards her. Instead of trying to understand or comfort her, he sides with his own family members. Since there is no

love relationship between them, she feels so alienated from her husband that she ceases to feel any hurt or regret. She feels a total separation from him. Her reflection reveals the self of Monisha as devoid of such love feelings towards her husband:

If only love existed that is not binding, that is free of rules, obligations, complicity and all stirrings of mind or consciousness, then, but there is no such love (135).

The kind of love that she aspires for is not available to her. Jiban destroys whatever meaning their relationship might have had. Her desire to develop a love relationship with him and a desperate urge to make it meaningful is destroyed only by rejection and loneliness. It plunges her into the most disastrous pains, fears and regrets. She withdraws herself from the material concern of family. She also advises her sister to rebel and always go in the opposite direction. She suddenly becomes conscious of having lost all zeal to exist. Her fear of touch and intimacy, her withdrawal from passion and its display confine her to her own private passion. She becomes aware of a vast gap between her self and the world around. She reflects:

I am locked apart from all of them, they cannot touch me, they can only lip-read and

misinterpret. Similarly, I cannot really hear them; I cannot understand what they say. I have never touched any one, never left the imprint of my fingers on any one's shoulders, of my tongue on anyone's damp pallet. What a waste, what a waste it has been, this life enclosed in a locked container, merely as an observer, and so imperfect, so handicapped an observer at that (239-240).

Lack of peace, solitude and fertility turn Monisha into a pitiable figure. Her happy and satisfying infancy stands poles apart from the taboo-ridden family of Jiban. The suffocating atmosphere of the house makes her uneasy. She finds no getaway from the suffocating family environment. She reacts with such a frenzied passion that even her impassive husband is surprised. She considers that her life is dedicated to nothing. For her, the choice is between death and mean existence, and that, surely, is not a difficult choice (122). She does not take long to decide her course of action. She finally decides to immolate herself. Just before she destroys her bodily life she ruminates:

I am standing here, pressing myself against the wall so as not to feel senior aunt's flesh bump into me. I could not bear to have her touch me while she is sighing and humming and swaying to this loud music. I could not bear

to touch, however vicariously, this appalling exhibition of a passion that ravages the soul and body and being. If I did, I should be a traitor, and a liar. I have never been touched by it, nor ravaged. I bear no scar on my body. I am different from them all. They put me away in a steel container, a thick glass cubicle, and I have lived in it all my life, without a touch of love or hate or warmth on me (239).

The tragedy of Monisha characterizes the dilemma of many fateful young Indian women who have nothing else to fall back on. Desai in this novel brings into focus a typical postcolonial Indian woman's dilemma and anxiety, whose life is torn between the two worlds of old morality and new awareness. As an educated and conscious new Indian woman, Monisha cannot bridge the gap between tradition and modernity, awareness and taboo. The age-old myth of woman as an inferior sex devoid of creativity and sublime thought pushes her back into the realm of an alien world. Concerning her character, Narendra Kumar comments:

Unlike Maya, Monisha is not a neurotic. In the jungle of civilization, invisible laws turn her into a helpless, isolated victim of a monstrous system. The image of the racehorse is symbolic of the impending tragedy in the

novel. The wounded horse is suggestive of the protagonist's predicament (1996, 23).

We can locate the elements of a modern existential crisis in this novel. Desai seems more interested in exploring human mystery than the natural one. She is primarily concerned with the theme of individual choice. Conflict between the sensitive individual and insensitive universe creates a sense of powerlessness in the individual. Since man cannot comprehend or defeat nature he becomes despondent which consequently leads to existential alienation. The handling of the wasteland and Bohemian themes provides the novelist with an opportunity for dealing with existential modes of life such as nihilism and nausea.

The novel also deals with the tragic predicament of Nirode against an inimical world of Calcutta. There is an atmosphere of spiritual stagnation in his life. He is described as an "outlawed hermit crab" (190) or an "ill-tempered hermit" (194). It is a sterile condition that he represents. His sense of void emerges from an awkward and embarrassing domestic tension in which all things seem insignificant and hollow. He feels hurt and betrayed, and considers all relationships to be needless and futile. He thinks that marriage, bodies, touch and torture are meaningless and unsatisfying (35). A devotee of philosophers like Baudelaire and Camus, he is strongly obsessed with

failure. According to him achieving success in life creates only a sense of emptiness. This is not at all acceptable to him. He meets failure after failure. He confesses to his friend David:

I want to fail quickly. Then I want to see if I have the spirit to start moving again, towards my next failure. I want to move from failure to failure to failure, step by step to rock bottom. I want explore that depth. [...] I want to get there without that meaningless climbing. I want to descend, quickly. [...] Happiness, suffering - I want to be done with them, disregard them, see beyond them to the very end (40).

Indeed his entire life style becomes a negation of life and a rejection of love. He never replies to his mother's letters. He becomes a masochist who rejects the concept of progress and advocates failure. Instead of acceptance, he wants negation. Silence and solitude become two most powerful attractions for him. He refuses even to make essential contacts which life demands. As Desai herself writes, "The intricacies of relationship - approach, recompense, and obligation - these aroused in him violent distaste and kept him hovering on the fringe of the world" (62).

Nirode may be considered as an Oedipus or a Hamlet who is unduly obsessed with his mother's relations with major Chadha. She stays in her utopian house at Kalimpong enjoying her flowers and garden with her adulterous lover. Nirode is disgusted by her sensuality. It disables him to draw conclusions regarding her conduct. The torment of alienation makes him incapable of human emotions. He ends up as a 'wandering bohemian' constantly experimenting with failure. Desai describes of him:

He was proud to the point of being a fanatic, he was intense enough to be capable of whole-hearted dedication, yet he drifted, a shadowy cipher, and his life consisted of one rejection following another. He loathed the world that could offer him no crusade, no pilgrimage, and he loathed himself for not having the true, unwavering spirit of either within him. There was only this endless waiting, hollowed out by an intrinsic knowledge that was nothing to wait for (64).

The theme of alienation arising out of cultural conflicts can be studied in her next novel, *Bye-Bye Blackbird*. The novel mainly deals with the alienation of Sarah, whose Indian husband Adit does not let her English-self to be preserved. She experiences an identity crisis more than any other characters in the

novel. "She had become nameless; she had shed her name as she had shed her ancestry and identity, and she sat there, staring, as though she watched them disappear" (31). Her alienation seems mainly caused by cultural disparity. Both husband and wife suffer from adjustment problems at the various levels of their existence.

Sarah mutely suffers from her alienation by herself. Adit fails to consider her interests. He frequently insults her English-self. Though she is ready to sacrifice her everything to save her marriage, yet he seems to be criticizing her. He forces her to prepare Bengali food without giving any importance to the likes and dislikes during her dinner. Every time he would pass some mild insults upon her. Describing her wife Adit says to his friend Dev:

These English wives are quite manageable really, you know. Not as fierce as they look - very quiet and hardworking as long as you treat them right and roar at them regularly once or twice a week (29).

Sarah is already frustrated due to the callousness of her own people. Being sick of the selfish mode of life of the English, she marries an Indian. But when she finds her own husband insulting her, her sense of alienation is more intensified. She gives up her food habit, cultural background and family pride, but

somehow or the other, she is degraded by her own husband. She makes Indian dishes and listens to Indian music. But inside her she feels that she is playing double roles, one in the morning with the schoolchildren and one in the evening with her husband. Her identity is questioned. She is neither Sarah nor Mrs. Sen nor both. Her face is only a mask, her body only a costume. Desai describes her:

Who was she? [...] Where was Sarah? Staring out of the window at the chimneypots and the clouds, she wondered if Sarah had any existence at all, and then she wondered, with great sadness, if she would ever be allowed to step off the stage, leave the theatre and enter the real world - whether English or Indian she did not care - she wanted only its sincerity, its truth (34-35).

When her friends ask about her in-laws, she cannot answer them properly. Julia once comments on her: 'If she's that ashamed of having an Indian husband, why did she go and marry him?' Sarah analyses the difference of Indians and Englishmen. She says that English people aren't as self-conscious as they are supposed to be. They are really quite open when it comes to things like that. Unlike Indians, they are not in the least bit self-conscious about their persons but very much so in their relationships (65).

The difference between her self and the Indian way of life becomes clear and the gulf becomes greater. The indifference of her own people makes her feel insignificant as a particle of dust, paralysing his ability to act and build 'the tension in togetherness'. As she longs for a group-oriented society, she finds it difficult to have meaningful communication with a stereotyped personality from the west. She also sees that their urbanization has erased an individual's uniqueness. What hurts her most is the indifference of people.

When she attempts to relate herself with the world around him, she fails. A sense of insecurity and anxiety is felt within. She feels like Alice falling, falling down the rabbit hole, like a Kafkaesque stranger wandering through the dark labyrinth of a prison (64). She tries to break the geographical or cultural bondage, but in the process she does not gain her freedom. Instead she finds herself in another kind of exile. Such experience makes her a neurotic for she is unable to attach meaning to her experience. She becomes aware of such state of chaos and confusion in her created by external pressure. She feels that she is losing her balance.

Desai presents her characters as undergoing spiritual crisis, arising out of conflict between

reality and illusions that they built up for themselves. They are basically unable to make a lasting connection between truth and phenomena. Instead of agreeing to conform to the practical realities of life, they attempt to bring a new meaning to their existence through the complex nature of their self-made illusions. For them subjective vision is more conducive than the immediate situation where they live. The force of a larger and powerful world consisting of the other also acts upon their illusions. It also makes them experience a decline of faith which had sustained them so far. Being without an alternative set of beliefs, they are beset by an acute anxiety in them. This is further intensified by the presence of objective reality which continues to affect their subjective vision.

Psychic disparity on the level of understanding deepens the sense of alienation. The contrast between value systems in husband-wife relation is established from the very beginning of her first novel, *Cry, the Peacock* and continues through *Voices in the City* and *Bye-Bye, Blackbird*. The theme of disintegration in a family life caused by such disparity is revealed in *Where Shall We Go this Summer* as well. Inadequacy of mutual understanding forms a major concern in the novel. Though the natural flow of affection between husband and wife seems almost intact, yet it is more

frequently disturbed due to misunderstanding and lack of adequate forbearance.

The novel gives an account of a middle-aged woman, Sita whose abnormal childhood environment and frustrating human interactions turn her into a disintegrated personality. Her motherless childhood and negligent up-bringing by her father makes her experience desertion and psychic disorders. She becomes a prey to emotional crisis and also feels a neurotic pride in her. She believes that the spirit of violence infects everybody living in the present, including her own children. She thinks that:

Everyone fights. They are all violent... like the waves incessantly, tiresomely crashing into each other, her sons hurled their bodies at each other as if they were made for attack and combat. [...] No one offended her so much by violence as Menaka in her carelessness. She watched disbelievingly, as Menaka, telling her about a party she had been to, idly reached out her fingers and crumbled a sheaf of new buds on the small potted plant. [...] Menaka had done it unconsciously, had not meant to destroy anything at all. Destruction came so naturally; that was horror (44-45).

Her grief also arises from her failure to accept the present social values and attitudes of life. Her feeling of helplessness in an unfair society adds to her anxiety. She considers the world around her as lurching in ruin. She thinks that everybody around her leads an animal life. She says that they are nothing but appetite and sex. Only food, sex and money matter to them (47). Besides being merely unable to communicate efficiently with her husband, she feels distant from the world around. She is distressed at "the tedium and ugliness of a meaninglessness life" (145). She even doubts the relevance of her existence on earth. "Life seemed complete, full, without her; there was no reason for her to exist" (84). Yearning for meaning and order in life she finds chaos and futility. She finds her urge to freedom lost. She cries out that she wants to "escape from the madness here, and escape to a place where it might be possible to be sane again" (23).

A great difference in attitude between husband and wife also aggravates her sense of alienation. The novel provides a number of events that reflect a widening gulf between the couple. One morning, as she sees a pack of crows attacking an eagle, 'wounded or else too young to fly', she tries to scare the crows with an air gun but in vain. The crows jeer and tear the eaglet to pieces. The situation objectifies the conflict in her own life. But Raman is irritated by her big concern for

the helpless eagle. Her actions appear to be nothing more than a weird 'act of drama' to him. He does not try to probe into her troubled mind. Whatever she does appears to be extravagant to him. When she feels pity at the dying eaglet, he makes fun of her. She is deeply hurt when Raman remarks about the result of her action in such words: "They have made a good job of the eagle. Look at the feathers sticking out of that crow's beak (41).

On the part of her husband, love seems scant and understanding meagre. She thinks that he delights in her failure to protect the eagle. This small event indicates the wide gulf that alienates her from her husband and children. She often remains despondent and unhappy. She fails to satisfy her husband by show of natural affection. Emotional reassurance, so frequently needed to make life pleasant, "simply did not exist for her and should not make it exist. So she did not speak any words of love or reassurance to him" (41). The novelist brings out this point all through the book and frequently refers to Sita as "wanting and not being given what she wanted" (132). Desai describes her plight thus:

She felt so weak, she wanted to lay down her head and weep, 'my father's dead - look after me.' She cleared her throat. 'All right', she said, hoarsely (131).

Her face was so grey; such sharp grooves ran from her nostrils to the corners of her mouth. It was the face of a woman unloved a woman rejected (133).

Sita is also disturbed by Raman's unimaginative way of life. Because of dire difference between their attitudes, she fails to open her heart to Raman. It becomes an intrinsic cause of a subtle distance between the two. Although desirous of complete surrender to her husband, she keeps back her feelings to herself. A lack of emotional communication leads both husband and wife to fragmentation and mutual seclusion.

Sita feels that not only her husband, but also her children are inconsiderate towards her. They have different tastes and likes. They are apathetic and brutal. Menaka carelessly tears the buds and destroys the paintings. Karan gets his lustful joy in the destruction of things than in building them. Her reflections amply signify her increasing alienation from the children:

Destruction came so naturally. That was the horror (45).

Children only mean anxiety, concern, pessimism, not happiness. What other women call happiness is just sentimentality (98).

All that mattered to her, they discarded (137).

The theme of love had been misunderstood or rejected in the novels of Anita Desai. Since men provide comfortable home and fulfil some material needs, they consider that women have no reason to be discontent. They become the spokesmen of a society which doubts the judgment of a woman who struggle to break free from traditional standards. They also forget that women are not satisfied with mere food and sex, home and babies. Rather they aspire for something higher than these basic needs. Since their very aspirations are neglected or misread, these women feel defeated and bereaved, which creates in them a sense of futility, absurdity and also a desire to commit suicide or homicide.

More than being simply the accounts of marital disharmony, these novels are also symbolical of the individuals' inability of coming out of their private worlds. They try to establish a point of contact between the inner world and external reality. The female characters fail to see the world as it is. They desire to see the world as it should be. Maya feels

that she is neglected, but it is also a fact that she never for a moment tries to glimpse what would go inside Gautama. Sita fails to recognize the good spirit in Raman. This not only increases a distance between the two but also gives rise to a sense of rootlessness in her.

Anita Desai is primarily concerned with the individual. The delineation of nature serves only to highlight her characterization. Nature for most of her characters is not a benevolent guide or a nursing mother. Rather it is inanimate object, devoid of any feeling or sensitivity. Nature itself is neither friendly nor hostile to man. It is only that man cannot understand the mystery of creation or universe. Whenever he tries to comprehend it with his own measures, his comprehension is bound to be incomplete and fragmentary. Nature has its own way and processes which man has not been able to grasp. The characters of Desai consider nature to be indifferent and inaccessible. Their very fixedness of such an attitude towards nature and universe separates them from its resources.

Man by essence is a social being. But when he finds himself entirely different from society in every aspect he gradually pushes himself back into the alien world of seclusion and alienation. The case with Bimla Das in *Clear Light of Day* such that her very efforts to

make a happy life prove futile. She is not an isolated woman by her very nature, but the situations turn her into one. Her parents misread her creativity. Her brother Raja, whom she had loved more than anything else, deserts her at the time of her troubles. This makes her regard herself as alienated from all the family members.

The novel is a family story of Raja, Bim, Tara and Baba, the four victims of an unwholesome childhood atmosphere. Later, Raja becomes prosperous by marrying Benegir, the only daughter of their landlord. Tara also gets married to a bureaucrat. Bim is left alone with her social obligations and the burden of her idiot brother, Baba. It instigates her to experience dejection and futility in human relations. She finds herself alienated from her family members with whom she was once spiritually attached. She finds no physical or spiritual relationship with them. She feels wounded by the indifferent attitude of her late parents and the unfeeling behaviour of her brother Raja who deserts her at the time of her suffering.

Bim had loved Raja intensely but he ran away, undoing his role of a brother and taking the part of a landlord. One day, she receives a letter from him in which he hints at raising the rent of the house she and Baba lived. She feels betrayed and defeated. This intensifies in her a sense of disparity between her and

her brother. She comes to the conclusion that everyone is neglecting her. She also apprehends how time has ravaged the old affections of childhood and has created a changed pattern of relationship in the family.

Her sense of alienation is also increased by her failure to achieve a balance between her inner-self and outer realities. She is caught up in a web of the past, which makes her unable to live fully and happily in the present. Unable to forget the pain of her past, she wants to reject its very memory. Yet she is frequently haunted by childhood nostalgia, when the four brothers and sisters were happy together. She cannot replace the child Raja with the adult Raja. Her frustration gradually develops into a lasting and unhealed wound, which disables her in her quest to find any meaning in human relationships, including marriage. Dr. Biswas, identifying her dilemma thus says to her:

Now I understand why you do not wish to marry. You have dedicated your life to others—to your sick brother and your aged aunt and your little brother who will be dependant on you all his life. You have sacrificed your own life for them (97).

When she reads *The Life of Aurangzeb*, she sees a parallel between herself and the Mughal Emperor. The last words of the Emperor become the mirror in which

she sees the course of her own life. Aurangzeb says in a letter to his son that many were around him when he was born, but now he is departing alone. He knows not who he is or wherefore he came into the world. Life is transient and the lost moment never comes back. When he has lost hope in me, how could he hope in others (167)? These words reveal not only the agony of the Mughal Emperor, but also the psychic turmoil of Bim.

Anita Desai considers alienation to be the central problem of modern man. For her alienation has both universal and social dimension. In the universal aspect it arises in man's continuous struggle with an insensitive universe. Placed before the totality of the universe, man fails to comprehend the universe. This may also be viewed as nature's wilderness and its apathy to man. In its social sense it arises from isolation from one's fellowmen. It refers to a failure of communication and lack of understanding. It might be due to narrowness in the face of ultimate values. Universal alienation makes man aware of their insignificance before the totality of universe whereas social alienation makes man conscious of his inessentiality. Man's alienation from another person may be seen as his separation from the other by the barriers of language, intellect or psyche. His alienation from himself may be understood as an intense split or division within the individual. It can also be studied as the loss of the self or the development of

some depression in which he begins to consider himself an object.

The theme of such alienation can be studied in Baumgartner's *Bombay*. In this novel, Anita Desai presents an intense mental torture of modern man. Hugo Baumgartner is a wandering Jew all his life. His various experiences like painful childhood in pre-War Berlin, failure in business in India, and imprisonment during the Second World War make him realize universal alienation. He leads a Sisyphus-like life whose existence seems to be like a series of hollow gestures. Everywhere he is looked down upon as an outsider. He is too dark for Hitler's Germany and too fair for the Indian mass. Desai describes him thus:

Accepting but not accepted; that was the story of his life, the one thread that ran through it all. In Germany he had been too dark - his darkness had marked him as the Jew, *der Jude*. In India he was fair - and that marked him as the *firanghi*. In both lands he was the unacceptable (20).

Baumgartner is portrayed as devoid of social and cultural heritage. Even after staying fifty years in India, he is not accepted by the Indians. He finds himself alone and his loneliness becomes his companion. The Indians do not accept him as their own. Instead

they look down upon him with contempt. "They watched him fearlessly—to them he was nobody, an old man with an empty bag" (8). Such rejection intensifies his sense of alienation.

When Hugo first comes to India, he stays in Bombay for few days. Then he is sent to Calcutta for a business deal. His stay in Calcutta marks a turning point in his life and career. The spectacle of death and homicide before and after the independence radically alters the mode of his thought and action. It makes him feel the need to eliminate his meliorism from the web of his fantasy. His resentment also stems from the rising violence and crime committed in the name of race and religion. It brings down his altruistic self gradually yet effectively.

The horror of the Second World War leaves him with depression and sterility. His father was tortured and murdered by the Nazis. The Germans captured his property forcing him to leave for India, a land of alien race and culture where the British government arrests him for his German passport. When the War starts, he is put into the detention camp with other German arrestees, where he has to undergo all sorts of suffering like all other war victims. The prisoners in the camps are treated like subhuman beings. In Germany he had to suffer because he was a Jew and in India he has to suffer because he had a German passport. In the

camps, Jews were persecuted both by the Nazis and the British. His strange, severe and bitter experiences in British run camps for six years is here narrated in a vivid manner:

As long as news came in of German and Japanese victories, Baumgartner and the others in the Jewish quarter had good reason to feel thankful for the protection of the British-run camp, however sick with sorrow over the fate of their relationship or of Germany, however restless and frustrated and bored by the lifeless monotony of the camp. At least it was a refuge, even if temporary (131-132).

He writes many letters to his mother in Germany but never gets any reply from her. It is informed that she had lost her address, or she was lost. After the war, the prisoners in the camp start worrying about their freedom. But to Hugo it creates a sense of doom and defeat. He does not like that freedom where all sorts of dirt, mud and decay of Calcutta would welcome him. He longs for a neat and disciplined camp. After his release from the camp, he finds himself quite ignorant of the INA, and the Indian freedom movement. This makes him strange in the eyes of his fellow beings. They look at him with fury and contempt. Being conscious of their attitude, he silently slips-away from their company. He sees the hatred and bloodshed

during the partition of India. The communal riot in Calcutta before and after the partition creates a void in him. He finds himself overtaken by yet another war within himself; the war between his own divided selves:

His war was not their war. And they had had their own war. War within war within war! Everyone engaged in a separate war, and each war opposed to another war. If they could be kept separate, chaos would be averted. Or so they seemed to think, ignoring the fact that chaos was already upon them. And lunacy. The lunacy of performing acts one did not wish to perform, living lives one did not wish to live, becoming what one was not. Always another will oppose to one's own, always another fate, not the one of one's choice or even making. A great web in which each one was trapped, a nightmare from which one could not emerge (173).

The division between his self and his existence makes him an absurd character. He is an absurd, who is alienated to the extreme. The cultural and racial division always torments him. Although forced to stay in India, he looks back at Germany with nostalgia. Germany haunts and the horror and loss of motherland always pursues him. He is an alien in India, forced to leave his motherland. He looks like a man who is

descending a ladder of patriotism and national pride. He becomes a dehumanised soul in Indian soil. All his life he lives alone, both inside and outside himself. He suffers from an unusual experience from realizing he is unaccepted everywhere he goes. "The God had spat him out". He had not been found to be fit. "Shabby, dirty, whiteman, *firanghi*, unwanted" (190). To accept a foreign land as his own is a tragic experience for him.

Baumgartner not only faces the crisis of cultural difference but also the crisis of self-dignity during post war period in India. He himself does not desire to live devoid of purpose and cut off from his religion, metaphysical and transcendental roots, yet the very biosphere in which he lives in forces him to lead an alienated life. He realizes that life is nothing but an ironic dilemma of pointless activities. Such realization leaves him aimless and absurd.

The novel portrays the helplessness of the individual against the tormenting human conditions of life. Hugo tries to accept Indian society but it becomes hostile towards him. He experiences an utter alienation in his existence. The novel also suggests that any attempt to define human existence in a cut-and-dried manner will often end up as an exercise in futility. Since man often finds himself on the horns of conflicting dilemmas and suffering, his desire becomes meaningless.

Although Desai deals with a variety of themes, her concern with human alienation marked by wasted lives and shattered dreams remains prominent. As she explores various aspects of the crisis of modern life, the central image in her novels is one of disillusionment and disfigured identity. As a critic comments, her preoccupations consist of the way in which we live as part of the changing pattern of life. An attempt to explore, appreciate and impose a meaningful pattern upon the apparently chaotic matter of life marks most of her novels (Taneja, 42).

In a male-dominated Indian society, woman is still regarded as a second person, a second sex. She is often considered to be devoid of intellect or incapable of being equal to man. Even an educated woman cannot follow the career of her choice if she fails to meet her preordained duties. The discharge of her womanly tasks must take priority. Such discrimination has created a rift in human relationships causing irritation, boredom and confusion in modern women. Such plight of the modern Indian woman is depicted in her latest novel, *Fasting, Feasting*. The novel primarily deals with the alienation of Uma whose life is spoilt by the birth of her brother. She is trapped at home and suffocated by her snobbish parents and their traditions. She is bullied and reprimanded by her

callous mother. She fails to receive any loving care from her parents.

Although the central focus of the novel is on Indian family relations and the associated problems of adjustment and acceptance, the inner tension and frustration of the individuals constitute its main focus. Papa and Mama seem to agree completely to each other, but internally they conflict with each other. Uma is the real sufferer. She does not find any complement and satisfaction in her action, even in her being. She also contemplates suicide, but cannot do so. She remains a hopeless character all her life. Her life is made frustrated by her mother's rudeness and father's indifference.

The alienation in Uma is prevalent from the very beginning of her childhood days. In school the nuns never permit her to go and pray inside the chapel. She is curious to know and do what it is but the nuns look too religious and out of touch. When Arun is born, her mother discontinues her schooling. Since all the importance is given to Arun, the long awaited son in the family, Uma has not only to discontinue her studies but also to demolish her creativity. But her plight is nobody's concern.

Mama treats her like a tigress. Once when she goes out with her cousin, Ramu, to the restaurant, her mama

reprimands her and says that she was a disgrace to the family (52-53). As she grows up, the problem of her marriage troubles her parents. She is exhibited to Mrs. Shyal's son but he likes Aruna, not Uma. She is later engaged to Goyal's son but he also declines from marriage. Finally an elderly man, Harish accepts her. But his unenthusiastic expression relinquishes all her hopes. During her engagement, he looked at Uma glumly and without interest. What he saw did not seem to make a change in his attitude. Her marriage ceremony is described thus:

The ceremony wound on at its own ponderous pace. Finally the sullen bridegroom broke in and said curtly to the priest, 'Cut it short, will you - that's enough now.' The priest looked offended. If he could not even tolerate the wedding ceremony, how would he tolerate their marriage (90-91)?

After the marriage, he brings her to his village by the train and Tonga. He leaves her on the same day and goes to Meerut for work. The whole family seems strange to her. Nobody talked to her directly, only instructions are given to her. Later it is found out that he was married, had four children and lived in Meerut. Papa comes and takes Uma home. "Having cost her parents two dowries, without a marriage to show in

return, Uma was considered ill-fated by all and no more attempts were made to marry her off" (96).

The alien experience of Uma is intensified by the fact that she finds herself separated from her own values and choices. She leads an alienated life because she does not experience herself as the centre of her own world; as the creator of her own acts. Instead she finds herself as a subordinate entity under the pressure of domestic affairs. Such subordination creates in her a sense of insignificance and futility. An existential predicament overrules her existence. She is also tormented by the fact that she is simply considered as a second sex by her parents, by her suitors and even by her husband.

The profound anguish in Uma plunges her into an acute identity crisis. One can gather from her statements that she is alienated from her parents as well as from her friends. She finds her sister and herself as the children of loveless parents. The two broken engagements and one unsuccessful marriage marks the second phase of her alienation. Forced into a state of total alienation, she finds her very survival threatened. She finds her life meaningless and hollow. What is at stake, however, is not physical but spiritual.

The concept of alienation is the one essential element in the writings of Anita Desai. She is concerned with exploring the state of alienation in men and women in modern India. From *Cry, the Peacock* to *Fasting, Feasting* the notion of alienation runs through as a scarlet thread. Not the situation of objectification but the conditions of isolation, division and desertion become major concerns in her novels. These novels present a picture of man as experiencing the turmoil of existential alienation on various levels. She presents her characters suffering from a sense of dislocation between the ideal and real. The discrepancy between what they aspire to do in life and the harsh reality also plunge them into intense misery.