

## CHAPTER FIVE

### **SURVIVAL OF THE SELF**

... at the surface level man's self-posing nature entails denial or negation of his unity with nature, but the more reflective moment of his life makes him conscious of how much he owes and belongs to nature. This consciousness negates his essentially alienative consciousness. By negating his earlier negation, alienation from nature, man not only returns to nature but also does so with added qualities and depth of consciousness. By the negation of a negation, by the de-alienation of alienation, man return to richer to the 'lost' spiritual unity of man and nature. This second stage of alienation has been characterized as basically an exercise in de-alienation.

(Krishna Roy, *Essays in Social and Political Philosophy*,  
1989, 165)

## SECTION ONE

### **Meaning of Survival**

The conditions of alienation and quest bring about a revolutionary change in the individual consciousness and spiritual evolution in the novels of Anita Desai. Her characters are portrayed as coming to the vital realization that the torments of alienation can be transcended through knowledge of the self. They also know that difference itself does not necessarily create a sense of despair. They attempt to overcome separation and distance in order to attain survival. They also come to know that turning away from the stark realities of life is not at all the solution of the torments of alienation. By facing the critical situations of life with an openness to communicate and transcending them by way of realization, they achieve an ideal solution of their predicament. Most of them arrive at their survival by involving themselves with the world around. It is only in a living communication with the world and his fellow beings that they discover their identity and survive in this hostile and mysterious world. The panacea for most of them lies in their heroic struggles and thus working out their individual aesthetics of life.

The term survival is a self-explanatory one. It is "an idealist passion for unity, an obsession for integral experience, a search for unity against the divided nature of consciousness" (Levi, 261). It can be understood as an attempt at the spiritual unification of human kind or as an inner freedom. It includes the survival of human dignity and in the end the survival of some human warmth. It is the ability to reach and touch others. This also refers to the return to the self. It is an attempt at an inward journey of the soul by the individual. It is also a "notion of transcending alienation by re-uniting subject and object, and also by reconciling man to the world" (Bannet, 250). As an attempt to overcome the torment of alienation, it can be understood as man's return to the self in which he becomes his own highest goal and an end to himself.

Sense of survival is very much related to the feeling of alienation. The very feeling of alienation paves the way for quest and survival. A conscious being does not let the torment of alienation destroy his sense of values and positive attitudes towards life. He knows that he has every right to differ from the other. Alienation does not provide self-destruction but points towards survival. It is a necessary step for survival or without alienation there is no survival. It can also be said that if there were no experience of alienation, there would not arise any urge for quest

that might lead an individual to realize the still higher level of survival.

In Anita Desai, survival can come only through knowledge, spiritual salvation and faith in oneself. It can be attained only after a realization of the self as an independent and individualized entity. At the same time, it is by communication and involvement that an individual can achieve wholeness, a unity of body and soul, and also an understanding of life's splendours. When asked if she has anything to say about her views on life, she answers to Atma Ram, "I have nothing to add to what I have put into my novels" (1996, 99). Therefore we are free to assume that the realizations achieved by her protagonists form the philosophical insights of the novelist herself. Their attempts to create some lasting values in life through communication and communion consists the fundamentals of their survival. Their philosophical realization leads them to survival.

Survival may also be understood as an act of free choice. Since man possesses tremendous potentiality of becoming, he can transcend negative effects of isolation and come to realize his true identity. It is by knowledge and recognition that an individual can achieve wholeness, a unity of body and soul, and also an understanding of life's splendours. The ideal solution for human predicament can only be achieved by

facing the teasing situations of life with an openness to communicate, and also by transcending them by way of realization. Although survival refers to human relationship and acceptance of reality, yet it does not suggest a total yield to the social norms. Survival calls for individuality even in the midst of social interactions and relationships. An individual has every right to lead his life as his choice. But such choice should be a healthy selection. If the selection is shaky or unauthentic, it leads to total dilemma and confusion. A healthy selection leads to authenticity of being. Such authenticity is one of the much-needed essences of human life. Survival is the by-product of such realization of the self.

The notion of survival can be understood in two phases: detachment and transcendence. Detachment implies turning inward in order to realize the true inner self. It also refers to separation between the individual and the social. Transcendence refers to the realization of what man actually is so that he might become what he truly or potentially is. It implies a victory over one's solitariness or isolation. It is also a turning to self-identity in connection with the re-attainment of unity. This second stage of survival can be reached only by realizing the true self of the individual. Instead of quarrelling with the indifferent world and environment, these individuals attain their survival as independent, self-realized and spiritually-

matured individuals. Survival also refers to the realization of spiritual unity by, what Krishna Roy calls, 'de-alienation of alienation' (1989, 65). An individual tries to return to the lost spiritual unity between self and the world around by such negation of negation, by de-alienation of alienation. Such process of growth is brought about by various factors including individual consciousness, recognition and realization of the self.

For Hegel survival refers to self-identification of the spirit. "Having taken up the notion of alienation from a social philosophy, Hegel transformed it into a metaphysical notion. He uses it to characterize the process of progressive and alternating self-differentiating and self-identification of the spirit, the main theme of his metaphysics" (Roy, 116). He believes that the self is free insofar as it maintains its identity and keeps simply and solely touched with itself, or maintains the undivided unity of its self-existence.

Most of the existential writers consider that the feeling of alienation not only hints at the loss of identity. It also points towards human freedom and survival. Alienation is an essential experience for a person. Kierkegaard views that one who conforms to the conventions has lost all senses of his individuality. He also expresses that when man conforms himself to the

familial or social personalities or obligations, there is every possibility of losing a 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. He argues that man as an "existing individual" with tremendous potentiality of becoming is always in process of becoming.

Nietzsche also considers man in the process of becoming and 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. For him 'not humanity, but Superman is the goal'. In his view, man is something, which must be surpassed. He is a bridge and not a goal. He is a rope stretched between animal and superman - a rope over an abyss (Copleston, 188). In his writings, man is portrayed not only as an alienated individual, but also as a seeker of the new dimensions of survival. His declaration of the death of God can be interpreted in twofold significance: first it indicates man's total separation from the concept of the supernatural and secondly, it refers to the individual's search for a new zenith to hang on to. It also suggests man's potentiality of becoming without any supernatural aid. When man returns to his true self by way of declining the concept of God, he becomes

independent. Such independence is one of the keynotes of existential survival

Sartre also strongly emphasises human reality and human freedom. His theory of freedom is based on his analysis of the 'for-itself'. According to him we cannot choose to be free or not, we simply are free by the fact that we are consciousness. Our sense of freedom cannot be separated from the 'human reality'. Human freedom precedes the essence of man and makes it possible. Giving much emphasis to human consciousness, he writes: "It is for consciousness that the world appears as an intelligible system of distinct and interrelated things. If we think away all that is due to the activity of consciousness in making the world appear, we are left with being itself, opaque, massive, undifferentiated, the nebulous background, as it were, out of which the world is made to appear. Being is. Being is in-itself. Being is what it is" (1992, 29). It is therefore improper to consider that the existentialists have discussed alienation only as a negative term. The sense of alienation as discussed by them is an essential element in recognizing the true self of an individual. A critic comments that:

According to existentialists, a non-alienated or inauthentic life is one in which man is not truly himself (Johari, 509).

An urgency of existential freedom leading to survival of the self forms the basis of the novels of Anita Desai. Her characters suffer from existential crisis of alienation, which leads them to their quest for existential freedom of choice and becoming. Some of them also recognise their self-potentialities to transcend their predicaments, especially their negative attitude towards life. Survival for them does not mean only a physical or spiritual but an existential one. Such a concept of survival seems to be developed through the dialectic of existence and essence, being and thought, materialism and idealism. When existence is said to predominate over essence, it becomes a call for materialism and humanism also. This leads the individual to preside over his destiny or his course of life. Such human existence enables the individuals to preside over their design or essence. They are shown to be struggling to prove their existence. They do not depend on external agencies or destiny in order to define their existence or being. They confront their own existence; they endure their survival physically as well as spiritually. Therefore, in her vision, survival has both physical and spiritual dimensions.

Realization of the self is therefore, the hallmark of survival. The individuals initially take the state of difference as a negative one. Through the process of quest and recognition, they come to the knowledge that difference has to be there, but one should not divide

and distance the other because of such difference. They also realize that being different from another entity is a necessary step towards a spiritual unification of the self. It is an essential element in acquiring individual identity. There are various phases of realization that they come to attain. They undergo various trials and errors before coming into the grasp of the true nature of their being and their relationships with universe and society. When they find themselves alienated and differentiated, they take everything around them as indifferent and hostile for their being and becoming. This leads them to rebel against those supposed alienating objects, and also to search for their true identity. Some of them also come to realize that objects or situations are not responsible for their condition of becoming, but they themselves are. When such insight occurs to them, they start to divert their outlook from the outer world to the inner self. They also begin to cultivate their own sense of responsibility. Their survival comes after such realization, when they learn to communicate, accept, tolerate and value the existence of other individuals. Such is the true survival of human relationship, survival of human dignity, survival of some warmth in human love.

## SECTION TWO

### **Realization of Survival**

The characters of Anita Desai realize the meaning of their existence from various perspectives. Most of them are more concerned with being and realization than with achievement. A mere carrying on of life is not a true survival for them. Survival should be meaningful, insightful and deep. Their knowledge helps them to do away with the false peace and unreal security. They also come to the knowledge that difference does not alienate but points towards knowledge and brings about realization. Their final realization leads them to profess that life cannot be comprehended objectively. Life itself is a paradox and human beliefs are ambivalent. It is more mysterious and enigmatic than philosophy and religion could comprehend. But such incomprehensibility should not be equated with confusion or chaos. Rather this should be understood as the scope of human soul to search beyond peripherals, to jump outside phenomenal reality, and enter into the unfathomable. These characters fight against the alienating conditions of their life in various ways. These conditions are distance and division in human relationships, lack of communication, and ignorance of the self. Some of them are caught up in a dilemma whether to create an isolated mythic world or to accept

the burdens of reality. Yet most of them are portrayed as transcending the torments of alienation by way of knowledge and recognition of their selves as independent, self-sufficient and also capable of rising above the ordinary.

Although some of the female characters of Anita Desai fail to achieve the warmth and dignity of physical love, yet their very quest for meaningful life makes their existence meaningful. Their mighty struggles to rise above the chains of confined life can be understood as human efforts to rise above the shackles of tradition. Maya in *Cry, the Peacock* actually fails to achieve her desired love and dignity physically. But her higher aspiration for spiritual unification with her husband translates her into more than an ordinary fun-loving woman. Although she does not really survive on the physical level, yet she can be said survive on a higher level of human spirit. Monisha in *Voices in the City* also experiences futility and emptiness in her life, but she never gives up her higher pursuits and superior aims. Failure does not make her defeated. She is destroyed but not defeated. Though she does not survive in the physical realm, the values she dares to add to her life; the meaning and beauty that she always aspired for do survive. Instead of living a drab life, these females opt for freedom and choice. It is the element of choice that makes them survive.

In *Voices in the City*, Desai presents her idea of survival through the portrayal of Nirode whose whole life is marked by freedom and choice. He dedicates his life to the search of individuality. He comes to realize the value of human relationships at the conclusion of his career. The death of his sister, Monisha, brings him into realization that his quest is incomplete without human communication. He even realizes that utter freedom is not only impossible but also destructive in certain respects.

Although initially Nirode takes the world of Calcutta as hostile and inimical towards him, later on he comes to know about his own ignorance of the environment. It is not that Calcutta can be friendly or hostile to him. Though the external environment may influence an individual in certain respect, yet the sole responsibility lies on the individual's self-determination or choice. But such realization comes only after a long process of acceptance and rejection, trials and failures. As life itself is a process or a movement, every intelligent soul, unlike the drab ones, move forward to grasp the meaning of change and recognition. Nirode also, as an intelligent soul, moves from one ideal to another one. He becomes ready to change, ready to sacrifice everything to meet his goal of total freedom. He wants to be done with happiness or suffering, and see beyond them to the very end (40).

His very motives of change and sacrifice make him capable of realizing the truth of his being, the value of human dignity and also the meaning of human freedom. He makes an ardent search for a deeper meaning and a purpose of life. He comes out with the conclusion that one has to work for something higher than happiness or agony to arrive at the 'equanimity' (222). He believes that one has to rise above pleasure and pain, and go beyond passion and nihilism.

Nirode attains his spiritual survival when he rises above Camus's idea of suicide. He reads from Camus that 'in default of in-exhaustible happiness, eternal suffering at least would give us a destiny. But we do not have even that consolation, and our worst agonies come to an end one day' (40). For Camus, nihilism should lead to suicide. But instead of getting his consolation in death, Nirode finds his ultimate survival in human interaction and communication. He rises still higher than the concept of nihilism. Unlike Camus he discards the philosophy of suicide and gets consolation in communication, lasting human relationships and love. He becomes aware that only a healthy communication can lead humanity to peace and happiness and also freedom. The sickly psychological obsession of unfulfilled passions and the decay of consciousness are replaced by healthier life spectacles at the finale of this novel.

From the very beginning we see him rising above the concepts of success and failure, affluence and poverty by his higher pursuits. For him attachment to the material or the transient is disease and detachment from these is health. He believes that pursuit of happiness only leads to a dead end and a blind alley. He wonders what worse death there can be than at the hands of happiness? The world would come to a stand still (94). Whenever he gets any hints of his attachment, he just jumps off as if shaking the dust off from him. He is not ready to sacrifice his ideals. Desai describes him as a unique character:

No, no, he's unique in this city of commerce. He's unique in this city of compromise and relative values (169).

He realizes that transitory things cannot satisfy the need of the human soul. Such insight makes him capable of valuing life above all. He gives importance to sanity and the purity of one's inner soul. He admits to his sister Amla that at the end, he realized that the only thing he wanted to protect, that any sane man needs to protect, is his conscience. One may call it individuality or conscience, or anything, but there must be this essence inside us, and we must keep it: keep it secret in order to keep it - bearable. Mixing, diluting, muddying it - that's the disease (183-184).

His confessions give us an idea about his earlier mistakes of his reckless quest for failure:

You know, I once told a friend [...] that life lived to be a success only follows one success after another, but eventually has to bend with the arc and arrive at the bottom. And since I never was any good at going along with the others, I thought I would take the other direction and follow failure after failure and reach the bottom of the arc much quicker, while I was still young enough to see and feel and understand with every one of my senses. But that was the mistake. [...] You can't descend to such a complete darkness, such complete isolation, all exposed. That's where you most need your covering, your carapace. That's where you most need to know how to hide, because not only is it unbearable to expose yourself to such agonies, it is also pointless, it wears you away and leaves you - nothing (184).

The death of Monisha brings Nirode and Amla, his younger sister into knowledge of their bond. Both of them realize the importance of feeling, love and communication, caring and reaching out to others. Amla feels that Monisha's death had pointed the way for her and would never allow her to lose herself. She knew

that she would go through life with her feet primly shod. She would involve herself in her drawings and with safe people like Bose, precisely because Monisha had given her a glimpse of what lay on the other side of this stark, uncompromising margin (248).

Even more revolutionary is the change in Nirode. The loss of a family member, especially the one who cares for him the most both physically and emotionally, brings him to the knowledge of human value. He resolves now to care for the ones who are living, chiefly Amla and the other members of the family. Desai describes the condition of Nirode, sitting with his sister and aunt, watching over Monisha's body till morning:

He seemed unable to remain still or silent, he was filled with an immense care of the world that made him reach out, again and again, to touch Amla's cold hand when he saw it shake, or embrace the old woman in the battered wicker chair when he saw her weep. He pressed them to him with his own, which till now had been agonisingly neglected. There was no much he wanted to tell them - to reassure them that no outrage had been committed, that Monisha had died from an excess of caring, in a fire of care and conscience, and that they too must accept, with a like intensity, the vigilance of heart and conscience, allowing no need of

indifference or incomprehension to drift by, but seize each moment, each person, each fragment of the world, and reverence it with that acute care that had driven Monisha to her splendid death (248).

For Nirode, the way of attaining his survival of the self comes with his caring for others, and not by withdrawal and isolation. It is only by avoiding his mythic ideals of solitude and rejection, and by accepting instead the realistic attitude of communication and involvement that he finally attains a wholeness, a unity of body and soul, an understanding of life's grand design. As Desai describes him, he felt himself elevated to an unimaginably high vantage point from where he could see the whole fantastic design of life and death. This lucidity made him transparent, allowing night and sorrow to merge with his own ecstasy, till everything became one, became unified, and understandable. He had listened to silence, till out of silence music had sprung (249).

Desai values the question of human development through the process of choice and action. Her novels give the idea that survival cannot be forced upon oneself. One has to know that he exists. He has to create his self-identity by himself. He has to be responsible for his acts of free choices. The degree of

such realization differs from person to person. Every individual is not an enlightened soul. Although the individuals realize the truth, the degree of realization does vary considerably.

The study of her novels also reveals her idea of true survival as innate in lasting relationship between myth and realism, between poetic vision and phenomenal truth. She is in favour of authentic living that comes out of a realization of the value of communication and a balanced relationship between the two worlds. Her characters ultimately subordinate their mythic imagination to moral vision in order to attain survival. She values a realistic approach to life. This refers to an interest with life and acceptance of responsibility. It also refers to the fact that a glorious past is nothing but a myth which cannot be regained. The idea of achieving some kind of mythic retreat from the burdens of reality, no matter how attractive, is rejected by Desai in her novels.

The way of attaining true survival is therefore, not by withdrawal and isolation, but through involvement with others. Call for a heart to heart communication leads most of her characters to social survival. Many characters like Amla, Nirode, Bim or Deven try to give meaning to their existence through communication and responsiveness to others. She articulates her views that past and its memories have

to be met sensibly. Man has to be reconciled with reality. Turning away from the stark realities of life is not the solution of the torments of alienation. The ideal solution for human alienation is only by facing the tormenting situations of life with an openness to communicate, and transcending those situations by way of realization. Her idea of survival refers to the fact that one must accept the burdens of reality. Destroying myth in order to come into close contact with reality is thus one ideal survival for her characters. For many individuals myth and illusion has only intensified the torment of alienation. Those who adopt myth as an essential part of their survival are sooner or later frustrated, tormented and lost. But the ones, who recognize myth as unreal and unsupportive, have survived in order to face and conquer the indifferent environment that they live in.

Desai portrays her characters as attaining such survival through a process of search and growth. When some of them finally recognize the cavity or vacuity of their long cherished myth or fantasy, they come to a state of realization. In the vision of Anita Desai, the very realization of the truth leads to true survival. In *Bye-Bye Blackbird* Adit goes through various experiences before realizing his true self as an individual. The different phases of his character may be interpreted as the process of birth and rebirth. A sense of recognition of what he really aspires for and

what he really is comes to him only after his experience of alienation in London environment. After a visit to Sarah's parents, his attitude of life undergoes a radical transformation. A great change coupled with a sense of nostalgia begins to increase in him. His wistfulness assumes great proportions making him to feel stifled. He starts thinking himself as a stranger in London society. His innerself seems to be essentially Indian. His traumatic experience in a distant country allows him to realize what lies at the core of his being. He finds himself as an exile in an alien land, caught in a hostile milieu, torn between acceptance and rejection. He also perceives that his crisis of identity is the outcome of such alienation.

Initially, his recognition of such alienation works adversely on him. He gradually realizes the fact that even after a long stay in London, he still remains a misfit. He also realizes that the assimilation of another culture is difficult. His marriage with an English wife does not enable him to get rid of his feelings of uncertainty or humiliation in an alien land. His increasing sense of alienation with London makes him conscious of his deep-seated Indian tradition. The oriental Adit cannot fully become an English gentleman. Although he tries to adjust in other cultural realms, his self always remains alien to another. He becomes nostalgic about his homeland and longs to return and see something Indian, like "a slowly meandering creaking bullock cart... or a monkey-

wallah with his frocked and capped monkeys jingling the bells on their delicate ankles, or a marriage procession proceeded by a brass-band decked in marigold and tinsels" (87).

When Adit finally realizes his real self, he throws away the garb of his self-created myth of Englishness and accepts his original nature as an Indian, as a Bengali. Desai writes that his vowels had become short and sharp, his consonants long and hissing, as they had been when he had first arrived from India (230). He gradually moves from self-sufficiency to even more fretful isolation and loneliness in England. Ultimately he takes the decision to return to his homeland along with his wife. His self-awareness helps him to get rid of his illusion. He wants to escape the artificial life of London that he is living. He records that:

Little India in London. All our records and lamb curries and singsongs, its all so unreal... Whatever it is, it will be Indian; it will be my natural condition, my true circumstance (232).

The decision of Adit brings a great havoc and conversion in the spiritual or psychical disposition of Sarah, his English wife. In seeking his own self Adit is totally unaware of the loss of self that his

decision implies for Sarah. Previously, Sarah had tried to find solace in the myth of India: India of distant mysteries and uncommon wisdom. Her search for perfection in an Indian myth is shattered during her encounter with her Indian husband and his changing nature. She staggers between reality and unreality on her way of realization. But consequently she comes to know that India of her fantasy is fake and unreal. When Adit decides to return to India, she shudders in the beginning. She is unsure of her well being in an alien land. It seems that her identity would be lost in the taboo-ridden Indian society. But there is no loss of identity in her case. She is optimistic that at least in India she would have an identity. Adit's resolution brings her dilemma and quest to an end. Therefore she also accepts his decision and resolves to follow him to an alien land. Her final decision is not based on fantasy or myth. Her choice stems from a genuine belief in unity in diversity across different races and cultures. It is her spirit of openness which enables her to enter into a different culture and acquire a different self. She considers this as an adventure mixed with some regret. Her final decision translates her into a realist from a creature imprisoned by myths.

Such insight enables her to submit her personality and her interest in order to get accommodated in an alien land of different culture and tradition. It is not that she decides to follow her husband out of compulsion. She does so out of hope and courage that

she would be able to transcend the barrier of cultural and racial differences in order to establish her true identity. She comes to know that humanity is above racial or cultural barriers. She also realizes the meaning of difference in an alien situation. In other words, she is not alienated by her difference from the other in her alien future. The very insight enables her to cope with the unknown realities of life yet to come. Desai portrays Sarah as being transformed from a pitiable figure to a brave warrior, who is ready to battle with the ups and downs of life.

The novel traces the evolution of Adit and Sarah. There is significant moral and spiritual growth in Adit's rejection of England and Sarah's acceptance of India. Adit finally transforms from a mythical dreamer into a realist daring to face reality. His remark reveals his realization of the futility of his mythic quest. "All our records and lamb curries and singsongs, it's all so unreal. It has no reality at all. We just pretend all the time" (204).

An urge for balanced relationship between objective reality and subjective truth also constitutes one important survival principle in the philosophical stance of Anita Desai. The other form of survival consists in man's return to himself, a journey within and knowing his self-potentialities in facing the absurdities of existence. Most of her characters mentally develop through delusion, fragmentation and

realization. These characters dare to live although their lives seem not worth living. There is a significant growth in age as well as in the awareness of her central characters. Their final realization suggests a kind of unification and consolidation of various levels of experiences.

The individual's return to the self by rejecting the myth of past is an essential phase of survival. Such idea of survival may be studied in *Where Shall We Go this Summer*. In order to escape the artificial life of Bombay, Sita escapes to the island of Manori. Her flight to the island is indicative of her wish to have eternal happiness or something passionate which does not belong to this world. When she comes to stay in Manori, she perceives the vacuum hidden within her. She also realizes her liability for her life. She gets ample time to examine herself in the island. It leads her to realize her true selfhood, her worth and self-identity. She also comes to know that the island of Manori is not a place of miracles that would enable her to achieve a marvel of evaporating the child in her womb. She learns that the island is no place for her refuge nor does it have any magic of its own. She finds that she has arrived "at the old house on the once Magic Island to find the past all burnt to white ashes" (37). She gets no magic prevalent there, and she begins to sense that the magic had long since gone. She also feels that the 'pastoral haven' her father had

supposedly created on the island was a myth in the most literal sense of the world. Thinking back to the first time she had ever glimpsed the island when she had first arrived there with her father, she feels that even then she had sensed that there was no perfect magical retreat where one could escape from the realities of life. Desai describes the magic of the island only as a myth and illusion that Sita has to break with:

She saw the island as a piece of magic, a magic mirror - it was so bright, so brilliant to her eyes after the tensions and shadows of her childhood. It took her some time to notice that this magic, too, cast shadows (63).

Since the island of Manori fails to provide her with a proper meaning of her existence, she feels herself as much alienated and frustrated there as in the society. The rugged road and bullock cart, the grove and the fields only reveal the ravages of time to her. She does not find any key to unlock the magic of the past glory there. She realizes that the magic or the illusion itself is a mere fraud. She comes to the knowledge that an 'immaculate conception in reverse' is impossible. Finally she admits that there was no magic here - the magic was gone (112).

When the myth of the magic island is shattered, Sita gradually begins to feel the warmth of family love and responsibility. She finally comes to the knowledge of her own insufficiency, which she tries to bridge and also to correct. She realizes that running away from the realities and responsibilities of life is not the answer to her problem. Though she feels sorry for her lost childhood, which she identifies as her self or the whole, yet she admits her escape to the island in order to stay whole was an act of cowardice. She also feels that she has a natural concern about her husband's troubles. This leads to free flow of affection between the two. She now starts worrying about Raman's problems:

His boys at home must have worried him, while he was at work in the factory, which was not without its problems either - he looked worn, much older than his years. Nor could he stay here, resting, as she was doing (138).

Such great transformation in Sita does not develop out of mere compulsion or her duty-consciousness. It develops through her knowledge of the futility of her long-cherished myth of 'Miracle Island'. It is the result of a realization of her self-potentiality to live along without any illusion. It enables her to challenge and reject the lure of a mythic past in order to re-enter the present and future. There are no easy

solutions to life's problems. Running away from responsibilities will certainly not solve any problem. When Raman comes to take Menaka and Karan back to Bombay in time for school, she realizes the worth of his critical realist mode of life. When he persuades Sita to get to a hospital, she accepts his proposal. She thinks that Raman is full of balance and moderation:

He never hesitated - everything was so clear to him, and simple: life must be continued, and all its business - Menaka's admission to medical college gained, wife led to hospital, now child safely brought forth, the children reared, the factory seen to, a salary earned, a salary spent. There was courage, she admitted to herself in shame, in getting on with such matters from which she herself squirmed away, dodged and ran. It took courage. That was why the children turned to him, sensing him to be the superior in courage, in leadership (139).

She also realizes the importance of a balanced relationship between the ideal and the real. It is when a sense of balance is lost that things go wrong. The very realization brings Sita into her survival with awareness. She decides to return to the world of social responsibility, along with her husband and children.

When she returns home, she does not need any illusion to survive now. She now becomes able to reconstruct her links with life. She resumes her life in symbolic manner by taking a ritualised mud bath, and tries to get over her isolation by learning to laugh.

Sita's struggle and realization represent the rebellion and recognition of a rational and responsive woman against the social conceit. Her final return to normal life does not suggest her compromise with a routine life. It indicates her good sense and courage to fight back the teasing uncertainty of life. When she finally understands the value of Raman's practical wisdom, she decides to accept life with its reality. She comes to an affirmative conclusion that there is no freedom and fulfilment without involvement. She also becomes conscious of the knowledge that purely subjective vision does not suffice in giving her a true identity. She also realizes her inability to establish a rapport with subjective reality and her self-created illusion. When she comes to the grasp of such knowledge, she rises above her self-created illusion. She attains her true identity by keeping a deep faith in life and on its blessings. Her newfound positive attitude towards life and its responsibility gives her true survival.

The character of Sita can be related to the character of Anita Desai herself. Both the characters

are seekers of perfection and truth. Both have a deep faith in life and individuality. The following statement that Desai makes in an interview with Atma Ram reflects her life-affirming faith in human spirit. She refers to her protagonist Sita in these words:

If one opts for life, one must compromise with it like Sita in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* Drawing a line means certain death (1983).

Desai's sense of survival also demands that every conscious individual should be free from all bondages and controlling agents; both natural and supernatural, and at the same time arouse in oneself a sense of self-independence and self-sufficiency. Her purpose is not only to portray the conditions that alienate individuals from one another, but also to indicate those situations that create and strengthen a sense of freedom, which would enable the individuals to make independent choices. In her vision, all the selections and decisions are to be made by the individual himself and should crop out of one's own inner conscience and realization. Most of her characters also rebel against social and universal absurdities. For Desai, struggle for survival becomes one kind of remedy adopted against universal absurdity and futility. Her characters seek equilibrium between soul and body, mind and matter, essence and existence.

Survival also refers to an authentic existence and integrated personality. Her imagination looks motivated by the possibility of finding new dimensions of survival against the malaise of modern life. A combination of myth and realism provides some solution to the problem of creating an authentic identity in the face of modern dilemmas. Idea of true survival thus remains in lasting relationship between myth and realism, poetic vision and phenomenal truth. Desai is in favour of authentic living that comes out of a realization of the value of communication and some reasonable relationship between the two worlds. Her novels finally subordinate her poetic and mythic imagination to a moral vision of life. She exalts individual awareness as to face life and take responsibility.

In *Fire on the Mountain*, Desai portrays Nanda Kaul as realizing the truth of her existence in the evening of her life. Although she tells fantastic stories of her childhood days and her father's great exploits in Tibet and her wonderful dreamlike childhood in Kashmir to her great granddaughter, yet she knows that she cannot return to her glorious past. When Raka asks her: Why did you come here... instead of going back to Kashmir? Nanda replies that one does not go back (93). She knows that if one cannot return to the past, one should move forward and face the present realities. Rejection of present and escape from the duties of life

is just an illusion. She also realizes the futility of her action in running away from the responsibilities of life in order to cherish an unreal world of myth.

When Nanda stays for quite some time in the lonely house of Carignano, she gets ample opportunities to look into herself. It helps her to realize a great void inside her. She had somehow tried to live peacefully there away from the great treachery and selfishness of her children and grandchildren. Still her painful memories of past do not let her peace to be undisturbed. She feels that her father had never been to Tibet. They had not had bears and leopards in their home. Nothing but overfed dogs and bad-tempered parrots were there. Her husband had not loved and cherished her and kept her like a queen. He had only done enough to keep her quiet while he carried on a life long affair with Miss David, the mathematics mistress. Her children were also alien to her nature. She neither understood nor loved them. Her attempts to captivate Raka were only a fabrication. They helped her to sleep at night. They were tranquillizers or pills (145).

Realization of such truth makes her to realize her hollow existence. It also helps her to wake up from disillusionments. She feels that her life in the mountain is nothing but a heap of lies, sorrows and painful memories. She becomes able to realize the vacuity of her fantasy. Although she cannot return to

with the fire" (Johae, 41). If Nanda Kaul is not dead, there is every possibility for her to recover something from the ashes of the burnt-out landscapes. Her attempt is now to shatter those falsifying images and myths that she had kept in order to escape from the torments of alienation. She draws a line between illusion and truth, myth and reality. Carignano, the mountain of solitude is a myth to her. She seeks a getaway from the stark realities of life by escaping into illusion. But her final realization helps her to transcend such myth. She is now willing to come in contact with real life. Her survival gives a different meaning to her alienation.

Bim in *Clear Light of Day* embodies Anita Desai's vision of the new Indian woman, who longs for an independent and self-supporting life. She refuses to play the usual role of a docile wife and attempts to be a truly liberated woman. Unlike many traditional girls, she refuses marriage and opts for the life of a spinster in order to follow the career of her choice. She gracefully accepts her way of life despite its limitations. The novelist has portrayed her ascending from one level of understanding to another one. She undertakes a kind of journey from ignorance to experience and then to self-realization, from where she has every opportunity to proceed towards self-knowledge and wholeness.

her children with this realization, yet her recognition is worth considering. She comes to the conclusion that she is the master of her own life. With this knowledge, she stops blaming others for her misfortune. She also comes to the knowledge that revenge or resentment are not the ideal solutions for human alienation.

The novel also presents the theme of rebellion as an essential element of survival in the life of Raka. The little girl has grown more and more impatient with Nanda Kaul's fantasies and fabrications. She herself is only interested in the truth of things - stones, pinecones, solid objects. Finally she sets fire to that whole illusory world. She rebels against the social or familial oppression of a girl. Her setting fire to the mountain can be seen as an act of refusal to be submissive. It is also a protest against the structures of oppression which threatens her identity. This may be the authority of her family or of a larger institutional hegemony. Her reaction is to destroy and to deconstruct what has displayed the virgin mountain forest.

Desai never seems to conclude this novel in a conventional manner. When asked about Nanda's death, Desai replies that she never meant the book to end in suicide or even in death. "I'm perfectly ambivalent about the ending myself. I have no idea what happens to Nanda Kaul I don't visualize her end. It's over for me

Bim ventures to achieve her childhood vision of becoming a heroine. She truly follows her dream and her ideal. She gladly pays the heavy price required for her search by giving up the contentment of a married life. She plays the roles of Florence Nightingale and Joan of Arc within the confines of her family. When she was young, she nursed her brother Raja who was down with tuberculosis and looked after her ailing aunt with the utmost care and devotion. She is disappointed when aunt Mira dies and Raja deserts her apparently with a view to achieving his own dream. But she spends her declining youth devotedly looking after Baba, her brother, who needs her till his last breath. Thus Bim, unlike Raja, achieves victory in realising her dream. Although the betrayal of Raja haunts her, she constantly tries to organize herself into some sort of order and happiness. She works her way out through the maze of loneliness and torment. Her routine life of teaching at college comes to be of great help in maintaining her sanity. Her fortitude helps her to be a normal being against all odds. Such a heroic attempt transports her from a wretched creature to a brave warrior.

Bim looks for her spiritual survival in forgiveness and love. Her alienation and quest are suggestive of her journey to transcend the past. The main theme of the novel is thus the renewal of the self or seeing the light or knowing the truth. She finally

takes in the unbreakable bond among the family members. She also knows that her approach towards life was an extreme one and her familial love was fragmented. She now wishes more than anything to recover that wholeness. The following lines from the novel underline the maturity and fulfilment of her consciousness:

Although it was shadowy and dark, Bim could see as well by the clear light of day that she felt only love and yearning for them all, and if there were hurts, these gashes and wounds in her side that bled, then it was only because her love was imperfect and did not encompass them thoroughly enough and because it had flaws and inadequacies and did not extend to all equally (165).

She dismisses every jealousy, guilt, revenge and anguish. In dismissing these feelings, she also throws out from herself a past of hatred and bitterness. When such recognition dawns upon her, she feels unburdened. She also realizes that Raja is not a hero but only an imitator. She realizes that she had clothed him in a hero's mantle by mistake. She feels illuminated as if all the debris accumulated from the past has been cleared. She attains new awareness, and her self-knowledge makes her crumple and discard the false romantic image of Raja.

It is not only a moment of realization but also one of reconciliation. For her, it is a rare moment of illumination. She clears the dreadful debris of the past by tearing off the papers and letters, including the offensive and unpardonable letter of Raja in a forgiving state of mind. Her transition from hatred to love also indicates her transition from alienation to accommodation, from rejection to acceptance, from egotism to altruism. She makes an evaluation of her own self and rejects all that has hindered her growth into a truly liberated soul. Towards the end of the novel, she attends the music programme arranged at Misra's where Mulk's guru sings. She realizes that the only way to make her whole is to forgive and forget her grudges against her brother Raja and his unforgivable letter, and move into the future through present.

Bim attains a unity of the self by forgiving Raja and by making peace with her past. She realizes that she belongs to Raja, Tara and Baba, despite the gulf in between them. She attains self-knowledge, reflects upon her own unbreakable ties with her brothers and sister, and truly assesses the significance of time in relation to eternity. Such recognition of the past with all its myths and illusions lead her to wholeness. Myth and realism, past and present finally infuse. She is suddenly overcome with the memory of reading, in Raja's well-thumbed copy of Elliot's *Four Quarters*, the line:

*'Time the destroyer is time the preserver'*

Its meaning seemed to fall out of the dark sky and settle upon her like a cloak, or like a great pair of feathered wings. She huddled in its comfort, its solace. She saw before her eyes how one ancient school of music contained both Mulk, still an immature disciple, and his aged, exhausted guru with all the disillusionments and defeats of his long experience. With her inner eye she saw how her own house and its particular history linked and contained her as well as her whole family with all their separate histories and experiences—not binding them within some dead and airless cell but giving them the soil in which their roots, and food to make them grow and spread, reach out to new experiences and new lives, but always drawing from the soil, the same secret darkness. That soil contained all time, past and future, in it. It was dark with time, rich with time. It was where her deepest self lived, and the deepest selves of her sister and brothers and all those who shared that time with her (182).

Bimla's self-discovery thus lies in her love for all. At the time of this realization, she shows a flood of affection rising in her heart for everyone. She

sends a loving letter to Raja through Tara suggesting him to visit her and Baba, and also informing him that she would be waiting for him (176). She realizes that the very bitterness is a great burden and bondage for her to attend that state of independent being, self and sovereign. Her final act is not a duty. It is an act of selection and decision which is done in total freedom. She draws out that forgiveness from her own within after contemplating and reviewing her whole past. When she forgives Raja, she becomes totally independent both from within and without. She holds neither hope nor despair of Raja's return to home. But she lives as independent and responsible for her choices and decisions. This is truly an awakened freedom of choice that Desai bestows upon Bim.

Desai disregards her characters as being simply representatives or cardboard creatures. She herself has confessed: "I don't like to generalize about my characters: for me they are individuals, and an individual acts out of her own impulses" (Johae, 39). She talks of spiritual freedom more than social freedom. The main issue is the question of knowledge of the self. Her characters are not lunatics or idiots. They are the ones whose thoughts and behaviours are beyond mental calculations and above rational assumptions. They are guided by intuition and not by mere intellect. They are the examples of wisdom who press on to spiritual freedom disregarding all material

comforts and social approval. They are conscious and capable of transcending the torments of alienation by way of their personal quest and realization. In her melioristic vision of life, people can come in contact even in their differences of mind and culture.

Deven Sharma, the protagonist of *In Custody*, disregards his material comforts and social approval of the life of a lecture before his higher ideal of poetic truth. He wants to transcend his ordinary life through creating a literary masterpiece by publishing a book on Nur. Desai does not discredit his quest for higher ideals. But she discredits his idea of mythicising Nur, whom Deven worships as a hero or as a poetic legend. Nur is only an old man tormented by financial needs and social problems. But Deven glorifies his existence. Desai tries to show such kind of human folly as overstatement or fantasy. To do away with all sorts of myths and fantasies and find the truth within self is the final message of this novel.

Deven journeys through fantasy and ignorance to struggle and realization. The novel shows a significant broadening of the horizon of the views and ideas of Anita Desai. Deven's sufferings pave the way for his quest and realization. He finally realizes the vainglory of Nur as a poetic legend. He also comes to know the folly of his desperate quest in finding meaning in the vanity of the so-called great poet:

But what vainglory it had been to try to find and entry into Nur's world - the world of drama and revolving lights and feasts and furies; how inadequate he had proved to its demands and expectations. No, all he could measure up to was this - this shabby house, its dirty corners, its wretchedness and lovelessness. Looking around it, he felt himself sag with relief and gratitude. At the same time his shoulders drooped in defeat (67).

Initially he is swayed by the idea of creating a work of lifetime. Consequently he finds himself defeated by his own helplessness. Since his very being is capable of realization, a clear awareness of universal betrayal and recognition of human limitation do help him to break away from the present wasteland and to move towards genuine understanding of the totality of life. He realizes that his final and true identity lies in his attempt to reconcile his subjective vision with world and its demands. This enables him to achieve an openness to look at things as they really are.

As a keen artist, Anita Desai never brings her views into focus abruptly. As she believes in the process of becoming, she lets her characters evolve

through the process of choice and action, failure and success before their final realization. Deven Sharma also as an individual, amply evolves into maturity and realization. His self-discovery at the final moment of crisis is neither abrupt nor incredible. A close analysis of his character shows that he is not one of those self-alienated individuals, who lack the capacity to feel and cope with life. He is not the one who yearns to express himself but feels incapacitated. He has, no doubt, his share of intense conflicts. But he possesses the talent to get out of his dilemmas with the help of self-analysis and self-awareness. His transformation is effected through an aesthetic experience. "The new Deven at the end of the novel is transformed from illusion into reality.

Anita Desai considers human relationship marked by a healthy communication as an essential element of survival. In her vision, an individual cannot survive when he becomes utterly devoid of purpose. He cannot stay whole when he keeps himself totally cut off from every religious, metaphysical and transcendental roots. He needs some place to stand and some roots to nourish him. Desai brings into focus an existential survival of Hugo Baumgartner in her novel *Baumgartner's Bombay*. After being rejected from everywhere, Hugo comes to know that although he desires to befriend all, yet he belongs nowhere. The realization of such nowhere-ness occurs to him in the concentration camp, "where he had

been and what he had been doing before his arrest, what he would do after his release himself" (109). But even after such experience, he establishes relationships and communication. He pets sick and homeless cats. He cares for Lotte and Kurt, the two unfortunate Germans. He makes lifelong friendship with Chimanlal, and goes to horserace with him. He realizes that human relationships safeguard against the torment of universal alienation. Although he meets indifferent and hostile people, he does not stop being friendly to them. He realizes that the only thing which can sustain his life is human relationship.

In the vision of Desai, the sense of alienation points towards knowledge and brings about realization. As Desai is more concerned with being or realization than achievement or goal, a mere carrying on of life is not a true survival for her. Survival should be meaningful, insightful and deep. It refers to doing away with the false peace and unreal security. Considering this way, those who opt for myth or fantasy, do not actually survive. Their illusion is never transcended; they never come out of their private cells to communicate with the other. Their survival is only a servile one, a selfish participation with unreality. True survival lies in subjective vision rather than in objective reality. Through her character portrayals Desai professes that life is not an object that can be explained in words. Life itself is a

paradox and human beliefs are ambivalent. But this incomprehensibility is not confusion. Rather it is a possibility of human mind to search beyond peripherals, to jump outside phenomenal reality and enter into the realm of Truth.

Knowledge of the self is thus the final survival that the characters of Anita Desai attain. To know is to be awakened. To know that one is to be alienated from the other is to realize the truth of one's being. To destroy the illusion means to come out of darkness into the light. This refers to the understanding of alienation and transcending the torments of alienation. Most of her characters experience alienation and come to learn and grapple with its meaning and significance in their lives. It is their wisdom and enlightenment that elevates their sense of dignity and human value. They learn to accept life with the help of their knowledge. From alienation they move on to a quest for self-identity through their struggle with life. By learning more about themselves, they come to realize their own existential situations. They confront it physically and spiritually through their understanding about life. Herein Desai's characters come to learn the lessons of survival, which has multiple aspects - physical, economic, moral, social, and primarily the existential.