

CHAPTER FOUR

QUEST FOR IDENTITY

One's preoccupation can only be a perpetual search for meaning, for values, for - dare I say it - Truth. I think of the world as an iceberg - the one-tenth visible above the water is what we call reality, but the nine-tenths that are submerged make of the Truth, and that is what one is trying to explore. Writing is an effort to discover and then to underline and finally to convey the true significance of things.

(Anita Desai, *Interview with Yasodhara Dalmia*, 1979, 13)

Quest for identity refers to the existential struggle of man in order to attain meaning and value in his life. It is an inward journey, which is also a journey for existence, a search for roots and a struggle for self-expression. A careful survey of the novels of Anita Desai reveals such quest for identity as innate in every conscious character. She not only deals with the alien experience of man but also delineates various means and methods that he adopts for his survival. Though considered alien and misfit in his environment, he is also the seeker for meaning and truth of his existence. Even if he undergoes traumatic psychic experience due to the collapse of value system and lack of satisfactory alternatives, he refuses to give up his quest for self-identity. We see constant struggle of the individual as a heroic attempt, which finally brings glory to him and also adds dignity to the spirit of freedom. This search for truth or quest for identity gives him a different dimension, depth and meaning even in a wretched condition of life.

In the context of the novels of Anita Desai, failure, dejection and frustration especially in matters of human relationships do not always give rise to complete chaos and anarchy. For her, search for values and meaning in life is the most needed drive for human existence. She portrays man as struggling against the given situations of life. She also tries to explore

the inner realms of his being, which she calls iceberg. Little concerned with traditional notions of truth, she is frequently inspired to peep into the inner recesses of man rather than in the outer spectacle of the world. For her 'it is depth which is interesting, delving deeper and deeper in the character, a situation or a sense rather than going round about it'. In an interview, she herself has stated thus:

I am interested in characters that are not average but have retreated or being driven into some extremity of despair and so turned against, or made a stand against the general current. It is easy to flow with the current, it makes no demand, and it costs no effort. But those who cannot follow it, whose heart cries out 'the great NO', who fight the current and struggle against it, they know what the demands are and what it costs to meet them (Dalmia, 13).

The pursuit of being and the process of becoming are the foundations of existential thought that she has picked up as her fictional backbone. The former concept refers to the reality of the existing man and the later one to the quest for survival accompanied by the individuals' tremendous possibility of becoming. Her characters strive to seek the Truth by refusing to conform to the present situations of life.

Quest for identity of the modern Indian woman constitutes one major trait in her novels. Her woman protagonist is portrayed as engaged in establishing her dignity and self-identity against the given conditions of life. She never gives up her quest for a higher meaning in life. She has longing for love and communion of the spirit in every aspect of their existence. Instead of compromising with the humdrum of mundane life, she is shown as struggling to give meaning to her existence through quest for love and communion of the spirit.

Search for love and communion of the spirit can be traced in the very first novel of Anita Desai, *Cry, the Peacock*. 'How important is sex where not union but communion is concerned' Maya records. The root of her quest lies in her excessive involvement with the sensuous beauty of life. She is alive through all her senses and lives intensely for each moment. It is really her effort to tell her story to herself, to discover some meaning in her life, and even to justify herself to herself (Iyenger, 465). She longs for permanence of love and beauty. She confesses that she has so much to look at, to touch and to feel, and be happy about. Her world is full of Gautama (118). She longs for moments of love and fulfilment. The truth of living, the quality of existence, the colour and flavour of each passing moments for her become things

to be felt and not to be explained. After taking a flower from Gautama, she remarks:

Do you know, I should not mind dying now, after all. At this very moment. Then it would remain like this, for me (121).

Maya wants Gautama to love her existence and help her fulfil her desires. Her quest is based on sensuous contact with the world around. She believes in the unity between body and soul, self and society. She yearns for the peace that comes from companion life alone, from brother flesh (18). She does not wish for anything in her married life excepting a caring and responsive husband. She wishes to die happily in the loving arms of her husband. He is the one with whom she desires to make a point of contact with the world of human activity. Her keen sensibility makes her more intrusive about the meaning of life and death. Her quest lies in her vision and some undefined self-cultivated fantasy.

Both Maya and Gautama are seekers of truth and meaning in their existence. Desai attempts to present conflict between two different approaches to life marked in the lives of Maya and Gautama. Maya's love of beauty and sensuous life stands in sharp contrast with Gautama's philosophy of detachment. Conflicts between reason and sensibility, objective reality and

subjective truth form the basis for the quest in this novel. Gautama stands for truth and balance, and Maya for idealism. Gautama seeks his satisfaction in detachment whereas Maya looks for it in attachment. As a realist, he believes in action and reason. From Gita he learns that attachment leads to destruction:

Thinking of sense objects, man becomes attached thereto. From attachment arises longing and from longing anger is born. From anger arises delusion; from delusion, loss of memory is caused. From loss of memory the discriminative faculty is ruined and from the ruin of discrimination, he perishes (112).

But Maya seeks a higher love, beyond the matter of fact realities. Instead of being conscious of duty alone, she becomes conscious of love. She desires to satisfy love with love. She longs for expression of emotions and affections to drench her love-thirsty heart. She is romantic and self-indulgent, pursuing fancies and dreams. She is like a toy-princess living in a world of elusive happiness. Her utterances reveal her romantic longing for her husband, the only lover:

I live my life for you. [...] You are - untouched. How can I explain it to you then (114)?

Maya has a stifling sense of freedom. When Gautama takes her into a railway compartment and locks it, she cries hysterically: "Let me out: I want to live, Gautama, I want to live" (156). The close railway compartment creates in her a terrible sense of fear. The letter of her brother brings a message of freedom to her. She imagines him as a young hawk hard to be tamed. As a non-conformist, a rebel working in a canning factory in New York, life for her brother has a meaning. She looks at life, whereas he interprets it. In fact, he is the objectification of her innermost desires. He stands for freedom which she desires the most.

Maya's quest also lies in her effort to achieve freedom from her father figure. Only then will she be freed from her claustrophobia. Since she has engraved her father's image in Gautama, she unconsciously decides that she must destroy her husband in order to liberate herself from her father obsession. She thinks that Gautama has reached the stage of detachment that nears silence. She tries to enter his world but he is so engrossed in his work that he does not realize when she had entered the room, had spoken, had left. She wonders: "Could death disturb him then" (198)? She convinces herself that he is the one who should die. She feels that with his life denying ideas he has no right to live.

Since Gautama cannot fill the vacuum in her imagination, gradually the moon, symbol of female imagination, starts to govern her sentiments. Although she sees the moon as ominous at several points, still it represents the revolt and anger raging within her. Maya ruminates that when it rose out of the churn of her frenzy, vast and ghost-white, written over with dim, tortuous signs in ash-grey, it was not the gentle moon of love-ballads and fairy revels but a demonic creature, a phantom gone berserk trying to leap the threshold of her mind (27). The moon captures her vital solidity and translates into insanity which prevails over her commonsense. Her husband commits a grave mistake by coming in between her illusive quest and objective presence:

And then Gautama made a mistake—his last, decisive one. In talking, gesturing, he moved in front of me, thus coming between the worshipped moon, and me his figure an ugly, crooked grey shadow that transgressed its sorrowing chastity. 'Gautama!' I screamed in fury, and thrust out my arms towards him...saw him fall then, passed through an immensity of air, down to the very bottom (208).

When she pushes her husband over the edge of the roof, she in fact achieves a victory over tradition. Her action is not based on some realist mode. It is motivated by the female myth. The price she has to pay for her liberty is awfully heavy: the price of sanity. Yet, it is a better alternative than remaining a prisoner to the tradition of male myth forever. Her extreme sensitivity makes her revolt against such tradition. It indicates her rebellion against the limited vision of life that the pragmatic philosophy of Gautama provides with. It also signifies Maya's attempt of removing the obstacle from the path of her quest. Since she does not find any spiritual or emotional parity between her husband and herself, the existence of Gautama not only becomes insignificant to her, but also disruptive. Her leap into insanity suggests her translation from objective reality into subjective vision or her self-nurtured fantasy. She stands for change, whereas Gautama represents the patriarchal tradition. She defies such tradition through her senses and emotions, but Gautama uses his logic to support the most traditional view of life. It is such a traditional and patriarchal philosophy of detachment from life that Maya rebels against. Her disaffection with Gautama is partly responsible for her artistic beauty more than her lover.

The quest for self-identity of the new Indian woman is focused even in *Voices in the City*. Monisha is depicted not only as an alienated soul, but also as a seeker of the meaning of her existence. Like Maya, Monisha also refuses to live a 'one-dimensional life'. She longs for peace and solitude where she could nurture her selfhood and grow into dignity. Her search is to attain freedom and solitude, both internal and external. She yearns for the free air of Kalimpong, where she could identify herself with the sincerity and novelty of nature, "the solitude of the jungles there, the aqueous shadows of the bamboo grooves and the earth laid with great fallen leaves" (116).

Monisha has something higher in her individuality. Her intellect is filled with the thoughts of writers like Kafka and Dostoyevsky. Although her in-laws are apathetic to her higher sensitivity, yet she keeps her awareness intact. She rebels inwardly against the servile existence within the rigid confines of a traditional Hindu family. Unlike many other Hindu women, she longs for creativity and privacy. Her intellectual aspiration is beyond the grasp of the ladies of the household, who always talk about dowries, saris, babies and jewellery with 'their indoor minds, starless, darkness' (81). Though her search is foiled by the suspicions of her unimaginative in-laws and mean-minded husband, the very nature of her quest transports her to a higher plane. Instead of trying to

adjust herself with the mundane realities of life, she tries to seek meaning within herself. She has knowledge of her search. She also knows the life of other householders as being "traceless, meaningless, uninvolved amounting to non-existence" (140). If she were a naïve and simple woman, devoid of any awareness, she would perhaps comply with the imposed mundane life. But her enlightened mind cannot rest without having the desire to peep beyond phenomenal reality.

Revolt against social or universal absurdities is one of the essential dimensions of the quest for identity. A sensitive individual rebels against social and universal absurdities. Desai's characters are motivated by the search for unity, spiritual order, meaning and truth. Many of them rebel against their given situations of their life. Their rebellion is not for some political or social purpose but for attaining freedom, meaning and truth. This rebellion may be called what Camus calls 'Metaphysical Rebellion'. Most of the characters of Desai refuse to accept the weight that makes them live in a wretched condition. Maya in *Cry, the Peacock* pushes her husband off the roof to defend her world of sensuous abundance whereas Monisha sets fire on herself in order to reach the core of her being. Both the acts may be interpreted as their acts of rebellion against the suffocating isolation in their married lives. Maya's abolition of her husband may be considered as an attempt to get herself free from the

unimaginative world of Gautama, and Monisha's suicide can be viewed as her attempt to give a meaning to herself at least in death, for her present life has not been able to provide it. Her suicide is preceded by self-knowledge which asserts her freedom. It is an exercise of her choice.

Nirode is another character of the novel, who also has a search for higher values in life. His pursuit of higher values in life constitutes the thematic nucleus of the novel. He starts a magazine in which the intellectuals of the whole nation might exercise their power for the reawakening India. As a writer and editor of meaningful journals, he attempts to communicate his higher and original ideas to the whole nation. Ordinary people work for success and happiness but Nirode relinquishes both. He feels that such things would lead his life to blind alley. "He feels frantically proud, capable of great dedication yet shifting like a shadow, a cipher, from one rejection to another" (54). It is clear that his body encloses a sublime spirit, which is averse to the docility of an office life and its servile bossism. He is unhappy with his magazine as it presents a 'lot of trivial, worthless scribbling' that has no deep essence or message for mankind. He gives up all pursuits of worldly benefit for the higher purpose of writing. Monisha, his sister, testifies that he had 'done away with all other things in order to have time to read and write' (114).

Freedom is the primary quest of Nirode for which he is ready to sacrifice everything. He resents his father's inheritance, shifts from one business to another one. As a hermit he loves nothing but freedom. He longs to be free from family, tradition and heritage and wants to be himself. Considering the heavy cost of freedom, he says that "independence is too damned expensive" (131). But still he has a positive soul full of admiration for greatness wherever it is found. His faculty is verified by the amazing play he writes although theatres are unfit for it. It is only that the society fails to understand his talent. Even though he is misunderstood, he never gives up his quest. His struggle raises him above the level of common humanity.

Nirode debates for anonymity of the true artist as an important ideal. He believes that giving signatures and announcing names is improper to an artist of high rank because it involves some egoism. He holds in high esteem those anonymous artists who never bothered about fame or celebrity. For him, anonymity of artists should be sustained in the field of writing as well. He criticizes those great writers, who could not resist the temptation of publicity. As an artist, he considers writers as worse than painters and other artists:

'The Ajanta murals, the temples at Konarak and Khajuraho - not one of them bear a single signature, does it'? He asks it like a question of potent interest, and this makes him smile, the white skin on his lips cracking as he does so. 'But writers,' he says, 'writers were always a vain bunch, from Kalidas downwards. Blasted fools, the lot of them. It's only a waste' (130)

Related to his higher pursuits, his devotion to fine arts and is another significant aspect of his quest. He touches upon a still higher notion that if speech is silver silence is gold. Speech involves attention to the audience. The audience may place different demands on the artist based on their preferences. This will be a great burden on the genuine artist. His ambition in life becomes "to earn only as much as I need immediately, never so much as to spill into the bank" (157). He avoids all sorts of encumbrances in order to be free and be alone to write. Action without desire for result guides him in early life while working with the newspaper and the magazine. Guided or misguided by the principles of Gita, he always seems in search of detachment.

Nirode is a rebel, who rejects the world of security for attaining an existential freedom. Instead

of living a dull and mundane life, he wishes to die an independent death. He wanders all his life from one rejection to another one, from failure to the next one to achieve total freedom. To get hold of freedom, he is even ready to move from failure to failure to rock bottom. He considers the concepts of success or failure as sheer hindrances on the way of freedom. In order to attain an existential freedom, he attempts to transcend every barrier: familial, social and moral. He reflects that it is "better to leap out of the window and end it all instead of smearing this endless sticky glue of senselessness over the world" (18). He also confesses that happiness or suffering - he wants to be done with them, disregard them, and see beyond them to the very end (40).

Since his search is to attain freedom in its totality, he desires to escape from the stark realities of life. In order to free himself from bondage of security he gives up his handsome job and starts editing *Voice* magazine. Then he begins to write as a free-lance writer. Again he opens a bookshop in a dirty locality. All these are his attempts to get hold of freedom and wholeness. Success for him is but a mere delusion. For him "life lived to be a success only follows one success after the other, but eventually has to bend with the arch and arrive at the bottom" (184).

Nirode's rebellion is not political, but metaphysical one. It is a rebellion against human degradation. He has a passion for clarity and unity of thought, and a craving for meaning and truth. His is a rebellion by means of which he protests against his condition and consequently against the whole creation. It is metaphysical because it disputes the ends of man and of his creation. As a rebel he defies more than he denies. He lives in a world he creates for himself and he is by and large all alone. He rejects every outside agency that would obstruct his freedom of becoming. His search is for freedom at its totality, and not for security. In the name of freedom, he discards his family wealth and ancestry. He rejects everything that would link him with the mundane routine life. He desires only his private world of doubt and questionings. Desai describes his desire as follows:

What he wanted was shadows, silence, stillness - and well, he told himself, that was exactly what he would always be left with. He remained in the half-dark - and each light on that street served to show up an expanse of wall, a doorway, a balcony that was darkly shadowed - and bled with longing to go... (8)

A quest for racial and cultural identity can be studied in her next novel, *Bye-Bye Blackbird*. The novel deals with the theme of cultural conflict born of the

colonial encounter between India and Britain. Through the portrayal of Adit, Desai tries to portray a quest for cultural and racial identity. Adit searches for his new identity in the west. He tries to identify himself with the English way of life. He praises the life in Britain to the extent that he completely identifies himself with it at the expense of his Indian past. He confesses to his fascination for England in the following words:

Yes... I do love here. I'm happy here. I like going into the local for a pint on my way home to Sarah. I like wearing good tweed on a foggy November day. I like the Covent Garden opera house. I like steamed pudding with treacle. I like - I like thatched cottages and British history and reading the letters in the *Times*... I like the pubs. I like the freedom a man has here: Economic freedom! Social freedom! (22).

His basis for occidental fascination is based on its rich tradition of art and painting. He visits art gallery illuminated with the rosy, noontime vision of the Impressionists. He looks for meaning and beauty in the poetic tradition of Shakespeare, Wordsworth and Eliot. He sings:

Earth has not any thing to show more fair:

Dull would he be of soul who could pass by.
(75)

He feels that "the English have a genius of preserving art and beauty and keep it somehow fresh and vivid, miraculously safe from the ravages of time and decay, so that it affects generation after generation in precisely the same manner - and even outsiders from the far corners of the world" (92-93). He searches for a higher dimension in life and art. He crosses the threshold of his native land in order to get social freedom which he fails to achieve in India. His desire to jump ahead of traditional mores of Indian life can be considered as his new awareness. This makes him unable return to his past. His desire to find unity with his fellowmen or his attempts to establish new ties by marrying Sarah can be taken as his egalitarian endeavours.

The novel also deals with the theme of cultural and linguistic adjustment in the lives of Indian immigrants in England. They experience many things, encounter variety of people and situations, discuss several subjects; but their sole objective is adjustment in social, intellectual and educational areas. There is a clash between two races or customs, not forged or artificial but innate and inborn.

Tired of too much duty and very little liberty within the traditional Indian life, most of her characters choose myth in order to escape the painful reality. They seek peace and security by adopting myth as an alternative for their predicaments. Their approach at escaping the stark realities of life by adopting myth as a possible alternative forms one major traits of their quest for identity..

Desai deals with the very fundamental question of human existence in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* The novel poses the question where shall we go from here? It also deals with the quest for meaning and purpose of life. The novel becomes a query of Sita's total self. Her quest for identity emerges from the conflict between two contrary attitudes towards life. A disagreement of feelings between the husband and wife can be found in the novel. Like Gautama in *Cry the Peacock*, Raman is a successful businessman who has a rather pragmatic view of life. Sita is sensitive and imaginative, having more than an ordinary sense. If Raman is social and extrovert, Sita is personal and introvert. If he has common sense, she has higher notions about life than the average woman would have. Because of such temperamental variation, the points of disagreement between the two often occur.

Sita's quest begins with her disgust at the conception of her fifth child. As a sensitive woman she

considers modern civilization as a crazy one for sensitive souls. She considers the world to be filthy and unworthy for the child that is pure and safe in her womb. She seems to have higher sensitivity and higher worries than common mothers. She has the normal approach of a good mother, and has given birth and brought up four children, proving to be a caring mother. The common features of the horrifying modern civilization violate her sensitive temper. She believes that in such a world children cannot be held healthy:

How could civilization survive, how could the child? How could she hold them whole and pure and un-impeached in the midst of this bloodshed? They would surely be wounded, fall and die (55-56).

Her reluctance to give birth to the baby is in a way symbolic of her wish to prevent the very experience of suffering and violence. In a hot discussion with Raman, she bursts: "What I am doing is trying to escape from the madness here, escape to a place where it might be possible to be sane again" (35). What she actually wants to achieve is a wholesome world of purity and love. She longs for such a world where there would be no selfishness or treachery. She rebels against the modern civilization and human degradation. Her rebellion becomes a universal one. She wants to stay whole mentally and emotionally. This calls to her mind

a desire to escape. She wants to keep the unborn baby forever safe from the cruelty and violence of the real world of masculine values of war and violence.

Therefore, when she finds that she is about to bring another human being into the world something snaps within her. She informs her husband that she will not have the baby. When he asks if she means to abort the child, she answers: "I want to keep it - I don't it to be born" (35). She thinks that she can somehow prevent the birth by going back to the mythical Manori, where strange miracles are known to occur. She imagines that she can contain the conception inside her. Instead of opting for abortion, she dreams of a miraculous evaporation of the child. Her desire of escape emerges from the fear of a doomed and destructive human predicament.

In order to escape from all the predicaments of her life, she tries to find an answer in the myth of the *Magic Island*. What she knows inwardly, she refuses to accept outwardly. Manori the island of myth and miracle vies the critical realism of the present metropolis. Her childhood home Manori stands just opposite to the critical realism of Bombay. It is also clear that as a mother and wife her life in the realist mode is limited. Therefore, she goes away to Manori dragging her daughter Menaka and son Karan with her in search of her lost individuality. Her retreat to the

island is only to prevent her fifth baby from being born into the world where destruction came so naturally. She wants to return to her past, to her childhood days. Longing for her childhood days, she utters to her daughter:

I wish I had your talent, I would nurse it so carefully like a plant—make it grow, grow. I used to think—after I left this island and had to think what I would do next—that if only I could paint, or sing, or play the Sitar well. [...] I should have grown into a sensible woman. Instead of being what I am [...] I should have known how to channel my thoughts and feelings, how to put them in use. I should have given my life some shape then, some meaning. At least, it would have had some for me—even if no one had cared (86).

On the island she wants to achieve a miracle, an immaculate conception in reverse. Her decision to go to Manori during the monsoon is an act of rejection, which Raman terms as madness. But for her, the escape to Manori from the hostile civilization is an attempt to regain her sanity. When Raman interprets her escape as desertion she refuses:

No, no - desertion, that's cowardly. I wasn't doing anything cowardly [...] I was saying No—

but positively, *positively* saying No. There must be someone who says No, Raman! [...] Perhaps I never ran away at all. Perhaps I am only like the jellyfish washed up by the waves, stranded there on the sandbar. I was just stranded here by the sea, that's all. I hadn't much to do with it at all (108).

Sita's escape to the island not only suggests her social rejection. It also indicates her quest for peace and solitude. Since she fails to look into herself in the dull life of Bombay, she moves away from it to probe the essence of her being. Her journey becomes the journey from the stark realities of life to the illusive world of fantasy. This is also a journey involving her self-research. She runs away from the humdrum of life just to attain what she calls wholeness. Manori in her dream is a place of miracles where she hopes to achieve the miracle of not giving birth to the child. As Desai writes: "The island had been buried beneath her consciousness deliberately, for years" (57).

Sita embodies the theme of rebellion against the evil of the world in the form of rejection of procreation in such a world. As she is upset by the gross decadence of the world, she is made to reject the very process of procreation. As a mother, she is not ready to reconcile herself with such a civilization

where her child would be born. She confesses: "That's what I refuse to do, you know - have it born to such - such a life" (143). Her revolt is against the norms of society which considers a woman inferior to man. It is because she sees beyond those norms. She cannot stand finitude but wishes to attain her pure being, or what Sartre calls being for itself or *pour-soi*. In her revolt and subsequent resolution, she reveals a strong assimilation of the modern and the traditional outlook of Indian woman (Bande 183). Desai portrays her as a new woman with a strong Indian personality. She is a blend of western temperament and Indian grace. She breaks social norms and traditional values. She declares herself and also breaks the classical image of the Sita of the Hindu myths. Alienation and quest for love are the central motif of Sita. Evidently the two concepts, alienation and quest are complementary and lead to one another. She not only rejects the unconditional acceptance of the secondary role but also rebels against the entire system of patriarchal social relationships.

An escape into myth and fantasy as a possible alternative to the torment of alienation can also be studied in *Fire on the Mountain*. Like Sita in *Where Shall We Go this Summer*, Nanda wishes to retreat from her responsibilities of adult life into a realm of solitude, where she could indulge in the fantasies of her childhood. But unlike Sita, she has fulfilled her

duties as wife, mother and grandmother. She chooses to escape only after the death of her husband and after all her children and grandchildren are grown and married.

Being upset by her social life, Nanda acquires a lonely house named Carignano on a remote hill. What pleases and satisfies her at Carignano is its loneliness. In her lonely house, she finds herself free from all the burdens of family and also to be able to make her free choices. She does not consider her age as a hindrance in her search for peace and solitude. She wants to achieve total freedom from the world of duty and responsibility like a sannyasian.

Nanda's stay at Kasauli not only signifies her love for a secluded life away from the din and tumult of her family life. It also indicates her quest for selfhood, her identity and Truth. Like Manori in *Where Shall We Go this Summer*, the mountain of Carignano plays the role of a dreamland in the life of Nanda. What she aspires for is peace and solitude, away from the tension of family life. As Desai describes; "All she wanted was to be alone, to have Carignano to herself, in this period of her life when stillness and calm were all that she wished to entertain" (17).

The responsibilities of family life had been a barrier for her to reach the core of her being. Her

busy and pleasure-loving husband had nothing to do with her private self. He let down her emotions by loving another girl and refusing to take notice of her feminine sentiments. Her relationship with her children was not intimate either. They had betrayed her by refusing to accept her motherly affection. Nanda feels that her involvement with social life had only bred frustration by placing a hindrance in the path of her quest for identity. When she is finally able to rid herself of all social and family burdens, she is rather satisfied. "She had been so glad when it was over. She had been glad to leave it all behind, in the plains, like a great, heavy, difficult book that she had read through and was not required to read again" (30).

Although she is disgusted with the present realities of life, she could never quench her fantasy of a glorious past. On one stormy day, when she finds herself in a forced companionship with Raka, her great granddaughter, she tells the stories of her mythical childhood. She tells the stories of her own father's trips to Tibet, the land of myth and magic, where he had undertaken daring feats. Her longing to keep the memory safe is indicative of her quest for adventure and freedom. Although she cannot actually return to the past, she lives in its glorious memories. She keeps alive the memory of her legendary father as an adventurous voyager. She narrates:

He was away in Tibet - oh, for years, years. He went every step of the way on horseback, or on foot; the Mustagh Pass, the Baltoro glacier, the Aghill Pass [...] a terribly hard dangerous route. [...] He went to Lhasa, saw the Potala [...] there he ran into the strangest people of all, Lamas and sorcerers [...] with the strangest powers. They could do magic: they could make idols speak, turn day into night... (83-85).

Desai's interest does not lie in mirroring the externals. It lies in exploring the inner recesses of individuals. Writing for her "is an effort to discover, and to underline, and finally to convey the true significance of the things" (Dalmia, 13). Desai not only seeks to investigate the inner crisis of her characters, she also deals with the independent existence of the individual as being solely responsible for his choices. The various characters in her novels confront their own existence. She is also interested in analysing the hidden self of the individual as a tremendously potential in dealing with the torments of alienation.

Her characters take up various ways of dealing with the absurdities of their existence: by committing suicide and homicide, hoping for the better and also living with it. The subject of living with it and

confronting their existence bears more importance for the novelist. Their attempt professes that life is more important than death. Her characters possess a positive attitude to life. They have inner frustration and mental turmoil but still they dare to live, and some even venture to transcend this frustration and gloom. They see a light even in the midst of darkness and sorrow.

A study of the novels of Anita Desai is always a soul-searching process. She not only deals with the exploration of human predicament but also with man's perpetual quest for meaning and truth. She unravels the torturous involutions of sensibility with subtlety and fineness, and her ability to evoke the changing aspects of Nature matched with human moods is another of her assets (Naik, 243). Her attention is transferred from the mere observation of the outer world to the revelation of the inner-self of her characters. The novel with her becomes either a psychological drama or an existential allegory. She attempts to delve deep inside her character to explore the mystery of life and also to analyse the situations responsible for man's tragic condition on the earth.

A search for higher ideal also motivates most of her characters. A quest for meaning in life through poetic creation is typified in her novel, *In Custody*. Deven, a humble lecturer in a college, tries to seek

meaning in his life through his involvement in poetry and music. His sense of quest emerges from his compulsion to shut his poetic mind in order to earn his livelihood by teaching in a college. He is a poet who had long ago set aside his ambition to write poetry to live and to earn. But he is forced to put aside his love of Urdu literature and instead get a job as a lecturer in Hindi, a field in which he had little interest and skill.

Unable to find comfort in his real life, his poetic mind escapes into fantasy and myth of hero worship. What is denied to him in the real world seems attainable in the shadowy world of Nur's poems. A meek and credulous young man, he is swayed by an idea of creating a work of lifetime and is prompted to take an interview of Nur. He does not seek to compromise with his sense of alienation. A search for vocation accompanies him. His search is for poetic truth and beauty. He is portrayed as seeking meaning in the emptiness as typified by Nur, who himself is confused and frustrated. When Murad, the editor of Urdu literary magazine, *Awaaz*, assigns him to take an interview of Nur, he is happy. "He went on reciting that great poem of Nur's that his father had loved to recite and that he still read, ceremoniously, whenever he felt sad or nostalgic and thought of his father and his early childhood and all that he had lost" (44).

In order to give meaning to his poetic interest, he accepts his interview of Nur, the greatest living Urdu poet. Nur becomes the image of perfection as a poetic model for him. "He had pictured him living either surrounded by elderly, sage and dignified literatures or else entirely alone, in divine isolation" (51). He visits Delhi for the said assignment and traces the whereabouts of Nur. When he enters the house of Nur, he feels as though he is truly about to leave behind his dross and drab life and ascend to a wonderful world of poetic beauty and mythic splendour:

It was to him as if God had leaned over a cloud and called for him to come up, and angels might have been drawing him up these ancient splintered stairs to meet the deity... this, surely, was the summons he had been waiting for all these empty years... he had never conceived of a summons expressed in a voice so leonine... a voice that could grasp him, as it were, by the roots of his hair and haul him up from the level on which he existed—mean, disordered and hopeless—into another, higher sphere. Another realm it would surely be if his god dwelt there, the domain of poetry, beauty and illumination (39-40).

In his quest for poetic beauty, Deven deludes himself by overestimating Nur. He mythicizes the poet,

in whom he fancies every possibility of transforming his ordinary life. He considers his life as a Hindi professor to be futile and meaningless. And now he attempts to find his meaning in the poetic world of Nur. He intends to transcend the dull and monotonous life of a college professor and materially disappointed life of his wife in the economic and cultural backwardness of Mirpor by chronicling the life and poetry of Nur. He seeks to acquire distinction in the college through association with the living poet. His artistic motive is also harmonised by a more materialistic one of getting promotion through the publication of an article.

Desai seeks to explore the roots and background of her family especially that of her German mother, Antoinette Nime, in her next novel, *Baumgartner's Bombay*. Concerning the theme of family roots in the novel, she herself has stated in an interview with Andrew Robinson, "... all these years I have been searching for a way to return to my background, and only found the key a few years ago" (1988, 2). And her findings find their expression in this novel. She has explored the German roots of her mother whose search for cultural roots and self-identity are typified by Hugo Baumgartner.

The very sense of alienation creates a quest in Hugo Baumgartner. Failing to adjust himself in his own

homeland, he comes to India searching for a self-identity and also security. Perhaps here he would find himself a new Identity, one that suited him, one that he enjoyed (62-63). Although he is uprooted from his native land, he tries to establish himself in his new-found land, India, where he desires to bring his mother also. Even after the war, he still desires to re-establish himself in Calcutta, and then in Bombay. His search for establishment, his attempts to find a new identity even in an alien atmosphere speak of his dignity and give meaning to his existence. He refuses to compromise with pessimism and continues with his quest for his identity. His very existence leads to a search for the roots. His staying in India converges in a quest. Desai presents a cultural quest of the individual in alien land.

One day Hugo meets a dying cat. He brings it home, but it dies. This incident creates in him a new sense, a new idea. He begins to collect homeless cats to his flat for his company. But it makes his visitors less and less. Even his best friends cease to come to his flat. One cannot be accustomed to loneliness. He needs company. Therefore, Hugo has pet cats, stray cats, sick cats, starved cats, and homeless cats. Because of his cat collection, he gets different titles like 'Pagla Sahib' or 'Billiwalla Sahib'.

When an individual finds no sense in existing realities and objective values, he moves towards subjective truth that cannot be expressed in comprehensive language. Language becomes insufficient to explain the whole truth. The search for subjective truth is the outcome of a mature mind. The ordinary people who are satisfied with mere food and sex, home and children have no concern with truth or identity. They cannot cross their limit of phenomenal reality. Only when the dividing wall of ignorance and reason are knocked down, then the search begins. What concerns her most is the search for those sensitive or inquisitive individuals who dare to seek their identity, truth and self.

Journey to Ithaca provides a different idea of quest. The novel basically speaks about the spiritual journey of Matteo into the Indian mysticism. The only child of affluent Italian parents, he is restless since his very childhood. When he reads Herman Hess's book *The Journey to the East*, a desperate longing for India and her mystic beauty arises in him. In the year 1975 along with his wife he undertakes his 'journey to the east', hoping to understand India. In India, he visits swamis, gurus and ashrams searching for spiritual fulfillment and meaning in life. He believes that everything in India has a sign, a design. He also reads from *Katha Upanishads*, which teaches him that one has to follow the path of joy, not pleasure. To attain

spiritual enlightenment, he encounters several monks and swamis: clothed, naked, and half-naked. In order to receive the eye of faith to see beyond through meditation, he makes himself a recluse. He becomes more and more silent, distant and detached with the world around. He tries to find the meaning universal mystery in Indian religiosity:

Then feeling himself alone in his lack of faith, Matteo began to keep to himself. He felt disabled, without the skills the other possessed, a kind of leper amongst them. So he rented a room for himself where he might be alone and meditate and concentrate upon his need for the extra faculty that he desired and required if he was to survive. He had begun to feel that if he could not have a vision of spiritual truth then he could not continue to live - not here, not as he had done (66).

His search for real India makes him frenzied and dishevelled. He sees universe in stone (68), goddess in a doll (69), and guru in a drunkard (69). He wants to be someone else, different than he is. After running from pillar to post in search of a guru, he reaches to an ashram on the mountains in the North. He meets the Mother, the head of the ashram. In her presence he finds peace, joy and deep contentment. He seems to get closer to his goal under her blessing and guidance. The

Mother takes him with her on her search (88). The Mother impresses him to think and meditate only on her. He listens to her message of universal brotherhood and equanimity. Her words arrest him. He thinks that without her he is lost. "He felt that only thing in his life that mattered was to retain those impressions" (106). Her every word is like nectar to his thirsty soul. He considers her as a passage between the temporal and the eternal, between vanity and void.

Thus his journey seems to end in total surrender to the Mother. She becomes identical with the India of his imagination. He considers that she is the "one who can reveal the unknown to me" (141). The Mother addresses her devotees that "the only purpose of our existence here is to experience fully, to be full" (100). As Matteo listens to her he experiences "the revealing of a great luminous bloom" (99). He wanders: "over there (the west) people do not know there is a mystery" (58). It is this mysterious essence of existence that Matteo tries to capture and desires to be identified with. There has all along been an element of bewilderment or a gap between his self and the world around. He tries to fill the gap with the solidity of the Mother.

Matteo has a goal of attaining nirvana or void. He follows it single-mindedly. He is so obsessed with his pursuit that he simply does not care for his parents,

wife or children. Like many Indian monks, he seems to have been devoid of such personal feelings. He becomes an unfeeling idealist. He does not change gradually. He desires to replace himself with someone else.

Matteo carries out a literal and metaphorical 'Journey to the East'. The journey here refers to spiritual gratification for his wandering and searching soul. The search for a home is related to the search for identity. The name 'Ithaca' refers to a mythical place, which motivates his nostalgia of a long lost home. India and Ithaca merge into one another. His search for spiritual gratification can also be related to his search for self-identity. He believes that there is no happiness for him who does not travel (190). The idea of journey is linked up with theme of quest, rooted in his collective unconscious. What keeps him preoccupied here is the idea of a persistent journey. It is something like the concept of Ananta Yatra which is embedded in the Indian philosophy of life.

Matteo's search is existential. Like Nirode, he rejects everything. His search makes him conscious of his alienation from his family members also. As a born seeker, he exhibits signs of worldly failure from the very beginning. Even as a boy, he fails to conform to the social and domestic norms. "His thoughts begin to crystallize and soon he targets the path of joy in preference to the path of pleasure" (24). Actually, he

does not existentially belong to the humdrum of the world. His parents cannot understand him. Even his wife fails to communicate with him. He is existentially divided from the rest of the world. He accepts a choice of following the life of a mystic by resenting everything he has. Like Nirode, he jumps from one failure to another one, from one illusion to the other one. Both of them are portrayed as archetypal figures fathoming the truth of human existence. Nirode searches for freedom at any cost whereas Matteo desires to reach a state of emptiness where he himself desires to merge into. He seeks neither independence nor dependence, neither attachment nor detachment. Finally he discards even the desire to be desireless. Like Buddha, he seeks to realize a state of void fulfilling Patanjali's maxim, *chittanivrittam* or negation mind.

It is, therefore, the search, which makes the characters of Anita Desai different from their fellowmen. They try to create and preserve their own values of life. In order to protect their self-identity or self-created ideals, these characters adopt various measures. Maya pushes her husband off the roof with the intention of protecting her world of sensuous abundance. Monisha sets fire on herself to reach the core of her being. Sita escapes to the magic island in order to rediscover and protect her lost wholeness. Deven seeks to define his life with the meaningless existence of Nur. Nanda retires herself as a complete

recluse in search of peace and sanity. Bim forgives her unforgivable brother and Matteo searches for his identity in the mystified being of the Mother. These characters face the agony of living without giving up their incessant battle against the oddities of life. Thus alienation is not synonymous to defeat to them and they fight a good battle in their lives. They never give up their battle against the ferocious assaults of existence. They are not even static figures. They make an effort to know themselves. In the process of their search they also undergo transformation leading to self-knowledge. Their soul is unyielding; their will to power is perpetual. They make spiritual journeys, soaring higher than phenomenal world. All these are human attempts to reach and capture the holistic vision of life. In all these cases, the search for truth, the quest for an identity, the hunt for a meaning in life, and the desire for a moment of balance has remained the most essential feature in her novels.