VI. NOTES OF A SYMPHONY
This chapter studies those novels of Mrs. Anita Desai which are not woman-centred as the four novels dealt with earlier. On the other hand, the central characters in the seven novels are males and the women are subordinate figures in the plot-pattern. The women characters belong to different nationalities: Indian and foreign and are usually contrasted with each other on intra-novel basis highlighting the universality of the problems of woman's existence in the world at large.

In *Voices in the City* Mrs. Desai explores the theme of isolation and existential angst of the Ray siblings of Kalimpong: Nirode, Monisha and Amla. Drawn against the backdrop of the corrosive influence of the city of Calcutta, the story presents the emotional travails of these three characters as they try to come to terms with their personal suffering and the “terror of facing single-handed, the ferocious assaults of existence” (Desai :1979, Times of India). Their lives and reactions are shaped by two major influences: the beautiful accomplished mother with her “terrible contempt and resentment” (p-207) towards their malicious, self-indulgent father; and the corrupting, confusing influence of Calcutta. They are never at peace with the established order of society. Nirode comes to Calcutta to realise his dreams but is crushed by it. Monisha comes to the
city as a bride, but suffers from the drudgery of household works and lack of communication in the ferocious black-barred house of her in-laws. Her alienation leads to her suicide at the end. Their younger sister, Amla comes to the city with her first job as a commercial artist. Initially the gaiety and verve of the city enthrals her, but gradually the overpowering, corroding influence of the city alienates her. She carries on an illicit love affair which results in her heart-break and agonising existence.

The story presents varied episodes figuring different characters converging on Monisha’s death. The locale holds mirror to the individual psyches. Though the story primarily presents Nirode’s unenviable situation, still it is in the portraiture of the two sisters Monisha and Amla that Desai reveals her acute observation of and empathy with the modern educated woman placed in traditional society. The story of Monisha is an extension of the theme of marital disharmony presented in Cry, the Peacock, though she is in many ways a direct contrast to Maya. While Maya’s fear, her attachment to worldly things and need for sexual satisfaction were at the root of her tragedy, Monisha’s passive and frigid nature creates all her problems. Married into a middle-class, orthodox, Bengali joint family, Monisha suffers from ignominy in her in-laws’ house.
The mindless drudgery of household work, the shocking lack of privacy and the endless discussions of food, are antithetical to her fastidious taste. Growing up in the hills of Kalimpong, the black-barred windows of the Calcutta house makes her claustrophobic. Incrementally, her marriage to Jiban, a dull, prosaic government officer, whose lack of intellectual and aesthetic taste added to his verbose, officialese, offends her intellectual and refined mental make-up.

As aunt Lila, her mother's half-sister, recollects that Monisha was deliberately married off to this family by her father against her mother's wish with a desire to change her morbid nature. She feels lacerated by the insensitivity of her in-laws first by their open, insensitive discussions about her blocked fallopian tubes causing barrenness, and later by their accusations about her stealing money. Alone and misunderstood, she feels suicide to be the answer to her problems.

On the structural level, *Voices in the City* is divided into four sections, each devoted to one character. The first section is devoted to Nirode presenting his personal crisis and his fight against the oppressive city. The next is Monisha's diary describing her experiences. The third section presents the vivacious Amla in contrast to Monisha. This section
in third-person narration represents the consciousness of Amla. Moving from Nirode’s problems to her own and then to Monisha’s ‘shadow’ like appearance and gloom, this section throws light on their past as well as their present situation in life. The last section dominated by the sense of disaster with Monisha’s suicide alludes to the important figures in the psyche of the siblings – the mother vis-à-vis the city and goddess Kali.

Monisha’s section is presented as a first person narration in the ‘diary’ format. It begins with her arrival at her mother-in-law’s house following her marriage. The story is developed through a series of images drawing Monisha’s barren existence in the dark, dismal city. Monisha, modern, educated, and an introvert, is married against her will into this traditional family where women practically live inside the kitchen. To escape extreme boredom and purposelessness of life, she begins to write a diary. Monisha’s diary is a chronological narration that begins with her arrival at her in-law’s house after marriage and ends with mention of the denigrating act of her writing a diary. All through her writing she reveals a secret desire to communicate with the outer world. The vivid account of her reception, the house, and the antics of the in-laws is presented with astute observation and a touch of mild satire:
The Baw Bazar house. Central, an idol in the shape of an umbrella stand. Hung with folded, black umbrellas like the offerings of Pilgrims and worshippers. On either side of it, the reception arranged by the heads of this many-headed family. In the small of my back, I feel a surreptitious push from Jiban and I am propelled forward into the embrace of his mother who is all in white and smells of clean rice and who, while placing her hand on my head in blessing, also pushes a little harder than I think necessary, and still harder, till I realize what it means, and go down on my knees to touch her feet . . . Another pair of feet appears to receive my touch, then another. How they all honour their own feet! . . . Feet before faces here, but the jumble of sounds is soft, tolerant (p.109).

The impassive report and the camera eye for details, give away their disparate culture. So ‘feet before face’ stand at the fulcrum of that family- well grounded but mindless. The vivid picture of the dark horrible umbrella stand is symbolic of the dreariness of that family. Monisha calls it ‘this many headed family’ – which powerfully brings to the mind the many-headed, destructive, cruel ‘Ravana’. Monisha’s writing reflects her
intelligence as well as her sardonic humour. Placed in such an uncongenial atmosphere she feels encaged and alone. The sense of captivity and alienation follows her even when she retreats to her own room at night:

   Upstairs to our room. Here the idol splits into two—a black, four-poster bed in the centre, and a gigantic black wardrobe against the wall. But it is not they that intimidate me . . . but the bars at the windows. Through the thick iron bars I look out on other walls, other windows - other bars . . . A black, bitter, terrifying sound that repeats and repeats itself like the motif of a nightmare.

   'What's that?' 'What's what?' 'That sound.' 'What sound?' 'It seems to come from that house, that window there.' 'Oh. Probably one of the children there preparing for a test, an exam.'

   What kind of an examination could it be that exacts from a child this mindless, meaningless monotony of empty sound, hour upon hour, for it seems to have no end? (pp.109-10).
Monisha's diary reveals an impression of the atmosphere of her new home on her first day as being totally incompatible with her finer sensibility. Her despair and desperation in her own situation is made worse by her observation of Nirode and her worries for him. Her interest in and her concern for her brother and sister are greater than her concern for her husband and the same is represented through the very minimal space devoted to him in her diary. No connubial bliss, no conversation with the husband, nothing except mentioning the cooking and eating in the family. The only solace for her is the memory of the house at Kalimpong in her childhood and the locale of her husband's last posting.

Almost as often as I catch myself thinking about Kalimpong, I find myself thinking about Jiban's last posting, out in a district, away from the city and the family. The solitude of the jungles there, . . . the bell-like dignity of the elephant on whom we rode through the jungles. Jiban away on tour, I alone with myself, no visitors at all (p-116).

The reference to Jiban's posting in that lonely place and the associative memory of Kalimpong reveals her 'morbid inclination' (p-199).
as Aunt Lila speaks of. The same is also reiterated through Amla's recollection and reflection:

Monisha had always confused her, often mystified her, but never to such a degree as to more than exasperate her. Now she stirred with foreboding – this sister had wandered away, into same unholy garden of her own, stood there now like one of these lifeless statues, on the brink of a stone fountain, and seemed not to realize that the fountain was dry and what confronted her was no ripple and trickle of cool water but only dry, hard flagstones (p.149).

The metaphor of a stone statue beside a dry fountain stands for Monisha's dry, barren existence which she has accepted without a fight. Silent, cynical, morbid, and a little malicious like the father she fails to appreciate the dull existence in her in-law's house and becomes an introvert.

. . . Amla was deeply shocked and confused by some change in Monisha that was not exactly blatant—that is, it was not so much a change on the surface of her face and body—yet
seemed to have seized the girl and turned her inside out, giving her an eerie unreality. Something, Amla saw, had laid its hands upon her, scarred and altered her till she bore only the faintest resemblance to the quiet and subtly uncaring elder sister Amla had remembered (p.142).

Amla’s observation brings out the difference between the sisters. The artist in Amla perceives the extreme anguish of the sister. The presence of Amla unearths many lost memories and kindles in Monisha an eagerness for life:

Monisha seemed to suffer some shock, too, in thus regarding her sister-shock at feeling such a crepuscular passion of remembrance and longing at the fresh sight of Amla (p.142).

The “crepuscular passion of remembrance” brings out the difference between the sisters which is further elaborated through their individual response to the city:

From all sides their moist palms press down on me, their putrid breaths and harsh voices. There is no diving underground in so over populated a burrow, even the sewers
and gutters are choked, they are so full. Of what? Of grime, darkness, poverty, disease? Is that what I mean—or the meretriciousness, the rapacity, the uneasy lassitude of conscience? Has this city a conscience at all, this Calcutta that holds its head between its knees and grins toothlessly up at me from beneath a bottom black with the dirt that it sits on? (p.116).

While the above entry reveals Monisha’s Kafkaesque vision of the city of Calcutta with her helplessness and the void permeating her soul, a contrast is seen in Amla’s enthusiastic response to the city who finds its ‘crowded lanes’ and ‘ginger bread houses’ quite appealing. The contrast between the two sisters’ approach to the city reveals their individual personality. On the other hand, both the sisters are similar in their worries for their brother Nirode. But, all of Monisha’s thoughts veer around her lonely caged life and her childlessness:

Like a burst of wild feathers, released full in my face, comes the realization that they are talking of me, my organs, the reasons I cannot have a child. I can’t leave these vegetables I am cutting up for them – that would create a disturbance —
but I stop listening, and regard my inside: my ovaries, my tubes, all my recesses moist with blood, washed in blood, laid open, laid bare to their scrutiny (p.113).

Monisha is understandably shocked at the insensitivity of her in-laws, with their discussing such a painful, personal thing as of her barrenness publicly without caring for her emotion or reaction. With her personality and sensitivity, it may not surprise one that Monisha commits suicide as her escape from such emotionless, almost moribund existence. But, is suicide the only way available for Monisha? Given a positive attitude of life-assertion Monisha could have transformed her existence as well. But through suicide, Monisha points to Amla a way out of such impasse.

As to Amla, she decides to come to terms with life taking her cue from Monisha’ a disastrous life. Amla’s section begins with her arrival at Calcutta as a commercial artist and the story of her life is presented through three different phases. In her eagerness to earn, to be independent, she proceeds through rebellion to ultimate triumph over her limiting situation. She is initially enthused with the ginger-bread houses, the curving streets, with her proximity to her brother and sister,
and also with her work. But gradually the death-in-life existence of Monisha and the putrid life of Nirode, shock her out of her complacence. Thereafter, she gravitates into the orbit of Dharma and becomes obsessed with his personality and lives for the present only. However, her admiration of Dharma is severely tested by her later knowledge of his callousness towards his daughter. Disillusionment severs her bond with Dharma and his life. Death of Monisha teaches her forbearance and acceptance. She exhibits courage through her acceptance of life inspite of its limitations sensed by her. Thus, Amla works as the foil to the character of Monisha.

As a character, Amla belongs to the higher type of Desai women who instead of caving under external pressure, are able to rise above their limiting situation. A comparison between the sisters shows Amla’s resilience and her profiting from Monisha’s experience. Monisha’s sterile existence and her aversion for the city are at complete odds with Amla’s effusive reaction to the city at her first arrival. She faces everything around her - her work, her house, her reactions to Monisha and Nirode and later her love for Dharma - with the same enthusiasm. However, the oppressive clutch of the city saps her energy and makes her pessimistic,
but she glimpses the extremity of such morbidity in the death of Monisha. Amla experiences a gamut of emotions, from enthusiasm to revolt to conformity, and rises above the other Desai women characters. She can be placed among the more mature of Desai women like Bim, Lotte and Sophie.

In the novel, Calcutta comes out as a character central to the narrative which sometimes overshadows the human personages of the novel. The dead, decaying, oppressive city leaves an indelible mark on the characters affecting and altering their lives. Amla compares it to a monster that simultaneously captures, enchants and repels with its "subterranean, underlit, stealthy and odorous of morality" (p.150). Monisha shuns emotion as she shuns the dirt, filth and the over-crowded city. The oppressive spirit of the city saps her intellect and closes the doors of escape and she succumbs to the dark loneliness of the city of destruction. Monisha’s violent death, however teaches Amla the value of conformity and non-involvement and she is as much saved by this lesson as by her artistic inclination.
Bye-Bye Blackbird, one of Desai’s early novels, is about Dev and Adit, two Indian immigrants in England. Yet it is Sarah, Adit Sen’s English wife, whose emotional turbulence lends the novel its poignancy. By marrying an Indian, Sarah has alienated herself from her own soil, but that does not automatically make her a part of her husband Adit’s world—the blackbird in the white soil of England. Moreover she faces dual problems of becoming an outsider in her own country and then having to become the emotional anchor to her husband. Critics have studied this novel chiefly as the emotional travails of Dev and Adit or the social isolation of Adit and Sarah or as that of East-West encounter. Yet it is the delineation of the psyche of Sarah, her social and psychological alienation, her fortitude and submissiveness in the face of disillusionment, which underline the most interesting area of study that is usually neglected by the critics. R. S. Sharma sees in her final submission to the whims of her husband the “annihilation of self that marriage involves for a female . . .” (Sharma: 1981, p.90).

Sarah’s passage from a baffling time of identity crisis and helplessness to understanding and acquiescence, marks her out as one of the enlightened of Desai women.
Adit is fascinated by England because of his education and his life in London. But he marries Sarah, not because of her Englishness, but as he told her on their first meeting:

“you are like a Bengali girl,” . . . “Bengali women are like that—reserved, quiet. May be you were one in your previous life. But you are improving on it— you are so much prettier!” (p.73).

Sarah, the docile, reticent girl growing up with English values, suffers silently the problems arising out of such cross-cultural marriage. Her husband is, too self-absorbed and too ignorant of women’s problems to lend her support in her identity crisis. Her romantic ideas, like that of her present landlady Emma, are gleaned from stories heard or read from exotic books, and get crushed under the humdrum and drudgery of family life. Her cross-cultural marriage makes her “nameless, she had shed her name as she had shed her ancestry and identity” (p.31).

Alienated from the world of her childhood and unable to completely understand or accept her present life, she goes through
extreme social and emotional anguish and feels her life to be a series of play acting and "and she wondered, with great sadness, if she would ever be allowed to step off the stage . . . leaving the theatre and enter the real world – whether English or Indian, she did not care, she wanted only its sincerity, its truth (p.35).

Confusion, helplessness and agony become a part of the fabric of her life. In the process she loses her verve for life and grows secretive. Torn between these two worlds she feels “cut and slashed into living, bleeding pieces” (p.164). As N. Raj Gopal comments, “Sarah’s problem is human. She wants to be a real person whether English or Indian. She is fed up with sitting on the fence (Gopal: 1999, p.58).

Structurally the story divided into three parts has the first untitled part as the exposition, revealing the cause and nature of Sarah’s problem. The next chapter, “Discovery and Recognition”, underlines Sarah’s existential agony revealed through her confusion, withdrawal, and alienation when she shuns her acquaintances and moves around “drawing across her face a mask of secrecy” (p.31). Her suffering reaches its nadir when her husband decides to go back to India and she discovers her pregnancy. The final section entitled “Departure” where Sarah’s
husband, Adit, is shown to decide to go back to India, Sarah finds a resolution to her problems. She prepares to sacrifice and to forgo her personal interest for the sake of family happiness and, like a docile Indian woman, resolves to follow her husband to India leaving her native country for good.

Sarah's psychology has been delineated deftly by Mrs. Desai through different stages in the novel. The story opens in London when Dev, Adit's friend, wakes up on a Sunday morning in the Sen Household. We see Sarah doing the menial work of the household while helping Dev through his initial obstacles in England, as, for example, recognising English coin and its different locale. But the next morning we see a different Sarah: "Sarah walked on cat's feet down the stairs, down the gravel walk to the gate, and was out on the morning road with swiftness that suggested feline magic" (p.30). This symbolic projection of Sarah's gait underlines her graceful though stealthy manners. Such animal imagery is frequently used to highlight Sarah's nature and traits of character. Thus, her likeness to a cat in her swift, stealthy habit reflected even in her gait, exhibits her feeling of vulnerability and need to protect
herself. This desire to hide and shield herself from society is a dominant trait of her character.

It is only in the second chapter that Sarah’s problems are revealed to Adit when once he sees her on the far side of the same bus he was in while coming back from work:

What was Sarah’s secret? Once even Adit had wondered when, by chance, she got onto the bus that he had travelled across the river on and he had had, by force, to observe her from a distance . . . her anguish had struck him in a salt wave, . . . but seeing the look on her face, turned as it was to a window curtained with rain-drops, he had sat back, sat silent, shocked by that anguish. An anguish, it seemed to him of loneliness – and then it became absurd to call her by his own name, to call her by any name: She had become nameless, she had shed her name as she had shed her ancestry and identity, and she sat there, staring, as though she watched them disappear (p.31).
If Sarah’s husband and his friends feel alienated and inferior by the treatment meted out to them, then Sarah’s complete isolation in her own country is sadder and more confusing. On the surface, she is seen to be an efficient worker both at home and in the school. But it is her inner self that cries out with agony for the loss of her own identity and her play-acting in the peculiar situation of her life:

Who was she – Mrs. Sen who had been married in a red and gold Benares brocade sari one burning, bronzed day in September, or Mrs. Sen, the Head’s secretary . . . Both these creatures are frauds, each had a large, shadowed element of charade about it . . . They were roles- and when she was not playing them, she was nobody. . . . Where was Sarah? (pp.34-35).

Her anguished self questioning here reveals her dilemma which even Adit, inspite of his obtuseness, that makes him constitutionally unable to pay attention to his wife, had surmised that day in the bus.

Sarah is also first of Anita Desai’s working woman. But unlike many working women, her job adds to her woes rather than emancipates her.
Being a secretary to the head of the school, she has comparative solitude but discussion of private life crops up at leisure hours, lacerating her with other's inquisitiveness. Her love for privacy is seen as her shame to own up her Indian husband and hence she is criticised by her colleagues. Their prying eyes and gossips distraught her as much as the banters pelted at her on the road: “Hurry, hurry, Mrs. Scurry!” (p.32), which sounds almost like “Hurry, hurry, Mrs. Curry!” (p.34) to her. She knows that she is unable in her effort to keep her personal and professional lives separate:

... if only she were allowed to keep her one role apart from the other, one play from the other, she would not feel so cut and slashed into living, bleeding pieces. Apart, apart. That enviable, cool, clear, quiet state of apartness (p.37).

Thus, we become intensely aware of Sarah’s life and her failure to bring a balance between her two worlds.

The pattern of the orderliness of her childhood world has vanished. Brought up in a quiet atmosphere, this present upheaval unsettles her which leads to her confusion and sense of rootlessness. Adit’s decision to
leave for India at such a moment of her inner crisis adds to her woes and she goes through extreme emotional anguish:

It was her English self that was receding and fading and dying, she knew, it was her English self to which she must say good-bye. That was what hurt . . . England, she whispered, but the word aroused no special longing or possessiveness in her. English, she whispered, and then her instinctive reaction was to clutch at something and hold on to what was slipping through her fingers already (p.221).

This existential angst corrodes her from inside, but Adit’s decision to leave for India propels her growth to maturity. As she had earlier expressed her desire to leave the stage, of play-acting between two roles of English typist and Indian bride, now by accepting to follow Adit she gives up her English self and gains self-assurance:

Sarah had only been able to decide one thing- that it would not do to cope with this problems single-handed as she had done with all the others, that she would have to change, ask for help and accept it (p.207).
With such acceptance of help from Adit, their voyage to India becomes a release from the cage of ostracisation, self-doubt and uncertainties:

She felt a small contraction of unwillingness followed by a large, warm expansion of heart that the adventures of old must have felt when they cut loose from the shore and set sail for what was then a fabulous land (p.208).

In Sarah’s desire for this voyage lies her need to be free from her past, from anything that can stop her from complete adjustment to her new life. As she has reiterated she felt torn between the opposite forces of her working place and her home and her homeland, so this voyage provides her the perfect opportunity to resolve her dilemma though at a great cost.

Critics have complained against the lack of attachment and passion in the Sarah-Adit relationship, but the narrator has subtly given us a glimpse into their marital life through Dev’s observation:

Occasionally . . . when an animated conversation came to a guillotined end as he entered the drawing room—he had the
unhappy sensation of being the fifth wheel on the carriage (p.99).

Later, the narrator presents another aspect of their marital relationship when Adit, after a visit to his in-law’s house, feels dejected and abused by his mother-in-law’s harangue:

Normally, at the first hint of depression, he would settle down comfortably and arrange to have a coddled time of it, relishing Sarah’s concern, relishing his self-pity, relishing the drama of it all...

(p.175).

But at the same time, this concern and tender ministration of Sarah is not appropriately reciprocated by Adit. Even when he knows of Sarah’s pregnancy, he feels happy at the prospect of his child taking birth in India and not apprehensive about the voyage that might create difficulty for Sarah in her condition; nor is he concerned about her heavy duties of packing and arranging things for shipment. But Sarah like a dutiful Indian woman does the household work ungrudgingly just as she takes care of her office duties. Not only here but in many other instances, we see the difference between the couple. While Adit is boisterous and emotional,
Sarah is placid and restrained. She is also different from the other female characters shown in the novel like Mala, Bela or Ratna. In the first chapter, there is a contrast drawn between Mala and herself: "Occasionally she shot a look at the statuesque Mala, at the way her black hair gleamed in the light and her white teeth sprang out in a big laugh at a remark Sarah had considered smug or unkind but was evidently not so . . . (p.25). The other women characters are presented as foil to Sarah’s quietness, her gentleness and her adaptability.

Sarah is one of the Desai’s earliest strong women who have the courage to bend when circumstances need the same. Thus, she is different from Maya and Monisha in her adaptability and in her positive attitude to life. Her gentleness, her adaptability, and her meek submission to her husband’s desire—all speak loudly of her respect for marriage and family values. Bye-Bye Blackbird, thus, dramatizes Anita Desai’s faith in family system and traditional values that cut across racial and cultural diversity.
Anita Desai’s *In Custody*, made into an Ivory Merchant film, is one of her more famous novels and has three women characters. It is primarily the story of Deven Sharma, a college teacher of Hindi, who loves Urdu poetry, especially the poetry of Nur Shahjehanabadi. Nur, once a stalwart amongst poets, is degraded into a derelict through drinking. When Deven is assigned the job to interview Nur by his friend Murad, editor of an Urdu Magazine, he wastes no time in meeting Nur. But he is shocked to see the deplorable condition of the poet. Deven is used and misused by all his acquaintances. His wife Sarla has become sad, irritable and dejected through his neglect and spend-thrift habits.

Deven’s emotional drama is made poignant by the depiction of three women characters who, as Salman Rushdie in the preface to the book says, are “a part of the process by which women are excluded from power over their own lives is a final, bitter irony behind what is an anguished, but not at all a bitter book” (Rushdie: 2007, p.5).

The novel depicting an intricate relationship between the poet and the critic, Nur and Deven, highlights the failure of both in their family life.
Sarla, Deven's wife, is presented more through her actions and gestures, than her speech. She is not introduced till the end of chapter-4 when she is presented through her behaviour as witnessed by Deven.

When he did get home, Sarla was standing in the doorway with her arms and sari wrapped about her shoulders and her face bent under the thin straggling hair as she talked to a neighbour outside-the picture of an abandoned wife . . .

As he pushed open the gate . . . Sarla twitched a fold of her sari over her head. She didn't normally cover her head when he appeared; it was evident that she was preparing for a scene . . .

Sarla abruptly detached herself from the doorpost and turned to go in, holding the fold of her sari firmly over her head as if she were in mourning or at a religious ceremony. Sighing, Deven followed. He knew this manner would be his punishment for many days to come (pp.73-74).

The narrator here reveals the marital disharmony in the life of Deven and Sarla along with her character through her evocative gestures.
Her body language- "arms and her sari wrapped about her shoulders and her face bent"- expresses powerfully the dejection and disapproval of a wife whose husband is absent from the house, without intimation, one night and two days. Deven's thought of Sarla's behaviour vouchsafing his retribution for his escapades quite clearly reveals the disharmony of their marital life.

Later, the consonant psycho-narration underlines the background of Deven-Sarla marriage. Deven, the professor and poet (though none of his poems have ever been published) marries Sarla, a plain, prosaic girl. The marriage is arranged as she was found "suitable" for she seemed to be "plain, penny-pinching and congenitally pessimistic"(p.75). The narrator, thus, presents the elders' erroneous assumption of Sarla's character:

What they had not suspected was that Sarla, as a girl and as a new bride, had aspirations, too; . . . Sarla's home had been scarcely less grim but on the edges of it there flowered such promises of Eden as could be held out by advertisements, cinema shows and the gossip of girlfriends . . . Her girlfriends
had a joke about it-'Fan, phone, frigidaire!' they would shout whenever anyone mentioned a wedding, . . . (p. 75).

Sarla’s dream of married life with a professor is shattered by her penury and frustration. It made her bitter and gave her the usual forbidding appearance. She has neither care nor concern for him, whether he is dead or alive. Her language is short, rude and offensive. But she never raises her voice or quarrels with him. As Deven broods:

Sarla never lifted her voice in his presence-countless generations of Hindu womanhood behind her stood in her way, preventing her from displaying open rebellion. Deven knew she would scream and abuse only when she was safely out of the way, preferably in the kitchen, her own domain. Her other method of defence was to go into the bedroom and snivel, refusing to speak at all, inciting their child to wail in sympathy (p. 169).

In a more interesting twist to their marital relationship, she is shown to suspect Deven’s fidelity, particularly once while attending the only College function where the staff members are asked to be
accompanied by their spouses. Here, Sarla overheard Deven’s colleague, Jaydev teasing him about his supposed escapades with a lady in Delhi. But her usual reticence stops her from chiding Deven. She only sulks. The emotional gulf between the couple widens but Deven worries little about it. He also refuses to accompany her to her parents’ place without caring how it would hurt her ego.

But Sarla’s summer sojourn to her parents’ place teaches her to value life at her own home. She accepts the frustration and failure of her “caged” existence:

Contrary to appearances, she was actually quite pleased to be back in her own domain, to assume all its responsibilities, her indispensable presence in it; in her parents’ home she had missed the sense of her own capability and position (p.227).

Sarla, thus moves from frustration with her life to acceptance of the same highlighting the scope for growth in an otherwise meaningless marriage. But the same cannot be said of the two other female figures, Nur’s wives, whom Deven has come to know of. Deven meets Sufia Begum, the uneducated first wife of the great poet Nur with whom the
poet has a daughter; and the second woman, Imtiaz Bibi, a prostitute who has warmed herself into Nur’s life through wiles and has begot him a son.

Nur is shown to be under the spell of Imtiaz, both for giving him a son and also because of her blow-hot - blow-cold approach through which she has reduced Nur to a blubbering, wine-sodden derelict.

Deven, who is an unreliable observer because of his excessive admiration for Nur’s poetry, carries the impression of Imtiaz as a wily female who crushes Nur under her crafty feet.

When Deven first meets her, he is horrified to witness Nur’s debasement and her ferocious verbal abuse of him as he lay prostrate at her feet after vomiting profusely. Her white and silver dress with kohl-ringed eyes and blood-red mouth and her tirade against the poet create a deep gash in his mind and he cannot forget his first impression of horror of Imtiaz. Deven likens her to a monkey and her verse “third-rate” and “not worth listening to” when he was present in her musical soiree.

Further, “Just as Deven had suspected, the voice proved nasal and grating . . .” (p.92). Deven feels enraged by the little that he hears:
Oh, she had learnt her tricks very well, the monkey. Did she not have the best teacher in the world to put these images, this language into her head? It was clear she had learnt everything from him, from Nur, and it was disgraceful how she was imitating his verses, parodying his skills, flaunting before his face what she had stolen from him, so slyly, so cunningly (p.93).

The slyness and stealth of her action is later confirmed by the poet Nur while he recounts Imtiaz Bibi’s entry into his life. He recounts her life as a famous dancer and singer who used to come to his house, sitting quietly in a corner, listening and imbibing his art. Gradually she sends Nur’s secretary away and dominates his life - both at home and at work. She stole his name, his jewels and even his house. As Nur recollects: “That is what she really wanted, you see. This house-my house-was the right setting for it” (p.98). Once solidly stationed in the house, she reduces the poet to intellectual impotency and crushes his spirit.

But her language, though venomous for Deven, is one of a literate person as when she compares the university teachers to “jackals from the so-called universities that are really asylums for failures, trained to feed
upon our carcases” (p.136). Deven also compares her to Nur’s first wife and finds the language of the latter crude and unsophisticated in comparison to the “flowery Urdu spoken upstairs” (p.146), and wonders “if this was why the poet had turned from an uneducated country wife to the kind he had upstairs” (p.146).

The difference between the two wives of Nur is apparent even through their appearance: one tall, old, withered, uneducated and unsophisticated, the other small, flamboyantly dressed, manipulative, and dangerous like a “dagger, a blade” (p.141).

Deven’s dealings with all the three women changes towards the end. Broken by the failure of his project, he looks upon his wife, returned recently from her parents’ house, from a fresh perspective. Her grumps, her shabbiness, her toil, instead of eliciting the usual disgust from him, create a sense of shame in him as well as tenderness for her. Though he does not exhibit this new attitude, he nonetheless “considered touching her, putting an arm around her stooped shoulders and drawing her to him. How else could he tell her he shared all her disappointment and woe?” (p.227).
While this new-found tenderness anticipates an emotional breakthrough for this couple in their marital life and there by project an aspect of Indian womanhood, the two women in Nur’s life, especially Imtiaz Bibi and her final letter to Deven, project another image of the woman figure. Imtiaz’s handwriting, like her personality, “is large, slopping, filled with flourishes and ornamentations” (p.228). Her elegant writing unnerves Deven. Her language, her unassailable logic and at last her challenge to Deven to read and appreciate her poetry undeniably imprinted on his mind the image of a crafty, grabbing, devouring female figure completely different from Sarla. Thus all the three women, among themselves represent two contradictory aspects of Indian womanhood.

If Sarah of Bye-Bye Blackbird has the option to exercise her will to follow her husband or not, such option is unavailable to Lotte and Hugo Baumgartner of Baumgartner’s Bombay: the victims of the Holocaust. While Hugo is the hero of the novel, it is Lotte who supplies the much needed psychological sustenance to Hugo. Thematically the novel explores the sense of isolation and solitude, the desperation of the displaced, the trauma of separation from one’s native land. Along with
such sense of non-belonging and rootlessness, of the characters of Hugo and Lotte, Desai presents woman’s inner strength and resolve to overlook her own personal problem in order to provide succour to her male counterpart suffering from acute sense of exile and alienation.

Hugo Baumgartner, born to an affluent Jewish family of Germany, migrates to India on the eve of the Holocaust and continues to live in heart-wrenching, debilitating isolation, amidst poverty and filth. Memory of his childhood, the treacle-toffee like love of his mother, failure of his promise to bring her to India, assail him and make life unbearably painful for him. In his abject misery he finds solace in the company of his compatriot, Lotte.

The novel is divided into seven chapters of almost equal lengths and presents the memories of Hugo in a linear fashion, starting with his love-filled, luxurious childhood and moving to the beginning of their misfortune brought by the Nazis; then to his departure to India, his imprisonment during the world wars and his few days of glory as a businessman; to the ultimate joblessness and penury.
The beginning of the first chapter and the last chapter deal with Hugo's brutal murder and Lotte's horror and anguish against the backdrop of complete insensitivity and apathy of the public:

It was wonderful, perfect – the *memsahib* giving a scream, clapping her hand to her mouth, standing struck, rushing forward, throwing herself on the corpse, weeping, ‘Hugo, Hugo, *mein Gott*, Hugo! What have you done?’ (p.271).

Her acute anguish is further revealed through the narrator's representation of Lotte's actions following this scene:

Although she had fled the blood-spattered scene and fled the collected crowd . . . and hurried down the street at a speed uncommon for her, a speed no one would have thought possible on those high red heels that were no longer firm but wobbled drunkenly under the weight of her thick, purpled-veined legs, Lotte slowed as she neared her door. . . When every lock was in place, she leant against the door in the theatrical manner that came naturally to her . . . (p.7).
Just after sketching the picture of Lotte as an old, unpolished woman with her ‘theatrical manner’, the narrator reveals another trait of Lotte’s character in her reaction to reading the bunch of letters to Hugo which she had found in Hugo’s house and brought with her.

Lotte pressed her fingers to her lips, to her eyes, to her ears, trying to prevent those words, that language, from entering her, invading her. Its sweetness, the assault of sweetness, cramming her mouth, her eyes, her ears, drowning her in its sugar. The language she wanted not to hear or speak. It was pummeling her, pushing against her and into her, and with her mouth stuffed she moaned, . . . (p.11).

The repetition of such words as ‘to her eyes, her ears, . . .’ shows the impact of her long lost German language on her memory. The longing and nostalgia only heighten her sense of desperation, isolation, and loneliness of existence that till now was slightly alleviated by Hugo’s presence.

Hugo on his part is the ‘Nowhere Man’ not having any possibility of going back home to Germany and yet treated in India as an outsider,
firangi, and floats rudderless in his jobless, homeless existence. Memory of his mother whose soiled letters he preserves even after knowing about her death, tortures him in the post-partition India. The yawning gap between his love-and-luxury-filled childhood and his present destitute existence makes him morose and nostalgic. Through all his anguish and solitude he seeks succour in the company of his compatriot, Lotte, who was a dancer at a bar in Calcutta which he used to visit in his initial days in India. Notwithstanding her crude language, her “gin-drinking, her dancing, all her disreputable ways” (p.81), she fills up a gap in his life created by being away from his homeland. Her unaffected, forthright manner immediately pleases and relaxes him: however “foul her accent, coarse her expressions and jarring her voice” (p.81) the sound of his own language in his exiled existence is greatly soothing to his nerves. Lotte’s vibrant, uncomplicated, undemanding personality makes Hugo seek her out at moments of trouble or inner crises as he does on the last day of his life following his tragic encounter with a German youth in a café.

Hugo looks upon Lotte as his sister and feels free in her company to the extent that he looks through her tins for food or sleeps with her in the same bed:
With small groans they made themselves comfortable against each other, finding concavities into which to press their convexities, and convexities into which to fit concavities, till at last they made one comfortable whole, . . . (p.100).

This image of brother and sister together on bed creating a whole is presented also in the novel Clear Light of Day highlighting the importance of family values and love in Anita Desai’s view of life. Hugo’s need for companionship that he can get from Lotte is contrasted with the absence of the same from another compatriot and a fellow dancer of Lotte –‘Gisi the Gold-digger’ (p.119).

Lotte also reveals the loving side of her nature in her treatment of Kanti Sethia, the merchant, whom she marries to avoid imprisonment. Though she acted in a mercenary manner, she also lavishes on Kanti her affection and care and touches his feet like an Indian woman. But after his death, being ill-treated and driven out of her house by Kanti’s children, she becomes quarrelsome and takes to drinking. But in spite of all her bad behaviour, Hugo seeks her out to relieve his loneliness, his sense of rootlessness and purposelessness in existence.
Unlike Hugo, however, Lotte neither wallows in self-pity nor tries to depend upon others for being rootless and alien in India. She rather uses her foul language and quarrelsome nature as a shield against the callousness and cruelty meted out to her.

In drawing the character of Lotte, Desai has deviated from her cannon of upper middleclass and educated women but underscores the resilience and resolve she has always ascribed to the woman in general. Brought up as a dancer, Lotte does not lack in finer sensibility or sense of womanly duties. She is flexible enough to abide by the Indian custom to touch the feet of her husband, Kanti and nurse him through his illness. Though her marriage is not legal and Kanti visits her place rarely, yet she bears no grouse nor makes any unnecessary demands upon Kanti. On the other hand, she bears such grouse against Gisela, who is more pragmatic and a dominating person. Lotte calls her a gold-digger. And even though both of them are in Bombay she prefers Hugo’s company to Gisela’s. On the other hand Gisela avoids the company of Lotte because she is ambitious to climb the social ladder- a desire that goes against Lotte’s character. While Hugo considers her as a “painted hussy” (p.238), he thinks that Lotte could have been a sister he never had. Gisela reveals
astute business sense and makes herself big after the departure of the Britishers from India, but Lotte has only an illegal marriage and is left a destitute after Kanti’s death.

The character of Lotte conforms to Desai’s ideal of woman as the gentle, caring, dutiful one abiding by customs, but at the same time strong, resilient, and life—asserting.

Journey to Ithaca is at once a reiteration of and a departure from the concerns of the Desai canon. Anita Desai’s usual theme of alienation and marital disharmony is presented in course of developing the central motif of quest in the novel. Further, it embodies the pregnant preaching of the Rig Veda: “There is no happiness for him who does not travel” (196). The novel recalls the famous epic of Homer, Odyssey, where Odysseus journeying to his homeland Ithaca meets with numerous obstacles before reaching his final destination. India is Ithaca in the novel and for the three central characters, Matteo, his wife Sophie and the Mother, it is their spiritual home.
The plot develops journeys at multiple levels — emotional, intellectual and spiritual. The poem by Cavafy that starts the novel states that the journey may be long, but the traveller should have the goal fixed in his mind, and the experience one gets on the way is far richer than all the riches one may aspire for. The novel presents the arduous journey that Sophie undertakes to be with her spouse, the journey of Matteo which had started far back in his childhood and still continues like that of the legendary hero, Ulysses; and the turbulent and anguished journey the Mother has to undergo before she finds her solace in the company of her Guru in the Himalayas.

The narrative of parallel quests is presented structurally in four chapters with a Prologue and an Epilogue through a third-person narrator in a split narrative. The Prologue reveals the background to Matteo's story, his early non-conformity and silence which take eventually the shape of his spiritual quest, to Sophie and his children's sad fate. The Epilogue presents the unending journey of Matteo, in search of peace and Sophie in search of Matteo. The main part of the novel, divided into four chapters, delineates the arduous journey of Matteo and Sophie through India, their innumerable obstacles, the heartaches and the
Thereafter the narrative moves away from Matteo–Sophie relationship to the ‘Mother’s’ overpowering influence of Matteo. The jealous and dejected Sophie searches for ‘Mother’s’ past. This portion of the narrative is primarily the story of the ‘Mother’ presented through her diary and recounting her dreams and hallucinatory vision. It records her attainment of enlightenment through her incessant search for truth. The diary entries record the facts of her journey to India as well as her emotional turmoil from doubt and despair resulting in her ultimate ecstasy. The chapter also presents Sophie, who in trying to search the ‘Mother’s’ past and an insight into the higher order of things. Continuing with her deep and abiding love for Matteo, the narrative highlights the spring of energy in Sophie that sustains both herself and Matteo.

The Prologue opens with Sophie’s final days with Matteo in India, when Matteo was recovering from Hepatitis at a hospital. Sophie’s desperation at their situation in life, Matteo’s unflinching devotion to the ‘Mother’ and Sophie’s understandable jealousy, set the tone of the narrative by acting as an exposition. It also presents the situation of their two children: Isabela and Giacomo living with their grandparents. Their
enactment of an Indian scene horrify their parents and Giacomo is sent away to school at Milan. In her endeavour to keep alive Giacomo’s as well as her father’s memory, Isabela manipulates her grand-mother to reveal their father’s past. And through the mother’s eyes we come to see Matteo: “His entire presence seemed made up of his silence” (p.16) whose life was shaped by the private tutor, Fabian, who had gifted him a copy of Herman Hesse’s The Journey to the East and had painted an exotic picture of India for him.

Matteo is the son of a well-to-do Italian family and is quiet and introvert in nature. As a child he had this contradictory impulse to conform and to break away from family rules which made him alienated. Sophie, is the only child of a wealthy German banker, and a journalist by profession. They meet while Sophie’s parents along with her came to Matteo’s place for a business lunch. Though the indolent atmosphere and the good food prove a failure for the business, Matteo finds a companion in Sophie. Soon after they marry and leave for India on their honeymoon. But once there, Matteo neglects Sophie and gets immersed in his spiritual quest. During their visit to Goa Sophie takes to drugs to get over her dejection. Though she is able to recover from addiction “Sophie was
baffled by what it had all come to, and the dark inexplicable gulf that now existed between them” (p.77). But Matteo, still obsessed with his spiritual quest, is unaware and unconcerned of Sophie’s dilemma. The crisis in their marriage deepens:

Yet when Matteo came to her in the night, she fought him off fiercely. ‘I can’t-I can’t here, in this zoo. I want to go away. I want us to be by ourselves.’

‘By ourselves.’ Matteo withdrew in distress. ‘By ourselves we’ll never come to know India’ (p.47).

The first chapter throws light on the situation between the couple through a conversation between Sophie and Matteo:

‘When will we leave, Matteo?’ She asked sharply, out of a wish to interrupt more than anything else, and break into his privacy, his maddening privacy. ‘Must we wait till the Mother’s death?’ He looked at her sorrowfully, not closing his book or putting down his pen. ‘You are free to leave when you like, Sophie,’ he said, trying to sound cool and controlled.
'I know', she replied. 'I know I am free. But you? What I want to know is about you. Are you free?'

'I am free, Sophie,' he said in that same infuriating tone. 'But I am waiting—for a sign. I have always waited for signs. And then followed them'... (p.33).

This conversation brings out the temperamental incompatibility between the couple: Matteo's detachment and Sophie's attachment. It also shows Matteo's dependence on such superstitious things as 'signs'. The marital disharmony is quite clear, while the wife is interested in interpersonal relationship and family values, the husband as seeker after truth fails to realise the truth in the wife's point of view. She decides to leave India with the children.

But coming out of the ashram makes her see the world with renewed perception and fills her with dismay and hatred:

If she had hated the Ashram, the Mother, Matteo and their lives there, it was nothing, she now felt, compared to the hate she felt for the world outside. Matteo had spoilt it for her. Bitterly she thought how the standards he had set, of silence
and intensity and purpose, had become the standards by which she would find herself judging all that followed in her life.

By the next night, when she had finally made her way through the queues and crowds and tumult of the airport... the sense of escape to freedom had entirely dissipated to be replaced by this bitter sense of loss and betrayal (pp.150-51).

The passage underscores Sophie's initiation into spiritual life and throws into relief her hopelessness of a bleak future. Though she goes to her parents' place in Germany she is unable to settle down there as she finds her mother's obsessive concern for the children. So she leaves for Italy and goes with the children to the house of Matteo's parents. Here she tries to lead a "normal" life but gets disgusted by her life there. Now that she is separated from Matteo, her longing for him becomes painful. She decides to unravel the mother's past to disillusion Matteo and to wrest him away from the Cyclopes like ensnarement of him by the Mother. Her jealousy of the Mother on finding Matteo's complete surrender to the latter's charisma forces Sophie on an arduous journey to discover Mother's past and the journey also leads to her self-realisation.
As Neeru Tandon says: “But the very route of chilly bleak bitterness, of renunciation and unfaith, ironically brings her, in a roundabout way, closer to faith and devotion. She returns to India, and after the Mother’s death goes ahead on her journey as a lonely pilgrim” (Tandon: 2008, p.196).

The Mother, as Sophie realises also has undertaken an arduous and remarkable journey, one full of turbulent and treacherous pitfalls. Sophie discovers the Mother through her diary which begins with her voyage towards India and expresses her restless quest for a spiritual guide to give direction to her inner craving for enlightenment. The quest is also in partial fulfilment of a prophecy once made to her by an old hagdah at Cairo during Ramadan. The slow paced entries parallel her arduous journey as she shifts through difficult chapters describing physical and mental turmoil.

Called Laila by her parents, the ‘Mother’ is the only child of a Muslim father and a French mother, both of them are teachers. She gives them a lot of tension and heartache by her free-willed, impassioned behaviour. In desperation they send her away to Cairo for schooling with a promise to send her later to France to learn dancing which she is
interested in. In Cairo, during Ramadan she meets an old hagdah who predicts a union between a god and goddess in the north. Growing up in an "agnostic, academic home" (169), she fails to translate into reality her soulful yearning for a vision of the ultimate bliss. So she does not conform to or accept the rules and dictum of the society and gets alienated. Her restless search for the vision of the supreme takes her to a "false master". While in France she gets more and more attracted towards India and later follows a dance-troupe to India. But here finally through betrayal and avarice of the dance-master, she musters up courage to go in search of her true master in the north, as has been prophesied by the hagdah. She succeeds in her search only after a long battle with sickness and alienation. In a night of violent storm and torrential downpour of rain, she is finally able to attain the peace of her soul in the company of her true guru.

But the story of the 'Mother' is also the story of exercising power and fascination. Right from her childhood she has shown the capacity to dominate and captivate others. We learn about this trait of her from her mother's observation while restlessly walking and waiting for her one night: "If Laila were there, her voice would be raised above all the others,
bullying them, making herself heard and felt” (163). On another occasion in France while outside a zoo she mesmerises a restless panther and they “ambulated together, panther and girl, keeping pace, sending out messages of mutual admiration, building a web between them of delicious complicity” (192). And this Calypso-like capacity to captivate, to possess, of the Mother creates later an unbridgeable gap between Sophie and Matteo. Though Matteo is generally indifferent to the worldly pleasures, he is easily duped or captivated by the so-called spiritual seekers. In his childhood he is captivated by his tutor Fabian; in India by many fake gurus and ultimately he surrenders totally to the charismatic ‘Mother’.

Sophie’s search gives her spiritual insight and she is able to unravel the mystery of the ‘Mother’ and end her own feminine insecurity. But her Matteo obsession remains intact till the last and she goes in search of him. Rama Kundu likens the ‘persistent journey’ of Matteo, Sophie and Laila as part of the “ananta yatra, which is embedded in the Indian philosophy of life” (Tiwari: 2004, p.275).

The journeys of both Laila and Sophie are opposite to each other: one goes in search of god and the other in search of the human.
However, their journeys are similar in their renunciation and persistence. Their journeys to self-realisation are also similar in so far as both of them achieve peace of mind following a violent storm both literal and mental. On their visits to zoo, the ignominy of imprisonment of such a magnificent beast as tiger affects equally their sentiment. Further, both are alike in shunning the false and cruel rules of religion. The Mother becoming a self-styled Guru preaches freedom of expression: “we do not listen to the black scolding voice of religion here. Religion makes one ashamed, makes one guilty, makes one fearful... so we turn our backs on religion” (p.98). Sophie too shouts at her mother when she wants to baptise her baby: “You believe a baby should be dumped in a basin of water by a priest and have some mumbo-jumbo said over its head or it won’t go to heaven, eh?” (p.152). Thus, though the two women characters are different and inimical to each other, they are alike in many ways. The novel stresses two opposed impulses of search for enlightenment and importance of sustaining family values in face of renunciation for spiritual quest.
Fasting, Feasting underscores a similar attitude to life, to struggle
against the obstacles and to honour family as the soul of one's existence.
Here Desai presents two groups of double women characters from varied
backgrounds - an extremely orthodox family from Benares and a modern
American one. The central theme of the novel is the parent – child
relationship or more appropriately the gap between them.

The two families of Uma and Melanie are connected through Arun
who visits Massachusetts to pursue higher education. A further
connecting link between the two is food. Incessant talk and reference to
food form the major part of the lives of the characters. The central part of
the novel is concerned with Uma’s family of five and Melanie’s four
although the actions of a number of other characters are passingly
referred to.

The novel also draws comparison between the east and the west,
between paucity and plenty, and between a boy child and a girl. It is
primarily the story of Uma, the eldest, the ugliest and the most oppressed
of the three children of ‘MamandPapa’, the two seemingly inseparable
persons. Being less beautiful and less endowed than her younger sister
Aruna, she is crushed under unending drudgery and demands of her
parents. Added to her woes are her multiple deformities of being myopic, flat-footed, epileptic, and slow-learner. Though she loves to go to school, she is made to drop out to take care of the new child, a boy. The discrimination of the parents is glaring through their ecstasy at the birth of Arun and their earlier grouse at the birth of daughters. While her sister Aruna is determined to succeed at all costs, the docile Uma is turned to a chattel. Her problem is compounded only by the neglect and heartless apathy of her parents and her sister. Having to work for the comfort of the family, she is denied even the basic human right to leisure and privacy. Cheated twice by fraudulent dowry mongers, her unenviable situation remains unchanged. Her feeble attempt at freedom is crushed by the 'sly', idle, self-indulgent parents. She is neither allowed to take up a job nor is allowed to have friends or even the luxury of a phone call. Her need for an eye check-up is called a wastage of money both by the parents and Aruna. While she is refused the solace of a book, the parents enjoy leisure, food and sex. As she recollects: "They'd heard sounds, muffled, escaping involuntarily from behind the curtains" (p.15). Despite her unrealised ambition and unassuaged hunger Uma perforce accepts her lot with forbearance when a widowed aunt, Mira-masi, intervenes.
Mira-masi calls her the lord Shiva's consort and at times takes her on pilgrimage and there by consoles her.

Inspite of her slow wit, Uma is a good observer and the narrator uses her to focalize on her mother's cunning in playing cards and chewing pan behind her husband's back, her self-pride, her apathy for anything not concerned with her and her husband and finally her loss of identity and complete subjugation by her husband.

Uma's counterpart, Melanie in the USA is also a victim of hunger in her family of opulence and plenty as suffering from bulimia, she vomits whatever she eats. Her mother, Mrs. Patton is obsessed with purchasing articles of food but neglects to cook often and leaves the job to Mr. Patton. Mrs. Patton gives more time to look after Arun than Melanie and Uma's brother, Arun, on his part is surprised to find this unexpected similarity, between his hapless sister and this independent but neglected foreigner. Both Uma and Melanie are, thus, hungry for parental attention and care amidst the opulence of their families. At least, Uma finds succour from her aunt, Mira-masi, while for Melanie, it is the hospital that provides the sustenance.
The narrative is focalized mostly through Uma but since she is not mentally alert and mature, the narration juxtaposes frequently the past and the present. The present tense describes episodes of near past almost like a commentary, emphasizing the immediacy and timelessness of memory. The present-past jumble breaks the linearity of narration. The story begins in medias-res with the parents perched on their swing in the veranda. They talk about their tea-time snacks and make Uma run hither and thither on manifold demands which ruffles her:

Uma flounces off, her grey hair frazzled, her myopic eyes glaring behind her spectacles, muttering under her breath. The parents, momentarily agitated upon their swing by the sudden invasion of ideas – sweets, parcels, letters, sweets – settle back to their slow, rhythmic swinging (pp. 4-5).

The passage highlights Uma’s helplessness and mute anger at her parents’ total neglect of her.
In contrast to her parents, her aunt Mira-masi provided Uma with her much needed sustenance in life. She enjoys her aunt' food as well as the gossips and stories that her aunt tells.

She never tired of hearing the stories of the games and tricks Lord Krishna played as a child... Best of all was the story of Raja Harishchandra who gave up his wealth, his kingdom and even his wife to prove his devotion to the god... Then Uma, with her ears and even her fingertips tingling, felt that here was someone who could pierce through the dreary outer world to an inner world, tantalizing in its colour and romance. If only it could replace this, Uma thought hungrily (p. 40).

Though Uma is no longer young, she is still interested in listening to stories especially from Mira Masi. These stories help in transporting her beyond the world of her immediate physical limitations. Since the narration is too packed with episodes, loosely connected by the dreaming Uma, the representation of her by the novelist reveals psychological depth and invests Uma’s struggle for self-actualisation with pathos as she is unable to voice her revolt. She seeks to overcome her limiting circumstance through religion that provides succour to her life.
The life of Melanie is a mirror-image of Uma’s. Melanie’s silent revolt against neglect leads to bulimia and she is rescued through hospitalization. In both the cases, the children fail to raise their voice of protest against the parents and the family culture.

The world of Melanie and Mrs. Patton is paralleled by Uma’s life of deprivation and starvation. If Uma’s mother willingly forfeits her right to liberty of thought and movements Mrs. Patton, Melanie’s mother, is subjugated by the husband even in her food habits. Though she likes vegetarian food, she is forced by her husband to eat meat. Her total neglect of Melanie leads to her psychological problems. Like Uma, who suffers from epileptic fits, Melanie suffers from Bulimia. The lack of parental support for the children, their “feasting” against the children’s “fasting” is quite alike in India as well as in America.

Apart from the major figures of women, a number of minor women characters like Mira-masi, Uma’s sister Aruna and cousin Anamika, are relevant for understanding the family drama that Desai so carefully builds up in this novel. Aruna, Uma’s more beautiful and accomplished sister, is able to marry “the handsomest, the richest, the most exciting suitors who presented themselves” (p.102). But her need to be perfect and better
than others has spoilt her zest for life. Even the obtuse Uma thinks “was this the realm of ease and comfort for which Aruna had always pined . . . Certainly it had brought her no pleasure; there was always a crease of discontent between her eyebrows and an agitation that made her eyelids flutter . . . “(p.112). The beautiful, gentle, well-read Anamika’s life is destroyed at the altar of marriage. She was constantly tortured by her mother-in-law and her husband. This leads to her miscarriage after which she could never have a child. For twenty five years she suffered, but no one, not even her parents, came to her rescue. They valued their social status and prestige more than their daughter. When she is burnt to death, the in-laws told that it was an accident- but it is Uma who fumes and cries out at the injustice of the parents of Anamika. The character of Mira-masi is pivotal to the growth of Uma’s. The aunt constantly supports her while the mother only bemoans her failure in marriage. Mira-masi gives her opinion that: “She is blessed by the lord. The Lord has rejected the men you chose for her because He has chosen her for Himself” (p.98). It is, however, Mira-masi, who breaks the monotony of Uma’s life by taking Uma to some of the Ashramas and temples that she keeps visiting. And it is in Mira-masi’s company that Uma finds solace and support that
is sadly not forthcoming from her parents. But Uma prefers to burn in the sacrificial fire (jagyana) like her Puranic namesake rather than raise her voice against the insults and injustice of her parents.

The story of the life of people impacted upon by the Holocaust dealt in Baumgartner’s Bombay spills into Anita Desai’s latest novel The ZigZag Way with an interesting twist. The novel does not delineate characters suffering from angst and isolation as is usual in Desai’s other novels but characters strong-willed enough to challenge and overcome the tide of horror. The Holocaust and the war unleash a chain of events spreading from Germany to Cornwall and to Mexico to America. Set against the backdrop of Mexican culture of the rites for the dead – the Dia de los Muertos – the novel presents the lives of its three major characters: Eric, Dona Vera and Betty Jennings. Though it is primarily the story of Eric, a Harvard scholar and a drifter, it is his seemingly magical experiences in Mexico that lend a touch of mystery to the beguiling landscape and also to the custom of the day of the dead.
The narrative begins with Eric who, after graduating from Boston, impetuously follows his girl friend Em to Mexico. When Em goes away on field trip for her research work leaving him behind, his aimless sojourn lead him to Hacienda de la Soledad, now housing the formidable Dona Vera, the so called Queen of the Sierra. The hacienda is also the place where Betty Jennings had breathed her last giving birth to her son, Eric’s father. Now Eric wants to trace his life backward to arrive at the root of his insipid life and also to finish writing the book for which he has received a “generous grant” (p.12).

Structurally divided into four parts the novel unravels the secrets and mysteries surrounding these two women Dona Vera and Betty Jennings. The narrative begins with Eric arriving, on the eve of the Dia de los Muertos in the ‘ghost-town’, so named after the death or departure of the miners and destruction of the mines during the revolution. The next two chapters are devoted to each of these two women, Vera and Betty. The novel comes to a close on the day of the dead. Narrated by a third person narrator, the story is presented from Eric’s perspective and follows his zigzag journey from Boston to the ‘ghost town’ in search of his
grandmother's graveyard, of which he learns only during his last visit home.

Eric's first encounter in Mexico is with this formidable Dona Vera, the widow of a mining baron, and this chance meeting leads Eric to his destination. Dona Vera, living in the Hacienda de la Soledad, is a self-styled champion of the cause of the Huichol Indians and patron of many research scholars and explorers thronging her hacienda. This frail, aged woman contrives to strike awe and admiration from others through her temperamental behaviour and opulent attire.

Born in a poor family of Germany, she taught herself to dance, by beguiling one of her admirers to pay for her tuition and becomes a dancer at a bar and tries to rise above the poverty and squalor of her parent's house. Knowing about the impending disaster following Holocaust and world War she captivates through her wiles the unsuspecting Mexican mining baron, Roderigo, who is twice her age and a widower and was on a business trip to Germany. Due to the wars his business discussions could not take place and he whiled away his time at the bars where Vera captivates him with her coquettish charm. Coming from a family full of relatives, friends and acquaintance her seemingly solitary status and lack
of money worries him after they are married. But once in Mexico and ensconced in his house Vera reverts to being an ill-mannered, hysterical woman, which creates much flutter in the family of Roderigo with his ancient lineage. Dona Vera, the daughter of a father without means, feels restricted by her upper class husband’s society and craves for “solitude and space” (p.68) she never had in the dingy hovel of a house she had always lived in. Further she feels cramped by the strict rules and regulation of her aristocratic husband’s family. The husband neither has the time nor has the practice or patience to understand or accommodate Vera’s needs or request. So she leaves the luxury of her husband’s house and moves into his once fabulous but now ruined Hacienda de la Soledad. Like its name, it provides space and solitude to all.

She learns to ride on horseback and rides to the open fields where she first sees the Huichol Indians during their annual pilgrimage up the mountains to collect the cactus or peyote which they eat customarily. Dona Vera manages to befriend them through her usual wait- and- watch policy and once, when they were tired due to their long walk under the hot sun, calls them to the hacienda for refreshment. Though they fast during this time, the cool cove of her house and the refreshing lemonade
make her an endearing character for them. Gradually she makes them exhibit their wares to her and sells the same on their behalf in the towns through her husband, who used to come infrequently to visit her. This makes her a messiah in their eyes. With time she becomes famous and scholars from all over the world start visiting her place to undertake research on the tribe. She converts the hacienda to a study centre for the tribal culture, addresses august gatherings, allows visitors, presides over them like a member of the royalty, and keeps a few Indians, comfortably away from her at the end of the table like pets or trophies.

Eric during his stay at this place takes note of this strange relation and confides it to the loquacious innkeeper at the ghost town:

It is strange, but she never speaks to them, only of them – to the foreigners who are present (p.106).

To which the innkeeper astutely observes:

‘You know why?’ Andre’s eyes were twinkling... ‘I tell you why. I believe – I believe – she does not know the language! That is why. She has never learned the language! Such “experts” are to be found here, in
Mexico, you know. Difficult for her to keep up the pretence...” (p.106).

Eric's fascination with her stems from the way she tries to daunt him with her flamboyance as well as her disdain while Eric mistakenly stayed at the hacienda thinking this would reveal something about the mines and miners. But Dona Vera shows a great contempt for the mine-owner for destroying and torturing the Indians.

Eric's next phase of travel takes him to the graveyard and the church and the mining town where his grandparents might have lived. Here the omniscient narrator presents the story of Betty Jennings and Davey Rowse. Betty living at Cornwall meets Davey at a chapel before he leaves for Mexico to make his fortune at the silver mines. Good at arithmetic, reading and writing, Betty becomes a great help to a family, with whom she comes to Mexico to marry Davey. The stunning scene, the dazzling colours- everything looks picture perfect. But gradually the monotony, the harrowing lives of the miners that make Davey 'dour' (p.134) depresses her. The sparseness, the scarcity, the scorpions and the surrounding all take a toll on her vivacity but she does not show her unhappiness seeing Davey's difficult work and life.
The outbreak of revolution along with the continuous murder and plunder forces the company to evacuate them and take them to the Hacienda de la Soledad – the company’s guest-house designate – though it has been sadly plundered and vitiated by the rebels. The ride to the hacienda which she had always dreamt of, takes its toll on her health as she was by then pregnant. The fear, the excitement, the painfully bumpy ride prematurely delivers of her son but she dies in the process. Davey goes back to the graveyard of the mining colony and only after a proper burial, leaves Mexico forever with his son. The son grows up with his maternal aunts amidst severe austerity of their frugal life. When Eric visits his father prior to his travel to Mexico with Em, he learns of his past for the first time and the same unconsciously sows the seed of wanderlust in Eric. He now wants to learn more about his grandparents whose incredible journey from Cornwall to Mexico parallels his own zigzag way of searching them out.

The last chapter is set amidst the churchyard and the day of the dead. In a seeming mixture of reality and fairy tale, Eric encounters here Betty’s ghost, still young, sprightly, laughing and forgiving. In Mexico, on this day they clean the houses light up the roads, clear and decorate their
graves and keep food for the dead at their door-steps believing that the
dead relatives would feast on them. But in place of food Eric takes only
flowers with him. Though disappointed, Betty’s ghost seems to excuse his
male obtuseness. Even being dead she is ready not to complain but only
to help, forgive, and accept. Through the creation of these two powerful
female figures Vera and Betty, Anita Desai brings out one aspect of her
vision of the woman as an indefatigable fighter. Her women fight to
overcome any barriers placed on their way in the name of custom and
culture or through chance and fate.

What strikes very much the reader is Desai’s depiction in the novel
of the scenic beauty of Mexico and the miners’ life. The quaint houses,
the holiday bazaars, various festivals and the grand luncheon party on the
occasion of the Prince of Wales’s birthday, bring out Desai’s painter-like
skill of description.

Anita Desai has moved far since the representation of love-lorn,
dependant Maya. Her women characters since then have progressively
been fighters, often fighting against themselves to put things right. For
her, this has been the picture of Indian woman and also of woman in
general, who in spite of being termed the weaker sex, is, the creator and in reality, the life-force, the sustainer.