Anita Desai began her literary career at the age of twenty six and started writing novels amidst her housewifery. She had her education in Delhi and later she married a Gujarati gentleman. At present she is living in the United States of America. She is a novelist as well as a short story writer. Her novels have attracted the critical attention of scholars in the academic circle. Her range of themes is limited to the domestic affairs, kitchens, gardens, beaches and the like.

A close study of the themes of the novels of both Anita Desai and Shobha De reveals that the two novelists are seriously engaged in taking up the following issues in their respective novels: unfulfilled love, incompatibility in marriage, divorce, the problem of rehabilitation after divorce, the social taboos and inhibitions, cruelty and violence to the female sex, sexual exploitation, extent of liberty and freedom to the female sex and crisis of conscience and values in the patriarchal society. Their themes are continued by the women characters in their respective novels.

The common recurring themes in their novels are women’s struggle for self realisation and their quest for identity. A study of the themes of the novels of Anita Desai and Shobha De reveals that they are very much concerned with the plight of women in the patriarchal society.
Most of the early novels of Anita Desai are centred on the theme of man-woman relationship and she presents the predicament of modern women in the patriarchal setup.

According to Iyengar, “the explosions in Mrs. Desai’s novels occur only within narrow domestic walls. Always, always it is the intolerable grapple with thoughts, feelings and emotions”(464). She is the most perceptive and consistent explorer of the inner life of Indian women convulsed by an acute sense of helplessness in the face of the onslaughts of unfeeling world and the resultant mental agony. She attempts to portray in her novels the complexity of themes-Indian sensibility, the quest of self assertion and the status of women in the patriarchal social setup.

Commenting on the novels of Anita Desai, Suman Bala and D.K. Pabby observe: “The world of Anita Desai’s novels is an ambivalent one: it is a world where harmony is aspired but often not achieved” (8). Iyengar rightly observes:

Since her preoccupation is with the inner world of sensibility rather than the outer world of action, she has tried to forge a style supple and suggestive enough to convey the fever and fretfulness of the stream-of-consciousness of her principal characters. (16)

The Quest for feminine identity is largely a post-independence social phenomenon in India, a phenomenon influenced by various changing forces of reality – freedom movement, progressive education, social reforms, increasing contacts with the West, and urban growth. The emergence of women writers in
the last quarter of the 19th century carried with it a double significance. It bore testimony to the birth of a new era of emancipation for the Indian women, an era of increased opportunities and a more dynamic participation in the social and intellectual life of the country ushered in by the great social reorientations which came at the turn of the century. Secondly, it was also a commentary on the rise of individualism in the life and letters of the age, an individualism which is closely associated with the rise of the novel in India in the same way in which it was associated with the rise of the English novel.

Reality, for Anita Desai is neither metaphysical nor socio-political. She has given an existential dimension to human predicaments – anguish, alienation and despair. Plot in her novels is not a spatio-temporal progression. It leads to the protagonist’s self discovery. In contrast with novelists like Mulk Raj Anand and R.K. Narayan, Anita Desai employs “the language of the interior” to delineate the inner tensions and crises in the lives of her characters. Desai rightly comments: “My novels are no reflection of Indian society, politics or character. They are a part of my private effort to seize upon the raw material of life - its shapelessness, its meaninglessness” (A Singh 85).

The married life of Maya and Gautama in Anita Desai’s novel *Cry, The Peacock* results in a rupture because of their ill-temperament. Her marriage is, in fact, an arranged marriage and not based on mutual love and affection. Divided into three sections, the first section of the novel describes tension and conflicts between two characters of different temperaments. The last section
presents an ironic view of the world of common sense, a world in which the protagonist has no place. The large middle section which is rendered in the first person presents the tragedy of the central character, but interestingly enough, the story is presented from her point of view. The first section of the novel presents an event – the death of a pet dog—and its effect on the two major figures in the novel, Maya and Gautama. The novelist builds up the atmosphere and the tension through a carefully detailed description of things, both big and small, which appear to be so important to one character and of no consequence to the other. The long middle section is in the form of a first-person narrative with Maya, the protagonist, narrating her own story. Her careful artistry is illustrated by her intelligent mixing of the first person narrative with the third person rendering of the story for the purpose of contrast. Although Anita Desai’s sympathies as a writer are with Maya, she maintains a distance from her character so that the reader is able to see the character in all its complexity and richness. It is clear that man-woman relationship seems of particular interest to her for in most of her early novels she writes on this theme.

Father-daughter relationship is the leitmotif of Cry, The Peacock and Maya suffers from father fixation. Her neurosis is the result of her love-wish which she transfers from her father to her husband and which remains unfulfilled. Her neurosis is further heightened by her awareness of her horoscope and the prediction of the albino astrologer, which leads her to killing Gautama and committing suicide. The married life of Maya and Gautama
results in a rupture because of their attitudes and temperament. Maya is full of life and wants to enjoy life to the utmost. To her, sexual satisfaction is a necessity and the total denial of it makes her a victim of neurosis and schizophrenia. She is interested in all the good things of life – nature, birds and animals, poetry and dance. She loses herself in the enjoyment of beautiful sights and sounds. The cries of birds evoke a sympathetic chord in her. She is presented in the novel as a woman who longs for pleasures of life.

On the other hand, her husband Gautama, a friend of her father, very much older than Maya is a prosperous, middle-aged lawyer. Cultured, rational, and practical, he is too much engrossed in his own affairs to meet the demands, of his young and beautiful wife. He cannot admire his wife for her great qualities. His disparaging remark about her that she has a third rate poetess’ mind hurts her sensibility. Maya confesses thus:

Because when you are away from me, I want you. Because I insist on being with you, being allowed to touch you and know you. You can’t bear it. Can you? No. You are afraid. You might perish. (113)

While Maya is longing for love and affection, her husband Gautama is incapable of understanding her genuine feelings and is insensitive to her emotions. Krishnaswami rightly observes their relationship: “Her needs for nurturance and for being nurtured are left unfulfilled by a husband who is incapable of husbanding her in the traditional masculine role” (250).
This is further illustrated in her novel.

> She (Maya) is not seeking a fulfilment of the mundane love but of archetypal love. She is longing for the companionship like that of Radha and Krishna. It is a communication that she seeks - the true marriage in which body, mind and soul unite - the sort which the peacock seeks when it shrieks out its inside in its shrill intense mating calls. (116)

In spite of her seductive postures and her initiative in love-making, Gautama remains rigid and cold. Disappointed Maya describes her predicament in these words:

> I turned upon my side, close to him conscious of the swell of my hip that rose under the white sheet which fell in sculptured folds about my rounded form. His eyes remained blank of appraisal of any response. It was as though he had seen only what he had expected to see, nothing less and nothing more. (41-42)

The cries of peacocks in the novel represent her cries of love, which simultaneously invite their death. Like her, they are creatures of the exotic wild and will not rest till they have danced the dance of death. She describes how they danced and produced a remarkable impact on her mind:

> I heard their thirst and they gazed at the rain clouds, their passion as they hunted for their mates. With them, I trembled and panted and paced the burning rocks. Agony, agony, the moral agony of their cry for lover and for death. (96)
Being intensely in love with life, she turns hysteric over the creeping fear of death: “I am dying. God, let me sleep, forget, rest. But no, I’ll never sleep again. There is no rest anymore - only death and waiting” (98).

Her preoccupation with death had been actually planned long ago in her childhood by the albino astrologer’s prophecy foretelling the death of either of the couple after the marriage. To make matters worse, the indifferent behaviour of the husband’s family also adds to her sense of loneliness which gradually develops into an actual sense of alienation. The solitude and silence of the house prey upon Maya. Also, the death of her pet dog starts a chain of reminiscence and reverie. Suddenly an eerie bit of experience, long buried under the load of years, is thrown up like the lava and glares at her in all its alienation and fury. Deep in her consciousness, the terror persists and paralyses more and more the normal motions of her mind and heart.

One day there is a dust storm followed by a few drops of rain. Gautama, who is quite unaware of this, accompanies Maya on the roof of the house at her request. The pale moon has risen and Maya is fascinated and bewitched by it. Gautama and Maya are at the low parapet’s edge. Casually he moves towards her and hides the moon from her view. Maya waxes into a sudden frenzy and pushes him over the parapet to “pass through an immensity of air, down to the very bottom” (208). Three days later, Gautama’s mother and sister take Maya to her father’s house at Lucknow in order to admit her in an asylum. But in the course of the night, they hear a cry of horror and they rush upstairs: the heavy
white figure of the elder woman goes towards “the bright frantic one on the balcony, screaming” (208).

Also, the novel portrays the inner emotional world of Maya who is the victim of city life. The city of Delhi acts in this novel as a compulsive presence. The parties, dances, drinks and gossips in the club disturb her inner mind considerably. Moreover, she is disillusioned with the life in her in-law’s family. She feels estranged from her husband’s world and feels rejected and utterly lonely in the house. Thinking of her unhappy marriage, Maya reflects with deep concern:

It was discouraging to reflect on how much in our marriage was based upon nobility forced upon us from outside, and therefore neither true nor lasting. It was broken repeatedly, and repeatedly the pieces were picked up and put together again, as of a sacred icon with which, out of the pettiest superstition, we could not bear to part. (40)

The first part of the novel *Cry, The Peacock* projects dramatically Maya’s response at the death of her pet dog Toto. To Gautama the death of Toto is a natural happening, but to her, it is the prelude to some greater calamity about to happen. Maya’s loneliness is, paradoxically, due to her too much of attachment. It is not for the lack of love for her husband that she suffers, but for too much of love for him. Her feeling of alienation also emerges basically from her total disillusionment with the life of the metropolis that has
little disregard for abiding emotional relationships. Maya feels helpless and she needs someone to offer her protection and consolation. Everyone fails her including her father. Gautama, her husband is engrossed in his own world. Arjuna, her brother runs away from home when she was younger. Even her friends offer no refuge to her. Maya feels that she is alienated. She utters thus: “There was not one of my friends who could act as an anchor any more, and to whomsoever I turned for reassurance, betrayed me now” (73).

Iyengar observes that Maya and Gautama, of course, make several attempts at serious conversation, but a barrier prevents effective communication. “What is real to her is shadow to him, what are facts and hard realities to him have no interest for her. What is Truth? What, exactly, is “the truth of living?” Maya feels that, even if she should try to formulate a comprehensive answer, he wouldn’t (or possibly he simply couldn’t) understand her” (466).

The closeness that Maya seeks in their friendship is never attained. She is obsessed by her childhood prophecy of disaster that prevents her from leading a normal life with her husband Gautama. Strangely, the albino astrologer has started exerting an uncontrollable influence on Maya by the long forgotten childhood. This melodramatic incident, correlated with the horoscope, cannot be treated as mere fantasy but as a strong explanation to her sensitiveness. She feels exasperated at Gautama’s cold response to her physical and emotional needs: “There were countless nights when I had been tortured by a humiliating sense of neglect, of loneliness, of desperation that would not have existed had I not loved him so, had he not meant so much” (201).
Her disillusionment with the life in her in-law’s family leads her to seek solace from the non-human world of nature that reflects a sense of harmony in contrast to the discordant quality of urban life. Nature comforts her as well as heightens Maya’s loneliness. Even the lonely stars, isolated from others, deepen her sense of isolation when she looks at the night’s sky. In a state of utter loneliness she remarks,

“Torture, guilt, dread, imprisonment – these were the four walls of my private hell, one that no one could survive in long. Death was certain” (88). In Cry, The Peacock though the central section is narrated through Maya’s consciousness, it attains objectivity in its narration of events, and her relationship to other characters.

In Voices in the City Nirode is first presented in his own right by the narrator but in the succeeding parts he is seen through the eyes of others, through Monisha’s, through Amla’s and finally face to face with Mother - a relationship which he no longer has any courage to reject, but a tie which is snapped outside his own will. This novel also deals with the theme of marital discord. Like Maya, Monisha is frustrated and alienated. She also commits suicide like Maya in the end. Cry, The Peacock is a tale of Maya’s love for Gautama, her husband. Deeply devoted and affectionate in nature, and over sensitized in mental proclivities, Maya requires an understanding partner with sympathies commensurable with her sensibilities. The tragedy begins in her life because her husband Gautama does not possess those wide-ranging sympathies.
In *Voices in the City*, Monisha is endowed with higher sensibilities, which is self-evident when she is attuned to music in the conference hall, “I wander in this labyrinth at will and blessedly we never touch, merely remain in mystic communion with each other. I am willing to follow till I die” (123).

Maya in *Cry, The Peacock* is married to an older man, a detached, sober, industrious lawyer, who is unable to recognize and understand the female sensibility. Monisha in *Voices in the City* seems to be a psychic case. Her relationship with her husband is characterized only by loneliness and lack of proper understanding, whereas her husband is a pseudo – moralist, a rotund, minute-minded and limited official, always given to the habit of quoting from Burke, Wordsworth, Gandhi and Tagore. She herself gets bored of him. Ultimately she develops an incurable claustrophobia and commits suicide. *Voices in the City* is a tale of struggle by men and women of Calcutta for higher life of conscience and values. Nirode, the protagonist, aspires for a life full of values whereas Monisha is enthralled by music and aesthetics. The recital of sitar transports her to a higher region of ecstasy and placid happiness. The experiences of Nirode, his sisters Monisha and Amla in the sprawling city of Calcutta form the plot of Anita Desai’s second novel *Voices in the City*. The novel has the traditional beginning, middle and end. The events in the lives of Nirode, Monisha and Amla are narrated in the consecutive sections. In fact, this is a complex novel, divided into four sections. Part I deals with Nirode, and the Part II with Amla and the final part with Mother. Though each section seems to be self-contained and conclusive, it is organically linked to the other section.
Monisha’s sufferings in her in-law’s house are due to her sensitive and intelligent mind and her thirst for freedom. The events in her life in the city of Calcutta are related through entries from her diary. Monisha is an extraordinary woman who reads Kafka and Camus. She arrives at the ancestral house of Jiban, the Bow Bazaar house. It is a joint family of large size that welcomes her in the traditional manner. A number of uncles, aunts, nephews, nieces, cousins and in-laws crowd the big house which has four storeys. During most part of the day, she is asked to do household chores. There is no privacy and she meets her husband only in the evenings. The novel presents a moving account of the marital discord. Her incapacity to bear a child is ridiculed by the elderly women members of the family. She is deeply pained to note that her love for books is also ridiculed by others in the family. Her marriage has caused her mental agony.

As a result, Monisha suffers from a terrible sense of alienation. Her husband Jiban is worldly wise but essentially a mediocre. When she has not been treated properly in the joint family, she says:

Look at me, my equipment, my appurtenances. My black wardrobe, my family, my duties of serving fresh chapattis to the uncles as they eat, of listening to my mother-in-law as she tells me remarkably many ways of cooking fish, of being Jiban’s wife. If all this were to blow away, what would be left would be very small, too transparent and vulnerable. (111-12)
Attending on her brother Nirode, who is seriously ill, Monisha has many occasions to muse on the meaning of existence. His illness gives her many chances to leave the house. One day after her husband’s exit, she takes some money from her husband’s savings and goes to meet Nirode. She spends the day with Nirode and returns home. The uncles and aunts look at her with suspicion and Monisha cannot tolerate this anymore. Her tragic suffering owing to economic dependence is an example of the predicament of the educated unemployed women in India. Again, Monisha’s marital life is a re-enactment of the Maya-Gautama relationship. Like Maya, she is frustrated, lonely and dejected. Her longing for touch and intimacy and her lack of communication with her husband make her life dull, miserable and insignificant. She broods on the futility of her existence. The only escape from this state of existence is to accept solitude and to be in exile: “I find on this level that solitude that becomes me most naturally. I am willing to accept this status then and to live here, a little beyond and below everyone else, in exile” (135).

The last section of the novel deals with Monisha’s tragic end. It is a taut, dramatic and moving episode that functions as a fitting climax to the novel. The concert she attends provides her with many searching questions about life. She reads the Baghavat Gita for answers to her questions. She wants to go back to her mother in Kalimpong but soon dismisses it as she is afraid of her mother’s disapproval. She has no other alternative but to commit suicide. Her
last words are significant: “I am turned into a woman who keeps a diary. I do not like a woman who keeps a diary. Traceless, meaningless uninvolved—does this not amount to non-existence, please?” (138).

Monisha is placed in such an awkward situation that she ultimately commits suicide. Monisha’s death shocks Nirode. Even though he had recognized certain things in her behaviour which betrayed the torment she was going through, he did not try to understand and offer solace to her. Her tragedy teaches him a new tenderness of outlook that he has hitherto lacked. Hers is a case of ill-matched marriage and she fails to adjust herself to the atmosphere of the joint-family of her in-laws. The result is her tragic end by burning herself. In a way this novel is more about familial relationship rather than about fulfilling the relationship. Although the title may make one feel that the novel is about the city of Calcutta, the “Voices” in the title refers to the people. The familial relationships shown in the novel are of two types: that of one’s own family and parents and the family of in-laws. The second category applies to Monisha who is married to a middle-class family, socially respectable but a plebeian family. Anita Desai has portrayed the feminine psyche mainly through the character of Monisha. Monisha’s plight increases because sterility is a stigma for a married woman. She is neither happy with her husband nor with the members of his family. Her impending death by suicide has been poetically described by Anita Desai even before her actual death which comes later in the novel. Monisha yearns for eternal darkness beyond sleep because even sleep
may have nightmares. She feels herself totally submerged in darkness. While the two novels *Cry, The Peacock* and *Voices in the City* deal with the theme of marital discord, her novel *Where shall we Go This Summer?* deals with the theme of alienation.

In this novel Desai presents the predicament of a lonely married woman who aspires to triumph over the chaos and suffering of her rather unusual existence. Desai deals with the monotony and loneliness experienced by married women when they are ignored and slighted in the family. The children grow up and become independent, while husbands are increasingly busy with their routine work. Sita, the protagonist of this novel, is living in her Bombay flat. She feels bored as the members of her family follow their own ways of life. Her husband, Raman, a factory-owner, fails to understand his wife and her sentiments. The story is told in three well-defined parts. The first section is devoted to Sita’s coming to the magic island along with Menaka and Karan. The second part deals with Sita’s life at Manori twenty years before her second visit to the island. In the final section, the novelist returns to the Monsoon 1967 and takes up the remaining thread of the story. It is interesting that, Anita Desai adopts a pattern of monsoon winds to describe the tumult in Sita’s mind. The conflict in the mind of Sita is between conformity and rebellion. In spite of her dislike to the ways of the world, to the traditional life of loyalty, she resumes her return journey to adjust to the role of a meek wife and mother. Hence she accepts defeat, and suppresses her passion.
The marital discord seriously affects the life of Sita, the protagonist. Though the incompatibility in marriage seems to be the major factor for the loss of happiness, there are other reasons, too, for Sita’s problems. Interestingly, the theme of marital discord is also linked with the theme of man-woman relationship or the nuptial relationship in this novel. She presents the predicament of women in the patriarchal society, in a joint-family set up and deals with the complex human relationship. In this novel Anita Desai presents once again the theme of conflict between two individuals. The novelist presents a series of incidents to highlight the theme of marital tension in this novel.

In Where Shall We Go This Summer? there is aching void in the life of Sita as a woman, a wife and a mother. Where Shall We Go This Summer? is again a very powerful novel delineating feminine sensibility. The theme of this novel centres round Sita a middle-aged, mother of four, depressed and angry. Rao rightly comments: “Sita and Raman represent the eternal opposition between the passion and the prose of life” (179). She is a submissive woman for whom love, security and belongingness are of great importance. On the other hand, Raman, too involved in his work, does not understand her sentiments. Sita is very much dejected over this. “I thought I could live with you and travel alone mentally, emotionally, but after that day, that wasn’t enough. I had to stay whole, I had to” (Where Shall We Go This Summer 148). First, she criticises the vegetable existence of the women and relatives of Raman; then she takes to smoking, criticising, condemning and verbally
attacking Raman’s friends. He is particularly bewildered and indignant when she refers to his business associates as animals. This is the period when Sita shows signs of psychic fragmentation. Soon, aggression gives way to resignation. She withdraws from life, denying herself joys and enthusiasm. Her husband and children are puzzled by her gloominess as they were by her rebelliousness. It is at this point she decides to escape to Manori.

In part III of the novel entitled *Monsoon 67* the readers encounter a serene Sita. She establishes a contact with the earth as she plays in the mud with Karan with oblivious joy. She recognises her latent ability to be happy.

She withdraws both physically and psychologically, rejecting life as it is lived but she comes back to accept life though she knows, life had no periods, no stretches. It simply swirled around, muddling and confusing leading nowhere. (155)

She had, in fact, managed to change some of her perceptions. Though karan, in his anger, tells her that he had come to fetch Menka for her admission, she knows that he had come there for them. She feels less isolated and more needed. By agreeing to accompany Raman, Sita had changed the external situation for the better and there is a possibility that with the evolution of her potentialities, she may march towards self realization. Surely, Sita had not grown inwardly, nor had her escape transformed her into an autonomous being, only she had been able to change the environment which might vouchsafe better human relations. The novelist presents the dilemma of a woman who
finds her married life uninteresting when her husband cannot understand her. Sita demands an elevating love from her husband. She, like Edna, remains unhappy, sad and brooding. She irritates her husband and puzzles her children too. She tries to turn her back on life, and compromises with it. Anita Desai in an interview with Ram says that in order to survive, one has to compromise with life. She transfers this vision to Sita and makes her take a wise decision. The narrative soon leads the reader into Sita’s past and as one tries to understand her conflicts, one sees her as human. Anita Desai’s fiction inextricably fuses the tension between the tradition and modernity, individualism and social unity, convention and innovation and determines the dimension and direction of the themes. The plot is replete with symmetry and harmony pervading the events of the story.

Anita Desai’s novel, *Fire on the Mountain* is in certain respects different from her earlier novels. The protagonist of this novel is not a young or middle-aged woman in conflict with the society. Nanda Kaul, the central character of *Fire on the Mountain*, is an old woman who in her youth and middle age had been actively involved in social activity. When the old woman meets her great-granddaughter Raka, they embrace each other. Their embrace is described as: “There was a sound of bones colliding. Each felt how bony, angular and unaccommodating the other was and they quickly separated” (40).

Nanda Kaul has chosen to spend her last years alone among the pines and cicadas, high in the mountains in a quiet house, wanting only to be left in
peace. However, her solitude is broken with the arrival of her great-granddaughter, Raka. To Nanda Kaul, Raka was still an intruder, an outsider, “a mosquito flown up from the plains to tease and worry” (40). The novel is pervaded by an overpowering sense of loneliness and isolation in the deserted life of the protagonist, Nanda Kaul and her great-granddaughter Raka. It portrays a reverberating and pathetic picture of old age through the protagonist.

Nanda Kaul is an old lady who lives a life of a recluse in her village at Carignano in the Shimla hills. Ramlal is the only other person in the house who helps and cooks for Nanda Kaul. She has preferred to live at Carignano because she does not wish her privacy to be disturbed at any cost. Nanda Kaul’s desire for privacy is so domineering that the very sight of the postman slowly approaching the house, irritates. The letter brought by the postman breaks the news of the arrival of her great-granddaughter at Carignano. This is the most unwelcome news to Nanda Kaul. She is living in an atmosphere of self-imposed exile at Carignano. Raka’s arrival at Carignano is a threat to Nanda Kaul’s consciously guarded privacy. Nanda Kaul’s separation from her husband is the most unpleasant fact of her life which she deliberately suppresses in the subconscious mind. Mr. Kaul was madly in love with a Christian lady whom he could not marry. Nanda Kaul endures all the humiliations and sufferings in her married life patiently. The married life of Nanda and Mr. Kaul appeared quite attractive, only at the beginning. Even her children were alien to her and that was why she was living alone. Raka too
loves a life of loneliness: “Raka wanted only one thing – to be left alone and pursue her own secret life amongst the rocks and pines of Kasauli” (48). There is a similarity between Nanda and Raka but with a difference as well. Nanda Kaul was “a recluse out of vengeance for a long life of duty obligation and her great granddaughter was a recluse by nature, by instinct” (48).

Violence and death form an aspect of the theme of loneliness in the novels of Anita Desai. In *Fire on the Mountain*, she exploits the situations of Ila’s rape and Nanda’s death to highlight the problems that confront women in a male dominated society. Exploration of this theme is the central focus of the novel. Nanda too suffers the psychological shock or rape and feels, like Ila, that her womanhood is defiled and insulted. She realizes the helplessness of women in the world. The anger and pain with which Anita Desai narrates Ila Das’ rape and murder, is an admonition against universal violence against women. Anita Desai seems to suggest that loneliness is a serious psychological problem for all women – girls, spinsters as well as married women – and death alone serves as release from loneliness.

In *Fire on the Mountain*, the three sections of the novel represent the relationship of the three characters to reality. Nanda Kaul wants to shut out the world with a conscious effort at retreat. She is unable to relate to it any more, while Raka has never desired to establish any equation. Ila Das lives in a world of fantasy and hope and is finally destroyed by them. Nirode who had been close to his mother and at odds with his father is embittered and estranged from
her after his father’s death. He is caught in an unbearable love-hate relationship with her, wanting her love and his independence at the same time. His resentment is against the possession and sensuality of love and the way it destroys people instead of liberating them.

Amla questions the premises of her parents’ choice of Jiban as a husband for Monisha and wonders:

Why had their father chosen him from amongst other young men surely known to him, or his friends and relations, whose names must have been proposed when word was sent around that the eldest daughter was to marry? Was it merely because Jiban was so unquestionably safe, sound and secure, so utterly predictable? Or was it because fathers did, unconsciously, spite their daughters who were unavailable to them? (198)

And then there is also Dharma’s relationship with his daughter who he had never wanted to change or slip “out of the chrysalis” (227). There develops a critical situation in the novel when Nanda Kaul retreats to Carignano after allowing her husband to have a life-long affair with another woman. Anita Desai implies in this novel that power and sex are the two well-known aspects of interpersonal relationships. The aged Nanda Kaul, in the novel lives in a decrepit summer villa in the foothills of the Himalayas, retreated in her small house called Carignano after the death of her husband, a university vice-chancellor. Once, an important figure in the society as well as in her vast
family, Nanda Kaul is one of those intelligent and unsentimental Indian women with a built-in streak of sardonic feminism who does not love their matriarchal role.

Nanda Kaul is the central character of the novel who in her youth and the middle age had been actively involved in social activity. In her old age she has withdrawn from society and the novelist very poignantly pictures the tragedy of old age in this novel. Ila Das and Nanda Kaul seem to be prisoners of their past. Wanting to be left to the pines and cicadas alone, Nanda has withdrawn herself totally from the world of “bags and letters, messages and demands, requests, promises and queries” (30). All she wants is 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 unexpected arrival of Raka unnerves Nanda and disturbs her privacy. Raka has had a rocky upbringing with parents both peripatetic and neurotic. She is presented as a shy, wild, withdrawn, alienated, not entirely attractive and a rather ubiquitous creature. Earlier Raka, which literally means the moon, is ironically likened to one of “those dark crickets that leap in fright but do not sing, or a mosquito, minute and fine, on thin precarious legs” (39). The alienation of Nanda Kaul, a sensitive woman is presented in this novel with tragic intensity.

In *Cry, The Peacock* though the central section is narrated through Maya’s consciousness, it attains objectivity in its narration of events, and her relation to other characters. In *Voices in the City* Nirode is first presented in his own right by the narrator but in the succeeding parts Nirode is seen through the
eyes of others, through Monisha’s, through Amla’s and finally face to face with Mother - a relationship which he no longer has any courage to reject, but a tie which is snapped outside his own will. Nirode who had been close to his mother and at odds with his father is embittered and estranged from her after his father’s death. He is caught in an unbearable love-hate relationship with her, wanting her love and his independence at the same time. His resentment is against the possession and sensuality of love and the way it destroys people instead of liberating them.

Anita Desai depicts the gnawing sense of immigrant sensibility in *Bye-Bye Blackbird* through three different yet related characters Dev, Adit and his English wife Sarah. Through Dev, Anita Desai captures the psychic journey of an Indian immigrant. The conflict between the imaginary world created in the Indian immigrant through his colonial education and reading and the reality that confronts him is highlighted.

While the novel, *Bye-Bye, Blackbird*, deals with the problem of immigration and racial discrimination, the novel, *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*, deals with the theme of alienation. In *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* Anita Desai presents the predicament of a lonely married woman who aspires to triumph over the chaos and suffering of her rather unusual existence. In the novel *Bye-Bye, Blackbird* the protagonist Sarah, the British woman feels gradually that she has lost her individuality and identity by marrying an Indian and leads her life as a cultural exile. It is not the marital
discord but the racial issue that is treated in this novel. The characters, Sarah and Adit in the novel Bye-Bye Blackbird are the victims of racial prejudices in an alien land and a sense of loss of identity and non-belongingness disturb their psychic equilibrium.

According to Mukherjee the most successful characterization in this novel is not that of an Indian, but of an English woman who has cut herself off from the mainstream of English life by marrying an immigrant Indian. Sarah Sen is a complex character with, hypersensitivity and intelligence. She claims kinship with the heroines of her two earlier novels, who are typically introverts. She undergoes the suffering of daily duality as a result of her having to inhibit two incompatible worlds. This novel explores the lives of the outsiders seeking to forge a new identity in an alien society. Adit and Dev, Sarah, Emma Moffit and Christine Longford are the chief exponents of the East-West concord and discord in Bye-Bye, Blackbird. Emma and Sarah together are in love with everything Indian – the Himalayan flowers, the bandits of Rajasthan, the henna pattern on the palms of ladies, the perfumes of attars, monsoons and famines, items of food and music of Bismillah Khan and Ravi Shankar. It is also because they have an urge to move towards the higher side of life. The novel is mainly built around three characters – Dev, Sarah and Adit. Dev and Adit are the immigrant Indians who themselves are trapped in England an alien country for them. They suffer from a loss of identity in England, an alien land and they find themselves uprooted from their moorings. Even though Dev has accepted
the English culture and the way of life, he finds himself an outsider. His friend Adit lives in England with his English wife Sarah. Sarah tries to identify herself with her Indian husband. They are not able to go along happily as husband and wife. Adit is preoccupied with the longing to go to India. This homesickness proves to be an impediment in his married life. Sarah has no complaints against her marriage with Adit. She cannot completely involve herself in her husband’s culture, nor can she adapt herself to her own society. Her bewilderment and frustration are the result of cultural shock. The novelist presents this effectively through Sara’s predicaments.

Fantasy is used in almost all of Anita Desai’s novels at different levels at the level of incident and imagination, and also at a purely lingual level. It objectifies itself in various ways, as hallucination and nightmare, as wishful thinking and personal aspiration, as a private world characterized by an obsession or a psychological fear. In *Cry, The Peacock*, fantasy operates as a means of escape for Maya who is unable to relate to reality. In *Fire on the Mountain*, fantasy is consciously projected as part of the total structure to enable the characters to relate to each other.

There are several instances of fantasy, nightmare, fears and heightened imagination scattered throughout the novel *In Custody*. Anita Desai’s irony is very prominent when directed towards Deven’s romantic notions about poetry and the lives of poets. He believes in the separateness of art from life, and that art belongs to a higher sphere, as mentioned earlier in the discussion:
“Another realm it would be if his god dwelt there, the domain of poetry, beauty and illumination” (78). For Deven who had never found a way to reconcile the meanness of his physical existence with the purity and immensity of his literary yearnings, the request to interview Nur, who had been his hero since childhood, appeared to be the very summons he had been waiting for all those years.

His romantic and idealized visions of the poet and his life receive a rude jolt almost immediately. He finds Nur’s home messy, disorganized, and shrouded in semi-darkness and shadowy gloom. Nur was seen presiding over his congregation of louts, these lasagnes of the bazaar world shopkeepers, clerks, bookies and unemployed parasites, who spoke as if they belonged to a world of hectic activity on the fringes of art and creativity: In contrast, Deven had visualized him differently:

He had pictured him living either surrounded by elderly, sage and dignified litterateurs or else entirely alone, in divine isolation.

What were these clowns and jokers and jugglers doing around him, or he with them? (106)

Nur’s excessive drinking and eating in such ribald and garish company are all repulsive to Deven. This perceived contrast between his vision and the reality is ironic. Deven’s ambitious project of recording the memoirs of Nur receives a setback in the shape of Nur’s wives.
It is in his fourth encounter with Nur that Deven realizes the inadequacy of his own romantic conception of art. Nur’s talk was digressive, even abusive during the recording sessions. Yet at the same time he perceives that appreciating art is not a matter of “separating prose from poetry, life from art – at times when Nur was relating a story of his youth, of his education, his travels his loves and quarrels, it would occur to Deven that this had some bearing on his art after all” (51). With his successive meetings with Nur, the illusory world of Deven’s creation regarding the poet is shattered. The very title of the novel points to this central irony. The title of the novel In Custody seems to mislead the readers. It is about an emotional prison, a spiritual prison, not a physical one.

Anita Desai’s In Custody, depicts an unhappy married life. Deven is married to Sarla but they are not able to get along happily as husband and wife. Both of them are frustrated in their own ways, but they are unable to do anything for each other. Deven feels as if he were in prison. Marriage, a family and a job had placed him in a sort of cage, and there was no way out of it. There is another kind of unhappiness in married life which, one finds depicted in Nur, the famous Urdu poet. He has two wives and there is no love between them. Nur's own life must be miserable on account of it. There are no details as to how Nur married Imtiaz Begum, but it has been clearly shown how in spite of his infatuation for her, he is not able to derive any happiness or satisfaction from her.
The novelist’s treatment of man-woman relationship is both artistically moving and psychologically sound. She concentrates on the predicament of modern woman in this male-dominated society and her destruction at the altar of marriage. Each one of the frustrated characters adopts his or her manner of facing the problem of alienation, suffering and boredom. The novel *In Custody* marks the continuation of some of her earlier themes and narrative tendencies, as for example, the quest for identity, the theme of self-alienation, the agonies of the wounded self, the problems and plight of alienated individuals caught in the crisis of a changing society. She excels particularly in highlighting the miserable position of highly sensitive and emotional women, tortured by a humiliating sense of neglect, of loneliness and of desperation. In this, and in other respects, however, *In Custody* marks a departure. In the first instance, there are a male protagonist and a male-centred narrative and point of view. Unlike the earlier novels, *In Custody* has an ineffectual but well-meaning young man whose problems are not just personal and private but public and social. Here one finds neither a sensitive and highly-strung woman protagonist nor any intense introspection bordering on neurosis. Meenakshi Mukherjee in the essay, “A Broader View: A Review of *In Custody*” points out that “the change is towards a widening of human concerns and a willingness to integrate concrete historical and specific cultural dimensions in the creation of interior landscapes” (5).
Further, the novel ends on a positive note unlike most of her novels, although the general tone is one of despair as was the case of her earlier novels. Perhaps, of all her works, *In Custody* displays Anita Desai’s humour arising from her amused observations on characters and situations. In a way, concerned with the problem of finding a still centre from which the inevitable conflicts and contradictions of life are resolved, the novel also reiterates the motif of the artist’s commitment as well as the critic’s. It postulates that the artistic sensibility should be deeply rooted in life, in the particular social context of which the artist is an integral part and that criticism should also approach art from this perspective. This is elucidated in the growth of the protagonist Deven. He fails as an artist because he is alienated from life and its realities and he considers art to be separate from life. His growth into an artist through the encounters with the Urdu poet Nur, is characterized by the transformation of his earlier perception of the separateness of art, life and the artist into a wider vision of their inseparability and mutual compatibility.

The story revolves around Deven, a Hindi lecturer in a Mirpore College. His weaknesses, trials and travails become the subject for scrutiny. Deven is an awkward and diffident person cherishing literary aspirations. He is stricken with a rare devotion to the poetry of Nur Shahjehanabadi. He considers that marriage, family and job have placed him in trap; and that they are obstacles to his literary pursuits. Deven is exploited by everyone, Nur and his two wives Satiya and Imitiaz Begum. In the process he discovers the dichotomy between
dreams and reality. The interview and the recording of Nur’s poems and memoirs end in a fiasco and leave Deven’s artistic aspirations crushed and his career in a ruin but towards the end of the novel, when everyone deserts him, Deven suddenly finds his own inner strength and learns to accept his responsibilities with fortitude.

Her novel *Journey to Ithaca* is different from the rest of her novels. It does not deal with any feminine issue. The novel is a story of multiple journeys undertaken by various people at different planes of existence. The novel presents the journey of two characters, Matteo and Laila for enlightenment. The long conversation between Matteo and Sophie which occupies a substantial part of the novel, reveals the irreconcilable conflict between the European couples; and the difference in the philosophies and attitudes towards Oriental philosophy resulting in emotional incompatibility. The novel begins with Matteo lying sick in a hospital in India. Sophie, who deserted him earlier hurries to him to take him back home to live with her and her two children. The novelist has united various groups of people from different parts of the world in order to present a cosmic vision of human life. Again the incomplete journey of Hugo in *Baumgartner’s Bombay* for his spiritual quest comes to his completion in *Journey to Ithaca*. Laila, the protagonist of this novel defies her social code for attaining the vision of human life. In an interview Anitha Desai admits: “Of course I do write of the contemporary scene and therefore the characters must contain the modern sensibility” (Athma24-25).
Her novel *Fasting, Feasting* is indeed a novel of contrast between two cultures, the one Indian known for its fasting and the other American a country of opulence epitomising feasting. The plot unveils through the perceptions of Uma in India and of Arun in America. Both of them are entrapped irrespective of the culture by oppressive bonds exercised by their own parents MamaPappa. They are the prototypical parents found in the middle class families of India, who discuss, plan, plot, control, and govern the activities of the children be it marriage or going abroad for studies. Choubey in her article “A Feminist Perspective of Anita Desai’s *Fasting, Feasting*” rightly comments:

> It is an indictment on men who believe in holding their women in their grip, it is a statement against women who take pride in their servility… It is a strong statement against male chauvinism, female apathy and reluctance and it is woman’s voice for freedom and emancipation. (98)

All the scholarship, distinction, beauty and the good behaviour of Anamika fall flat when she goes to the house of her husband. There she was treated worse than animals; she was beaten by her mother-in-law in the presence of her husband. Anamika spent her entire time in the kitchen doing all sorts of work. She has to feed “first the men and then the children and finally the women” (70). She has to eat the remains in the pots only in the end. This apart she was forced to do the massaging of the lady’s feet. She has never gone out of the house except to the temple with the other women. The first
section of the novel *Fasting, Feasting* is set in urban India and the second in suburban USA. The first section focuses on the middle class in India and particularly the position of women in the society. The family structure is clearly patriarchal. Daughters in this society are denied autonomy. Uma and her sister Aruna are not given any privacy. There is an open preference for a male offspring, females being seen as a liability.

Anita Desai’s novel *Clear Light of Day* presents a moderate power struggle through altered identity and gender roles. Woman’s desire to imitate man’s role is embedded in her unconscious because at some point of time, she feels that man is privileged and power is concentrated in patriarchy. The novel reveals human tensions that prevail between two sisters, Bim and Tara, and two brothers, Raja and Baba. Bim the eldest and now a college teacher is left behind to shoulder the family responsibilities of Baba the imbecile brother and Mira Masi the alcoholic aunt. Tara had married Bakul and escaped from this life; Raja too, had married a Muslim girl and migrated to Hyderabad (Sindh) to live a life of opulence and comfort. The action begins with Tara’s annual visit to her parental house and immediately, the power related confrontation between the sisters becomes evident. Tara is made to feel her impotent status: Bakul her husband has to consume black tea but there is enough milk for Bim’s pet cat. Bim’s authority in household matters has to be accepted by Tara but she tries to prove her superiority through her marital status and motherhood, a psychology tutored by patriarchal power structure. Bim confident, independent and autonomous capable of demolishing gender-related circumscribing norms
insists that she loves but because she cannot feel the agony of these wretched creatures.

The opening pages of the novel reveal clearly that Bim is the most powerful character in the novel. In the game of power, Tara could never excel as she was always “weak willed” and was never strong enough to “face challenges” (17). In her childhood she was led by Bim and in her adulthood, she meekly follows her husband and children. Only lately, she had become conscious of the strain: “She felt she had followed him enough, it had been such an enormous strain…” (18). Tara, never a serious contender had donned the mantle of gender identity very meekly as a woman, younger sister and a wife. Initially, she was an unconscious victim; but now she resents her doormat status. Sexually she is more attractive but she also knows that Bim despite being ordinary looking has exerted greater power on the opposite sex. “It was Bim who was attractive” (36). ‘Bakul had always admired Bim’ (150). The reason for her popularity and power was her confidence and steadfast mission of life. In her younger days, she had repeatedly claimed. ‘I won’t marry. I shall earn my own living and look after Mira and Baba and be independent’ (140). After Raja's desertion she had accepted the new gender role of the family guardian and the bread-winner. Distinctly, she had emerged as the most powerful individual in the family. In comparison all the male members located around her fade into insignificance. Her father was an absent authority; Raja was never strong or selfless enough to carry the burden of the family;
Dr. Biwas, Bim’s suitor was too ineffectual to influence her in any positive way. Her desire to become a Florence Nightingale and a Joan of arc (126) clearly demonstrates her inner strength. According to Anita Desai, self confidence is born from inner strength and this leads to the creation of a powerful personality. External factors do play a role in the functioning of the power game but the true source of power is rooted inside the person.

Anita Desai ensures to project through different Episodes Bim’s progress from passivity to action. The symbolic gesture of pruning Tara's curls or wearing Raja's trousers is a signifier of the desire of resistance for woman’s traditional roles; Bim seeks freedom from the limiting gender identity. Sexual politics tends to deprive her of power and she opposes it by opting for a behaviour pattern that is a taboo for women. She smokes, of course and this offers her no power but it surely declares her autonomy. Bim decides to earn her own living and leads the life of a spinster but no aspersions can be cast on her ‘singleness’. She grows up in the true sense. In this Bildungsroman, she becomes the archetype of Shakti and knowledge. In Jungian sense she has a “fully developed individual personality that transcends gender” (Russell 18).

Her problem is quite different from others in the novel. Bim in the novel controls the power game; none in the novel, can really challenge her. Anita Desai presents Bim’s intellectual, economic and spiritual rebellion into the narrative structure but avoids the issue of erotic longings, in woman. The novelist is obliquely suggesting that a woman’s power need not reside in woman’s sexuality. The same thematic pattern is followed almost in all her
novels. The only exception is *In Custody* wherein Imtiaz Bibi claims power through her sexuality.

Anita Desai in delineating the lacerated psyche portrays the ontological insecurity, alienation and anguish of uprooted individuals in *Bye-Bye Blackbird* and *Baumgartner’s Bombay*. Postcolonial India has witnessed the migration of many educated Indians to the lucrative abundance of the West. It can be seen as an escape from the economic and communal chaos prevalent in India. The adaptation of the alien culture has been proved very difficult. Anita Desai treats this theme in these two novels.

Anita Desai’s treatment of feminism is different in the sense that her protagonists are generally not rebellious in nature; rather they suffer only to learn how to encounter the harsh realities of life. Iyengar is of the opinion that in Anita Desai “the inner climate, the climate of sensibility that lours or clears or rumbles like thunder or suddenly blazes forth like lightening, is more compelling than the outer weather, the physical geography or the visible action” (464). Prasad in his article “Gender Discrimination in *Fasting, Feasting*” in *Women’s Writing in India: New Perspectives* says that her feminist outlook is always suffused with poetic exuberances and moral imagination (44).

Anita Desai’s fiction stands as a collective metaphor for her ways of celebrating womanhood in the midst of conflicting ideologies, woman bondages and phallocentric notions of womanhood. Most of her fictional female characters are existential characters jittery in asserting against suppression.
Women in her novels are hypersensitive, solitary and helpless. They are
denigrated, isolated and tormented by the patriarchal domination. She maintains:

I am interested in characters who are not average but have
retreated or been driven into some extremity or despair and so
turned against or made to stand against, the general current. It is
easy to flow with the current, it makes no demands, 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, know
what the demands are and what it costs to meet them. (An
interview, The Times of India, New Delhi, April 29 1979)

Anita Desai pays more attention to form and technique in her novels.
R.S. Sharma affirms that this is the first step in the direction of psychological
fiction in English (127).

Her characters suffer from lack of parental love, disturbed infancy,
broken homes and Oedipus or Electra complex. Loneliness and unrequited
love drive Desai’s heroines to the jaws of death, often manifesting in madness
or suicide. Anita Desai confesses in an interview, “writing is my way of
plunging to the depths and exploiting the underlying truth. All my writing is an
effort to discover and to underline and convey the true significance of things”
(Dalmia, Yashodhara “An interview with Anita Desai”, The Times of India, 29
April 1979 4). Anita Desai employs nostalgia and memory as major tools in her
novels and her protagonists are disoriented in the present and obsessed with the
past; they wander down the memory lane.