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INSIDER/OUTSIDER: ANITA DESAI AS A SOCIAL NOVELIST

by

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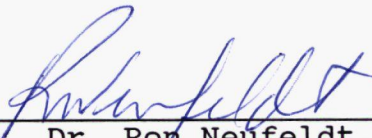
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Abstract

Insider/Outsider: Anita Desai as a Social Novelist

Indian novelist Anita Desai is generally regarded as a psychological novelist who explores the inner life of her characters at the expense of a broader social vision. R.S. Sharma, for example, says that Desai "creates a private world of her own: her creative effort being part of a 'private effort to seize upon the raw material of life - its shapelessness, its meaninglessness, that lack of design that drives one to despair'" (10). Sharma's emphasis on the repeated adjective "private" (here pitted against an existential and non-social void) is characteristic of most critics writing on the novelist. But a close examination of Desai's representative works, namely, Bye-Bye Blackbird (social-realist), Fire on the Mountain (psychological) and Baumgartner's Bombay (social, political and psychological), reveals some obvious challenges to their views.

But even more radically one can see perspectives such as Sharma's as a result of a misunderstanding of the nature of Desai's psychological explorations. She is aware that the "personal is the political". In Bye-Bye Blackbird, the English Sarah's private agony in adjusting to her marriage to the Indian Sen highlights social

issues of cultural division and racism. Fire on the Mountain explores the personal past of its central figure, Nanda Kaul, but in doing so also examines the issue of patriarchy revealed in the history of her marriage. In Baumgartner's Bombay the exclusion from the German as well as Indian society felt by the Jewish Baumgartner and sensitively analyzed by the novelist raises very directly the social issues of ethnic and cultural alienation. Furthermore, in a very explicit way, Desai introduces public issues in these and other novels. In Village by the Sea, for example, she traces the disintegration of village life with the introduction of modernisation and technology while in Baumgartner's Bombay, the poverty and violence in the streets of Calcutta and Bombay are presented realistically yet sensitively.

As a Commonwealth writer (and a female writer) Desai writes from a somewhat marginalized perspective of an outsider, and it is, therefore, no surprise to note that her central characters are similarly alienated from the mainstream. My approach will share the author's focus on the insider/outsider relation, examining in a formalist manner the author's use of stream-of consciousness and imagery, her major means of revealing "the public in the private". However, form will not be studied as an end in itself, but rather as a means of restoring a more just and balanced view of Desai's achievement.

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Introduction

Indian novelist Anita Desai is generally regarded as a psychological writer who explores the inner life and vision of her characters at the expense of a broader social perspective. S.R. Jamkhandi states that Anita Desai "must be accorded the reputation of having firmly established the psychological novel in the annals of Indo-English fiction" (34). Anita Desai's fiction is inevitably though falsely labelled as purely psychological because her works contrast markedly with the writings of other Indo-Anglian writers, both in terms of form and thematic content. Shyam M. Asnani finds that Anita Desai explores the inner psyche of her characters and her interest is rooted in the introvert individual and "[his/her] psychological motivations, frustrations, sense of failure and his/[her] keen awareness of the sense of futility of existence . . ." (44). Desai's concerns, then, encompass the existential angst of her characters who struggle to find meaning in an indifferent universe. Desai's characters are often driven into despair and they find it extremely difficult, if not impossible, to succeed in an existential world where hard choices have to be made and lived through. Desai subscribes to existential thought in so far as it implies that "man cannot avoid decisions.

Reality inescapably forces man to decide. Man makes decisions in every moment, even unwittingly and against his will" (Frankl, Psychotherapy and Existentialism 47). Or as Sartre puts it: "Man is nothing else than his plan; he exists only to the extent that he fulfills himself; he is therefore nothing else than the ensemble of his acts, nothing else than his life" (724).

Viewing the psychic disintegration of the individual in a highly technological and urbanised culture, and studying the extremely complex nature of life in the twentieth century, Anita Desai presents authentically her culture's uncertainties, its complexities, its paradoxes. In accomplishing this task through her fiction, Anita Desai acts as a major spokesperson of her culture. This implies that Desai's fiction goes beyond being merely psychological. Through her psychological apparatus, Anita Desai explores the social and cultural dimensions of life. She is a novelist of social tensions and cultural conditioning, examining these through introspective, psychological means rather than through elaborate examination of history.

R.S. Sharma claims that Anita Desai's writing is different from writers like Mulk Raj Anand and R.K. Narayan who are more interested in "externalising what is implicit in social reality" (12). He categorizes Desai's fiction as having a poetic and subjective quality that she

employs as a technique in presenting a private vision of the individual. He further states that Desai "creates a private world of her own": her creative effort being part of a 'private effort to seize upon the raw material of life - its shapelessness, its meaninglessness, that lack of design that drives one to despair'" (10). Sharma's emphasis on the repeated adjective "private" (here pitted against an existential and non-social void) is characteristic of most critics writing on the novelist. However, he also finds that Desai's fiction is "reflective of social realities which are not immediately perceived" though she does not "dwell . . . on social issues" and does not view them as a "social reformer or moralist would do" (13). M.K. Naik remarks that Anita Desai is "more interested in the interior landscape of the mind than in political and social realities" (24). Such categorical or imbalanced opinions lead to serious underestimation of Desai as a social novelist. Of course, the reason for this underestimation is that her use of psychological, subjective and frequently feminine modes has misled many critics into thinking her concerns are merely private. But in fact she uses these modes, along with some extrovert, realistic modes, to explore larger issues of cultural inculcation as well as alienation.

In Stairs to the Attic: The Novels of Anita Desai, Jasbir Jain approaches Desai's works thematically, and she

highlights the psychological issues present. Jain notes that the social and political concerns in Desai's fiction are "subtly camouflaged and subdued" since Desai concentrates mainly on the inner moods and emotions of her characters (1). Indeed, Jain is right in the choice of her words "camouflaged" and "subdued". Social and political realities are discernible to the reader or critic who cares to look for them in Desai's fiction. Usha Bande, another Desai critic, feels that Desai's "skill in characterization has received but scant attention" (14). Bande's book, The Novels of Anita Desai: A Study in Character and Conflict, applies Third Force Psychology in her analysis of the characters in Desai's fiction, hoping to "amplify their conflicts, understand their behaviour and know them as human beings" (20). Bande states that Desai chooses to write about people who "remain 'outsiders' in their failure to accommodate themselves to the world of realities" (15). Bande is concerned with the wholeness of the human experience, its internal and external, conscious as well as the unconscious dimensions, and she points out that it would lead to unhappiness if the individual fails to achieve some balance between inner and outer realities. Bande's stance includes the social realities that constantly interact with the life of the individual and affect his/her inner well-being.

However, the critics who overplay the psychological tack of Desai's fiction are partly encouraged by Anita Desai's own statements made in several interviews over a period of time. Surely she does not claim any socio-political role as a novelist in the conventional sense of the term, but certainly, by way of implication, by way of indirection, she metaphorically suggests and explores social realities without making any direct statement or commentary on them. In one of her interviews, Anita Desai declares that her novels "are no reflection of Indian society, politics or character. They are part of my private effort to seize upon the raw material of life - its shapelessness, its meaninglessness" (Contemporary Novelist 48). So, in the context of this particular aesthetic sense, she is not a committed socialist writer or a propagandist because she does not make any critical statement about a fixed system of values - religious, social, moral, cultural, political. But like many social novelists, she explores reality to arrive at truth which is not absolute. She explains her writing as

an effort to discover, underline and convey the significance of things. I must seize upon that incomplete and seemingly meaningless mass of reality around me and try to discover its significance by plunging below the surface and plumbing the depths, then illuminating those

depths till they become a more lucid, brilliant and explicable reflection of the visible world.

("Replies to the Questionnaire" 2)

For Desai, as stated earlier, reality consists of both the outer and inner life of the individual; both dimensions, social and psychological, surface and depth, are equally important to arrive at the significance of things. Though at times Desai makes one or the other as her main domain, depending on the nature of the novel she writes, she remains conscious of the importance of both; even in a deeply psychological novel she never loses sight of the social issues involved. By plumbing the depths, she discovers reflections of the visible world. As Inder Nath Kher points out: "in the larger context of the sociology of literature, art is not an autonomous institution; rather, it has relationship to society as a whole, in so far as art imitates life and life imitates art. Art is a mirror of society, a clear or distorted mirror" (179). This idea is further reinforced by W.D. Ashcroft who states that "the written text is a social situation. That is to say, it has its existence in something more than the marks on the page, namely the participation of social beings whom we call writers and readers, and who constitute the writing as communication of a particular kind, as "saying" a certain thing" ("Constitutive Graphonomy" 58). Indeed, any artist in the world of

fiction is aware of the thin line between art and reality and that it is difficult, if not impossible, to clearly delineate and demarcate one from the other.

In her novel, In Custody (1984), Anita Desai herself deals with the protagonist's realization that art is not separable from life in all its beauty and ugliness. The protagonist, Deven, is a lecturer in Hindi who seeks to escape the monotony of his life through his interest in Urdu poetry. Through a chance encounter, Deven is offered an opportunity to interview his idol, an old Urdu poet, Nur Shahjehanabadi. The meetings between Deven and Nur create a relationship in which Deven becomes the custodian of Nur's art and consequently, his life, while Nur manipulates and relies on Deven to support him financially. Hence, both Deven and Nur find their social lives inextricably linked by art and through art.

As a writer, Desai generally resists being labelled and likewise, does not admit having any specific theory of the novel. Instead she says that

. . . theories of the novel are held by those of an academic, or critical turn of mind, not the creative. A writer does not create a novel by observing a given set of theories - he follows flashes of individual vision, and depends on a kind of instinct that tells him what to follow and what to avoid, how to veer

away from what would be destructive to his vision. It is these flashes of vision, and a kind of trained instinct, that leads him - not any theories. (Ram, "An Interview with Anita Desai" 99)

Desai speaks here of a visionary/creative writer who believes that "writing is not an act of deliberation, reason and choice. It is a matter of instinct, silence and waiting" ("The Indian Writer's Problem" 225). In her need for "secrecy and silence", Desai refuses to engage in further self-exploration or to elaborate the nature of the creative process. Desai carefully avoids any labelling of her works, feminist, socialist or political. Yet, issues pertaining to feminine sensibility or the awakening of feminine consciousness, and social and political institutions are implicit as well as explicit in her works. Despite the disclaimer to being a theorist, Desai has talked about the nature of her art most cogently and comprehensively in her many interviews. Moreover, theory always exists in the form of one's faith, one's aims, and one's compulsions. The very creative process involves some guiding principles.

Desai, as author, chooses to write about the plight of the individual in society. Her characters, particularly the problematic ones, search for authentic existence in a world of conformity and conventions. She

describes the nature of her characters as such:

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

Desai's characters, then, are people who are caught up in a world which is quite often a world of chaos and disorder. It is an artistic imperative that the author's social and psychological observations are inextricably linked. The "general current" that Desai mentions inevitably includes societal values and codes of behaviour that impinge on the individual and unavoidably affect his/her psyche as a whole.

Desai does not provide any definitive answers to social and personal problems, but indirectly and metaphorically, she suggests that individuals need to accept, change, tolerate, improvise, understand, assimilate and act positively and constructively upon external social circumstances that invariably affect their

inner worlds. In this sense, Desai can be considered a social writer, and perhaps, even a social reformer, because she is quite realistic in her portrayal of an indifferent world where issues like patriarchal oppression, racism and cultural alienation cause undesirable anxiety and frustration in the lives of people who face these situations. Her characters sustain themselves with courage and heroism in spite of the situations in which choices and commitments are required against the apparent meaninglessness of the human condition. However, Desai is a social novelist with a difference. She does not offer any critical polemic against the system she seems to undermine. For instance, a socialist writer like Mulk Raj Anand faces a different task than Anita Desai's because his writing is explicitly concerned with radical change within an Indian village or traditional setting where he advocates mass education, the abolition of dowry and equal rights for women. Mulk Raj Anand concentrates on group and collective psyche rather than the individual's problem without a larger social context. Mulk Raj Anand's Gauri clearly emphasizes the social message that women must have the strength and courage to improve their self-worth and position through education and suitable careers. They must be willing to defy social customs and traditional morality that subjugate them. Mulk Raj Anand's social criticism is

focussed against the traditional Indian value system as a whole and how it affects the welfare of people living in it. Mulk Raj Anand describes the aim of his art in the following words:

I have been confirmed in one fundamental realisation that truth alone should matter to a writer, that this truth should become imaginative truth, without losing sincerity. The novel should interpret the truth of life, from felt experience, and not from books. . . . And one must give up the outworn traditions, conventions, and dasturs, if they have no relevance under the changed circumstances. . . . one must seek the first and last freedom. (6)

In this manner, Mulk Raj Anand boldly makes a socialist statement in his fiction, be it about the acceptance of an untouchable into the Hindu society or the rights of women as individuals in the modern Indian context. He not only highlights the social issues but also clearly outlines the solutions to the problems. For example, in the Untouchable, Anand advocates the introduction of a waste disposal system to eliminate the need for untouchables to work in this demeaning area. Desai's characters, on the other hand, range from women in unhappy marriages to Indian and European characters in foreign lands. Desai's interest is somewhat different than Mulk Raj Anand's and

her major focus is on the predicament of the individual and his/her inner psyche that is affected by his/her struggle to survive or belong in the larger social context.

In exploring the inner world of her characters, Desai employs a unique writing style. Her fiction is neither transparent nor predictable. She does not "use the traditional plot structure with linear movement in terms of exposition, conflict, and resolution" (Amanuddin 154). Rather, through irony, reversals in the choices of characters, deconstructive twists in the narrative, by suspending meaning or message, she offers various levels of perception about her characters, but no ultimate truth. At times, her renderings of human situations, carried through simple plots but complex situations are surrealistic insofar as they juxtapose the absurd and the unexpected, as in the last scene of Fire on the Mountain. Desai explains her writing technique as such:

I start writing without having very much of a 'plot' in my mind or on paper - only a very hazy idea of what the pattern of the book is to be. But it seems to work itself out as I go along, quite naturally and inevitably. I prefer the word "pattern" to "plot" as it sounds more natural - even better, if I dare use it, is Hopkins' word "inscape" - while "plot" sounds

arbitrary, heavy-handed and artificial, all that I wish to avoid. One should have a pattern and then fit the characters, the setting, and scenes into it - each piece in keeping with the others and so forming a balanced whole. (Ram, "An Interview with Anita Desai" 101)

In other words, the organic form of her fiction grows as the novel grows and grows out of the materials she gathers; form becomes a mode of discovering content, and form and subject matter blend in a harmonious whole.

As a writer of German and Indian descent, Desai understands the configuration as well as confrontation of two cultures, Indian and Western, linguistically and spiritually, but she finds the English language supple and flexible and has accepted it as a creative medium without much fuss. She explains her position as such:

According to the rules laid down by critics, I ought to be writing half my work in Bengali, the other half in German. As it happens, I have never written a word in either language.

Possibly I found English to be a suitable link language, a compromise. But I can state definitely that I did not choose English in a deliberate and conscious act. If it did not sound like a piece of arrogance, I'd say perhaps it was the language that chose me. ("The Indian

Writer's Problem" 223)

The question of language, as far as Desai is concerned, is how she employs it to suit her purposes. She claims that she mostly uses the "language of the interior" - "the language of [characters'] thoughts, their interior selves - which has nothing to do with geography and can be written in any language . . ." (Sharma, Anita Desai 21).

The symbolic language of the interior that Desai employs in most of her fiction is one in which the characters express, assess and confront their inner wishes, fears and desires. The action in Desai's fiction is largely internalized within the thoughts and psyche of her characters. Making liberal use of symbols, spontaneously and subconsciously, Desai makes her characters more meaningful and significant. She uses a stream of consciousness method and flashbacks through memory, and her characters constantly relate to their past in an effort to understand and accept the present and plan for the future. Through vivid imagery and a poetic style, Desai presents her sensitive and marginalized characters in a perceptive and sensitive fashion. Desai says that

[it] is the movement of the wing that one tries to capture, not the bird. That is, it is the image that matters, the symbol, the myth, the feat of associating them, of relating them, of constructing with them. Whether one does this

in one's native or in a foreign tongue is not essentially important. It can be done in any language at all [sic] only it must be done spontaneously, compulsively, subconsciously, "Only connect." That is what a writer's existence is all about - he connects, he connects, all the time he connects. It is a process that does indeed employ language but also transcends it. ("The Indian Writer's Problem" 225-226)

In spite of the many similarities described in the preceeding paragraphs, forming a sort of uniform pattern in all the novels, Desai's works are clearly different in terms of novelistic modalities, subject matter and their stylistic execution. The poetic evocations of her language, richly displayed in novels like Cry, the Peacock (1963) and Where Shall We Go this Summer (1975) emphasize the idea that pattern and rhythm dominate her works. However, and sometimes, despite of her own comments, some of Desai's novels, like Bye-Bye Blackbird (1971) and Village by the Sea (1982) are different from some of her other works in that they are written in a less markedly poetic fashion, engaging in characters and dialogue that are realistic and typical, a technique that Desai claims to avoid. In these realistic novels, social issues like racism, cultural and national displacement and alienation,

poverty and industrial change are more clearly visible. Although Anita Desai is not a feminist or a socialist writer in the strict sense of the terms, her works such as Voices in the City (1965) and Fire on the Mountain (1977) speak of the basic loneliness of women, the incompatibility and disharmony in marriages, the issues of love, family and personal alienation that make her characters flow against the "general current," and struggle in order to survive in a hostile society. Desai's latest novel Baumgartner's Bombay (1988) portrays the racial, cultural and political alienation of its protagonist, Hugo Baumgartner, on a much larger scale.

Desai does not like to categorise her own writing, claiming instead that she transcends time and place by employing a universal language, which in this case is the language of the interior. While she comfortably situates herself and her writing as universalistic, what remains paramount in any novel is the experience of the individual. Desai is insider and outsider at the same time. Being half-German and half-Indian and a woman in a traditional and patriarchal society, she is inevitably pushed to the periphery - an outsider looking in, and paradoxically, an insider struggling to remain in the centre. Desai is successful in creating a balance as an English writer by combining both the eastern and western sensibilities that are part of her heritage.

While Desai is able to transcend her own dichotomy of being an insider/outsider in her life and in her writing, her characters, nonetheless, are displaced and suffer from the sense of alienation and crises in self-image which their social, racial or cultural displacement perpetuates. The theme of alienation/exile does play an important role in the lives of some of her characters. Exile can work at social, cultural, geographical, racial, political and psychological levels. The important question is why people get alienated and how they cope with the absurdity of their situation.

The figure of the insider/outsider in Anita Desai's fiction clearly highlights that the social and psychological issues present in Desai's works are interwoven into a complex fabric through poetic language, narrative style and artistic vision. Through explorations of the insider/outsider figure and the socio-political reasons for the individual's sense of alienation and exile, Desai has shown remarkable sensitivity in the structuring of her novels, integrity of artistic purpose, keen observation, sharp awareness and highly competent craftsmanship. The insider/outsider figures and the larger social issues of marriage, family, patriarchy, racial, cultural and national alienation are present in Bye-Bye Blackbird (1971), Fire on the Mountain (1977) and Baumgartner's Bombay (1988). The theme of exile, place

and displacement is a major concern in post-colonial literature and theory, but Desai does not write strictly from a post-colonial point of view. Rather, she is interested in the attitudes and struggles of the individuals in such situations. However, these issues will be discussed from a social point of view, showing how place, language and identity create internal chaos and disorder in the private and public lives of the individuals. Anita Desai does not provide any solutions or answers to the predicaments of her characters. She brings her characters to various levels of perception and awareness and leaves them there in her highly evocative and poetic fashion. Desai constantly subverts her own meaning in order to arrive at a larger meaning. More importantly, making a distinction between a social writer and a socialist writer, this thesis does not claim that Desai is a socialist writer in the conventional sense of the word. Rather, it emphasizes that social realities are implicit as well as explicit in her works, and therefore, through analysis of the insider/outsider figure in the fiction of Anita Desai, I would like to present a more balanced view of her achievement as a novelist.

In light of the above discussion and framework, I would like to say that a close examination of some of Desai's representative novels reveals some obvious challenges to the views of the critics and scholars who

deal with her works as purely psychological. Desai's fiction can and should be viewed from a broader perspective rather than merely as psychological explorations of the individual. Desai introduces public issues in her novels, and she is aware that the "personal is the political".

In the following pages of this thesis, I intend to provide a close reading of three of Desai's representative works: Bye-Bye Blackbird (1971), Fire on the Mountain (1977) and Baumgartner's Bombay (1988). In Bye-Bye Blackbird, Desai offers a truly objective picture of reality; she observes with candour the whole range of the immigrant experience. While she attempts to understand the predicament of her Indian characters, Dev and Adit, as they cope with their alien situation in England, she delineates with insight and compassion the English Sarah's private agony in adjusting to her marriage to the Indian Sen, highlighting social issues of racism and cultural division. This will be analyzed primarily as a social realist novel. Following this, I plan to deal with Fire on the Mountain as the kind of "psychological" novel that critics tend to write about. In Fire on the Mountain, Desai of course explores the personal past of its central figure, Nanda Kaul, using stream of consciousness and flashback techniques, but in so doing also examines the issues of patriarchy revealed in the history of her

marriage. This will be followed with a close reading of Baumgartner's Bombay in which Desai sensitively analyzes the exclusion from the German as well as the Indian society felt by the Jewish Baumgartner. Dealing with active evils such as war, imprisonment, betrayal and murder, the novelist raises very directly the social issues of racial, cultural and political alienation. However, in its form, the novel achieves a healthy fusion of realistic, psychological and surrealistic elements. Also, the novel offers, through its setting (scenes and events) a critique of history.

In all of the above-mentioned novels, I hope to show the presence of the social element of cultural alienation, caused by race, gender, culture and/or politics. But the generic/stylistic context in which this element is enacted is different. Desai is a social novelist in all three novels, but in good part in different ways. Desai offers a significant insight into the plight of an alienated individual who is caught up in the web of larger social issues like racism, self-identity, patriarchy and exile. As a Commonwealth writer (and a female writer) Desai writes from the marginalized perspective of the outsider, and it is, therefore, no surprise to note that her central characters are similarly alienated from the mainstream. My approach will share the author's focus on the insider/outsider relation, examining in a formalist manner

the author's use of stream-of consciousness and imagery, her major means of revealing "the public in the private". However, form will not be studied as an end in itself, but rather as a means of restoring a more just and balanced view of Desai's achievement as a writer.

Chapter One

Bye-Bye Blackbird

As stated earlier, critics generally underestimate and therefore understate Anita Desai's commitment, both direct and indirect, to socio-political issues and realities of life. Again and again, they overemphasize her poetic style and romantic sensibility. D. S. Maini remarks: "essentially, she is not a novelist of social comedy and manners, or even a novelist of ideas. Her forte is the poetic novel of sensibility" (223-224). Such a generalization as Maini's is carried over illegitimately to specific works which clearly do not fit it easily. Thus, R.S. Sharma erroneously observes about Bye-Bye Blackbird: "like her other novels, here too, she avoids the realistic mode to concentrate on the states of psyche" (45). However, for a proper and balanced perspective of Anita Desai's achievement, one has to examine the form and structure of each novel and the intentionality of her language. After the enormous success of Cry, the Peacock (1963) and Voices in the City (1965), which established her reputation as a psychological novelist, in Bye-Bye Blackbird (1971), Anita Desai tries her hand at a more extrovert and realistic novel, explicitly dealing with

social, political and cultural issues. Hari Mohan Prasad observes that

Anita Desai is a novelist of the inner weather of the mind. An uncanny ability to probe into the recesses of the heart is her forte. Cry, the Peacock and Voices in the City are crystal evidences of her inward sensibility. Bye-Bye Blackbird, despite its lyrics of landscapes, nuances of nostalgia and isolated moments of individual torment, is much less disturbing, much less intense. (58)

Apparently, then, Bye-Bye Blackbird is not so much concerned with what Henry James calls "the atmosphere of the mind" (401); rather, it is concerned with the external atmosphere and norms of society which impinge on human lives. More particularly, it deals with the hopes and aspirations, travails and disappointments of Indian immigrants in England. It brings into focus the issue of East-West encounter through racial tensions as well as interracial marriage, highlights the economic predicament of immigrants through their job-hunting processes, and sharpens the anguish of its chief protagonists through their loss of identity. Meenakshi Mukherjee states that "Anita Desai wrote Bye-Bye Blackbird after her first trip outside India, applying the freshness of her perception to record in minute detail subtle cultural differences"

(232). Even though she maintains that "Anita Desai is not writing a sociological tract" (227), Mukherjee clearly recognizes in her analysis of Bye-Bye Blackbird that Desai portrays, in her rich and poetic language, the London scenes, cultural encounters and racial issues from a more markedly social perspective than in her other novels.

The success or failure of Bye-Bye Blackbird should not be measured against the psychological depth and intensity of her earlier works. Its merit should be assessed on its own terms, its realistic mode and the socio-political vision of its author. Its realistic form enables Desai to portray the immigrant experience faithfully and to mirror the underlying truth of being an alien/outsider squarely and without romantic exaggeration. The novel, through its settings and events, particularizes the lives of ordinary people, offering a detailed account of happenings accurately observed from life: houses, museums, art galleries, trains, seasons, food and social habits, prejudices. Its narrative perspective provides the best window on the truth/actual situation of its characters and society. Desai's minute observations and skills as a writer are evident in her vivid and realistic portrayal of the sights and sounds of London:

Out in grey-blue Trafalgar Square, they stand at the foot of Nelson's column amongst the fountains The buildings are slate grey,

the sky blue-grey, the shadows deep and violet. The fountains spout and sparkle about the grey column and the grey lions, and the spoilt, overfed pigeons tumble above the welter of red umbrellas and blue mackintoshes. Red buses rumble down grey streets and, here and there, at the foot of tall grey pillars or on quiet grey window-sills, stand tubs of pink and blue hydrangeas. (60)

Desai's rich descriptions of London clearly establish her sense of realism and an ability to present a bird-eye view of the whole country. She uses her rich and poetic style to her advantage when she describes the scenes in the country. Seeped in Wordsworthian and Keatsian splendour, Desai transforms the English countryside to pulsating life.

In Bye-Bye Blackbird, Desai not only portrays the fears and hopes, conflicts and aspirations of the individuals struggling to be accepted in their adopted society, but also illuminates the attitudes of the East and West toward one another. The comic rendering of Emma Moffit's little India club captures the nuances and idiosyncracies of each culture, and shows how ignorance and a lack of understanding or tolerance inevitably leads to conflicts. Emma is shocked by the Indian sense of time or the lack thereof, and the behaviour of Indian musicians

and the Swami. Desai parodies the Western concept of India in this particular situation. Moffit's fascination for the East and her reason for setting up the club is based on the conception and hope that "wise people can come and lecture to us lesser beings, us little ones, and help us to expand, to set our sights on farther, on Eastern horizons" (43). Moffit's liberal attitude is somewhat condescending and based on ignorance although her intentions are sincere. She offers a genuine plea for greater tolerance and understanding between cultures. The greatest irony, however, is the fact that almost all the members in her club are Indians.

Like Desai's other works, the novel richly dramatizes that the personal is the public or the political, and here the social issues are highlighted. In an interview with Jasbir Jain, Desai states that "exile has never been [her] theme" as such and that "the problem is how to exist in society and yet maintain one's individuality rather than suffering from a lack of society and a lack of belonging" (15). However, there is a lack of belonging, and exile is a theme in Bye-Bye Blackbird. Raji Narasimhan rightly asserts that in Bye-Bye Blackbird, Desai examines "the image of lowliness bequeathed by colonial evaluations" and that the "bedrock dramatic statement of it is a throwoff of the colonial premise of native unworth" (181). Indeed, one of the central issues in Bye-Bye Blackbird is the

post-colonial hangover that Dev and Adit experience in the land of their ex-colonial masters. This post-colonial hangover revolves around the "themes of interracial and intercultural relationships, involving sex, love and marriage" (Aithal 101). Both Dev and Adit are outsiders in their adopted land, England. They are immigrants, lured by the promise of the golden land. However, they are often marginalised in more ways than one; their colour, race, religion, language and immigrant status make them blackbirds in the land of larks and thrushes. This difference creates a polarity in the immigrant's perception of England: other/White, english/English, immigrant/British, outsider/insider. This polarity causes a sense of displacement and sometimes raises questions about self-worth and identity.

In Bye-Bye Blackbird, Desai explores the effects of imperial acculturation largely through Dev's attitudes and conceptions as an outsider in India. Dev's attitude toward England resembles that of the ex-colonial masters toward India. He has a strange fascination and disdain for England, at once attracted and repelled by it. In his fascination for England, Dev journeys to the centre, London, to seek order and wrest control, "to study at the London School of Economics" (8), one of the world's most prestigious academic institutions in London. His intention in this early trip to London is to approach the

"professors and [impress] them with the subtle complexities and the deep wisdom of the Oriental mind"

(8). Dev seems to behave like the protagonist in Naipaul's, The Mimic Men, who feels that

Coming to London, the great City, seeking order, seeking the flowering, the extension of myself that ought to have come in a city of such miraculous light, I had tried to hasten a process which had seemed elusive. I had tried to give myself a personality. (32)

However, Dev's search for his "personality" is not free from inner conflict/turmoil that sometimes results in cynicism and open hostility. He constantly wavers between his decision to stay or leave England. He feels that

There are days in which the life of an alien appears enthrallingly rich and beautiful to him, and that of a homebody too dull, too stale to return to ever. Then he hears a word in the tube or notices an expression on an English face that overturns his latest decision and, drawing himself together, he feels that he can never bear to be the unwanted immigrant but must return to his own land, however abject or dull, where he has, at least, a place in the sun, security, status and freedom. (86)

The post-colonial individual, then, seeks "security,

status and freedom" (86), but while he journeys to the centre in his elusive search, he is ironically transformed into the role of a coloniser, one who has come to "rape" the land of milk and honey. He is, in this role, still under the influence of imperial ideology. Adit sums it up when he tells Dev "You just don't want to admit this is the land of opportunity and you've come adventuring in it" (19).

This brings out a distinction between Adit and Dev who perceive and handle various situations as immigrants quite differently. Adit accepts England only because he cannot find a proper job in India. His trip to India, "looking for a job for four months" disillusioned him; "All I could find was a ruddy clerking job in some Government of India tourist bureau" (18). Hence the attraction of "social" and "economic" freedom (18) in England entices him back to London. His decision to immigrate is based on economic and social preferences.

England represents the land of opportunity to Adit; he says "I see gold - everywhere - gold like Sarah's golden hair" (19). Sarah symbolises the English landscape to Adit, where he is the coloniser and the master. He denies Sarah her true English identity, remarking, "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!" (73). Adit's condescending and patriarchal behaviour toward Sarah parodies the historical relationship between the coloniser and the colonised.

Unlike Adit, Dev's dilemma lies within his anglicized Indian mind. He apparently loves and values the English language and literature. While he journeys to the centre of its origin, he is trapped by the past and the history of subjugation that his country and people have suffered. He is an outsider because he cannot mediate between his Indianness and Englishness imposed upon him through the colonial education. He is a mimic man out of a lack of choice since he has fed on the drug of an alien language. Dev wonders

. . . with an extraordinary precision of thought, how it was that so many people in his country, of so many generations and so many social and economic classes, had been brought up on a language and literature completely alien to them, been fed it like a sweet in infancy, like a drug in youth, so that, before they realised it, they were addicts of it and their bodies were composed as much of its substance as of native blood (122)

While the adoption of the English language and literature of the coloniser helps in anglicizing the mind of the Indian, he/she remains an outsider to British culture and

society. Desai highlights the important role that the English language and literature plays in the lives of educated people of the erstwhile colony. The influence is strong enough to make an Englishman/woman out of an Indian, but only as a clone since his/her mimicry makes him clearly the other. He/she cannot belong to the centre although he/she yearns for the origin. Dev's problem is precisely that he has

. . . travelled so far in search of the origin, the fountain-head of the vision induced by this drug, that enthralling, bewitching vision that had lived in him so long, so that now both drug and vision, copy and original, held him in a double net (122)

According to Janet Batsleer, for most post-colonial people the introduction of English as an academic discipline produced the nineteenth century colonial form of imperialism (Ashcroft, EWB 3). The colonized people had their own language and culture marginalised through the enforced acquisition of English. The post-colonial people view the world only through mimicry, though they long to be granted an insider status, thus causing a "double net" that Dev is entangled in.

The linguistic and cultural conflict that Dev undergoes highlights the political and social impact of colonisation on the colonized, which inevitably cause the

post-colonial hangover. As Gauri Viswanathan claims:

British colonial administrators, provoked by missionaries on the one hand and fears of native insubordination on the other, discovered an ally in English literature to support them in maintaining control of the natives under the guise of a liberal education. (qtd. in Ashcroft, EWB 3)

While the introduction of the English language functioned as a political and social pacifier for the coloniser, this policy created a "class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect" (156). And, when in London, the bastardized Indian is compelled to remain on the periphery. Dev bitterly feels that

Everything tells you you're an outsider and not entitled to the country just because you happen to have read and enjoyed its literature, or because you belong to something called the Commonwealth. (162)

Like many of his countrymen, Dev is condemned to be an outsider. Incensed by lavatories for ladies, gents and Asiatics, the vendor who refuses to name the price of the gold icon from Russia, and the damson-cheeked boy who calls him a "wog", Dev gets into an "obsessed search for the signs of imperialist insolence in the bland manners of

the British" (73). Armed with hostility and anger, Dev is unable to realise that he has become both the victim and victimiser. Ironically, he claims to be an "ambassador" of the Indian people, to prove to the "damn imperialists" that he is a representative of "free people" (123). But he only manages to further marginalize himself, both from the British and from the Indians whom he watches for signs of being "boot-licking [toadies]" and "spineless Imperialist [lovers]" (19).

Unlike Dev's perception of being an outsider, Adit's perception of himself as an insider is grounded in his lack of vision, or perhaps the desire to overlook the "drawbacks" (17). Unlike Dev, he ignores the racial insults and tensions; he does not show hostility or anger in his reactions and generally avoids what is painful in the new society. Consciously, or unconsciously, he fails to grasp the cold behaviour and indifferent attitude of his former landlords, the Millers, toward him. The situation creates a sharp demarcation and delineation of the post-colonial person as other. Adit believes to have a sense of rapport with the Millers and their personal history, but the Millers deny him that presumed privilege. Mrs. Miller feels insulted by Adit's attempt to consider himself on equal footing with them and to involve himself into their private and personal affairs. Adit remains a boarder in their history, one whom they were reluctant to

have because he was non-white. Adit, on the other hand, is not perceptive enough to understand his marginalisation by the Millers. The Millers represent the prejudicial and discriminatory conceptions and attitudes of many British toward the others. Sarah voices her discomfort about the situation when she claims: "when I think of all the Millers of England, I could leave at once" (83).

As a post-colonial individual, Dev is mesmerized by the idea of rewriting history and appropriating the centre, a myth and fantasy shared by many of the formerly colonised. Standing in the middle of Petticoat Lane, a London bazaar, Dev observes "an Oriental turmoil of shove and bustle, push, pinch and pickpocket". He notices "Indian traders with little trays of Moradabad brassware and Kashmir papier-mache" (61). Exhilarated by the "rowdy, libertine Indian atmosphere," Dev shouts the desire of the colonized:

Let history turn the tables now. Let the Indian traders come to England - the Sikhs and the Sindhis with their brass elephants and boxes of spice and tea. Let them take over the City Then let our army come across Let us abolish the British Railways! Let us abolish the vicarages and rectories and parsonages and build temples and mosques and gurdwaras. Let us bring across our yogis and

gurus, barefoot and robed in saffron. Let us
abolish the British public schools Let
us replace Latin and Greek with the study of
Sanskrit classics and Punjabi swear words . . .
. Let all British women take to the graceful
sari and all British men to the noble dhoti . .
. . . (61)

Robbed of his language, culture and custom, the post-colonial person becomes an outsider. While Dev leaves India to find better things in England, he is unwilling to work hard for them: "I want freedom not restriction. I want enterprise, not discipline. I want money. I want life. But I don't want to take a secretarial course . . . I just want a job, that's all - a real, paid job" (103). So, he waits for "the job to turn up" (99). Desai vividly paints the frustration of the outsider's search for a job in which he comes across signs that clearly exclude the marginal, "coloureds need not apply" (102). Dev is unwilling to settle for any blue-collar or mechanical work. Adit criticizes Dev's attitude toward mechanical jobs and his unreasonably high aspirations:

The truth is, we babus get it neat. People like the Singhs manage to find a place in any society, even if it is on the bottom rung of the ladder. At least they have a trade, they are useful But, not us. We haven't studied

for any profession, we want to gatecrash into one. We haven't the time, money or patience to acquire one in a school, we want to grab and learn in a week what others take three years to master. Cheek, that's what. It's the age-old babu dilemma - executive temperaments linked with worthless qualifications. (103)

These comments reveal marked differences in perceptions and attitudes toward job market and economic reality between Adit and Dev. Adit's approach is more realistic and pragmatic than Dev's. Adit knows the odds because he "had to work in a post-office in Coventry, to begin with" (105). But Dev simply wants to climb the ladder of success, reversing the hierarchy of power and race relations in the land of so-called golden opportunities. Desai highlights that the choosey immigrant inevitably faces disappointment and rejection. Dev cannot match his illusions of grandeur in England with the reality of economic, political and social situation facing the outsiders.

Desai perceptively presents both sides of the issue in the life of the immigrant. While the immigrant feels unwanted, his reception is inevitably hostile because he has come to claim without being claimed by the land. The immigrant hardly questions what he has to offer in return, living like the Punjabi family in Bye-Bye Blackbird, whose

motto is "[we] may live in exile here, but we work hard and we eat well and live in our own way" (119). In such a way, some immigrants create a microcosm within a society, and while they are alienated by society, they in return, choose to alienate. They simply fail to integrate into their adopted society and culture. In Bye-Bye Blackbird, like the other immigrants who are caught in an uncompromising world, Adit is forced to seek company among the Indians, cultural exiles struggling to find a centre in their otherness. Like other Indians, Adit continues to enjoy his lamb curry, sitar music, and openended, free conversations with his Indian friends. As Arun Mukherjee claims:

. . . society is not a homogenous grouping but an assortment of groups where we belong to one particular set called "us" and the other set or sets we distinguish as "them". (26)

Likewise, Adit and his group of Indian friends are clearly a set of "us" against the rest of society. Desai's gentle ironies are not lost upon the readers who realise that even some of the other Indians are further marginalized and excluded from Adit's little circle. The provincial and communal banter between the Indians after watching "Stranger in Bradford" (20) focusses on the fact that there is no centre; each group attempts to locate itself as the focal point - whether it is the Punjabis from

Pakistan, Lahore, Amritsar or Ludhiana (24) or the Bengalis from Calcutta or Delhi (25). The prejudice and disdain inherent in one Indian group for the other reveals a lack of unity or even tolerance among themselves.

Transformed to a larger framework in the context of a foreign society, the struggle between the centre and the other remains as an on-going reality. In this way, the marginalization is continually upheld, be it between the British/Indian or the Indian/Indian.

Dev carries to extremes the notion that art should fully reflect life as it is lived and imagined "because he was so well prepared to enter it - so well prepared by fifteen years of reading books that had been his meat and drink, the English books that had formed at least one half of his conscious existence" (11). While he feels a psychic connection with the world of English pubs, the sights and sounds of London, the museums and paintings of the West and the world of nature, he feels stifled and alienated by the struggles of daily existence. His romantic temperament is at odds with the reality of his situation in London. The deserted streets of London, the English love for pets, the sense of privacy and reserve in the British, and their different food habits force comparisons with his mental images of India. Neither does he completely release his Indian baggage nor does he fully accept the British heritage. The "double net" (122) of

Dev's existence exemplifies his own predicament, and, by implication, the predicament of most immigrants anywhere in the world. The immigrant has to resolve the issues pertaining to this "double-net" to maintain a degree of equanimity. He should be flexible in his social and economic choices. He has to show understanding and toleration toward cultural differences. In order to assimilate in a new society, he has to alter some of his core beliefs and values.

Dev's failure to establish a healthy sense of belonging causes him anguish/trauma that metaphorically transforms London into a hostile and bewildering place; the physical landmark reflects his inner turmoil:

Dev ventures into the city. He descends deeper and deeper, into the white-tiled bowels of Clapham tube station. Down into the stark caverns, artificially lit, by way of long, ringing staircases where draughts sweep icily up and down and yet leave the underground airless, suffocating. The menacing slither of escalators strikes panic into a speechless Dev as he is swept down with an awful sensation of being taken where he does not want to go. Down, down and farther down - like Alice falling, falling down the rabbit hole, like a Kafka stranger wandering through the dark labyrinth of a

prison. (57)

Dev's fear and anguish reflect the feeling of otherness, having been swept away by what is foreign and unfamiliar, becoming a stranger even to himself. He loses control and fears that he will "never emerge into freshness and light" (58). He is caught up in his "schizophrenia that wakes him in the middle of the night and shadows him by day while he wonders whether he should stay or go back" (86). The theme of the rootless post-colonial person assumes universal overtones when the authorial voice in the novel states that "it is a strange summer, in which [Dev] is the bewildered alien, the charmed observer, the outraged outsider and thrilled sight-seer all at once and in succession" (85). Desai highlights the crux of the matter and the conflicts of the post-colonial immigrant who cannot anchor his identity and position.

Dev's love-hate relationship with England is contrasted with Adit's early love for England. Adit is quite happy to be in England, as he says:

I love it here I like going into the local for a pint on my way home to Sarah I like the Covent Garden Opera house - it has a chandelier like a hive of fireflies; when I stand under it, I feel like a millionaire. I like the girls here - I like their nylon stockings and the way their noses tilt upwards,

and I used to like dancing with them I
 like the pubs. I like the freedom a man has
 here - economic freedom! Social freedom! (18)

However, Adit's mimicry of the centre is manifested mostly externally; he sings opera and likes "steamed pudding with treacle" and "thatched cottages and British history" (18) while his actions are largely grounded in his Indianness. His mimicry does not touch his core, and his desire to be a true English sahib is undermined by his desire for lamb curry, "charchari", and "good, rich carrot halwa" (15). He trains his British wife, Sarah, to cook Indian meals and proudly and ironically contradicts himself when he says "no British broths and stews for me" (15). Like those of most post-colonial people, Adit's penetration and integration into the adopted land are based on selective choices and options; he accepts the world of art, literature, opera and rejects the British food, British attitudes and sense of reserve, and imposes his Indianness on his wife, Sarah. Edward Said suggests that the marginalized desires "not only to be accepted but to be adopted and absorbed" and because of this, post-colonial people generally "immerse themselves in the imported culture, denying their origins in an attempt to become 'more English than the English'" (Ashcroft, EWB 4). Adit, at times, seems to comply with Said's remarks, but his accommodation of England, its society and culture is

somewhat based on a sense of conflict rather than whole-hearted acceptance of his adopted land.

Adit's confrontation with his Indianness brings him to the realisation that his perception of his role as an 'Englishman' in London has only offered him a mode of survival with a stamp of otherness ingrained in him:

Sometimes it stifles me - this business of always hanging together with people like ourselves, all wearing the label Indian immigrant, never daring to try and make contact outside this circle. This business about those grisly side-streets, looking for Indian shops and Indian restaurants. All our jokes about our own situation - never about anyone or anything else. It's so stifling - all the time, all the damned time - being aware of who one is and where one is. God, I am fed up. (185)

But it is only when Adit becomes fully conscious of his Indianness and his actual marginalization that he is able to return to India and hopefully establish his status as an insider. However, Adit's realisation and transformation from his love for England to disenchantment with England is only metaphorically portrayed by Desai: "He felt drained of the brightness of life, as though blood had ceased to flow inside him" (175). Desai lapses here into a poetic and subjective style and therefore, she is unable to offer any clear explanation or concrete

reasons for Adit's sudden detachment with his surroundings:

He could not tell himself, "My mother-in-law hates and despises me. Dev makes fun of the life I lead and the ideals I profess. Therefore I am angry. I am hurt." It was nothing so precise and definable. This was not the sole or even the main reason for his mood. (176)

Could it be India's war with Pakistan during 1965 and the resurgence of Adit's nationalist feelings? Perhaps not. Adit's mood of disenchantment with England is juxtaposed upon Dev's eventual reconciliation with England and his otherness. Unlike Adit, Dev is now "determined to seek, discover and win the England of his dreams and reading" (168). At this point in the novel, the authorial voice poses the question, "Why, then, was it Adit who was leaving while [Dev] stayed on? What had made them exchange the garments of visitor and exile?" (228). Desai's poetic answer remains highly mysterious/ambivalent:

Somewhere, at some point that Summer, England's green and gold fingers had let go of Adit and clutched at Dev instead. England had let Adit drop and fall away as if she had done with him or realised that he had done with her, and caught and enmeshed his friend, Dev. (224)

However, the personification of England as the siren or temptress who entraps her victims is paradoxical on two levels. Firstly, Adit who has seen the gold in England and Sarah's golden hair is now aware of the limitations of his vision, and the relationship between the "siren" and Adit is symbolically over. Adit declares: "I've had enough. It's all got to end now. There must be a change. A - a big change. I've got to do it" (202). Adit wants to get rid of his life of "pretense" in England and begin to live in the "reality" of India. If he ever chooses to return to England, it would perhaps be on very different terms. Furthermore, Sarah's golden hair has now been transformed into the "Indian landscape" (180), and England and India become symbolic extensions of Sarah. Secondly, England is transformed into the aggressor and the colonizer, attempting to control and entwine the colonized and getting rid of him when she is "done with him". Desai's image of "England's green and gold fingers" is reminiscent of the Imperialist attitude toward the colonies.

D.S. Maini claims that the resolution in Bye-Bye Blackbird is a "novelist's manipulation in short" (227). Hari Mohan Prasad claims that "[t]he dilemma of Dev all along and of Adit for a great length is seated in the mind, not rooted in the self" (66). However, Desai's portrayal of the decisions of her characters to return to

India or stay in England is largely related to the socio-political situations and personal issues at hand. Dev and Adit are not entrapped in purely existential dilemmas because their anxiety is externally caused by their cultural and social exile/alienation. In all likelihood, the decisions made by Adit and Dev are not absolute. Adit reminds Sarah that they will return back to England if they are unhappy in India, and even after accepting England, Dev is suspicious about the attitudes of the conductor and the old lady in the train (230), thus highlighting that his acceptance of England is not complete.

Dev's decision to remain in England matures during his sojourn in the countryside. He ceases to view England as the aggressor and finds in the rambling countryside the replica of his conception of England: "[He] found his dreams had been an exact, a detailed, a brilliant and mirrorlike reflection of reality. English literature! English poetry! he wanted to shout and, instead, raised his arms to the sky, clasped them, in pagan worship, in schoolboy excitement" (170). Dev's acceptance of England is located in the fusion of his internal and external conceptions of place. Encouraged and accepted by the open arms of nature, he adopts an attitude of romantic enthusiasm and feels the "rapture of a victor and lover, a rapture that accompanied him back to London so that he no

longer saw it with the eyes of a member of a once-conquered race, or of an apprehensive and short-sighted visitor, but of someone before whom vistas of love, success and joy had opened" (229). Dev's sense of being accepted highlights the philosophical notion that the post-colonial person should first find meaning and a centre within his/her true self before he/she learns to embrace the external reality at large. Adit's decision to return to India, on the other hand, reflects that every post-colonial person reacts differently to his sense of otherness; there is no simple formula that applies to every person in a marginalized situation. In the end, the confrontation between self and other becomes a confrontation between true Self and the egotistical self.

This confrontation between Self and self is most evident in Adit's British wife, Sarah. Sarah's decision to marry an Indian/outsider creates in her a crisis of identity. Her true Self enables Sarah to take charge of her own destiny, but the egotistical self makes her over-conscious and sensitive to the racial implications of her marriage. Desai's sensitive portrayal of the East-West marriage captures the paradoxes and ironies in the situation; the power relationship between the colonizer and the colonized is inverted. Sarah, as British and a woman is doubly marginalized. She cannot and does not understand and appreciate many Indian customs and values.

Forced to participate in Adit's Indian group, she becomes an outsider and cannot penetrate the "foreign world" of Adit and his Indian friends (25). She cannot understand the language, jokes and banter and openness of Indian relationships and their sentimentalism. Her situation as the colonized is most apparent when Adit forces her to cook Indian food and wear a sari and heavy, gold jewellery. But, since Sarah loves Adit, she goes about the business of living quite placidly, carrying her anxieties and emotional burdens inside her. She faces the anguish of her loneliness with courage. Adit's insensitivity to the private agony of Sarah heightens her sense of otherness. However, Sarah tries her best to accommodate Adit's idiosyncracies in order to find peace and harmony in her marital relationship.

But, Sarah's displacement/alienation is double edged; she constantly lives with a dichotomous personality. She strives to be English at work and Indian at home. She rejects any attempts to find a compromise between these two worlds and is upset when Philippa requests her for Indian stamps. Her fear that the secret of her two identities would be revealed creates a sense of paranoia in her behaviour. She avoids people, especially her British friends and colleagues and their questions about her personal life. Julia Baines retorts, "If she's that ashamed of having an Indian husband, why did she go and

marry him?" (37). Sarah's failure to find her centre creates a dilemma. She wonders

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, who sent out the bills and took in cheques, kept order in the school and was known for her efficiency? Both these creatures were frauds, each had a large, shadowed element about it She had so little command over these charades she played each day . . . she could not even tell with how much sincerity she played one role or the other. (34)

Desai's portrayal of Sarah also encompasses her recurrent theme of alienation and lack of communication in marriage. Sarah does not express her feelings of being an outsider in her own country to Adit. Desai claims that Sarah's alienation is self-imposed because "she chooses it deliberately by marrying a foreigner. She is an exile in her own land, in her own country" (Desai, "An Interview with Jain" 14). Perhaps Adit is incapable of understanding Sarah's situation. Desai probes further into the possibilities and implications of an interracial marriage. The Punjabi matriarch expresses a common concern about an East-West marriage when she says;

When I hear of our boys coming here and marrying English girls, I always feel pain here inside me. I feel pain for the girl and also for the boy because I know how hard their life will be and that the English girl can never belong to us. (218)

However, both Adit and the Punjabi matriarch believe that Sarah is the reincarnation of a Bengali girl. Ironically, they can accept her as "one of them" only by establishing her otherness.

Sarah's precarious position is clearly exemplified during her visit to her parents' home. The sharp contrasts between the volatile and loquacious Indians and the reserved British are comically drawn by Desai, not only through their manners but also in their food habits. Adit and his friends literally invade the Roscommon's kitchen and make pakoras and chutney for themselves, insensitively rejecting the watercress sandwiches that their hostess has prepared for them. Neither is comfortable with the other, caught up in ethnocentric and racial prejudices and misconceptions. Sarah too is misplaced in this parody of manners between centre and the other. In a sense, she is neither English nor Indian. The only explanation that she can offer to her mother is that "everyone [is] a bit different from the other but not too much" (139). In defending Adit, Sarah shows her

loyalty and love for him and is very concerned for his personal happiness and well-being. However, in the process, she is swept by an anguish because she has "become nameless, she [has] shed her name as she [has] shed her ancestry and identity" (31). Reading Kipling's Plain Tales from the Hills, she is perhaps made aware of the clear demarcation between the East and West.

Adit's decision to return to India forces Sarah out of her neutrality. But it is certainly not an easy situation for her. Desai captures her sense of despair as well as mild hopefulness in these poetic words:

Sarah felt herself as nothing more than a chipped cup that was not worth the trouble of packing up or giving away but was best left here, like the remains of a picnic, a holiday on a lonely bank or a deserted beach. She listened to the waves receding down this beach on which she had been left, listened to footsteps sinking down the road. At this moment her curiosity and her courage shrank inside her into a single drop of rainwater, a flake of ice, and she could hardly believe that Adit would be able to lift her and to transport her to a land where she would regain warmth and personality. If she was to come to life there again, she was sure it would be as a new, a different personality.

Perhaps this would make it all easier for her,
for Adit, for everyone. (221)

Pushed between this and that, she chooses to release "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 - not saying good-bye to England [which] was always within the scope of a return visit" (221). Like Adit and Dev, Sarah knows that one has to constantly make decisions in one's life. Sarah's choice, to a certain extent, is based on a lack of choice, because Adit's decision to return to India is made independent of her wishes. However, the realisation of her pregnancy and its social and moral ramifications forces her to choose in favour of accompanying her husband to India. Adit's and Sarah's child will be the product of the fusion of the East and West. Even if the East is East and the West is West and the twain shall never meet, the offspring of East and West will function as an intersection between the two worlds.

Sarah's decision to return to India with Adit is by no means a perfect resolution of her problems. It is not even a temporary solution of the insider/outsider dilemma. She might accept India but whether or not India would accept her is not known. There are no guarantees on either side. She feels the doubleness/duality of her situation in most realistic terms:

things her child would not know and enjoy and tried to stop herself by attending to another list, the list of things the child would know and enjoy, but in spite of the substantial length of this list, she could not help biting her lips and casting another look at the pleasures it would have to forego. (223)

Sarah's inner pain and doubt at her condition are quite visible in the scene of her departure from England:

Sarah leaned out - one arm waving, briefly, slowly, in doubt or unwillingness, she herself could not say. She called out a subdued goodbye to the little dark knot on the platform, waving. The last she saw of it was Bella's bright head in its midst, like a saucy marigold in a city window-box, last symbol of London's cockney staunchness that she was losing now, had lost already. (228)

In Bye-Bye Blackbird, the theme of insider/outsider is directly related to the sense of place, accommodation and alienation. The major characters are racial and cultural exiles. Only when they find a centre within themselves and make a decision to accept, accomodate or adapt, do they regain an insider status. The post-colonial person and his/her otherness finds expression in his/her efforts to locate meaning in this world. Desai

does not offer any simple solutions, simply because there are none. The search for meaning is always different for each individual, and some sense of alienation is inevitable in the post-colonial or the immigrant situation.

Critics who claim that Desai is a purely psychological writer simply ignore the fact that in Bye-Bye Blackbird, she offers a highly perceptive treatment of social issues of cultural alienation, East-West encounter and the protagonists' search for the centre. In addition, the descriptions of the city and the countryside, mannerisms of the Easterners and Westerners, racial and cultural prejudices and the economic realities of the job market are presented in social-realist terms. These critics have not perceived her implied artistic aims accurately. Bye-Bye Blackbird is markedly different from a novel like Cry, the Peacock. Desai is not only vivid in her portrayal of a socio-political reality in Bye-Bye Blackbird, but also highly successful in the aesthetic presentation of her cross-cultural vision.

Chapter Two

Fire on the Mountain

In an interview with Jasbir Jain, Anita Desai claims that Fire on the Mountain is one of her best works and one that has given her the most satisfaction and has come "closest to what [she] set out to do" (12). Indeed, Fire on the Mountain is a celebrated novel that the critics and scholars extol for its psychological explorations which distinguish Desai as a writer of the inner landscape. Madhusudan Prasad says that "in Fire on the Mountain, Desai again handles, as she has done in all her earlier novels, an existential theme with consummate delicacy and dexterity" (78). Undoubtedly, in comparison with Bye-Bye Blackbird, Fire on the Mountain is primarily psychological in its portrayal of the anguish of its aged protagonist, Nanda Kaul and her confrontation with her past, the fate of her great-granddaughter, Raka, and friend, Ila Das. While Bye-Bye Blackbird is more concerned with explicit social and political issues pertaining to the immigrant experience in terms of the East-West encounter, Fire on the Mountain relies heavily on the atmosphere of the mind and the awakening of consciousness.

Although Fire on the Mountain is explicitly a

psychological novel, it nonetheless reveals the social issues that affect the inner psyche of its characters. This highlights the inextricability of the psychological issues from the social framework inherent in the novel. Fire on the Mountain highlights an important and crucial question in Indo-Anglian fiction in its portrayal of the treatment of women in a traditional and patriarchal society. Desai is not a feminist propagandist and while her explorations of the psyche of women who are affected by their external circumstances are experimental in nature and raises many valid and important questions, she offers no explicit solutions. As a writer, Desai has recognised the limitations of her portrayal of women and her failure to provide any resolutions/solutions in her fiction; she began to see that [she] had imbibed, without

thinking, that old male dictum of Accept or Die by which women lived in India, [and] that [she] had not allowed her characters to so much as criticize the system let alone alter it.

(Canada-India Opportunities 163)

Desai's approach falls short of Lukacsian critical realism, that is, she does not offer any social criticism of the system or provide alternatives/answers to what is being criticized, be it the patriarchal oppression or cultural alienation suffered by her characters. However, her opinions are indirectly though succinctly reflected in

Fire on the Mountain, where the women characters finally confront the truth about patriarchal tyranny, a truth which invariably pushes them to the margins of sanity. In this way, Desai highlights the necessity for some kind of change for Indian women in this position or situation.

Some critics give due attention to the social as well as psychological issues in the novel. Jain claims that "Fire on the Mountain is about women, their vulnerabilities and their helplessness" (141). Bande asserts that for women in the novel, "outer forces do affect the workings of their minds, but their trouble is ingrained in the sense of insecurity developed in the claustrophobic atmosphere they live in" (91). The women in Fire on the Mountain constantly struggle to remain as insiders and end up being outsiders in their frantic efforts to find meaning and happiness in their lives by fighting against a society based on the "old male dictum".

Women are thwarted by Indian tradition and mentality, since in a patriarchal, hierarchical society, the ruling system ordains that woman's role is in the home, as wife and mother, where the male dominates over the female. Indian society is generally full of faithful, docile and subservient wives. As such, Indo-Anglian fiction generally applauds a traditional portrayal of the Indian female who is usually the obedient and hardworking daughter, a meek and submissive wife, and the self-

sacrificing and suffering mother. She is brought up to go through her roles (domestic, social and biological) in a quiet and conventional manner. For an Indian wife, the traditional code of conduct is that of the "Pativratadharma which consists of atmasamarpana -merging her identity in that of her husband's - having no views or voice different from her husband's" (Shirwadkar 65). As such, it is very difficult for an Indian woman to rebel or raise an outcry in order to assert her own identity. Even when she does protest, she ultimately fails because the forces of cultural inculcation cannot be overcome completely. She must face public shame and dishonour and many women find this too great a price to pay. Unlike her Western counterpart, the Indian woman may not have the economic or financial independence to leave an unhappy marriage. Her upbringing forces her to put up with her wifely and motherly roles at all costs. The Indian woman opts to remain in a marital situation even when it stifles and hurts, rather than asserting her will or getting a divorce. In the Indian culture, a divorcee or a widow is looked down upon because she does not have a man.

An Indian woman inevitably turns to man for comfort and solace, love and companionship, economic security and her desire to have children and property. She wants to be free and independent, but paradoxically, this freedom is invariably expressed in terms of her relationship with

man. She wants to be respected as man's equal and wants a sexually satisfying relationship. She expects man to be successful in his career and be capable of sensitive response to her inner psyche. And yet she fails to assert her independence because of society's expectations of her role as dutiful wife and mother, thus creating a contradiction between her private self and the public role.

Desai's women cannot be compared to their Western counterparts and expected to rebel in a similar fashion. The Indian woman's fight for her independence is different from her Western sister's. She must begin by recognising and refusing to put up with patriarchal oppression and by taking the appropriate action within her traditional framework. Desai's depiction of women in Fire on the Mountain is situated within such Indian thinking and environment. Nanda Kaul, Ila Das and Raka are all victims of patriarchy and each struggles in her individual way to be independent and happy.

Nanda Kaul's life appears to be in constant tension as a wife and mother; ultimately she is merely an outsider in her household because of her loveless marriage. Nanda Kaul's confrontation with her sad past and tragic failure as a woman is described in terms of four psychological stages: her withdrawal to Carignano, her apparent rejection of Raka, her attempts at reaching out to Raka

through fantasy, and finally the shattering of her illusions and recognition of the truth of her situation at the death of her friend, Ila Das. Through the interpretative role of memory, the narrative voice exposes the contradictions between illusion and truth, fantasy and reality. Nanda Kaul's centre of meaning has been constantly in flux because of her inability to make hard choices in her life. It is her acceptance of status quo that brings about her downfall while her psyche silently suffers the agony and anguish of her predicament. As Inder Nath Kher points out, most Indian women are caught up in their traditional role models and hence "their anguish of living does not stem from their courage to choose their own destiny; rather it is caused by their inability to choose and make themselves" (176).

Nanda Kaul's withdrawal to Carignano is rooted in her desire and resolve: "she wanted no one and nothing else" and all that "she was prepared to undertake" was "to be a tree, no more and no less" (4). Content with the beautiful scenery, apricot trees and the arid environment of Carignano, she resents any intrusion into her private domain and is unnerved even by the approach of the postman and the rings of the telephone. She claims to yearn for solitude in a "period of her life when stillness and calm were all that she wished to entertain" (17). The narrative voice, however, exposes Nanda Kaul's sojourn to

Carignano as a decision lacking actual choice because no one wanted to keep her elsewhere and her "sons and daughters had come to help her empty the Vice-Chancellor's house, pack and crate their belongings and distribute them and then, escort her to Kasauli None could stay with her" (30-31). The death of her husband signifies the end of her function as the figurehead of the Kaul household. Her children prove extremely selfish and self-centred. Carignano is all that is left for her at this point. Internally, Nanda Kaul feels bitter about her lonely situation because she has spent most of her life mothering and playing her wifely duties:

She had had her cane chair there, too, and she had sat there, not still and empty but mending clothes, sewing on strings and buttons and letting out hems the slovenly, neurotic ayahs she had to have because there was such a great deal of washing and ironing to do and Mr. Kaul had always wanted her in silk, at the head of the table in the dining room, entertaining his guests closing the wire screen doors behind her to keep out the flies, looking sharply to see if the dark furniture, all rosewood, had been polished and the doors of the gigantic cupboards properly shut (18)

Nanda Kaul does not find any real satisfaction or

happiness in this role. At Carignano, out of frustration, she wants a barren and quiet life. She finds comfort in reading an article in The Pillow Book of Sei Shonagon in which a woman is encouraged to allow her house to be "dilapidated" and "overgrown" (27). However, Nanda Kaul constantly wavers between withdrawal and the need for communication; she allows herself to be surrounded by animate and inanimate means of communication: the postman, the telephone, Ram Lal, Raka and Ila Das. In spite of her fascination with starkness and barrenness, she continues to wear her silk sarees up in the deserted hills of Kasauli.

Desai highlights the futility and unnaturalness of Nanda Kaul's withdrawal through nature imagery. Nanda Kaul's desire to be "left to the pines and cicadas alone" and to "imitate death, like a lizard" (23) is but a reflection of the state of her inner being. She selectively rejects the images of mothering in nature in the hoopoe(4) and the domestic call of the cuckoo (19) and the langurs and their young. She seems to enjoy the barren and stark aspects of nature. But, in rejecting the totality and wholeness of the natural world, of life and death, joy and sorrow, she reveals her own painful experience as wife and mother, which has been largely grim and unfulfilling.

By going to Carignano, Nanda Kaul symbolically

attempts to escape her role as the Other, which Simone de Beauvoir describes as the Female polar to man, where "he is Subject, he is Absolute - she is the Other" (16). In being the Other, in a traditional and patriarchal society, Nanda Kaul leads her life as a dutiful and obedient wife and mother. Her identity/being is defined in terms of her position as Mrs. Nanda Kaul. In the context of the modern Indian ethos and of woman's place in the post-colonial society, Nanda Kaul is marginalized as an individual. The contradiction inherent in this situation is that she is an outsider to her subjectivity but an insider to her tradition and society by accepting her roles and the status quo. The flashback technique uncovers the malaise in the heart of Nanda Kaul. In the stillness and quiet of Carignano, she recalls her illusory "moment of private triumph, cold and proud" when she had been alone in the garden of the Vice-Chancellor's home. Nanda Kaul's sense of victory is hollow and unwarranted because the truth of the situation reveals that Nanda Kaul has witnessed the return of her husband with his mistress:

He had been to drop some of the guests home -no, she corrected herself with asperity, one of the guests home. She watched him go up the veranda steps, puffing at his cigar, and smell his rich tobacco. She had stood very still in the shadow flung by the logat tree in the corner of the

lawn. (26)

Nanda Kaul's marriage to Mr. Kaul is devoid of true love and sexual commitment because her husband has had a lifelong affair with Miss David, "the Mathematics mistress, whom he had not married because she was a Christian but whom he had loved" (145) all his life.

Nanda Kaul does not fully confront her husband and her pathetic protest takes the form of having her husband's bed put into a small dressing room. However, Desai's vivid imagery highlights her inner turmoil:

A lapwing started up in the mustard fields beyond the garden hedge, and rose, crying in the air. That nervous, agitated bird, thought Nanda Kaul, watching its uneven flapping flight through the funereal moonlight, what made it leap so in fright, descend again on nervous feet, only to squawk and take off once more, making the night ring with its cries? That hunted, fearful bird, distracted and disturbing.

(26)

Nanda Kaul allows her inner fire to keep on smoldering, under the pretense that she is the grey cat, watching the lapwing in the night. It is true that Nanda Kaul refuses to acknowledge openly her own tormented feelings because she prefers to disregard Mr. Kaul's mistress rather than confront her existence as her husband's lover. Desai does

not explore the theme of sexuality in the novel. The animal imagery may, however, reflect Nanda Kaul's suppressed sexual needs. Nanda Kaul's fascination for the animal world is further enhanced by the images of prey and predator, symbolising her own feelings of being the other.

The psychological upheaval in Nanda Kaul's life highlights the implicit social issues in Desai's novel. Looking at it from a particular Indian perspective, one may argue that Nanda Kaul is obeying the ancient Manava code that states that "the wife should tender implicit obedience to her husband even though he be devoid of virtue, seeks pleasure outside the home or beats her" (Neera Desai 14). Manu, the ancient Indian philosopher stipulates that the woman should be content in carrying out her wifely and motherly duties. She should not complain or go against her husband no matter what he does. Indian women are faced with such moral dilemmas in their marital situations and most, if not all, subscribe to their traditional value system. Although Nanda Kaul lives in a modern context where she may rebel if she chooses to, she opts to remain in her role as a dutiful wife and mother because of the social/traditional inculcation. The truth of the matter is also that she has chosen to suppress her inner psyche for the sake of economic and social status. She is unwilling to face the outcome of her possible rebellion because middle-class Indian women

are usually not trained or required to join the workforce.

Furthermore, Indian women are not willing to give up their social well-being because they realise that they will lose their social worth and respectability if they choose to challenge and expose their husbands in extra-marital situations. They would rather willingly bear their unhappiness because it is expected of them. They see themselves as incomplete without men regardless of the fact that they may be better off without them. The sociological perspective is that

A large number of [Indian] women still expect shelter, security and support from their husbands not merely because they are not trained for any occupation, but also for the reason that they have been taught to depend on menfolk.

(Ray 70)

Nanda Kaul's life, therefore, is psychologically and even socially unfulfilling. She is unable to find any genuine meaning in her role as wife or mother. She carries out her duties with a sense of foreboding and relinquishes her private self to the multitudes: "all right, she'd sigh, come, come all of you, get me, I'm yours, yours again" (24). In this way, to avoid conflict, most women, like Nanda Kaul, are discouraged from "exploring and expressing their needs" and consequently, they "transform their own needs" (Baker 19). In the process, they become bitter,

cynical and lonely. In this posture, Nanda Kaul is prevailed upon by her daughter, Asha, to keep Tara's daughter, Raka, her great-granddaughter.

Raka is an unwelcome intrusion in the life of Nanda Kaul. She comes from an unhappy home and a neglected family life and is a quiet, withdrawn and sickly child. To Nanda Kaul, Raka is "an intruder, an outsider, a mosquito flown up from the plains to tease and worry" (40). Nanda Kaul immediately seeks to reject any attempts to connect with another human being out of the fear of pain and rejection that she has experienced in the past: Looking down, over all those years she had

survived and borne, she saw them, not bare and shining as the plains below, but like the gorge, cluttered, choked and blackened with the heads of children and grandchildren, servants and guests, all restlessly surging, clamouring about her. (17)

The grotesque and horrendous imagery reflects Nanda Kaul's emptiness and the cynical and painful view that she has of her own role as wife and mother. Nanda Kaul's inability to find any meaning in her family situation and her silence was based on the paradoxical fear that "the threat of disruption of connections is perceived not just as a loss of a relationship but as something closer to a total loss of self" (Baker 83). Therefore, Nanda Kaul opted to

remain in a superficial but safe family structure.

However, now in her lonely, widowhood state, Nanda Kaul initially rejects Raka because she cannot risk attachment which might lead to disaster.

Interestingly, Raka is a child who herself withdraws from making any contact or connections outside her own private world. She is an outsider who refuses to conform to any norms or expectations. Nanda Kaul is shocked to find that

Raka ignored her so calmly, so totally that it made Nanda Kaul breathless. She eyed the child with apprehension now, wondering at this total rejection, so natural, instinctive and effortless when compared with her own planned and wilful rejection of the childNanda Kaul saw that she was the finished, perfected model of what Nanda Kaul herself was merely a brave, flawed experiment. (47)

Desai contrasts and juxtaposes the self-imposed withdrawal of Nanda Kaul and the natural and ingrained isolation of Raka. But, Desai also highlights the distinction between Nanda Kaul and Raka in these words:

If Nanda Kaul was a recluse out of vengeance for a long line of duty and obligation, her great-granddaughter was a recluse by nature, by instinct. She had not arrived at this condition

by a long route of rejection and sacrifice . . .

She was born to it, simply. (48)

Raka is described in terms of animal imagery. She is someone who is better able to respond to the animal world than the human one. According to Desai, Raka is "lizard-like", a "rabbit conjured up by a magician" and has "a pair of extravagantly large and somewhat bulging eyes" (39). Desai subtly hints at the similarity between Nanda Kaul and Raka; both characters are drawn towards nature because of the void in their personal lives. Desai interrelates the psyches of the characters with some aspects of the external landscape. Both Nanda Kaul and Raka experience fascination for destruction in charred places and burnt homes. The symbol of fire plays a great part in both of their lives, which "psychoanalysts consider [as] the objective phenomenon of an inner rage" (qtd. in Jain 100). Both Nanda Kaul and Raka are unable to find harmony between their psychological and social realities. Both seek to run away from what they so desperately need in their lives; they are unable to find love because of their inability or refusal to connect.

Trapped within a negative desire to remain detached and yet seek attachment of some sort, Nanda Kaul eventually weaves a world of fantasy in her effort to reach out to Raka. She is frustrated by Raka's apparent independence but recognises that Raka is a child in need

of love. In this case, Nanda Kaul plays the role of a predator in her effort to win Raka's attention; Raka becomes a "small fish gasping for its native air, but the old lady had her on the hook - a sharp, bright hook - and held the string tight" (95). Nanda Kaul is unable to win over Raka's confidence as Ram Lal does by accepting Raka without question or judgement. He warns her about the dangers in the ravine through stories concocted around some truth as well as fantasy; he cautions her against the jaguars, the snakes and the churails. Raka believes him because Ram Lal could "interest her . . . [and] at the same time give her reassurance of safety" (76). Nanda Kaul, on the other hand, undertakes to fabricate her past in her intense desire to win over Raka's attention. After reading The Travels of Marco Polo, Nanda Kaul captures Raka's attention by creating a fantastic story around the statue of Buddha, her father's impossible adventures in strange lands, and the ridiculous and amazing zoo she had in her childhood home. But Raka realises her game and soon loses interest in "the old lady's fantasy world" (100). Nanda Kaul faces failure in her desire for human contact, and later, she fails to give this contact to Ila Das when she needs it most. In the fabricated stories about her past, Nanda Kaul attempts to destroy or forget her past and seek refuge in a world of fantasy. But, from almost any perspective, escape into the world of illusion

is not possible. Nanda Kaul is unable to find meaning in her present because she fails to confront her life in the past and explore its possibilities. As Frankl puts it

[t]he eternal record cannot be lost - that is a comfort and a hope. But neither can it be corrected - and that is a warning and a reminder. It reminds us that, as nothing can be removed from the past For if everything is stored in the past forever, it is important to decide in the present what we wish to eternalize by making it part of the past.

(Unheard Cry for Meaning 125)

Raka resents and rejects Nanda Kaul's advances because she recognises Nanda Kaul's connection with a world which "had in its orderly austerity something she found confining, restricting" (91). Raka is beyond reach and remains the elusive catch. Like Nanda Kaul, Raka finds the world of contact disillusioning. She wants to live in her own solitary state as one who "[clings] to a rock - [her] boat, alone in [her] boat on the sea" (62).

Raka's fascination for the world of alienation and disaster is again poignantly reminiscent of Nanda Kaul's own barren and stark outlook. Raka, however, becomes a rebel in a society that fails to give her recognition and love. She is the product of a family that is in chaos and disharmony. Raka's outsider role is caused by the

perception she has of her family. This feeling of rejection and confusion is unearthed when she stumbles on the fancy dress party in the club:

Somewhere behind them, behind it all, was her father, home from a party, stumbling and crashing through the curtains of night, his mouth opening to let out a flood of rotten stench, beating at her mother with hammers and fists of abuse - harsh, filthy abuse that made Raka cower under her bedclothes and wet the mattress in fright, feeling the stream of urine warm and weakening between her legs like a stream of blood, and her mother lay down on the floor and shut her eyes and wept. Under her feet, in the dark, Raka felt that flat, wet jelly of her mother's being squelching and quivering, so that she didn't know where to put her feet and wept as she tried to get free of it. (71-72)

Raka is a product of a disrupted modern Indian family. Raka suffers the consequences of marital incompatibility and disharmony. Raka's mother, Tara, is a sorry example of a woman caught in a flux of changing social and moral values but unable to meet up to its demands. She is "reduced to a helpless jelly, put away out of sight and treated as an embarrassment who could, if she tried, pull

herself together" (14). Desai's view of marriage is expressed in negative terms; Raka's father is abusive while Tara's problem, according to her mother Asha, is that she is unable to "understand men" and that she is "the wrong type of wife for a man like him . . . " (15). Tara appears to be a traditional Indian woman who grudgingly allows her husband to manipulate and control her being. Unable to fend for herself or her daughter, she is eventually confined to a sanatorium. Her failure as wife, mother and woman precipitates the physical sickness and psychic rebellion of Raka.

Both Nanda Kaul and Tara are women who become the victims of a tradition that imposes the bondage of marriage upon them, despite the fact that they are emotionally and psychologically rendered bankrupt in the process. Desai shows that most Indian women prefer to bear their agony and abuse rather than take a stand against their situation and demand a divorce or their rights. Monisha in Voices in the City sets herself on fire because she cannot cope with her unhappy married life and joint family situation. Maya in Cry, the Peacock ends up pushing her husband off the terrace because he does not respond to her inner feelings and sensitivity. Sita in Where Shall We Go This Summer escapes to the island of Manori, attempting to seek refuge from her marital dissatisfaction. However, Desai also points out that the

failure to communicate one's inner fears and feelings to one's mate leads to destruction, not only of self but also of those that one loves.

Raka symbolizes the rebel who is willing to do away with a tradition that does not meet her needs as an individual. Her anger at an indifferent society is expressed in her desire for emptiness and destruction:

It made her ache for the empty house on the charred hill, the empty summer-stricken view of the plains below, the ravine with its snakes, bones and smoking kilns - all silent, and a forest fire to wipe it all away, leaving ashes and silence. (120)

She finally rejects the fantasies woven by Nanda Kaul and her efforts to connect. Ila Das' visit to Carignano precipitates Raka's inner fury and the ardent desire for silence and destruction.

While both Nanda Kaul and Raka seek to reject the past, Ila Das finds her present uncomfortable and future bleak. Her visit to Carignano turns out to be unpleasant and is seen as an intrusion by Nanda Kaul who attempts to erase the ghosts of her painful memories. Nonetheless, Ila Das revels in the memory of their glorious days at the Vice-Chancellor's house; in talking of these, she unwittingly exposes the truth of Nanda Kaul's position in her marriage and her husband's connection with Miss David:

Raka looked up, hardly able to believe her ears. She saw her great-grandmother carefully build a cage with her long fingers, a cage of white bones cracking apart. She saw Ila Das sitting silent, her mouth hanging open foolishly The badminton court - mixed doubles - Miss David - and here were Ila Das and Nanda Kaul, both beaten, silent. (122)

Nanda Kaul, at this point, represents the helpless victims of a system and society that marginalises women.

Ila Das' tragic situation stems from her unfortunate family circumstances, in which the

family fortune, divided amongst three drunken dissolute sons as in a story, and not a penny of it to either of the two clever, thrifty, hardworking daughters, Ila and Rima

They[brothers] pestered their mother and two sisters then, for the last of the jewelery, and soon had them driven out into rented rooms and boarding houses, finally to whatever roof charity would hold over them. Eventually, blessedly, they [the brothers] died. Or disappeared. (124)

From a critical perspective, it is hard to understand why women allow men, be it their brothers, fathers or husbands to ruin their lives when the law is available to protect

their rights. The Hindu Succession Act of 1956 states:

Property is taken in equal shares as absolute owners, with rights to sell, will and endow by the widow, mother, daughter, . . . as the case may be. The purpose of the law is to provide women, in the absence of social security adequate opportunities for employment, financial security and thus prevent destitution. (Ray 59)

Most Indian women, however, remain under the impression that they are socially inferior and legally unprotected and that the men have more rights bestowed upon them. They are ignorant of laws that are there to protect them, or their sense of loyalty to their families disallows them from taking legal action. Ila Das and her sister are awed by patriarchy so much so that they allow themselves to be driven into poverty by their brothers and bring ruin upon themselves.

However, Ila Das represents another dimension of a woman's role to Nanda Kaul. She does not succumb to a life of passivity. She fights her handicaps and finds real involvement in people's welfare as a social worker. It is ironical that it is Nanda Kaul who has helped Ila Das obtain her jobs. Anita Desai subtly points out that Nanda Kaul herself could have found economic security by taking up some job if she really wanted to. But Desai also shows through her characterization of Ila Das that

finding economic security is not easy and to maintain it involves great struggle. Furthermore, the Das sisters are misfits. Nanda Kaul "had watched those two horrifically ugly, hideously handicapped girls show the worth of their upbringing, their character" (124). There is a social stigma against women who have to fend for themselves and are not married. It is possible that this is why Nanda Kaul would rather stay in a marriage that provides all the social and material comforts of life. In presenting Ila Das as a working woman, Desai suggests an alternative course of action for women who find themselves in unacceptable social situations, but she also shows that Ila Das finally becomes a victim of the system when she is brutally raped and murdered by Prit Singh who wishes to marry off his minor daughter against the recommendation of Ila Das.

Ila Das' brutal murder forces Nanda Kaul to face her past, her truth. The suppression of her inner psyche inevitably leads to the shock of recognition that Ila Das' death precipitates:

She had lied to Raka, lied about everything . .

. . . Nor had her husband loved and cherished

her And her children were all alien to

her nature she did not live here alone

by choice - she lived here alone because that

was what she was forced to do, reduced to doing

(145)

Unfortunately, Nanda Kaul's realisation of her self occurs when it is too late and perhaps nothing can be done. The annihilation of self is almost complete and symbolically, Nanda Kaul as the dormant mountain is set on fire, leading to the destruction of self and nature. Nanda Kaul's end is superbly portrayed in surrealistic terms by Desai.

Nanda Kaul ironically achieves the stillness and solitude that she ardently desires all along. In the last scene of the novel, one finds Nanda Kaul sitting "on the stool with her head hanging, the black telephone hanging, the long wire dangling" (145). Desai resorts here to pure poetry; Raka's cry " Look, Nani, I have set the forest on fire. Look, Nani - look - the forest is on fire" (145) extends beyond the natural world and literal meaning.

Metaphorically speaking, she has destroyed the world of passivity, pain and despair. She has acted out the rage in the hearts of Nanda Kaul and Ila Das against an indifferent society which punishes even the strong and silent sufferer like Ila Das. By destroying the old order, Raka paves the way for a new beginning, a new society in which women will fight for their rights, their dignity and their respect as individuals.

Desai shows the price the Indian woman has to pay if she "chooses" to be like the dormant mountain. There is no stillness in nature except perhaps in death. It is

unnatural to be a recluse, to be utterly alone, and the Indian woman must give recognition to her emotional and psychological well-being. Perhaps, in the modern Indian context, it is the institution of marriage itself that needs to be examined as it imposes too much burden of social and cultural values on the individuals, particularly females. It is undeniable that most Indian marriages are not based on elements of personal compatibility but rather on social, cultural or financial reasons, as shown in the case of Monisha and Jiban and Jit and Sarla in Voices in the City and Maya and Gautama in Cry, the Peacock. All these marriages are bound to fail because they lack elements of shared human experience and meaningful communication between males and females. It is important to recognise the emotional landscape of a male-female relationship. The orthodox Indian perspective should change because

emotionality does not belong to the expected role behaviour in this relationship, on the contrary, a romantic love between husband and wife is undesired, because it endangers other family relationships and would be explosive for the patriarchal family. Husband and wife meet each other as strangers, their relationship is formal, emotionally distant and sex-centred.

(Mies 102)

Since Mr. Kaul has shown the capacity for a loving relationship with Miss David, his marriage to Nanda Kaul is probably based on the religious and cultural need for a Hindu bride rather than genuine love. He seems to sanction his own extra-marital liaison by giving his wife the control of household matters and establishing the illusion that she is the "queen" of the household in her silk sari. But he denies her the rights of a wife, reducing her to merely a child-bearing machine. He fails in his role as lover and nurturer. However, Desai presents an allegedly adulterous relationship without making any direct comment on the situation. She also fails to provide us with Mr. Kaul's perspective, and since Nanda Kaul explores her past through her memory, there is no guarantee whether her depiction is a true picture of the circumstances or merely an impressionistic account of what she imagined. But, nonetheless, the poignant revelation of Nanda Kaul's loss of self in her marriage is disturbing.

If we look at Ila Das and Raka as psychological projections of Nanda Kaul, Desai's subversive message can be found. Through them, Desai seems to be saying that the world is indifferent and uncaring but the individuals must seek to find a personal sense of meaning and happiness in their own lives. There is no escape from the sense of futility and destruction for those who simply give in to

the pressures of society. But for those who, like Raka, take a stand against the unacceptable conditions of their lives, or those who, like Ila Das, cultivate an attitude to fend for themselves, even though they may not be able to change the existential conditions of their lives, there is always hope and meaning in their courage to be in spite of all odds.

In Clear Light of Day (1980); Desai offers a portrayal of a more positive and enlightened Indian woman in Bim and Tara. She shifts from the over-sensitive and overtly tradition-ridden women to women who are more in control of their lives. These women stand against the current in a dignified and self-fulfilling manner. Even the marriage institution is reflected upon favorably in so far as Tara and Bakul are concerned in Clear Light of Day. Their marriage symbolizes continuity and Tara's daughters bring hope for a new generation of women who are educated, well-travelled and able to decide their future on their own.

Although Desai's fiction does not present any particular role model for the new and independent Indian woman, it deals with the issues of feminine sensibility and presents the awakening of female consciousness. Although the female characters are in the initial stages of their rebellion against patriarchy and orthodox tradition, the most important step in this direction is

the general recognition of feminine rage and protest against the injustices of male-dominated society. The psychological explorations of the inner lives of female characters provide an important and significant step toward the literature of concern and dissent. Finally, the silent and self-sacrificing traditional Indian woman has gained a voice and a presence that must be heard and felt in fiction. Desai herself says that

As a writer, I am committed to survival - to the survival of my word if not my physical self. I must find the ways in which a woman can not only survive in Indian society but allow her voice to speak and be heard. (Canada-India Opportunities 160)

Certainly, Desai's women face a large variety of situations and hence take their stand against the currents of society in various ways. There is no one simple or perfect formula. Some, like Tara in Clear light of Day succeed in creating balance and harmony in their marriages, while some, like Bim, Tara's sister, reconcile with their lonely but purposeful lives; they deliberately remain unmarried and shape their destiny with courage and determination. In Voices in the City, Aunt Lila adumbrates her philosophy about the roles of women in a free society and advises Amla in these words:

You belong to such a uniquely free generation

and that is something very new in our country. At least we have won our freedom and can do as you choose. How much you can do - how many careers and vocations and all the spirit and intelligence to do it with I hope you will not think it enough merely to be young, to be able to read any book you choose to read, to ride on a bus amongst silly young men, to go to a concert at night. With such opportunities at hand, you must surely want something greater than pleasure alone or the security of marriage alone - something more rare, more responsible.

(Desai 21)

Anita Desai's fiction must be given the recognition that it deserves; although a novel like Fire on the Mountain is largely a psychological exploration of the inner lives of its female characters, it also provides a social discourse. The treatment of the Indian woman in all her complexity is a new and growing phenomenon in Indo-Anglian fiction. Desai seeks to awaken the consciousness of both her female characters and readers, and in doing so, exemplifies the predicament and courage of Indian women in post-colonial India. She handles with dexterity the psychological as well as social issues by probing into the problems of patriarchy, male-female relationships, marriage and the plight of the working

woman in an urbanized, industrial society. Though she offers no definitive solutions or models, implicitly, her fiction continually presents challenges to spiritual slavery, passive acceptance of retarded value system and lack of self-recognition in human beings, especially women. Although she never openly challenges the 'old male dictum', she exposes the precariousness of mute adherence to social values that inevitably lead to the distortion of the inner landscape. In this manner, Desai's portrayal of reality in Fire on the Mountain captures the interior as well as exterior worlds of her characters and their struggles to create a harmonious centre. Desai's novel is one of the best examples of psychological and social realism.

Chapter Three

Baumgartner's Bombay

Desai's growth and maturity as a novelist is reflected in her latest novel, Baumgartner's Bombay (1988). She veers away from a purely psychological and poetic style which embellishes earlier novels like Cry, the Peacock (1963), Where Shall We Go This Summer (1975) and Fire on the Mountain (1977). Instead, in Baumgartner's Bombay. Desai experiments with and successfully combines psychological, social-realistic and surrealistic elements that portray the cultural alienation and loneliness of the protagonist, Hugo Baumgartner, who is caught up in social upheavals such as ethnic persecution and the violence that emanates from wars. In 1984, Desai stated that she "found [that she] was tiring of writing of the woman's world" (Canada-India Opportunities 163). As a novelist committed to growth, she wanted to "leave behind that enormous weight of fine impressions, sensations and secret thoughts that had become oppressive and suffocating, and deal with action and achievement and experience at last" (Canada-India Opportunities 163). Desai wanted to "write about men, create male characters and describe their world" (Canada-India Opportunities 163). These desires and

somewhat new directions in her artistic vision are more or less embodied in In Custody (1984) and Baumgartner's Bombay (1988).

Desai's technique in Baumgartner's Bombay shows or reflects a new sophistication and mature handling of her material. She abandons the stream of consciousness technique familiar in novels like Cry, the Peacock, Fire on the Mountain and Clear Light of Day. In Baumgartner's Bombay, Desai relies heavily on the flashback technique, juxtaposing the present and past, moving back and forth, achieving both sequentiality and simultaneity in the narrative. The novel achieves a cohesive and comprehensive picture of Baumgartner's childhood in Germany and his adult life in India. The novel begins with Baumgartner's murder and the concluding chapter deals with the circumstances leading to his violent end, displaying a linear progression of time and a circular movement of events from Baumgartner's life to his death. Through an omniscient narrator, Desai presents an objective but sensitive insight into Baumgartner's predicament and his heroic struggle to survive against all odds. In Baumgartner's Bombay, Desai also offers a critique of history through the scenes and events in the novel, grounding the work within a realistic framework.

In Baumgartner's Bombay, Desai's social vision and conscience are highly visible in her portrayal of the

poverty and degradation of the homeless in the streets of Bombay and Calcutta. She is neither overtly judgemental nor attempts to provide any solutions or answers to their predicament. Yet, she successfully strikes a sense of pathos in the reader in her realistic and unsentimental presentation of the family who

. . . lived on the pavement in front of Hira Niwas. They worked constantly at reinforcing the shelter they had built here, flattening out packing-cases for walls and tin cans for the roof, attaching rags to the railing around Hira Niwas and stretching them on to their own rooftop He had to avoid the gnarled and rotting feet of the man who always lay in a drunken stupor . . . as well as the pile of cooking pots that the woman washed in the gutter . . . and the heaps of faeces that the children left along the same gutter (6-7)

Throughout the novel, the narrator offers Baumgartner's personal view of the homeless and the poverty-stricken people who can barely make ends meet. Baumgartner is thankful for a roof over his head, though he too is homeless culturally and psychologically. His attitude toward the homeless in India is perceptively expressed in these words:

he never walked past them, never turned his back without feeling the hairs on the back of his neck rise, a brief prickle of - not exactly fear, but unease, an apprehension. He knew the absolute degradation of their lives; he knew the violence it bred - the brawling in the night, the beating, the weeping. Now the effect of it all had become dulled, but in the beginning it had appalled (7)

In this way, the "dulled" effect of poverty seems to create a sense of gradual disregard and the homeless continue to be pushed to the periphery where "life washed up in drifts, like debris" (9). Even Baumgartner, with all his concern and humanity, ultimately learns to look the other way and be grateful for his own poor and shabby existence.

In Baumgartner's Bombay, Desai avoids a highly poetic style and presents a more objective and realistic focus on reality through the major scenes and events. As in Bye-Bye Blackbird, Desai's narrator gives a vivid and detailed account of the atmosphere and people in London, in Baumgartner's Bombay the narrator gives an authentic flavour to Baumgartner's sightseeing in Venice:

At San Marco he paid a coin to see the pala d'Oro and imagine, when close to the gems encrusting the gold sheet, that he was already

in an Oriental potentate's palace He climbed up in the basilica and walked through the marble maze The throngs in the chapels below, the incense, the candlewax, the flickers of light and colour in the furry dark, all oppressed him (59)

However, in Calcutta, the description of place presents a clear picture of poverty and steers away from any romantic or exotic visions of the city:

Not that the house provided any kind of shelter from the city. Down at the bottom of the lane there was a gap in the wall where the gate had once been and one entered through that into the wall since the wall had crumbled and in many places disappeared, allowing beggars, cattle, stray dogs and vendors of the whole locality to wander in and set up wherever they found space. (174)

Thus, in Baumgartner's Bombay, there are explicit scenes and events that highlight Desai's social concerns that are often claimed to be missing from her works. She does not resort purely to imagery and symbols in this novel and her descriptions of places, people and events are highly realistic.

The social and psychological issues and concerns in Baumgartner's Bombay are effectively brought out through

the story of a man without family or country, an eternal outsider, accepting but unaccepted in India, as he was in Hitler's Germany. The novel offers a portrait of loneliness, cultural alienation, nostalgia, courage and love in the chaos of violence and human degradation. Malashri Lal states that "Desai rearranges a complicated sociology through the experiences of the lovable, clumsy. old Hugo Baumgartner" (282). The protagonist, Hugo Baumgartner, shows great courage and heroism in order to survive in a war-ridden society of Europe as well as India. The narrative structure of the novel itself emphasizes the chaos of existence both in the opening and concluding chapters; it begins with Baumgartner's friend Lotte's reaction to his death and the concluding chapter deals with the events leading to this gruesome event.

The novel opens with Lotte running away from the "blood-splattered scene" (1) in Baumgartner's apartment. The confusion and mayhem are effectively highlighted in Lotte's desperate attempts to regain her composure when she reaches her home. Caught in a nightmarish scene, Lotte mumbles "Not Hugo. Not God. Nothing" (2) and struggles even in making a cup of coffee. Filled with agitation and despair, Lotte's reaction emphasizes the absurdity of life:

When she pulled herself together and saw what she was doing, what she had done, she found

everything in a mess, reflecting her face, reflecting herself. The coffee spilt, the cards scattered, the bottle emptied, the glass lying on its side. A scene in miniature, copying the scene at Hugo's that she had fled. (3)

The scene that Lotte has fled from unfolds in the last chapter of the novel, where utter confusion prevails when Baumgartner's dead body is discovered. Total chaos ensues: the fire brigade is wrongly summoned, the cats in Baumgartner's apartment become frenzied when the police dogs arrive, and Farrokh and Lotte, Hugo's only well-wishers, are distraught at the scene. In the pandemonium, Baumgartner's death becomes secondary; even in his final moment, he is pushed to the margins. The novel ends without apology or resolution, simply bringing one back to the beginning of the novel in Lotte's apartment. Lotte reads the postcards from Frau Baumgartner in Germany to her son in India; postcards that she has stolen from the scene of the crime have been Baumgartner's dearest possession:

By the teapot, on the table, she spread out the cards, sniffing at longer and longer intervals. She moved them about till they were all in an orderly row before her. All. Each one stamped with the number: J 6731/1. As if they provided her with clues to a puzzle, a meaning to the

meaningless. (230)

Desai depicts Baumgartner's life as a "meaning to the meaningless" (230), where the individual struggles simply to exist in a shapeless and chaotic universe. Ostracized from the mainstream, Baumgartner becomes the eternal outsider in all the stages of his life: his childhood, his forced immigration to India, his internment in a prisoners of war camp in India and finally, his old age.

Baumgartner's childhood in Germany is a relatively happy and secure stage in his life. Surrounded by richness, prosperity, decorum and opulence, Baumgartner basks in the love of his father who "strode . . . [and] paraded - his head held high, his hat gleaming like the wing of an airborne beetle" (23) while his mother "with violets pinned to her blouse . . . smiling the smile she smiled for no one but him" (33). However, even as a child, Baumgartner feels a sense of alienation and is psychologically affected by two events in his life. Firstly, Baumgartner's father's refusal to allow him to go to the horse races with him creates an anguish that he expresses as he "ran to the window and beat on the glass as if to break it . . ." (34). Secondly, his first experience of being discriminated against as a Jew foreshadows his lonely and tragic life as an adult. At a Christmas party in school, the young Baumgartner rejects a gift that the teacher hands him when she realises that he

has been left out. However, Baumgartner does not accept the gift, feeling a

. . . sense that he did not belong to the picture-book world of the fir-tree, the gifts and the celebration . . . But no one had said that. Was it just that he did not belong to the radiant, the triumphant of the world? A strange sensation, surely, for a child. He could not understand it himself, or explain it. It baffled him, and frightened him even - as if he realised that at that moment he had wilfully chosen to turn from the step up and taken the step down. (36-37)

His strong sense of alienation even as a child is a motif that continues throughout his life and is constantly emphasized by the narrator in the novel. However, Baumgartner's sense of alienation is not merely psychological; the social factors at hand contribute in perpetuating the child's instinctive sense of isolation.

The first major social upheaval in Baumgartner's life begins when the anti-Jewish sentiment escalates in Germany. The whole scene of prosperity changes drastically as the trouble between the Aryans and Jews intensifies. The disintegration of the Baumgartner family begins with the collapse of their business:

Hugo was not aware but his father knew that the

wealthy Jews who had patronised the place, buying whole suites of furniture . . . no longer were interested in anything so difficult to transport as furniture. They had put their money into moveable assets, or else emigrated - to England, to Holland, to Canada. (39)

The narrator highlights how the Jews in Germany suffer discrimination at the hands of the Nazis and how Baumgartner's fear is reflected "in the night [when] the noises were so hideous that Hugo stirred but only to slip deeper into his bed" (42) while looters destroy their showroom and paint racist slogans on their windows. The final breakdown of the Baumgartner family occurs when Baumgartner's father is taken away by the German soldiers and for "two weeks there was no news" (43). The narrator does not make any social comment, but merely portrays the psychological breakdown of Baumgartner's father who commits suicide when he is released from Dachau and is sent home to his family. In this manner, the stable framework of Baumgartner's childhood is stripped away by the Nazi persecution and eventually, Baumgartner, left in the company of his mother, finds that even their "apartment became strangely empty, and this emptiness matched the silence into which they sank" (51).

The discrimination against the Jews is summed up in the attitude of a friend, Herr Pfuehl, who wishes the

Baumgartners to leave:

Yes, he wanted them out, he wanted to be rid of the past history of the firm and of the Baumgartner name - but it was not only that. He was worried. He was afraid of being accused of harbouring Jews when Hitler was trying to rid the sacred fatherland of them Nor was Pfuehl entirely in disagreement with the Fuehrer's plans and ambitions, not at all - there were many points on which he agreed with him such as the need for seizing the power of commerce and industry from their unscrupulous hands (54)

Political and social ostracization by the Nazi Germans ultimately force Baumgartner to seek a safer place, and the Gentleman from Hamburg, a business partner, suggests to Baumgartner that in "India he may begin a new life . . ." (53). He arranges for Hugo's passage with a letter of recommendation to his acquaintance in the timber trade in India. Baumgartner is forced to leave Germany as his life is threatened by the social and political situation. Even the Gentleman from Hamburg claims that "I cannot protect you much longer. You must be gone" (55). There is no choice or alternative open to Baumgartner who must flee from his homeland to protect himself.

Desai effectively and realistically captures the

anguish and injuries suffered by the Jews in their expulsion from Europe. Her portrayal of Baumgartner's life in Germany and the Jewish persecution assumes social overtones as it mirrors historical truth and events as they occurred in Germany during the early twentieth century. Baumgartner's experience in Germany is identical to the one felt by Jews in Germany as reported by Weinberg in Because They Were Jews:

The summer of 1938 was a period of unparalleled persecution. Boycotts, beatings, expropriation and arrests In early November, under the initiative of Joseph Goebbels, a vast, coordinated pogrom broke out all over Germany. Windows of Jewish-owned stores were smashed, synagogues burnt down, houses and offices sacked and looted by Nazi demonstrators. The Kristallnacht - the night of crystals or glass splinters behind them. (109)

Desai transforms historical reality into fiction and bestows upon it a human dimension in her creative effort to tell a tale of one man caught in the social upheavals of persecution and alienation. While the historian states that "during the years 1933-39, some 300,000 out of 550,000 German Jews emigrated" (Weinberg 110) to escape the persecution in Germany, Desai as a writer, arouses the social and psychological impact of the persecution felt by

the Jews by focussing on the individual. In Desai's "Replies to the Questionnaire," she states that

If Truth is what I am striving for - why not adopt another literary form: history, biography or social document? [because] one realises the power of a novel to convey the truth far more vividly, forcefully and memorably than any number of factually correct documents, exhaustively detailed histories there is more to be learnt about Victorian England in one novel of Dickens than from all the histories of the period put together This is precisely because an artist knows how to, or at least sincerely strives to select from the vast amount of material he has to hand in that so-called Reality and present it vividly and significantly. (2-3)

In her search for truth, Desai exposes the social and psychological dimensions of history in Baumgartner's Bombay. For the discriminated individual, there are no easy solutions since he does not have any options or choices. He must simply escape the mindless persecution and rebuild his life the best he can. In this context, Baumgartner has to go to India and begin a new life.

On his way to India, Baumgartner's ship makes a stop-over in Venice. It is in Venice that Baumgartner feels

that he can "find for himself a new identity, one that suited him, one that he enjoyed. The air quivered with possibilities, with the suspense of quest and choice" (62-63). He meets a Jewish woman, a painter, in the hotel, but she disappears. It is this incident that arouses in him the disturbing question of his identity as a Jew and he wonders where he

. . . might [find] other Jews. Strange, in Germany he had never wanted to search them out, had been aware of others thinking of him as a Jew but had not done so himself. In ejecting him, Germany had taught him to regard himself as one. Perhaps it was important to find what she had called their "quarter". Perhaps over here he would find for himself a new identity
(63)

Baumgartner's quest for a place, similar to Dev's search for "sun, security, status and freedom" in London in Bye-Bye Blackbird (86), reflects the desire of the outsider/alien to centre his existence and meaning in a place that allows his entry and assimilation into the new land. However, Baumgartner's position is more precarious as he is internally as well as externally affected by his ethnic background. No matter where he goes, whether in his homeland or in a new land, he remains an outsider. However, in Venice, Baumgartner feels that

Venice was the East, and yet it was Europe too; it was that magic boundary where the two met and blended, and for those seven days Hugo had been a part of their union. He realised it only now: that during his constant wandering, his ceaseless walking, he had been drawing closer and closer to this discovery of that bewitched point where they became one land of which he felt himself the natural citizen. (63)

Perhaps Baumgartner feels that he can become the "natural citizen" in Venice because the city appears to offer a neutral ground for him; Venice is not entirely foreign nor unwelcoming and the proximity to Germany offers a sense of comfort. However, although Baumgartner finds a psychic connection with Venice, the economic reality of the situation forces him towards his journey to India. A virtual stranger with a short supply of money, he is unable to remain in Venice, although the memory of Venice haunts him even in his old age in India when he claims to Lotte that "If I could go, if I could leave, then I would go to Venice" (81). Thus, Baumgartner's brief stay in Venice marks his last connection with Europe as there is no returning back, especially when the war signals the devastation and destruction of Europe. Lotte's reflection on Europe highlights the reality of the situation when she states that "Europe was gone, all of it . . . there is

no home for us. So where can we go?" (81). Yet, Baumgartner and Lotte do eventually find a neutral ground in India and a safer haven to be in than the war-ridden Europe.

The next stage in Baumgartner's life begins with his arrival in India, and his assimilation and adaptation to Indian things. His entry into Bombay creates a sense of nostalgia and immediately establishes in him a sense of being the Other:

He stood for a long time, unsteady on his legs, so long used to the pitching of the ship, trying to find courage to make his way through this tumult On that first day as on every other day, left to himself. He would have wanted on that day, to have a hand settle on his wrist, lead him. Or at least a signboard. In a familiar language. A face with a familiar expression. He felt his own panic going out, mingling with theirs. (83)

In his meeting with Chimanlal, the Gentleman from Hamburg's business connection in Bombay, Baumgartner discovers "all kinds of possibilities in the business world of India" (88). Chimanlal then sends Baumgartner to another business contact, Habibullah, in Calcutta. Baumgartner travels to Calcutta by train, and with Habibullah's help and introduction, he starts his business

life in Calcutta.

His stay in India is marked by a continual and urgent need to adapt to the Indian food, language, culture and customs. Unlike Dev and Adit in Bye-bye Blackbird who are familiar with their new homeland, England, through the English language and literature, Baumgartner feels "his world not merely opening up but torn open, hacked open to the Eastern light" (88). Baumgartner is a different kind of immigrant since he must learn the very basics of existence in his adopted land; he cannot even enjoy the pungent and spicy food which disturbs his system and he becomes colour conscious, hoping that "one day [he would] be darker" (93). However, even after living in India for many years, Baumgartner comes to the realisation that he never belonged to either the world of Germany or India:

Accepting - but not accepted; that was the story of his life, the one thread that ran through it all. In Germany he had been dark - his darkness had marked him the Jew, der Jude. In India he was fair - and that marked him the firanghi. In both lands, the unacceptable. (19-20)

One of the important adjustments that Baumgartner is forced to make in India is concerning the problem of language. To be a part of the Indian world, Baumgartner . . . found that he had to build a new language to suit these new conditions - German no longer

sufficed, and English was elusive. Languages sprouted around him like tropical foliage and he picked words from it without knowing if they were English or Hindi or Bengali - they were simply words he needed What was this language he was wrestling out of the air, wrenching around to his own purposes? He suspected it was not Indian, but India's, the India he was marking out for himself. (92)

Inevitably, he cannot penetrate and appreciate the Indian culture and customs and this hinders any kind of interpersonal relationships he might wish to foster with the Indians.

Baumgartner ardently desires to carve a niche for himself in India in his longing to be reunited with his mother by bringing her over from Germany:

It seemed desperately important to belong and make a place for himself. He had to succeed in that if the dream of bringing his mother to India and making a home for her was to be a reality. (94)

Baumgartner is unable to fulfil this "dream" (94) because of the war in Europe and has to rely on the postcards he receives from his mother to alleviate his apprehension and concern for her. However, Baumgartner's psychic longing for his mother remains unfulfilled and partly, Baumgartner

transfers his feelings onto his fellow exile, Lotte.

Desai's maturity as a writer is also apparent in her presentation of the relationship between Baumgartner and Lotte. In most, if not all, of her works, Desai avoids the theme of sexuality in male-female relationships. In novels like Cry, the Peacock, Fire on the Mountain, Where Shall We Go This Summer and Clear Light of Day, where issues like marriage and relationships are explored, the theme of human sexuality is hardly ever mentioned, and when it is, it appears in the form of images and symbols. However, in Baumgartner's Bombay, Desai creates a more realistic and convincing picture of the sexual relationship between Baumgartner and Lotte.

Lotte is herself a cultural outsider in India who has left her homeland to "earn a living" (97) as a dancing girl in Calcutta. When Baumgartner meets Lotte and Gisela, the two European dance girls at Prince, he feels an immediate sense of connection with Lotte. He is pleased that he can speak German with her and finds "himself enjoying the feel of German in his mouth, as familiar a taste as brown bread or beer, but puzzled by her accent, to his Berlin ear slurred and rasping" (96). Nonetheless, the two German exiles establish a bond of friendship and intimacy that lasts till the very end.

Lotte's situation is almost similar to Baumgartner's predicament in India. She remains the eternal outsider,

although her marginalisation also includes her position as a woman in a patriarchal and traditional society. At best, she willingly remains merely as a mistress to Kanti Sethia, who can not/does not provide her with an emotional or loving relationship, perhaps because of their cultural and racial differences:

"Kanti?" she huffed. "Who knows when he comes? Business, business, nothing else matters to the man. Then he gets tired, then he needs a change. Then he wants a little song and dance, a little drink with Lola, and one fine day he turns up at my door and wants me to go down on my knees and touch his feet, so grateful I am supposed to be for his visits." (203)

However, Kanti provides Lotte with some kind of economic security and fakes a marriage with her in order to prevent her from being taken away to camp during the war. At any rate, Lotte remains the outsider and finds a sense of acceptance and understanding in her friendship with Baumgartner. Baumgartner becomes embroiled in Lotte's life to such an extent that he realises the intensity of their commitment: "He became nervous of any involvement in Lotte's affairs, wished he could keep to himself, but there was too long an association, too deeply ingrained a habit . . . (210).

Eventually, their long association culminates into

occasional sexual intimacy during their visits to each other, starting even while the relationship with Kanti is ongoing. They satisfy each other's sexual needs and the feelings of intimacy and warmth:

Like a cat she pressed upon him, nuzzling, nibbling, without speech. 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, two halves of large misshapen bag of flesh, and then they were still and slept the heavy noontime sleep of the tropics, sighing and snoring less and less till they became totally immobile, silent. (82)

The relationship between Baumgartner and Lotte is realistically portrayed by the narrator, and evolves into one that is based on a sense of love and compassion, consequently satisfying Baumgartner's psychic need for his mother.

Baumgartner's stay in India is not entirely negative or unrewarding. From an economic point of view, Baumgartner achieves reasonable degree of financial stability until the war breaks out in Europe, or when at the end, he is forced to retire by Chimanlal's son. He establishes two important business connections:

Chimanlal in Bombay and Habibullah in Calcutta. As an outsider in India, Baumgartner is successful in finding work, one of the most important factors that has brought him all the way from Germany.

In the company of Habibullah, his business flourishes and he seems to enjoy his life. But the period of war within war in India causes another major upheaval in Baumgartner's life in India. The gaiety and the night scene of Calcutta that Baumgartner is part of soon becomes clouded by the threat of war in Germany. The declaration of war marks the end of Baumgartner's freedom:

. . . the policeman lifted him up by his elbows and called him Sahib "I have to arrest you, sir. War is declared and we must take you into detention camp. Very bad, sir, very bad."

(103)

Baumgartner's status as an outsider in India is aggravated by the fact that he is considered a German by the officers of British India. His attempts to be differentiated as a political refugee are disregarded since he was born in Germany. He has to suffer for the crimes of a country that has expelled him, while in the camp he is ostracized because he is a Jew. Desai weaves a complicated socio-political situation that marginalizes the helpless and innocent victim to such an extent that the trials of everyday living become struggles for survival.

Baumgartner, however, lives through this situation with courage and conviction. While in the camp, the breakdown of communication with his mother causes him deep anguish and concern. But Baumgartner attempts to find meaning even in the meaninglessness of his condition at the camp.

Baumgartner's internment in the camp lasts for six years. In camp, Baumgartner befriends Emil Schwarz and Julius Roth. He builds a sense of rapport with Julius and the two men derive comfort and pleasure from each other's company. Again, Baumgartner is transported to his childhood and his father's showroom as he and Julius recreate "his father's elegant well-lit, stylish showroom" (124) when they discuss Julius' sketches of furniture.

Baumgartner appears to find meaning in the present through the recurrent images of his happier past. Paradoxically, it is this long stay in the camp that gives Baumgartner a temporary sense of being an "insider". So much so that he

knew it was craven not to desire freedom, but it was true that captivity had provided him with an escape from the fate of those in Germany, and safety from the anarchy of the world outside.

(131)

The scenes and events in the prisoner of war camp are realistically portrayed by Desai. She captures the psychological and physical anguish of the inmates with sensitivity and accuracy. She highlights the fears and

emptiness of the inmates and the attempts they make to tide over their captivity through activities, physical labour and the "underworld of nefarious activity" (125). In all, she provides a total picture of the camp life and the effects on the inmates, especially Baumgartner. Desai provides a progression of time in the narrative through interspersing war reports with the reactions of the Germans in the camp:

The Athenia, bound for Canada with 400 passengers and crew, torpedoed by German submarines, sank 250 miles west of the Hebrides: 112 lives lost.

"Where is that wine you made, Finckel? Come on, out with it! No, tonight!"

Brest-Litovsk overtaken on 18 September by German forces from the west, Russian forces from the east. A German-Soviet pact.

"Come on, bring out the Zigarren, Zigarren folks." (113)

Through this narrative, Desai successfully focusses on the social consequences of war and their effects on people. Since history is based on reality, the events also reflect social reality.

Desai's concerns about the effects of history are focussed on the plight of the individual rather than the historical importance of the events. She neither criticizes nor comments directly on Hitler or Nazi Germany. Rather, in Baumgartner's Bombay, Desai focusses on Baumgartner's perception of history which is personal and individual. His desire is a simple and realistic one:

Although a part of him greedily, hungrily took in every morsel of information that came his way of the situation of Jews in Germany, of their disappearance, of the labour camps, of Nazi propaganda, another part frantically built a defensive barrier against history, a wall behind which he could crouch and hide, holding him to a desperate wish that Germany were still what he had known as a child and that in that dream-country his mother continued to live the life they had lived there together. (118)

Baumgartner's defences against history are reactively based on its impact on his life. He yearns for his childhood past, which represents a period of meaning and order. But he realises that because of the social situation, his life has been like "[night] and Fog" into which, "once cast, there was no return " (119). Thus, the individual becomes a mere pawn in the larger context of history, politics and wars.

The end of World War two signals the disbandment of the internment camp. However, the reality of freedom for the inmates also means that they have to face life after war. Baumgartner's feelings provide a psychological insight into a social dilemma:

He wondered if the long internment had not incapacitated him, made him unfit for the outer world. And what would they find outside?

Germany destroyed - no possibility of returning, so that he would have to accept India as his permanent residence. He wondered at his ability to survive in it, reduced as he was to such an abject state of helplessness, and the

knowledge besides of being alone. (133)

Furthermore, Baumgartner's ethnic paradox is highlighted when in the face of Germany's defeat, he could not cry for victory; it was not his Germany that was being defeated because he was an ousted Jew, and yet, it was his country of birth and he was German. Baumgartner feels that "[defeat] was heaped on him, whether he deserved it or not" (135).

Released from a global war, Baumgartner is plunged, against his will, into an internal war. In Calcutta "war raged in its streets every night" (162) and "India was going through the fever of partition" (166). Desai highlights the notion of war and the basic inhumanities of

man against man. Amidst the chaos, Baumgartner feels the utter helplessness of the individual who is thrust in the middle:

His war was not their war. And they had had their own war. War within war within war. Everyone engaged in a separate war, and each war opposed to another war. If they could be kept separate, chaos would be averted. Or so they seemed to think, ignoring the fact that chaos was already upon them. And lunacy. The lunacy of performing acts one did not wish to perform, living lives one did not wish to live, becoming what one was not. (173)

Once again, Baumgartner must experience the incomprehensibility of human behaviour, where politics, religion and cultural differences separate man from man. In Germany, Baumgartner is ostracized because he is a Jew. In India, he witnesses the Hindu-Muslim riots and learns that "twenty-thousand" people were killed, "Muslims killed Hindus, Hindus Muslims" (180). Again, Desai reveals the apparent meaninglessness of war and the plight of the individual caught amidst the chaos who becomes embroiled in a war whether he believes in its cause or not. In the Hindu-Muslim war, Habibullah now becomes a victim of racial persecution, and like Baumgartner, who was forced to leave Germany, he must leave Bombay and return to

Dacca, "the home of his ancestors" (183). In the process, Habibullah inevitably loses his business and claims to Baumgartner: "For us - India is finished Don't you know, sahib, they are driving us out" (168). Desai's portrayal of wars in Germany and India reveals the ironic and senseless repetition of cultural and political alienation that disrupts the lives of the people who become victims of persecution and hate, and inevitably, must flee from their lands simply to live. Thus, caught in the Indian war, Baumgartner is again forced to leave Calcutta and seek refuge in Bombay. Once again, he must rebuild his life.

One of the most admirable traits in Baumgartner is his capacity to survive even in the apparently shapeless and rejecting universe. After the disappearance of Habibullah and the ruin of his business, he returns to Bombay. He establishes a friendship with Chimanlal and fulfils a childhood desire by going to the horse races with him. Having been denied this opportunity by his father in Germany, Baumgartner finds himself transported back to his childhood by his visits to the tracks:

Thirty years the wizard had taken, but he had waved the wand at last, and now he was at the races. Papa, he wanted to shout do you see me here, at the races? To see the horses flying by on the circular track that

began in Berlin and ended here in Bombay which became, by magic, the Berlin of thirty years ago. (193-194)

Baumgartner sees in Chimanlal a sort of father figure and he achieves a sense of acceptance and fulfilment in his trips to the race-track. Finally, his childhood disappointment at being excluded from his father's trips to the race-track is psychologically alleviated and he achieves a temporary sense of being an insider. His success is further marked by a streak of good luck at the races. He and Chimanlal end up buying a horse and winning several silver trophies that Baumgartner keeps.

The narrator portrays Baumgartner's heroic attempts to make sense of life against the absurd in a surrealistic scene in the temple that Baumgartner visits in a village during one of his business trips on behalf of Chimanlal. In the dark chamber, Baumgartner cannot make out its contents, dimly making out a stone, "a black blob, spat out by some disdainful god, to land at his feet and then solidify, blocking his way" (190). Baumgartner feels a sense of death in the chamber, signalling the "end, no more" (190), but even in the face of death, Baumgartner is defiant:

But Baumgartner would not have its no. He turned and scrambled out of the narrow exit with such speed that he scratched his arms against

the stone, hurt his knee against its rib, and fell out on to the hillside as if ejected by whatever possessed or inhabited that temple. Indigestible, inedible Baumgartner. The god spat him out. Raus, Baumgartner, out. Not fit for consumption, German or Hindu, human or divine. (190)

Baumgartner feels a sense of psychological rejection that intensifies his feelings of being an outsider. But even in the face of psychological and social alienation in his life, Baumgartner never appears to surrender his will to live, not even in the temple of death which seems to promise an end from suffering.

In the meaningless world, Baumgartner does not look for any meaning. The meaninglessness of life is the only meaning he has. Or as Janette Turner Hospital puts it: "The meaning is that there is no meaning" (68). Even then, Baumgartner appreciates what he has in his old age:

Nothing, then, was what life dwindled down to, but Baumgartner found he enjoyed that nothing more than he had enjoyed anything. Perhaps enjoyment was too strong a word for such mild pleasures as he now knew - watching his cats devour a bag of fish . . . strolling down to Lotte's for a drink - but they suited him. He felt his life blur, turn grey, like a curtain

. . . . If he became aware from time to time, that the world beyond the curtain was growing steadily more crowded, more clamorous . . . then he felt only relief that his had never been part of the mainstream. Always, somehow, he had escaped the mainstream. (211)

Baumgartner is a born outsider, against his will and control, and yet he never gives up hope, going from day to day with courage and commitment to life. His apartment becomes a sanctuary for stray cats and Baumgartner becomes known as the "Madman of the Cats" (10) and he turns to restaurateurs, including Farrokh, "who filled his bag for him with the remains of the food cooked the night before" (10) for his cats. Baumgartner's family of cats gives him a sense of belonging and he bestows upon them his love and compassion, finding an ironical status of being an "insider" that the world has never given him. He thinks of himself as "crustaceous - crab - ungainly turtle . . . an old turtle trudging through dusty Indian soil" (11).

His commitment is his ultimate undoing. Baumgartner meets Kurt, a young German traveller, in Farrokh's restaurant. Kurt refuses to leave Farrokh's restaurant, slumping on the table for days, insisting on food and water despite the fact that he does not have any money to pay. Farrokh is incensed at having to aid the "foreign junkie" (141) in his restaurant and resents the fact that

people feel sorry for "a white man with golden hair lying in the street" (139) while disregarding the Indian beggars on the streets. Against Baumgartner's will, some sort of human responsibility is heaped upon him when Farrokh insists that he "speak to [Kurt] in his language" (140). Baumgartner feels a sense of revulsion in the contact with the Aryan German from his homeland, forgotten in all his years in India. Yet, Baumgartner displays true capacity for human kindness and love and finds his concern aroused in spite of himself, asking the boy if he should "bring the doctor . . ." (142) and eventually taking him home.

Although Baumgartner is an outsider who has to fend for himself all these years, he displays compassion and warmth for a world that has only rejected him. He offers Kurt food, beer and a place to rest in his apartment. Also, a vague sense of connection to Germany and the German boy is aroused within Baumgartner and he questions whether he had brought Kurt home because he was German and that it "was blood he had in common with the ruffian" (152). Ironically, Baumgartner's reward is a violent death at the hands of the German. Kurt represents a "new kind of evil" (Dinnage 36). Paradoxically, he has wrested a position of being an insider in India by being embroiled in the depravity and violence in Indian life; he has burned corpses in Benares, eaten human flesh with the tantrics, loved a temple priest's boy, lived with lepers

in Calcutta and loved a leper girl, sold cannabis on the steps of a mosque in Delhi, lived on the beach in Goa and bought, sold and taken opium and smuggled cases of opium on camelback in Rajasthan.

Kurt is a "true descendant of those who destroyed Baumgartner's family" (Dinnage 36). He symbolises the meaninglessness and unaccountability in human action. He becomes a representative of madness. And Baumgartner feels "drained by all the madness. Mad, that was what the boy was, quite mad. In Germany he would have been a delinquent, a criminal. In India he was mad" (161). Baumgartner escapes history by leaving Germany and building a new life in India, and yet he becomes a victim of the senseless violence and persecution that he has attempted to escape. Tired of waiting for Kurt who has left the apartment, Baumgartner prepares to sleep. Kurt's presence, however, evokes memories of his past and before he lies down, he reads the postcards from his mother and feels that his life has been an indescribable blur:

Germany there, India here - India there.

Germany here. Impossible to capture, to hold to read them, make sense of them. They all fell away from him, into an abyss. He saw them falling now, white shapes turning and turning, then going grey as the distance widened between them and him. (216)

Baumgartner realises that his life has been cast by social circumstances beyond his control and he has merely been swept by the tide of time and change. While Kurt represents madness, Baumgartner's life is based on ". . . ignorance Ignorance was, after all, his element. Ignorance was what he had made his own. It was his country, the one he lived in with familiarity and resignation and relief" (219).

Baumgartner's murder by Kurt reflects the absurdity of life and the chaos of human existence. Baumgartner's life has come a full circle in that he is murdered by a Nazi German who trades Baumgartner's life for the silver trophies on his shelf in order to buy drugs. Baumgartner is trapped in the abyss of hatred of man toward man, where human life ceases to be of any importance. The shapelessness of life is emphasized by the surrealistic scene in which Kurt plunges the knife into Baumgartner, his motions guided by sheer poetry of movement, balance and poise:

Kurt steadied himself, drawing his feet together, straightening his legs, both to ensure his balance and give him a position of strength . . . Then with great speed, he raised the knife, then bent, and plunged it in, deep into the soft tallow so that it shuddered and let out a kind of whimper, or just a gasp but some kind

of flutter. It had to cease, it had to be made to cease. Withdrawing his knife, he plunged it in again, and again, and again. (219)

Baumgartner's murder signifies the irrational and the inexplicable. In an ironic sense, Baumgartner has become a sacrifice to the temple of death that he had once visited. He becomes a victim of "some hideous human sacrifice" (190) and ends up as a "heap of death piled up" (190).

Desai superbly links past and present, social and psychological, and in the final analysis, "brings to vivid light, with pathos, a different kind of suffering and exile forced upon the wandering Jew" (Kirkus Review 24). In a review of Baumgartner's Bombay, Dinnage claims that the novel is "the most pessimistic, but perhaps the most powerful, of Desai's (36). However, even in the pessimism of the novel lies a glimpse of beauty, courage and meaning which defies even the irrational in the life of Baumgartner. Janette Turner Hospital says that "[i]t is rich in ironies. It is altogether memorable. It is heroic" (70).

Undoubtedly, Baumgartner's Bombay highlights a successful attempt by Desai to move away from the canvas of her earlier themes and an attempt on her part as writer to explore her German heritage. She says in an interview that

When I visited Germany, it wasn't even the ruins that I saw, it had been entirely re-built. My mother never went back. She didn't want to. She realised it had all gone. All the men in her family had died in the war. I have no links with Germany apart from the one of language. But before I lose that . . . I mean to explore that part of my background and retrieve what I can of it. Perhaps that is what writing a novel is - trying to retrieve some of the water flowing through your fingers. (Seth, "It's Fatal to Write with an Audience in Mind" 62)

In her attempts to retrieve her past through fiction and in the portrayal of the life of Hugo Baumgartner as an exile in Baumgartner's Bombay, Desai embodies a social vision and conscience that cannot be overlooked or ignored any longer.

Conclusion

Anita Desai's fiction deserves to be put into a proper perspective; she is not only a psychological writer whose preoccupation lies with the inner landscapes of her characters. A just and balanced view of Desai's achievement as a writer must include the social vision inherent in most of her novels. Her foregrounding of the individual protagonists does not obscure social, political and historical issues, though at times, she deals with these issues metaphorically. A close examination of selected novels, namely, Bye-Bye Blackbird (1971), Fire on the Mountain (1977) and Baumgartner's Bombay (1988) clearly distinguishes Anita Desai's position both as a psychological and social writer. The psychological and socio-political issues are inextricably linked in the framework of Desai's fiction and should be viewed as constituting a whole.

Many critics tend to overstate that Desai's works encompass psychological and existential realities; surely these elements are present in novels like Cry, the Peacock (1963), Where Shall We Go This Summer (1975), Fire on the Mountain (1977) and Clear Light of Day (1980). However, this thesis illuminates, through a close reading of three representative novels, that social issues are also

implicit as well as explicit in Desai's fiction.

Bye-Bye Blackbird (1971) is a social-realist novel that clearly deals with the experiences of Dev and Adit as immigrants in London. The novel sensitively analyzes the issues of racism and cultural alienation felt by the Indians in London, and also highlights the agony and anguish of an Englishwoman married to an Indian. Bye-Bye Blackbird reveals the effects of imperial acculturation and focusses on the predicament of outsiders struggling to belong to the centre. Desai's social vision is sharply and minutely recorded in the scenes and sights of London and the English countryside, presenting an objective and realistic view of the immigrants' situation.

Fire on the Mountain (1977) represents Desai's psychological style that critics tend to highlight. Undoubtedly, in Fire on the Mountain, Desai traces the confrontation between the past and the present of its aged protagonist, Nanda Kaul, and her eventual and shocking recognition of her empty existence as wife and mother. However, equally importantly, the psychological anguish of Nanda Kaul highlights the social issues of patriarchy and the roles of women in a modern but largely traditional society in which most women are marginalised. In Fire on the Mountain, Desai juxtaposes and contrasts Nanda Kaul's position with that of her rebellious great-granddaughter Raka, and a socially mistreated but heroic friend, Ila

Das. In doing so, Desai seems to offer alternatives to Nanda Kaul's unfortunate position as "outsider". Although Desai does not offer any prescription or any easy solution to the predicament of Indian women, her fiction, nonetheless, strives to awaken feminine consciousness and encourage questioning of age-old customs and traditions that cause psychological discontent and emotional and mental bankruptcy in women.

Baumgartner's Bombay (1988) is Desai's latest work. The novel clearly shows that Desai's skill and forte as a psychological writer extends beyond the narrow label given by critics. In Baumgartner's Bombay, social and psychological issues are sharply defined and co-exist in a brilliant exposition of the life of an outsider, Hugo Baumgartner. Baumgartner, a Jewish German exile in India, is a political, social and cultural outsider whose life is constantly uprooted by social and political upheavals beyond his control. Baumgartner's Bombay also presents a moving and real picture of poverty on the streets of India and the plight of the homeless, without making any judgement or pretending to offer any simple solutions. The novel focusses on class struggle/tension through the presentation of poverty in the vicinity of Hira Niwas on the one hand and the richness of Kanti Sethia on the other. In highlighting the complexities of wars within wars in a meaningless world, Desai exemplifies the courage

and dignity of the common man in his efforts to survive amidst personal emptiness.

Jasbir Jain is one of the few critics who clearly recognizes that "[b]esides the underlying current of psychological awareness there is, in Desai's novels, plenty of social criticism which surfaces as the characters analyze their circumstances" (141). These include the colonial hangover, cultural alienation, male-female relationships, marriage, family and the position of women in Indian society. All these elements are present in most, if not all, of Desai's works. Even a purely psychological and poetic novel as Cry, the Peacock (1963) examines the marital relationship between Maya and Gautama and illuminates their incompatibility and lack of real communication that inevitably lead the psychologically disturbed Maya to kill Gautama by pushing him off a terrace.

Village by the Sea (1982), on the other hand, is explicitly and intentionally social in its artistic direction, described as a "resonant story of change in older India". Desai herself states in the novel that

This story is based entirely on fact. Thul is a real village on the western coast of India and all the characters in this book are based on people who live in this village (6)

Village by the Sea traces the changes in the small fishing

community near Bombay that occur when industry and technology are introduced, and consequently, the effects of these upheavals in the life of a fishing family. In short, Village by the Sea becomes a sort of social document and highlights that Desai's concerns are not merely private and psychological.

Desai's growth and maturity as a writer is reflected in her fiction over time. As Jain further states, Desai has "moved away slowly but perceptibly to other modes and other worlds. The area she covers has widened and has begun to encompass social reality" (145). Social vision is apparent in novels like Bye-Bye Blackbird, Clear Light of Day, In Custody, Village by the Sea and Baumgartner's Bombay. Especially Desai's latest work, Baumgartner's Bombay, shows that her art is neither static nor predictable. She has moved from her narrow focus on the world of women to include that of men and out of the margins of Indian characters to encompass European and English characters, and she portrays their predicament with extreme sensitivity and insight. Desai's fiction cannot be labelled merely as psychological any more. Desai's social vision and conscience are justifiably present in her works and demand attention, and her plea for tolerance and understanding, where social issues like patriarchy, racial, cultural and political alienation, male-female relationships, marriage and family are

concerned, is a voice that cannot be ignored anymore.

Desai's social vision is neither based on unrealistic pleas for immediate change nor does she seem to offer any simple solutions. Rather, by focussing on the individual and his/her plight in society, she presents a sensitive and insightful portrayal of the "outsider". Janette Turner Hospital sums up Desai's vision in these words:

She is the compassionate chronicler of "little" people and their tiny circumscribed worlds.

Brush stroke by fine meticulous brush stroke, she makes those small worlds glow and pulse with life until we are drawn into them. We seem to see them under a magnifying glass, and we find that they are, after all, as full of ferment and rage and love and fear and great hopes and dashed plans as the crowded sculptural life on the gopuram of Minakshi temple. The small acts of courage or cowardice become epic in scope, and Desai's protagonists, insignificant in the eyes of society, are revealed as quietly heroic.

(66)

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