CHAPTER III

WHERE SHALL WE GO THIS SUMMER: “ALIENATION AND ACCEPTANCE”
Where Shall We Go This Summer? is Desai’s fourth novel and perhaps her shortest. The novel incorporates the story of a middle-aged woman, Sita, who is sick of the mundane routine of a meaningless existence. She feels suffocated in her well-ordered, posh flat in Bombay and struggles to break away from it all. Her husband Raman is a successful businessman and a loving husband. But at this stage of her life, when her fifth child is on the way, Sita feels that there is a strange loneliness, restlessness, and boredom in her existence and that no one cares for her as an individual. “She finds her very existence threatened with tedium and boredom - a terrible existentialist problem that besets the sensitive in this world.”

The easiest course open to her is to go to Manori, her maiden home. To recapture some of her past and to revive the magic created by her father, she escapes to the island in order not to give birth to her already conceived child:

She had come here in order not to give birth.
An explanation she had repeated to herself
and her husband so often that, instead of acquiring lucidity - “Ah! Oh, now!"
understand!" - it seemed steadily more strange, mistaken. Yet she had arrived, she was on the island, in order to achieve the miracle of not giving birth. Wasn’t this Manori, the island of miracles? Her father had made it an island of magic once, worked miracles of a kind. His legend was still here in this house - in the green fringe of the night shadows, the sudden Salem of a wooden shutter, the crepitation of rain on the roof - and he might work another miracle, posthumously. She had come on a pilgrimage, to beg for the miracle of keeping her baby unborn.²

There are three parts in the novel: part one, "Monsoon’67;" part two, "Winter’47;" and part three, "Monsoon’67." Each section is thus concerned with a particular season, time, and space. Part two provides the background to part one and part three. Part one and part three are based on the present events. Part two deals with the past events and is wedged in between the two segments of the present time, to function as the foundation and the link. Past and present intermingle and provide the backdrop of the novel. In part one, Anita Desai depicts the entry
of Sita into the island after living a life of "dull tedium, of hopeless disappointment" (58). The island was a heaven for Sita which held the key to her liberation from the existential anxiety, hopelessness, and suffering.

Manori is more a symbol than a place in the novel. The island concretizes the nostalgic memories of Sita's childhood. Anita Desai has shown the parallel between the forlorn life of Sita and the small island Manori which is away from the mainland, the waters of the Sea surrounding the island like the layers of memories overflowing the mind of Sita which actually cut her off from the inevitable responsibilities of the empirical world.

The island concretizes the feeling of isolation of Sita. She retreats into it as into a womb, with an obsessive desire to recapture once again her childhood innocence and purity. The recesses of Sita's mind are as unfathomable and mysterious as the sea. Her childhood memories are full of the sea, the waves, the sky, and the rugged, rustic characters of the little village on the island. She is doubly obsessed with the desire for purity and innocence because she is herself with child and has come to the
island in search of this pristine world for the sake of her child. Obviously, her own frustration with her life in Bombay drives her here in her desire to provide her unborn infant with a world that is uncorrupt.

But peace eludes her even on this island. Her spiritual problems remain unsolved. She realizes that the island has changed and that she cannot be happy there. Frustrated and crushed by this disenchantment, she finds that the only course open to her is to return to Bombay with her husband and children. Regarding the ending of the novel, Suresh Kohli rightly points out that in comparison with her earlier works, there is “one distinct change: Sita neither dies in the end nor kills anyone nor does she become mad. She simply compromises with her destiny.”

The tragedy of Sita is obviously due to her “constitutional inability to accept the values and the attitude of society – and her irreconcilable temperament.” Sita’s desire to abandon the sweat and turmoil of the urban atmosphere in Bombay where she and her husband Raman live with their four children in a bourgeois
neighbourhood is triggered by the subtle incompatibility between husband and wife. Ironically, Raman and Sita are no mythological stereotypes. Sita, especially, leaves the tradition of her ancient namesake far behind and takes to smoking and neurotic outbursts of temper as a result of this growing incompatibility. Shyam M. Asnani thinks that "her loneliness is symbolic of the loneliness of a woman, a wife and mother - the loneliness conditioned by familial and social constraints."5

The memories of Sita revolve round the island and her father, she had spent the impressionable days of her childhood on the island in the company of Rekha and Jeevan, and with her father. In the mind of Sita, the island of Manori is an island of miracles. She had seen the glory of her father surrounded by his disciples on the island of Manori. She believes that the magic of the island would remove the evil spell and her child would remain forever unborn. In the world of her fancy, the impossible would become possible. In this state of mind, she takes refuge on the island which lacked even the basic infrastructure required for leading a life of minimum comforts.
Sita’s thoughts and activity are determined more by the past events than the actualities of the present and the probable course of future events. She wants to live in the continuum of suspended time disobeying its inevitable flux, development, and destruction. The grownup Sita has the unrealistic mental attitude of a child or at best, an adolescent. The mental make-up of Sita does not correspond with her chronological age and she is a pure combination of the real and the unreal, the ideal and the trivial, the beautiful and the ugly. Anita Desai depicts the two aspects of Sita’s personality which are poles apart.

Sita is a chronic introvert. Inspite of the aberrations of behaviour she never lacked self-confidence, and put into action what she thought to be the best policy. She thought of Manori as the ideal place for her in the predicament faced by her and she gives no value to the advice of her husband Raman that Manori was not a suitable place for her during the monsoon season. She sees her boredom stretching all around her and engulfing her. It is so suffocating that she searches for a “few of these moments that proclaimed her still alive, and not quite drowned and dead” (33-34). She cries out that she wants to “escape from the madness
here, escape to a place where it might be possible to be sane again" (23). In her assertion "I will go" (24) lies her urge for freedom. However, once Sita is in the island, she perceives the "nothingness" that is within her. She is depressed at the realization that she alone is responsible for her choice, plans, and projects. A sense of emptiness pervades her, because human reality carries nothingness in its structure, and consciousness is that gap which is "nothingness". She feels forlorn. Now, "forlornness implies that we ourselves choose our being. Forlornness and anguish go together."6

Raman was always considerate toward Sita and fulfilled all her wishes - without any hesitation, yet Sita does not experience the exhilaration of life even though she becomes a mother of several children. She thinks that children were a source of anxiety, concern, and pessimism. She does not derive any happiness from the children except sentimentality. Against such ideas of Sita, Raman asserts the value of even sentimentality which according to him would make anyone more human. But Sita does not value the advice of Raman.
Sita, living in a congenial atmosphere, devoid of any conflict with her husband, rather happy with him, leads a happy and easeful life. But her fifth pregnancy upsets her and becomes the constant cause of conflict with her husband:

All through their married life they had preferred to avoid a confrontation. All that they had done, he now saw, was to pile on the fury till now when it exploded. Perhaps, there had been incidents, thoughts during the day he had not known about, would have left undisturbed had he known. It was as though for seven months she had collected inside her all her resentments, her fears, her rages, and now she flung them onward, flung them for her (33).

Every summer they go to some place or other. That summer they have decide to go to Manori: an island of miracle made by her father.

The path is sufficiently easy for those who say “yes” but the few who dare say “No” have to face untold difficulties. In one of her interviews, Anita Desai asserts that she is interested in characters who are not average “but have retreated, or been
driven into some extremity of despair and so turned against, or, made to stand against the general current. It is easy to flow with the current, it makes no demands, it costs no effort. But those who cannot follow it, whose heart cries out 'the great No' who fight the current and struggle against it, they know what the demands are and what it costs to meet them." Sita is certainly not average; she has gained the consciousness of the meaninglessness of life. She has confronted the absurd. She cannot share Raman's acceptance of life's ordinariness. His friends, acquaintances, relatives, and business associates are, for her, no better than animals, "nothing but appetite and sex. Only food, sex and money matter" (31-32). She calls them "animals" who are neither pets nor wild beasts but "pariahs ... hanging about drains and dust bins, waiting to pounce and kill and eat" (32).

The novel dwells on the theme of incertitude, alienation, and in-communication in married life. It is the alienation of a woman, a wife, and a mother, an alienation conditioned by society and family. The childless Maya's angst in *Cry, the Peacock*
is existential and psychic, but Sita's anguish in this novel is domestic and mundane.

Like Maya in Cry, the Peacock, for whom the dance of peacock is the symbol of love and death, Sita sees herself as a wounded eagle. The crows represent the callous society around her. In the first incident of the novel, Sita finds that crows are joyously screeching and pecking at something on the ledge below the balcony of her flat. It is an eagle, injured and unable to fly. She is infuriated at the crows and tries to drive them away with the help of a toy gun. But Sita knows that the wounded eagle has really no chance of survival against the attack of crows though she does not admit it openly. Sita is like the proud, defiant eagle vulnerable to the violence of crows because of its injury. This incident highlights the total absence of communication between Sita and those around her. Her daughter Maneka thinks that Sita's reaction to the eagle and crow incident is a mere act of drama created to embarrass the family. (41)

Desai dramatizes the conflict between two irreconcilable temperaments and two diametrically opposed attitudes to life.
Sita is a nervous, sensitive, middle-aged woman who finds herself isolated from her husband and children because of her emotional reactions to many things that happen to her. She is an introvert, whose suffering springs from her constitutional inability to accept the authority of the society. Hence her alienation is natural and dispositional. Atma Ram sees in her alienation "the boredom and loneliness experienced by married women when they feel ignored and unwanted."  

Raman fails to understand her violence and passion. Raman is sane, rational, and passive. Sita is irrational and hysteromaniac. The conflict between two polarized temperaments and two discordant view-points represented by Sita and Raman, sets up the marital discord and conjugal misunderstanding as the leit-motif of Desai's novels:

Her husband looked at her with the family expression — cool, curious, uncomprehending. Their guests had been business associates of his, he had thought them pleasant, tolerable, although he had not given their characters much thought. People were, to him, friends, visitors, business
associates, colleagues, or acquaintances. He regarded them with little humour and with restraint. With some he did business, with other he ate a meal. Some came to see him, others he visited.... Not an introvert, nor an extrovert – a middling kind of man, he was dedicated unconsciously to the middle way. So he could not tell what she meant or what she felt when she folded her arms about her and stared at the closed door, saying, “They are nothing – nothing but appetite and sex. Only food, sex and money matter; Animals.”

(47)

Desai demonstrates Sita’s temperamental disaffinity with Raman through the scene where they talk about the stranger encountered on the route from Ajanta and Ellora. Raman thinks that he (the foreigner) is a fool who did not know which side of the road to wait on. But for Sita he “seemed so brave.” She says that it was not his foolishness but innocence “and it made him seem more brave not knowing anything but going on nevertheless” (52). Sita identifies herself with the foreigner because like her he is so vulnerable – vulnerable to violence and criticism in the society.
Sita withdraws herself from her husband which is suggested through the crows’ preying on the eagle. Thus her alienation is biological and physical. Her introversion, like Maya’s in *Cry, the Peacock*, leads to her psychic odyssey. Sita’s father-fixation hinders her relation with her husband. Here, once again Desai returns to the elusive father-figure.

Sita’s unconscious identification with the stranger’s irrationality is expressive not only of her own quest for a life of primitive reality, but also of her alienation from Raman who regards it practically as an act of infidelity. Sita knows that since the ‘infidelity was only psychic,’ it was so much more immeasurable.

Sita wants to escape the tyrannous grips of a cannibalistic urban milieu. She wants to escape the forces of fear and destruction which breed archetypal urges. Her alienation from all experience is due to her love for life and her reluctance to accept violence in any form. Thus her flight to the island forms the focus of the novel. Sita deems the flight a holy pilgrimage, a journey for spiritual purification, a search for identity. Sita is an
uprooted woman who wants to regain her primitive self. Her escape to the island is a biological - not an existential - necessity. Ironically, Sita’s pilgrimage with its promise of renewal and regeneration is the result of her social alienation. There comes a change in Sita’s identity. But the children refuse to share the life of primitive reality which is the very identity of the island. Hence their alienation has very little or no impact on their individual identities.

The two children of Sita, Menaka and Karan, hanker to go back to the highly urbanized life that is real to them. In their opinion, retreat to the island is madness. On the now vastly changed island, the two generations learn to face the future. The island after twenty years is a half-paradise and a half-urban reality. The sea and the island which suggest two different polarities of existence provide a picture in contrast in the symbolic design and movement of the novel. Sita’s other identity finds expression on this island. It represents that part of her self which she had failed to realize earlier. The islet is a projection of her other self, her other identity. She knows there exists a close tie between herself and the island, but she knows too it is the island
that alienates her from her instinctive drives. The parallel existence of these two levels of awareness in her mind gives rise to her identity crisis. It keeps on tormenting her till she discovers that undifferentiated life is like a jelly fish, live and objective, but without form, without definite identity.

Sita's escape to the island is an escape from the 'madding crowd,' from the dictates of her social conscience: "He who refuses does not repent. Should he be asked again, he would say No again. And yet No... the right ... crushes him for the rest of life" (47). Sita's refusal to live life as it comes motivates her journey to the islet for the second time after a lapse of twenty years, a self-conscious journey made to receive and recreate the past. But this quest for the forfeited charm and simplicity of her past identity is an illusion.

Anita Desai has developed the character of Sita in clear hues and has read the hieroglyphics of Sita's mind. Even as a child Sita was unlike other children of her age-group and especially she had no resemblance whatsoever with her younger brother Jeevan or Rekha, whom Jeevan regarded as their step-
sister. Sita feels helpless and ill-informed before her clever younger brother Jeevan and Rekha, the sweet singer of bhajans. Sita feels hard to digest the information of Jeevan that they both resemble their mother and hence are different from Rekha:

Sita had to admit that Rekha, unlike her and Jivan, had a gift – she could sing. Day and night she was reminded of this one glory her sister possessed. It was what she heard at daybreak – her sister’s voice spinning out the silken thread of a morning raga in that quiet hour before the chelas had risen for prayers (77).

For Sita, mental world is more real than the world surrounding her. She totally subordinates the physical world to her whims and fancies which she believed to be more substantial than the actual events. She was not a paranoiac, yet she relapsed into the world of fancy created by her. It does not mean that she lived in a hallucinatory world. She took care of her children and wanted to bring them according to her own ideas without giving any weight to the views of Raman. Sita’s frequent return to her childhood days impedes her refusal to grow up and accept the
responsibilities of adult life, and her inability to comprehend the past conspires against her marital harmony.

Sita’s rebellion renders her unfit for society and its norms. It is because she has seen beyond the people surrounding her. As a conscious being, she cannot stand finitude, she wishes to attain "Being." As Sartre points out, a person who feels that he is different, is the one who has experienced the internal "nothingness." Sita has achieved that stage, though she cannot help being in bad faith because it is spontaneous: "one puts oneself in bad faith as one goes to sleep, and one is in bad faith as one dreams."9

Sita realizes one day in the Hanging Gardens the possibility of a tender relation between a man and a woman without the props of money, status, and power. She is impressed by the adoration bestowed by the man with a long beard on a weak reclining woman fully covered except her face. She does not know the relation between them, yet she felt a link of understanding and love between them which was beyond all description. That day she had a glimpse of the ideal relationship
possible between man and woman. She feels a vacuum within her, and finds her present life in comparison—nothing short of a nightmare. But she has no personal disregard for Raman and realized fully the invaluable attention and guidance given by him.

Sita is uncertain of her own self. “How could she tell, how to decide which half of her life is real and which unreal? Which of her selves was true, which false? All she knew was that there were two periods in her life, each in direct opposition to the other”.... (153). Moses traces the temperamental alienation between Sita and her father: “After all, ... she is not like her father. She is ‘plain’ compared to him who was like a god ... a magic man.” (156)

Madhusudhan Prasad finds Sita “a square peg on a round hole in her father-in-law’s.”10 But he fails to consider Sita’s biological and physiological urges. He only takes into account the temperamental drives which are but a part of the individual’s identity. Sita is the symbolic equivalent of the modern housewife
whose sensibility is perpetually under stress. Her mental agony is the outcome of her inability to cope with the modern society.

Sita’s return to Manori is an act of rejection of the violence and destruction around her, the gossip and quarrelling sessions of the servants, the fighting atmosphere amongst the children, and civilization’s ridicule of her effort to protect and preserve. Her defiance is also manifested in her provocative attitude towards the women folk of her husbands’ family and in her taking to smoking.

The destruction around her at home, in the newspaper reports about Vietnam, Rhodesia and Pakistan overwhelm her and she goes to Manori in search of a miracle, to preserve life without the need for it to be exposed to constant danger and also to find a meaning for her existence. Her return allows her to see the face of reality in this world of illusion, and she realizes that in essence there can be no running away from reality.

Sita’s return to Manori is not under any illusion of her past life. While still on the island, as a young girl, she had slowly grown out of the chrysalis of the childhood and begins to
question. She struggles to free herself from the magic spell of her father. But now after twenty years, the island life again gains an ascendancy over her. The island becomes a symbol of private refuge and is her only result of escape.

With Raman's visit and the children's betrayal Sita finds that this route of escape is closed. She has to accept the fact that she is a woman unloved, a woman bitter and jealous. Through this acceptance she also realizes that Raman is brave, while she is not. At last, much to her chagrin, she understands that she cannot say the great "No" - that had for ever been carved on her mind. She is a failure, she is crushed. Raman who has come to the island is unconvinced by her argument and reasons for her coming to the island and as he prepares to leave again for the mainland, Sita feels insecure and unprotected. Tired, in an unconscious symbolic action, as it were, she follows the trail of footprints of Raman that he had laid out for her: "she lowered her head and searched out his footprints so that she could place her feet in them, as a kind of gamut to make walking back easier and so her footprints mingled with his" (150). This gesture of Sita reveals in no uncertain terms
her acceptance of values of society around her and her return to conformity. She decides to accept the prose of life.

The positive ending is an important feature of the novel. Anita Desai is a novelist predominantly depicting the feminine, abnormal sensibility. It is pointed out that more often than not, her heroines come to a violent end. But in *Where Shall be Go This Summer?* Sita learns the courage to face life with all its ups and downs. It is after all Raman, whom she despised earlier for his practicality and matter-of-factness, who teaches her that:

*life must be continued, and all its business - Maneka's admission to medical college gained, wife led to hospital, now child safely brought forth, the children reared, the factory seen to, a salary earned, a salary spent. There was courage, she admitted to herself in shame, in getting on with such matters from which she herself squirmed away, dodged and ran. It took courage. That was why the children turned to him, sensing him to be the superior in courage, in leadership.* (138-139).
Sita reconciles herself to her lot. She strikes a balance between her in herself and the outer world, her prosaic self and her poetic sensibility, her individual self and the societal consciousness. Rightly does B.R. Ramachandra Rao observe: "the novel may, thus, be seen as a parable on the inability of human beings to relate the inner with the outer, the individual with the society..." which more often than not results in an alienation of the self.

The triptych structure of the novel neatly forms the pattern of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. Unlike the other works of Desai, here is a novel where the quest for identity does not end in death and desolation. It closes with compromise and conciliation. Thus Where Shall We Go This Summer? is an answer to temperamental incompatibility and the resultant alienation.
REFERENCES:


2. Anita Desai's Where Shall We Go This Summer, (Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 1982), p.31.


