CHAPTER – III

Alienation and isolation in Anita Desai’s *Bye-Bye Blackbird* and *Where Shall We Go This Summer*

Anita Desai’s third novel *Bye-Bye Blackbird* presents a love story in the background of the immigration problem. The title is directly related to the theme and signifies that England has said goodbye to one blackbird (Adit) but has offered a cuckoo’s nest to another (Dev.). Both Adit and Sarah are playing theatrical roles. Adit, that of the successful, foreign-based Indian while Sarah maintains the façade of a happily-married British wife into an over-enthusiastic family of Indian-in-laws who are waiting to welcome her with outstretched hands, as soon as she decides to visit India. Of all the novels of Anita Desai, this is one is most intimately related to her own experiences. She told an interviewer: “Of all my novels it is most rooted in experience and the least literary in derivation”. She held: “*Bye –Bye Blackbird* is the closest of all my books to actuality – practicality: everything in it is drawn directly from my experience of living with Indian immigrants in London” (World Literature, 31). The novel captures the confusions and conflicts of another set of alienated persons. It has rightly been maintained that in the novel “the tension between the locale and the immigrant blackbird
involves issues of alienation and accommodation that the immigrant has to confront in an alien and yet familiar world”. Dev, the chief character of the novel, has come to study at the London school of Economics, arriving “well in advance to make all the right approaches” (Bye-Bye, 9). He is, however, confronted with an initial problem of adjustment in a foreign land. He remains, we are told, “One of those eternal immigrants who can never accept their new home and continue to walk the streets like strangers in enemy territory, frozen, listless, but dutifully trying to be very unobtrusive and, however superficially, to belong (Bye-Bye, 208).

Adit marries Sarah, an English girl, because he is impressed by her beauty, shyness and rectitude. She looks like a Bengali girl to him. He says to her: “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” (Bye-Bye 73). But Sarah marries Adit because, “….. he seemed to have so much to give her – so many relations and attachments, pictures and stories, legends, promises and warnings” (Bye-Bye, 206). Adit is a colorful man. He is a light-hearted and open-minded man. He loves brightness and boldness, while Sarah is quite different – she is dull, simple and lonely. She wants to hide herself. Their personalities are quite different. Adit seems to be pre-occupies
with his own self alone. Sarah has a real understanding of him, of his moods, his mental state but Adit lacks it, “She’ll never come with me”, Adit shouted, pointing at Sarah. “She’s got cold feet. She has seen to it that I have burnt my boats and am ready to go, and then she breaks it to me. Always gently, always quietly. But I knew it all along. She hasn’t the courage, she is backing out…” (Bye-Bye, 246).

Sarah is sincerely attached to Adit and considers her relation with him more significant than everything else. Sarah’s character has more power. In her there is a real split, a real dilemma, a real suffering, but she triumphs over all these. She is a silent volcano, not dead, yet not bursting. She understands Dev, she knows her mother well, keeps a well balanced relation with friends and visitors, and shows a feeling for Adit. Right from the beginning she has been quiet in her response.

Dev’s loud arguments, the heated discussions of other friends never disturb her calm. She has a fascination for India. She will construct the dream of India in silence and will share it sometimes with Emma, but she is never crazy and would suspect Emma’s moving to the underlet world of fake swamis and phony sages. She reflects maturity in her behaviour with Adit when Adit passes through a frenzy. The whole personality of Adit has cracked apart into disjointed pieces rattling
together noisily and disharmoniously. She knows that even a small refusal will inflame him. Thus she agrees to do whatever he likes despite her sickness. She does not want this chaos to reflect on her marriage. She will sacrifice everything for preserving her marriage. Adit declares her mind to go back to India. He does not take much cognizance of her revelation that she is going to be a mother. He says without being disturbed: “My son will be born in India”. Sarah’s whole self is shaken; she feels revulsion and finds herself dragged this way and that by her emotions. But she will not lose her poise: “Let’s have a cup of tea” The whole world of agony is hidden within. But Adit will never understand; he is too preoccupied with his own self. How much severe, painful, searing the process of leaving England would be for her! She feels her English life is decaying, dying, England will remain as it is, only a greater distance. In her suffering we find the real dilemma of isolation and not a statement of immigration:

Silent frozen on the divan, Sarah and Adit held hands lie a pair of children, feeling Bengal, feeling India sweep into their room like a flooded river, drowning all that had been English in it, all that had been theirs, friendly and private and comfortable, drowning it all and replacing it with the emptiness and sorrow, the despair and rage, the flat gray melancholy and the black glamour of India. They themselves were
tossed about by the flood like float Sam and then became a part of it, the black flood (*Bye-Bye*, 256).

Adit does not let his wife Sarah take part in discussions with his Indian friends. This indicates the gap between the two cultures – Indian and English. This gap is so deep that there can merely be a superficial adjustment between the two. Sarah has been married to Adit for the last three years, but even then she cannot understand or speak Hindi, while he speaks English fluently. She does not bother much about India. On the contrary, he suffers from an inferiority complex by considering and a deep relationship. Adit is a self-centred man and he does not care about the feeling of his wife. The hollowness of their married life can be seen when he goes out with his friends leaving his wife alone just to,” …. pick up empty cups and glasses and full ash – trays and yawn her way to bed” (*Bye-Bye*, 27). His approach towards English wives becomes more clear when he say to Dev: “She’s used to being woken up. Those English wives are quiet manageable really, you know. Not as fierce as they look-very quiet and hardworking as long as you treat them right and roar at them regularly once or twice a week” (*Bye-Bye*, 29).

Sarah’s main problem is to know her identity in plain terms. Her married life being what it is, she begins to play roles to hoodwink people
and even herself. She would display her letters from India and discuss her Indian husband, knowing too well that she is parading” like an impostor, to make claims to a life, an identity that she did not herself feel to be her own” (Bye-Bye, 41). This acting out of roles tells upon her nerves and she feels ‘so cut and slashed into living, breeding pieces’. By the time they move to live in a new house, Adit retires from Sarah’s life as well. Herself puzzled by her husband’s bewilderment, she begins to have a clear idea of her miserable life:

It was as though she had chosen to be cost out of her home, her background, and would not be drawn back to it, not even by her husband …. She listened to the stream rush and an owl cry and felt herself cut loose from her moorings and began to drift round and round heavily and giddily, as though caught in a slow whirlpool of dark, deep water (Bye-Bye, 170).

The matters become still worse when we see that even Adit was unable to apprehend the real reason of her anguished loneliness and “sat back, sat silent shocked by that anguish” of hers (Bye-Bye, 34). Spelling out Sarah’s crisis the novelist continues” “An anguish it seemed to him, of loneliness – and then it became absurd to call her by his own name, to
call her by any name: she had become nameless, she had shed her name as she had her ancestry and identity” (Bye-Bye, 34). Everything else being gone, she is left with stark loneliness. Sarah’s eagerness to know her real identity and her failure and consequent disillusionment have been succinctly presented in the novel:

Who was she-Mrs. Sen who had been married in a red and gold Benaras brocade sari one burning, bronzed day in September or Mrs. Sen, the Head’s Secretary .... Both these characters were frauds; each had a large, shadowed element of charade about it. They were roles – and when she was not playing them, she was nobody. Her face was only a mask, her body only a costume. Where was Sarah? (Bye-Bye,38).

Staring out of the window at the chimney pots and the clouds, she wondered if Sarah had any existence at all, and she wondered, with great sadness, if she would never be allowed to step off the stage, leave the theatre and enter the real world – whether English or Indian, she did not care, she wanted only its sincerity, its truth (Bye-Bye, 38-39).

The contrast between Dev and Adit is, therefore, central to the novel. They are not merely two individuals; they represent two philosophies of life. Dev seeks an emotional affinity with his new home which is singularly absent in Adit, a man who has actually made a home
with an English wife. Adit accepts his wife in London as a temporary Sojourn and remains free from the dilemmas that keep disturbing Dev. Dev’s reactions are those of a sensitive person who looks for something more than bread, something more deep and tangible at the spiritual level. His longing for life-life in its variety and multiplicity – remains unsatiated in the new atmosphere where “everyone is a stranger and lives in hiding (Bye-Bye, 64). In a world where people “live silently and invisibly”, he is constantly remained of India. It makes him nostalgic of an India of familiar faces, sounds and smell. He finds English love for pets as a substitute for life that is excluded by English love for privacy: “What is new in Anita Desai is the effort to delineate sensitivity to locale, as it operates within the consciousness of her characters” (Anita Desai: A Study, 27).

Dev is highly critical of the behavior of the unmarried couple in Hyde Park whereas Adit appreciates it. The difference in their reactions to the city reveals the difference in their attitudes. Dev asks Adit: “Can you imagine an Indian couple behaving like that?” Adit promptly says: “No, there are not any. Not unmarried ones and the married ones are not in the parks, they are at home quarrelling”.
It is Adit’s Anglophobia that prompts him to shout furiously at his English wife, Sarah, accusing her of xenophobia, when she, on the occasion of their wedding anniversary, having reluctantly put on a sari and a gold necklace, compares herself to “a Christmas tree” much to his exasperation. Adit angrily says to Sarah:

You feel like a Christmas tree! I suppose all Indian women look like Christmas trees to you—or perhaps like clowns, because they wear saris and jewellery. You—you English people and your xenophobia! You’ll never accept anything but your own drab, dingy standards and your dull boring ways. Anything else looks clownish to you, laughable” *(Bye-Bye, 220).*

Sarah behaves like a tortoise. She is apprehensive of others and withdraws herself. She is always defensive because of her weakness, which is her marriage with an Indian. She wants to hide it from others. She does not share with her husband her views about her friends because like other English people sometimes she also believes Indians to be inferior. She suffers from inferiority complex regarding her Indian husband, and this complex forces her to behave like a sinner, Adit is deeply involved in his likes and dislikes and he does not bother about his
wife’s problems and even her feelings. Once by chance, he boards the same bus in which she is travelling, but he does not go near her and watches her from a distance. He considers her to be a stranger with hardly any genuine relationship. He all the time remains busy. This shows the wide mental gap between the husband and the wife. It seems as if she has lost her identity, and feels alienated from her friends, mother and society:” .... She had become nameless, she had shed her name as she had shed her ancestry and identity, and she sat there, staring, as though she watched them disappear” (Bye-Bye, 31).

Sarah hides her tensions and feelings from her husband because there is a wide gulf between them. Adit thinks that she needs the company of her friends because she is brought up with them and only they can understand her. But when he asks her to meet her friends, she refuses because she feels herself to be inferior to her friends due to her marriage with an Indian. She is continuously in search of her identity. She says that she has played so many roles that she has lost her own identity. She feels: “Her face was only a mask, her body only a costume. Where was Sarah? Staring out of the window at the chimney pots and the clouds, she wondered if Sarah had any existence at all, .... (Bye-Bye, 35)”. Sarah leads a double life: one at her house where she tries her best
to take care of her husband; and the other at her office where she works hard. But she has lost her identity.

But again, it is Sarah who, blindly, impulsively, is more involved than Adit and thus suffers more: “She has so little command over these two characters she played each day, one in the morning at school and the other in the evening at home, that she could not tell with how much sincerity she played one role or the other” (Bye-Bye, 38). A sensitive and reserved character to invite pity from her relatives, friends, colleagues and acquaintances, her longing for a Christian wedding deeply signifies this non-belonging and instability in her marriage: “I have never been to a Hindu wedding, so I don’t know how to compare. But I do not know that a Christian wedding is touching and charming and heart-wringing. An identical case is that of Samar ad Bella. At the party, Bella bursts out: “Just think, if they had caught an Indian doing it, they would have gone and on about immigrants in London and how would you have felt getting any bad name for your people? Now that she had come to crux of the matter so long bottled up out of wifely tact, she could barely restrain herself” (Bye-Bye, 214).

Through them is presented a highly volatile situation: “Two Indians, two English women, frozen in the stances of players on the
stage …. somewhere in a locked closet, a slab of marble like a blank grave-stone awaiting an engraving, a grand and a bunch of flowers” (Bye-Bye, 214). At the very outset, these marriages are marked with clear, burning strokes that band them with the inevitable mark of pain: Mala, the Punjabi wife laughed too, but Bella and Sarah sat in stiff silence, their Anglo-Sarah faces passive. They had learnt exactly how much of this foreign land was theirs to tread and given up early attempts out of curiosity and a desire to join, to interpret jokes. Mala and Jasbir’s craving for comforts and good living has alienated each other into a farcical marriage style. A maladjusted marriage has changed Mala and Jasbir for worse: Jasbir into an over-loud, unpolished, careless buffoon with all his attention on good, spicy Indian food; and Mala into a disheveled, impractical, impolite, idle young son, who shouts despairingly to the English hunters: “I am not black, I am not black, I am grey” (Bye-Bye, 29). She is a transplanted tropical plant, dying a slow death in the cold and loveless climate of foreign land.

Mrs. and Mr. Roscommon-James present an extraordinary, repulsive and ignoble picture of maladjusted married life. In a single, bitter sentence, the whole lurid atmosphere becomes clear: “She scolded him in tones that would lead anyone not present in the room, to think, she was speaking to an unusually haughty and tiresome dog; he never
answered” (163). This change in the late end of their lives has been objectively analyzed by Sarah, her anger and anguish was directed against both, she clearly identified the cause of maladjustment with the clash between egoistic tendencies of both her parents.

Even the most negligible married couples invariably present scenes of loveless, malevolent attitudes. Mr. Niller opposes his wife and supports Adit; Mrs. Gummidge growls at her husband each morning; Christie Hangford casually mentions a friend seeking divorce and she herself marries for money. Adit’s typical retort, “the married couples in India are not in parks, they are at home, quarrelling” (Bye-Bye, 74) finally, sums up the novelist’s view about marriage in general. Sarah becomes a cultural exile in her own land by marrying a foreigner. She tries her best to keep up her identity despite her Indian husband but is defeated. She finally decides to go to India with her husband Adit. Adit betrays himself by adopting the citizenship of a foreign country and marrying a foreigner but he too is finally defeated in his adventure. At last he decides to return to his own country. Dev, for whom England was only “a cold water land of brick and tiles gets trapped” by the enchanting beauty of the English countryside.
Surprisingly enough, Adit’s attitude to England also undergoes a profound change. He longs to go back to India. His nostalgia for his country is intensified by his experience of a visit to his in-laws, which was “marred by tactlessness, by inane misunderstandings, by loud underlining of the basic disharmony of the situation” (*Bye-Bye*, 199). His feeling acquires a threatening dimension giving him the feeling of “an illness, an ache”. He frankly admits to be” a stranger, a non-belonger” in England, “hunted out by the black sensation of not belonging” (206). He would be delighted if he saw by any chance a typically Indian person or thing “anything individual and eccentric, untruly and unplanned, anything Indian at all”, accuses his English his wife Sarah of xenophobia. He says: “You’ll never accept anything but your own drab, dingy standards and your dull, boring ways. Anything else looks clownish to you, laughable” (*Bye-Bye*, 220). The hypnotic charm of his English education and English wife being over, he is fortunately able to extricate him from the quagmire and go back to his homeland. But very few immigrants are lucky like him. There is no dearth of easy victims. The novelist comments: “England had left Adit drop and fall away as if she had done with him or realized that he had done with her, and caught and enmeshed his friend Dev” (*Bye-Bye*, 261). Adit has married an English girl and adopted British citizenship. He
develops a passionate attachment for England. He praises its people and their habits and later on he realizes that he cannot totally shed his Indianess. He is reminded of the colourful festivals like Diwali in India. He feels out of place in England. He tells Sarah that he has been betraying his self so long and he decided to face the reality by going back to India: “All our records and lamb curries and sing songs, its all so unreal. It has no reality at all. We just pretended all the time. I am twenty – seven now. I have got to go home and start living a new life” (Bye-Bye, 193). The maladjustment in the married life of Adit and Sarah is quite clear when he receives a letter from his parents, and he does not take pains to translate it to Sarah. He does not want her comprehend his country and people. Once she insists that they must go to India and at this he rebukes her remarking, “Have we the money? …. or the time ….? Do you know how much an air ticket costs?” (Bye-Bye, 146). He also does not know his wife fully well.

Though Adit shows that he has well-adjusted in the British society, yet it is frequently apparent that he has not changed his Indian way of thinking. On one occasion when Sarah’s cat put its nose in the rice and she does not bother to change it, he is greatly disturbed. This shows the wide gulf between the two different cultures of East and West which can never be one. This is the main reason of conflict between
Adit and Sarah. Like him, she also does not allow him to enter her personal world. Her unconscious mind is badly disturbed by her friends, mother and society. She is a devoted wife, and that is why she accompanied her husband to India and bids good-bye to England forever.

Concerning these characters, Anita Desai has observed in an interview with Yasodhara Dalmia: “I am interested in characters who are not average but have turned against or made to stand against the general current” (Interview, 13).

Sarah lives the life of a cultural exile in her own country. She feels displaced in England by marrying an Indian. Sarah married to Indian tribes her best to adjust herself with her Indian husband and his friends. She is worried about the loss of identity in her own society. When people discuss about India, she deliberately avoids the discussion. She is disturbed by an anguish of shedding her own name and identity. When Adit informs Sarah about his desire to go back to India, Sarah also agrees to go with him. Adit feels nostalgic for his motherland. He feels he has been pretending all the time. Their live in England have been so unreal: “All our records and lamb carries and sing-songs, so unreal. It has no reality at all, we just pretend all the time” (Bye-Bye, 204).
When the flat is almost empty after all that was to be sold as they are preparing themselves to go to India, Sarah feels that Adit is going to “transport” her to a land where she would “regain warmth and personality”. In that new land if she was to come to life again, that would be a different, and perhaps a better life, she must say good-bye to her English self: “It was her English self that was receding and fading and dying, she knew, it was her English self to which she must say good-bye” (Bye-Bye, 221).

WHERE SHALL WE GO TO THIS SUMMER?

Where Shall We Go This Summer? has been welcomed as “an interesting addition to Anita Desai’s achievement as an Indian novelist writing in English”. In this novel she returns to the theme of alienation and in communication in married life. A Characteristic variation of the theme of the first novel, this novel depicts the aching void in the life of Sita, who is to face the loneliness of a woman, a wife and a mother, by probing deeper into her inner life. The marital discord results chiefly from the dichotomy between two irreconcilable temperaments and diametrically opposite viewpoints represented by Sita and her husband, Raman.
Sita, a sensitive, over-emotional and middle-aged woman saddled with four children, feels alienated from her husband and children and undergoes unbearable mental agony because of her high strung sensibility and explosive emotionality. Sita has a ‘dry worn face’, which has assumed the aged stillness. Owing to her mental condition, she “continually broke into violent eruptions of emotion” giving frequently a “paranoiac show of rage, fear and revolt”, for “control was an accomplishment that had slipped out of her hold”. Her husband, however, was made of different stuff. His face was “usually as sold as a soundly locked gate” (Where, 34) and this would give an idea of his practical, commonsense approach to life:

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 others he ate a meal. Some came to see him, other he visited …. Not an introvert, nor an extrovert – a middling kind of man, he was dedicated unconsciously to the middle way.

The protagonist in the novel is Sita – a happily married woman of over forty with four children. Her husband Raman is a successful businessman and a loving husband. But at this stage in 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 affect the sensitive individual in this world. She grows defiant in her behavior and in desperation she decides to leave the house and goes to Manori, an island near Bombay, where her father had lived as a patriarch. But the peace sought by her eludes her even on this island. Her spiritual problem remains 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.

After her marriage, when she begins to live in the house of her husband’s parents, she feels like a square peg in a round hole. She finds everyone disgusting and family life insufferable. Living in “their age-ratted flat”, they all live “like pariahs” a life of “sub-human placidity, calmness and sluggishness” without any capacity for introspection and inwardness. Suffocated by “their vegetarian complacence” and “stolidity”, and also afraid that “their sub-humanity might swamp her”, she begins to behave provocatively in the family. She starts by smoking openly and speaking “in sudden rushes of emotion, as though flinging
dart at their smooth, unscarred faces”. After her marriage, when Sita come to Raman’s house, she finds herself in a disgusting surrounding. The family members of her husband’s house frighten her. Her husband Raman, who is neither an extrovert nor introvert but a middling kind of man is unable to gratify her emotional demands. She also suffers from the anguish of failure in communication with her husband, like Maya or Monisha. The lack of understanding on the part of her husband increases her agony. He remains engrossed in his business, her children grow independent and Sita is left alone in the abyss of boredom. But her husband never tries to realize her condition. He thinks everything goes on well.

She could not believe that he had really believed that all was well, and had not known that she was bored, dull, unhappy and frantic. She could hardly believe that though they live so close together, he did not even know this basic fact of her existence. Believing that in everyone’s life there comes a time when convention must be challenged, even though the act may crush him. Sita kidnaps her daughter and youngest son to begin the journey to the magic island. Her flight seems a pathetic imitation of her vain attempt to save from the rapacious crows crowded on the city’s rooftops the jellyfish which her son pokes curiously.
She remained at a distance and regarded the creature spilling across the shell – scattered sandhar. It appeared to her to be the brain of the opaque “mind” of some gigantic undersea creature that had lived all its life far beneath the level where light penetrated and that had, in the creature’s tormented death pangs, burst forth from the fine white skull – washed and washed again to that unearthly white – and risen to the surface of the sea, but quickly surrendered its four moments of momentum to the wash and draw of the waves (Where, 91).

Seeing the helplessness of the creature, she is able to recall the lines of the poem she has been trying to remember. Where Shall We Go This Summer? seems to be an epitome of an irresistible yearning for a purposeful life. Sita is keen to invest her life with a meaning. “The theme of an ideal motherhood shocked by the ugly criminality of the world harshness into rejecting procreative is well handled” (Mind and Art, 65).

A woman in her forties, Sita is pregnant. Maddened by the boredom and loneliness of her life in the city of Bombay, she wants to go back to her father’s island. Her decision to go there is to abandon the turmoil of the city of Bombay. Raman considers her decision to go back to Manori to be no more than sheer madness, for, in the island she would
not find any doctor or hospital or telephone. But she tells her husband
that she wants to escape to the island from the madness of the present
surrounding. She wants to escape to a place where it might be possible
to be sane again. Coming back to Manori, Sita finds that the island has
also been affected by the passage of time during the last twenty-five
years. It no longer remains the idealized island of Sita’s childhood. It is
in a dilapidated and rundown condition. Karan and Menaka insist on
going back to the urbanized life and Sita has to compromise with her
children. Menaka invites her father to take them back to Bombay, as she
has to apply for admission to the medical college. Looking at the
“unbearable excitement” of her children at the arrival of Raman, she
feels that “they are being disloyal to her, disloyal to the island, and its
wild nature”. She realizes that by escaping to the island she has escaped,
from duties, from responsibilities, from order and routine and from life
and the city. She comes to the understanding that life must be continued,
and all its business. Sita’s loneliness is symbolic of the loneliness of “a
woman, a wife, a mother – the loneliness conditioned by familial and
social constraints”. She accepts the grim truth that she has to face the
assaults of existence all alone. Sita leaves the island and goes with
Raman to the mainland, to the city which seems to her a place of solidity
and security, “the solidity of streets and the security of houses”. But she
is disappointed with life in the city, a crust of dull tedium, and she
decides to turn back once again to the island, where she would hold her
baby safely unborn my magic. The sea would wash the frenzy out of her
life: “Perhaps the tides would push the children too, into smoother, softer
beings. The groves of trees would shade them and protect them
(Where,93)

Coming back to the island, Sita finds it adversely affected by the
passage of time and changes in outlook. It is no more the island of her
memory and dreams. Sita realizes that life has no periods, no stretches.
It simply “swirled around, muddling, confusing leading nowhere”
(Where,154-55). Looking back, she finds that she had spent twenty
years of her life “connecting” eventually leading herself to a state of
acute frustration. She comes to the realization that escaping to the island
was a sheer illusion, like “an actress in a theatrical performance. She
decides to return to the reality, to a life of “retirement, off stage”. After
such a realization, Sita hopes that the great gap between her and Raman
would be newly and securely bridged. Her decision to return to her
husband signifies her defeat and failure on the one level and on the other
suggests that “the facing of the sordid realities of life and pilgrimage to
the island have graduated her into acquired a mature sensitivity.
Sita narrates the episode of the Muslim woman and declares to Raman that this is the most illuminating moment of her life. She was a very young woman, “fatally anemic” or “fatally tubercular”, looking pale and very beautiful lying on the lap of an old man. He was looking down at her and caressing her face so tenderly that it led Sita to think, “one does not see such an expression on human faces”. It was quite divine. They made her see her own life like “a shadow, absolutely flat, uncoloured”. Sita says to Raman: “That was the only time I have ever seen that life has meaning”. She does not know whether she married years that she had spent in the metropolis or the escape to the past, to the island were real or illusory. She gets confused and shakes her head angrily at the confusion, at the muddle: “Neither sea nor sky were separate or contained – they rushed into each other in a rush of light and shade, impossible to disentangle” (Where, 153). She gets herself prepared to go back to Bombay as she realizes that “life must be continued and all its business” (Where, 138).

Raman and his children look at things in a natural way, but Sita is just the opposite of them. There is a wide gap between the urban culture and nature. She wants to become a part of nature, while her children and husband live in the world of Industrial Civilization. Raman and his children represent mind and reason, while she represents feelings and
heart. The main problem in the family is the conflict between heart and mind. After her marriage, she could not adjust with her in-laws. Consequently, Raman moved to a flat where he and Sita lived alone. Sita does not want to welcome even the guest of her husband and is frightened by them, for she considers them “nothing but appetite and sex. Only food, sex and money matter” (Where, 47). She finds herself surrounded by violence all round and feels her stranger in such an atmosphere. She says to Raman:

“It’ all a madness – the boy acting out that scene from the film they say, fighting each other on the floor, Menaka and her magazines and the way she’s torn all those drawing of her’s I’d kept so carefully; the ayah taking Karan to that – that road-side dump where all the ayahs sit and gossip and fight; the way you laughed because I tried to keep the bird alive; the people here abound us.(Where, 36)

Sita is continuously waiting for some magical happening in her life. Her relationship with her husband is not emotional and deep. She is waiting for the day when her husband will understand her emotionally. She hopes that the unborn fifth child will bring some happiness and peace in her life. Therefore, during the period of her fifth pregnancy, she does not want to live in the violent atmosphere in order to protect her
child from its bad effect. She wants to go to the island where she has passed her childhood. This island is her dream world, and she wants to live in it with the children and husband away from the violence of this world. Obviously, she tries to run away from the bitter realities of life to the dream world. Sita thinks that her children and her husband have betrayed her. This shows the lack of love and understanding between her and Raman. She realizes that she has always remained emotionally lonely.

Sita is highly emotional and imaginative, while Raman is rational and logical. Their different approached toward life can be seen when they walk along the sea beach: “…. she was close enough to it to let the cream-filled waves rush up and dash over her feet, then leave them washed and tingling on the glittering sand, and he a little more landwards where the tide could not assault his shod feet, his dry dignity …..” (Where, 142). The sea indicates sentimentality which is very deep in Sita, but on the other hand, it does not touch the heart of Raman and that is why he remains far from the sea. He is very calm and cool-headed. He is a balanced man and avoids sentimentality. He adopts a middle way in life. He does not talk to her during the walk. But suddenly he asks her whether she always fees unhappy with his life. She is surprised at this and wants to assure him of her happiness, but she does not do so.
Sita realizes that her marriage with Raman is not based on understanding but is only superficial. She realizes that he has married her “for her fire and beauty” (Where, 134). Moreover, Raman had married Sita out of pity because of her father’s death. She thinks that her relationship with him is not based on true love, but on compromise only. None of them try to touch the inner feelings of the other. They have lived together superficially. She tells him about her vision of true and divine love which she had after seeing a couple in the Hanging Gardens. She saw a young woman lying in the lap of an old man and when this woman uncovered her burkha, Sita saw the face of this lady who was suffering from a fatal disease. The old man stared at her and caressed her softly. They were deeply in love and were unaware of this world. Two little girls were playing near them. This true love impelled Sita to realize the hollowness of her married life. Thus, Sita’s vision, Muslim woman and her old lover, indicates mutual love without any compromise and selfishness while her own married life is based on duties, compromise and selflessness only. This encourages violence and disharmony in life due to which she feels alienated from her surroundings. This vision also reveals the truth, that if someone truly loves and is loved by anyone, this life may be short but it will become meaningful. Raman cannot understand the real meaning of Sita’s vision pointing to the fact that
genuine relationship is based on true love, and not on duty or selfishness. Sita also realizes that, “children only mean anxiety. What other women call happiness is just sentimentality (Where, 147). She believes that children are not the creation of deep love and happiness, but merely are the outcome of a compromise between husband and wife. Hence they are troubles.

Sita thinks that perhaps the main cause of her mother’s escape was lack of true love between her and her husband. When Raman avers that both Sita and her mother are escapists, she reacts strongly: “No, no-desertion, that’s cowardly. I wasn’t doing anything …” (Where, 147). At last, much to her chagrin, Sita understands that she cannot say ‘No’. 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. Sita feels insecure and unprotected. Tired, in one unconscious symbolic action, as it were, she follows the trail of food-prints of Raman that he had laid out for her, “She lowered her head and searched out his foot-prints so that she could place her feet in them, as a kind of game to make walking back easier and so her foot-prints mingled” (Where, 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. She admits that destruction may be the true element in which life survives and creation merely a freak, temporary and doomed event. It flatly simplifies Sita’s supposed existential anxiety and anguish. Even the assumption that Sita’s attitude to the baby within is symbolic of her own ontology as a free being remains vague. The choice is not identical in the two cases. Anita Desai’s symbolic equation of a biological necessity with an existential necessity is simply unconvincing. We know from the beginning that with the baby in her womb, Sita has nowhere else to go but to come back to her home and her husband.

One can be aware of a wound inflicted without any apparent expression of brutality. Raman’s caustic comment: “He was a food – he didn’t even know which side of the road to wain on” (Where, 35) has an ironic ring about it. For Raman, reality has only one way – the logical way. The incident alienates Sita from her husband and later when Sita looks at her marriage album she muses, “…..amused to turn from the album to the mirror and see the layers of experience and melancholy and boredom that had settled upon her face since then, like so much grey sand. She was not dismayed, on the contrary. She felt a kind of pride (Where, 36).
As she unpacks her things and lies down along with her children, she begins to drift away mentally. She indulges in retrospection and remembers her unhappy married life with her busy, indifferent husband. Unlike legendary Raman and Sita, Raman and Sita in this novel do not represent an ideal husband-wife relationship; instead they are an ill-assorted couple, lacking altogether in harmony in their lives. Raman, like Gautama in *Cry, the Peacock*, is practical, busy and nonchalant to his wife. He represents the prose of life: while Sita the poetry of life. “A middling kind of man,” he represents sanity, rationality and conformity to the established norms of society and fails to comprehend her violent or passionate reaction against every incident. Whatever shock or disgusts her is natural and acceptable to him and vice-versa. In fact, Sita’s alienation from her husband was inherent in her relationship with her mysterious father. Temperamentally, they are like two poles wide apart.

Her dreams of getting love and affection from her husband end in a nightmare. The point at issue is that her husband ignores her instincts, and she likes him to treat her in a gentle and tender way. As a result, in the long run, the husband-wife relationship is dragged into difficulties that came out in the form of identity crisis, for both Raman and Sita and for binary oppositions. Does Sita succeed in her endeavours? She
makes desperate efforts, and is perhaps near her goal when she prepares
to welcome her husband on the island despite herself,

    Everything stirred, tumbled, rose around her. Strange, she
though …. The man so passive, so grey, how could the very
mention of him arouse such a tumult of life and welcome.
She felt it herself – unwillingly, unexpectedly – but she felt
if (Where, 94).

Sita ultimately recalls the verse in full and understands everything
in proper perspective. She feels that the gap of communication between
her and her husband can be bridged. She has discovered a formula,
gained an insight. She recalls the entire verse she has so long been
pursuing:

    Jerking her head up, she wanted to shout to him, “Wait! I’ll
explain … I can explain everything now”, and the words of explanation
clamoured inside her mouth. The heifer, the grain, the slumberous egg
and herself. “The strange, new knocking of life at her side …. Asks to
be hidden and wishes nothing to tell”. She wanted to shout the line to
him. She felt that if she could bring herself to tell him how the lines has
haunted her, and how and why she had searched for it and only now
remembered it, then the great gap between them would be newly and securely bridged (Where, 109).

She loves him when she sees him for the first time after her escapade. She felt so weak, the unwanted to lay down her head and weep, “My father’s dead – look after me” (Where, 131). All her life, she has been searching for a father-figure and Raman is far from being so. In her present state of defeat on the island the desire for security, tenderness and gentleness grows all the more increasing. But her agony is that her insensitive remains unchanged, dull and impotent so far as his response to her is concerned. On his second coming to the island this is evident, “. he had nothing more to give her, or he was just unaware of her needs and demands. He raised his hands and stroked Karan’s hair with a gentleness she herself ached to attract, and she stared at him, bored into him with her eyes, wanting and not being given what she wanted (Where, 132).

Sita is not very happy for having made a compromise, which she takes to her defeat. But married life, as Chesterton remarks, is a perpetual compromise and any compromise or sacrifice for a greater good vindicates one’s victory and greatness. Only by ‘connecting’ extremes one can arrive at an acceptable path in life. This is the positive
solution that the novel offers to the present-day temperamental maladjustments and consequent alienation (World Literature, 27). At the end of her escapade, Sita remained a person divided within herself. When Raman turned back to go, leaving her behind, she felt as if he had released her and she was free to go where she wanted. “She felt so high that she could have risen and floated out to see a black sea-bird”. But she did not. She began to trail after him, knowing she would follow him, follow the trail of footprints he had laid out for her. Like the free sea-bird at evening, she wheeled around and began to circle about and then dropped lower and lower towards her home. Suddenly she recalled the entire verse she had long been pursuing but which she had failed to recollect so far:

The wild young heifer, glancing distraught, with a strange, new knowing of life at her side runs seeking loneliness. The little grain draws down the earth, to hide. Nay, even the slumberous egg as it labours under the shell patiently to divide and sub-divide. Asks to be hidden, and wished nothing to tell (Where, 159).

She decided to go back to the city with Raman knowing that he had gone to fetch her only because Menaka has asked him to; knowing also is the burden of the additional responsibilities that would have to be
attended to by her as soon as he reached the city. Her only consolation was that she, like her mother, had the courage of saying ‘No’ and also the courage of “being a coward” which her mother would not have. Life is full of treasons, betrayals and treacheries one cannot avoid. These are elements that penetrate a person as air and water do. It struck Sita then that Raman too had suffered from worry and anxiety about her, the unborn child – it was her consummate glimpse into the human psyche. While walking on the beach she began to follow the trail of footprints he had laid out of her. She realized her “her time on the island had been very much of an episode on a stage, illuminated by gaudy sunset effects and played to the thunderous storm music. The storm, ended, the play over, the stage had now to, be cleared” (Where, 152). Instead of living a life of primitive reality on a false stage, she “was now to a life of retirement, off-stage” (Where, 153). She had realized the difference between the necessity and the wish, between what a man wants and what he is compelled to do. Her desire to bear the child and return with Raman to the mainland signifies her return to life community and society inspite of the debased dullness of life, the calamity, the lies and moral buggery, the odium, the detritus of wrong and sorrow dropped on every heart, for existence is not possible in an insulated stage of being, rather
existence implies being with others. She prepares herself for her return from manori, as she eventually perceives the reality of life.

--------- Her time on the island had been very much of an episode on a stage, illuminated by gaudy sunset effects and played to thunderous storms music. The storm ended, the play over, the stage had now to be cleared, then the player could go home. Instead of being a person who for many years had to perform on a false stage and had only here, on the island, begun to live a life of primitive reality, she had actually been playing the part here of an actress in a theatrical performance and was now to return to a life of retirement, off stage (Where, 110-111).

Anita Desai succeeds in conveying the mixture of fear, despair, and hope present in the woman’s heart. The house, at least, is solid, she thinks, but when she gets to it, she is terrified.