CHAPTER IV
THE ILLUSORY WORLDS.
The protagonists in Anita Desai substitute reality for the make-belief to create their own private world devoid of any problem or complexity. This stance is commonly adopted to resolve their conflicts that are oppressive and unbearable to them. A heightened sensuous awareness is regressed into dream as wishful thinking and personality aspiration.

In Cry, the peacock fantasy unravels Maya's inability to grow out of the protective fairy world of a child and find a recognisable room in a world surrounding her. Maya's negation of the reality around, is emphasised in the opening of the novel. The death of Toto, her pet dog drowns her in prolonged mourning. She does not strive to reconcile herself with the loss. She desperately wants her husband to feel the poignancy of the happening but is repelled as he coolly brushes off the sense of loss and quietly sips a cup of tea. The conflict between fantasy and reality is perceptible here. On seeing the dead body of Toto, Maya rushes to the "garden tap to wash the vision from her eyes", whereas Gautama makes arrangement for a decent burial. Toto's death is too great a shock for the hypersensitive Maya to cushion stoically. Scared of death, she recoils from her surrounding and seeks refuge in her childhood memories:

Above all, I wish to return to my old home with its gardens, its arbours and roses and azure-necked pigeons. No, not that either. Better still, my summer home in this hills, in Darjeeling..

She, desperately longs to see her father - a magician with a magical rod which can fly Maya to a fairy world. She says "I wish I could see father again. It always helps."
Maya is childless and Toto filled the void in her life as a baby-substitute. The death of Toto again reminds Maya of her childless status and intensifies her feeling of unfulfilled. With a sense of loneliness and despair, she tells Gautama:

'I shall miss him so-terribly, Gautama', I cried then, the confession tearing out of me in a stormy rush and even as I wiped away my quick tears, and wept more, I cried to myself - what is the use? I am alone.\footnote{1}

This is the first clue to the reader for Maya's refuge into the world of illusion. She unknowingly nourishes a hope that it would save her from the nagging sense of insecurity and obsessive fear of death. The death of Toto blinds her reasoning. The image of death becomes an inseparable companion. The death of Toto is therefore of much significance as it marks the beginning of the gradual collapse of reason, which would later shape the unreal as real. Her imaginary fears now become active and thrall her rational mind in the narration to follow:

... a shadowy something, that prodded me into admitting that it was not my pet's death alone that I mourned today, but another sorrow, unremembered. Perhaps as yet not even experienced, and filled me with this despair.\footnote{2}

The fear of death and ungratified sexual demands force her to take recourse to sustained delusions. She now finds it difficult to face the responsibility of her married life as the charm of childhood is too strong for her to escape. Soon her childish sensitivity grips her mind and engulfs her surroundings:

As a child, I enjoyed, princess-like, a sumptuous fare of the fantasies of the Arabian Nights, the glories and bravado of Indian Mythology long and astounding tales of princes - and regal queens, jackals and tigers, and being my father's daughter, of the lovely English and Irish fairy tales as well, that were read out to me by him.\footnote{3}
Because Maya's childhood memories are pleasant and happy, she aspires to re-live the same world. Besides, her world of illusion promises her everything she poignantly longs for in her 'home' shared with Gautama - love, recognition, mental support and moral courage. Maya describes fancifully her new world of which she is the queen.

The world is like a toy specially made for me, painted in my favourite colours, set moving to my favourite tunes. 6

In her illusory world, Maya forgets her own reality. She is now in the centre and the world made up of her choicest objects surrounding her. Her world of passion and beauty nearly arrests all dialogue, and communication with the outside world.

Maya's retreat closes her into a private world but unfortunately she fails to sustain the protective cocoon she works up. When Gautama pulls her up from her plunge into the illusory world, she tells him:

'I don't care to detach myself into any other world than this. It isn't boring for me.... The world is full-full, Gautama. Do you know what that means? I am not bored with it that I should need to hunt another one!'. 7

Maya's retreat into the world of fantasy does not subside her desire for emotional gratification and mutual affinity. The disquieting and unsuppressed feelings exist side by side filling her with morbid thoughts of death. Dreams, nightmares, the exciting dance of peacock and the fearful figure of the albino haunts her.

The dancing peacocks and the albino astrologer become dual symbols of death and sexual urge. Her peace of mind and integration of personality is now lost by the unacceptable present and not wholly gratifying past. Further, her withdrawal from the present and her retreat into the past in search of happiness, fulfilment and peace turns out to be a nightmare. This finally leads to insanity and murder of Gautama.

Mrinalini Solanki writes
Maya's retreat into the world of fantasy does not liberate her from the nagging sense of insecurity and obsessive fear of death. It provides her merely an opportunity for self-indulgence but fails to save her from schizophrenic disturbances.\textsuperscript{8}

Nirode unlike Maya rejects his past, his upbringing and everything that may remind him of his family. He hates the real world and is comfortable only in his self-conceived world of imagination. By keeping himself isolated from his family and friends, he pretends to preserve his individuality by indulging in the deceptive world of illusion. He strongly believes that he is a talented person with a quick intellect but being ignorant of his limitations, he fails to foresee his future. His suffering is related to his neglect of reality in assessing his worth.

Disappointed in his father and disgusted with his mother, Nirode adopts a defence mechanism denying unpleasant reality. He turns away from all unpleasantness, be it sights or issues. He escapes all criticism by rationalising his follies. Mrinalini Solanki writes:

Nirode, in reality, pretends to be what he is not. In his case the personality acted out is more a figure of fantasy than of any actual person. He poses to be a director, and his attitude towards authority and his masochistic drives are the outcome of his fantasized self. Nirode depends entirely on fantasy to fulfill his desire to rise above an average man's achievements. But this mode of coping with his anxieties and conflicts make him all the more lonely and unhappy.\textsuperscript{9}

As a victim of insecurity and disbelief in his own potential, he tosses from one career to another, to hold on to his identity. In his imagination, he visualises his disabled self in similarity with the marsh birds who could not fly long but hopped along the ground. Further at one place, he expresses...
One must be a king kite wheeling so far away in the blazing empty sky as to be merely a dot, almost invisible to the urchins who stood below, stones in their fists, ready to be aimed and flung.

Nirode's disappointment in his mother also accounts to his suffering. The relationship between his mother and Major Chadha torments him. His insecurity is reflected in his dream where he sees himself on the wrong side of the barbed-wire fence with his father, while his mother is on the other side, much beyond his approach. His unconscious mind strongly holds the belief that his mother is immoral and she killed his father for Major Chadha. He fears his own death in the hands of Major Chadha.

Like her brother Monisha also desires privacy where she can have a full play of her fantasies. She adores Kafka, Dostoevsky and Hopkins and wishes to join these luminaries of literature. She is also fascinated by the lurking darkness between the stars which she imagines are the only consolations on earth.

....rub a balm into my wounds, into my throbbing head, and bring me this coolness, this stillness, this interval of peace.....
Sleep has nightmares. This, this empty darkness, has not so much as a dream. It is one unlit waste, a desert to which my heart truly belongs.

Unlike Nirode, Monisha has no place to escape. Nirode's refuge in Calcutta is his escape from the tormenting reality. But Jiban's house is an inescapable prison for the agony-stricken soul of Monisha. Jasbir Jain writes:

Fantasy does not enter the world of Monisha and Nirode for they have closed their doors, and not drawn a circle around them as Maya has done in Cry, the peacock. They have not allowed their emotions to become known even to themselves, there has been a running away from the core selves instead of a circling in.
Like Nirode, she also wants a world of her own. Very much like her brother, she fails to develop any sense of involvement either with Jiban or with other members of the family. She says:

Alone, I could work better, and I should feel more - whole.
But less and less there is privacy.  

This passage reflects Monisha’s inner struggle against frustration and her helplessness at the sight of the manifest reality of life. Besides many such passages in the novel, there are comments upon the reason of her escape into her own world of illusion. At one place she implores:

Allow us just this - to stand back, apart, in the shadows,
and watch the fire and the flames, the sacrifices that are flung into it, the celebrations, the mourning, and permit us - not to take part.

Her search for meaningful relations does not allow her to enjoy a long happiness in her self-structured airy shell. This self-deception makes an incurable wound on her mind of which the result is her tragic end - self-immolation.

In contrast to Monisha and Nirode, Amla believes in enjoying life and not chasing unreal shadows. Being an extrovert she has no loads of secrets to torment her mind. Being an eager recipient of love, she is the one of the three characters who experiences the richness of emotions.

The studio seemed to be without walls, its interior melted into a dreamlike exterior that was boundless, in which time ran at a different pace from reality, and the dimensions were altered and suited to another world - an evening world, lit by a sun already over the horizon, but still radiant, as in that short, poignant moment of perfect luminosity before night descends.
Dharma's world of art is her world of illusion; with richness of colour and density of emotions. Amla and Dharma make the confluence of the real and the fantasized (the spell of the world of Dharma - the artist). In this connection Jasbir Jain comments:

While others who perhaps are more sensitive and also more morbid retain their one-sided hold on their perceptions, Amla keeps on broaching the two worlds - of the real and the unreal.... When Amla finds herself in love with Dharma, Dharma's world transforms her completely.\(^{16}\)

Amla finds immense satisfaction imagining her thoughts finding a visual outlet in the artistic strokes of Dharma on canvas.

The world of Dharma which Amla perceives is only world of imagination and make-belief. 'The real Dharma' is hidden behind 'the artist Dharma' which she fails to see. Her escape into the world of art makes her forget her chaotic surrounding which is never possible for Nirode and Monisha to overcome. Dharma, the artist totally transforms her and she becomes -

... A flowering Amla, translucent with joy and overflowing with sense of love and reward.... Here her small wild flower humour could blossom...\(^{17}\)

Because of common interests and likings, Amla gradually falls in love with Dharma and strongly believes that Dharma also loves her. The same is not true of Dharma. He does not think of his relationship with Amla beyond her portrait. To Dharma, Amla is only an inspiration. Her innocence leads him to a fresh insight everyday to better his creativity. He admits that Amla makes him see:

... What the subconscious does to an impressionable creature, how much power it has on them than sun and circumstances put together. And this is the revelation that made me clean my paint-brushes begin on a now era, the one you have come to see \(^{*}\)
Because Amla is life-like to Dharma's mental image of a woman, he is fascinated by Amla as an impressive being. He also admits:

She made contact with my silent, secret dream-creations and they directed her on to me. 19

Towards the close of the novel, Amla realises that she has shared an existence with Dharma in a world of illusion, and that such enchantment cannot become 'real'. She now avoids Dharma and the broken magic spell makes her see that Geeta Devi and Dharma’s daughter have a superior right over Dharma - the artist.

In Where shall we go this summer?, Manori emerges as an illusion, a refuge to Sita who wants to escape the muddledom which is a product of her marital discord. The island would prevent her child-birth; it would magically treasure her baby in her womb for an additional length of time:

She saw that the island illusion as a refuge, a protection. It would hold her baby safely unborn, by magic... its tide “would lull the children, too, into smoother, softer beings. The groves of tree would shade them and protect them?” 20

Lured by the magic of her father who cured the islanders by strange prescription, Sita makes a way back into her world of childhood as a way to withdraw herself from her surrounding.

Sita’s obsession with the world of illusion is obvious to the readers from the very beginning. Learning about the mysterious ways of her father and the desertion by her mother, Sita marries Raman to turn her back upon the oppressive reality. She tells Raman:

“What I’m doing is trying to escape from the madness here, escape to a place where it might be possible to be sane again.” 21
She is now possessed with the desire to plunge into the abyss of time and space. When she is convinced that her life with Raman holds no possibility of a change, she loses her nerve to continue her role-playing as a wife and a mother. She feels disappointed in marriage. Raman is no legendary figure like her father to give her protection and security. Turning her back to materialism, violence and ugliness she longs for an alternative to her meaningless existence. Her search for an escape transports her into her childhood world of fantasy - the world free of anxiety and violence subjected to living beings. Mrinalini Solanki writes:

Sita’s return to Manori reveals her desire to indulge in fantasy rather than face the reality. The moment she arrives here, she wonders, if she is really going to perform an act of creation or her own belly is going to protect the child for ever. By closing her eyes to the reality and resolutely following her fantasy she achieves a kind of victory by rebelling against her bondage, and overcoming her weakness. Her thought of protecting the child from the callous world is, in fact, a strategy to guard her self-image. She adopts the strategy of fantasy as a source of escape from the harshness and cruelty of her situation.

Sita’s refuge on the island reflects her quest to find an escape from the harsh reality of the world. This ends in a failure. It is her realisation of futility which makes her go back to Bombay to be with her husband, Raman. She decides for all time to live in the shade of her husband’s material comforts. In the words of B. Ramchandran Rao:

The tragedy in Where shall we go This summer? arises out of the inability of the characters to connect the prose and the passion in their lives. They have lived only in fragments. The novel ends with a defeated and despondent Sita unable to rediscover the passion of life and deciding to accept the prose of life. But the book ends with the implicit comment that this need not have been the only ending. It could have turned out otherwise.
Sita is tossed off and on between illusion and reality. She fails to perceive reality, which is the root cause of her maladjustment and frustration that results in her refuge on Manori Islands for no advantage. No sooner she becomes aware of the fact that the island is not the same island of her dreams and is now incapable of satisfying her basic necessities of life, her final disillusionment dawns with a coercion to make a retreat into Bombay and her husband's world of reality.

Raman's arrival on the island at Menaka's call shatter her world of illusion with reason getting upper hand on unreason. She now feels tormented and dissatisfied at not finding the island "a magic mirror". Raman offers help and saves her from the enchantment of the island. Menaka's words also help her to develop a balance between fantasy and reality. The emotional crisis is transcended and Sita once again develops affinity with her husband. She identifies her own self with her family and regains the competencies essential for a successful adult living.

The illusory world in Fire on the Mountain is a complex structure to an otherwise simple story. Not one or two but three worlds of illusion collude in giving an insight to the psyche of the characters. Nanda Kaul weaves a fascinating world of illusion to ornament her damaged 'self', hungry of fame, acceptance and love. She admits to her own self:

 Fantasy and fairy tales had their place in life, She knew it so well... who wanted truth? Who could stand it? Nobody. Not even herself.24

Raka's indifference towards her great-grand mother makes her willingly come down to the mental level of the child. Jealous of Ramlal to whom Raka is friendly she tries for an involvement in Raka's childhood by creating false stories about her parents and her upbringing. She tells Raka
'He loved to go riding with the children himself... Another thing he got up for the children was a badminton court and we’d have such games out on the lawns, all of us, at times even by moonlight... we could have anything we wanted of him, anything'.

To break through Raka’s indifference, Nanda Kaul delves into an imaginary childhood but to which she herself remains a stranger. She narrates a number of adventures never undertaken by her father. She also tells her about parents, husband and the collection of rich material in their house:

'It was too much, you know, Raka. I am not a collector myself. I had to break free of it. So I came to Carignano without any of it'.

Nanda is never a good role-player. Whenever she weaves fantasies, her voice changes noticeably demarcating the boundaries of fact and fiction. Jasbir Jain aptly comments:

Fantasy is used by Nanda Kaul (Somehow both ‘Nanda’ and ‘Mrs Kaul’ fail to fit in with the character Anita Desai has created, the two parts of her name need to go together while yet retaining their separate identities), initially as a means of breaking through Raka’s indifference... Later, she finds herself firmly entangled in the weaving of these tales and feels thwarted and disappointed when the necessary response from Raka is not forthcoming.

Raka, restless to her great grandmother’s world of illusion, is willing to listen to Ramlal and equally willing to build a private world of her own. She tells him about ‘Churails’ to which she patiently hears. But her own world of illusion is rooted in the world of her observation. This world gives her separate mental existence, away from the disjointed world of her parents.
Raka's illusory world is contrasted to the adult world of illusion her
great-grand mother inhabited. Her imaginary world provides a feeling of superiority
over high soaring eagles, over Kausali and ancient hills. Commenting on this feature,
Jasbir Jain points out:

The differences between the fantasy worlds of the two - Raka
and Nanda Kaul - lies also in the degree of freedom fantasy
offers. For Raka it is perhaps a move towards a liberation
from her childhood fears and a violent realisation of the future,
for Nanda Kaul it serves as a mirror of the hollow self she
has created and shocks her into the present. 28

That Nanda Kaul is worm-like and Raka behaves in lizard-like manner
is authorial way of imaging the characters. This, too is a product of the dream-like
feature and picturesque analysis of the characters.

In Clear Light Of Day nearly all the characters are lured by the world
of fantasy. Raja longs for the romantic heroism of Haroun-al-Raschid and identifies
himself with Hyder Ali Sahib. He loves horse riding and wants to have a horse for
himself. Later, he satisfies himself by buying a white pony for his son. He also seeks
refuge in the poetry of Iqbal and Galib, and a few romantic poets. He keeps himself
aloof by cycling off somewhere, reading adventure stories and imagining himself in heroic
role.

Bim, the sensible of all prefers to play the role of her idols - Joan of
Arc and Florence Nightingale. She has a very high opinion of herself and plans great
things in life. She tells Tara her sister:

I won't marry ... I shall work - I shall do things. 29

In her lofty aspiration, Raja is a companion and their affinity gives determination to
realise the cherished goals, only to Bim
Bim rejects poetry of Raja and disapproves of its sentimentality. She has no vocation and no hobby to anchor her interest to life. Bim’s only refuge is Dr. Biswas’s house and his mother to forget what threatens her normalcy. Living in her world of fantasy Bim discharges her responsibilities towards her house and its inhabitants. She permits Tara and Raja to escape in their worlds of dream.

In the words of Jasbir Jain:

The use of fantasy thus acquires an additional significance in Desai’s works for it permits a freer use of symbols and while allowing an insight into the unconscious it facilitates release from inner fears and obsessions.

Tara, Bim’s sister, on the other hand is always looking forward to make her fortune and discover herself a princess. Her dreams are innumerable; she also wants to become a wife and a mother and travel away from her house with her dream-boy. She also seeks bliss in the collective memory of her childhood drama which flows on her visits to her home, a solid ground as Bim calls it—the lawn, the rose walk, the guava trees and the veranda.

Everything carries a mark of Bim’s presence at all times of the days and months. As they grow old they deviate from this world of togetherness. Raja makes Hyder Ali’s home his world of pleasure; Bim escapes in the pages of history while Tara enjoys the soft folds of Aunt Mira’s sari to hide in. Eventually, Tara finds a room in the marital world of love and understanding by marrying Bakul, a foreign service diplomat. To Bim, home is her heaven and there is no need of the outer world, not even the marital world to which she is invited by Mr Biswas. He admires the intellectual craving and the mental strength of Bim and desires to possess her. She decides for all time to pay her ear to the love songs of the forties which Baba enjoys everyday. She resigns all worldly attractions like a mother to look after Mira Masi.
who has turned infant in her lunacy. Thus her world of fantasy brings to her the awareness of being the same in the midst of decay, destruction and meaninglessness of life. Asha Kanwar writes:

Childhood dreams of becoming a hero and a heroine are swapped in the mire of circumstances. The would-be hero finds himself playing the role of a fat, prosperous Pasha indulging his hobby but with no vocation to follow. Bim becomes nothing more spectacular than a college lecturer. Though she cannot become a Joan of Arc at least she is able to wrest some heroism out of her existence by managing single-handed her troublesome family. Her pompous childhood declaration of “I am going to be a mother and knit for my babies” proves true.

The world of fantasy becomes the world of adventure in Custody. Deven undergoes a new experience following the Urdu poet, Nur from Mirpore to Delhi. This transforms his personality and makes him acquire those qualities which makes his new but alien world a land of familiarity. He is now shrewd, gullible and courageous. The ideal Nur, the Urdu poet does not exist at all. Deven commutes between Mirpore and Delhi, between mundane lectures and reciting poetry to find Nur, that exists in books. His hectic schedule makes him see Nur the senile, greedy and lustful poet who repels Deven sharply. Learning what is urbanity and art, Deven now strongly struggles for an escape back into his customary living. He shuns for all time the grotesque world of hysterics, termagants, virago and the demented. Commenting on his return to Mirpore, Jasbir Jain writes:

Deven realises that he does not have the requisite degree of boldness to feel involved with them. He must, for the sake of his own sanity, keep Nur’s art separate from his senile self; the question does not arise of evaluating them together. They are separate and meant to remain so.
Deven’s world of fantasy envelopes his present reality. It is no recollection or recall-process. The real and the unreal run parallel in the same aspect of ‘time’, affecting Deven’s life and personality. Jasbir Jain comments as:

"Fantasy here is parallel in time and not prefaced by the phrase. ‘When we were children’. It is not a division in perceptions but one in conceptualities in thought processes and not in responses. The romantic becomes accessible but loses its romance in the process..."

Deven at the close of the novel realises that ‘Art’ is shrouded in mystery and an effort to undo this mystery would cause mental muddledom. He concludes that "Every question had its answer" but art is above it - Art is inexplicable:

"It art, if poetry could be made to submit their answers, not merely to contain them within perfect, unblemished shapes but to release them and make them available, then he thought, then - But then the bubble would be breached and burst, and it would no longer be perfect. And if it were not perfect, and constant, then it would all have been for nothing of, it would be nothing.

The epigraph given at the beginning of the novel becomes relevant at the end of the novel:

‘...They should take, who have the power.

And they should keep who can’.


Like Keats, the world of fantasy is the world of the Nightingale for Maya, Monisha. Deven, Bim, Raja and Sita where the “fret and the fever of the daily life”
has no existence. In other novels, like *Bye, Bye Black-Bird*, *Village by the Sea*, and Baumgartner's *Bombay* the world of illusion appears insignificant in painting the inner self, and is not a part of their narrative existence. To them illusion is no alternative reality. The suffering of Hugo, Sarah, Adit, Dev and Hari is no less intense but they do not resort to unreason as Maya, Monisha, Nanda Kaul, Raka, Tara, Raja, Bim, Deven and others do. They struggle to overcome their anxieties and fears through normal individual efforts.
Diagrammatic Illustration of Varied Functions of Fantasy.

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