CHAPTER – IV

WHERE SHALL WE GO THIS SUMMER?

Vacillation Between Illusion and Reality

Critics are of the opinion that Anita Desai in Where Shall We Go This Summer?1 (1975) reverts back to a familiar theme found in two of her earlier novels – Cry, The Peacock and Voices in the City. Here is Darshan Singh Maini: “Anita Desai returns to the theme of alienation and incommunication in married life – the theme of her celebrated first novel”2. B. Ramachandra Rao who considers the “story of marital discord, of the tension between husband and wife” to be an “oft recurring theme”3 in the works of Anita Desai, believes this theme to be repeated once again in this novel. B. R. Rao states that “Sita and Raman represent the eternal opposition between the passion and the prose of life”4. Incidentally, it is because of these opposite traits that marital discord arises.

S. Indira says that the novel takes up the “familiar theme of a married woman’s neurosis”5. She also cites another theme to be that of “escape and reconciliation”6. Harish Raizada also comments on similar lines – that Anita Desai reverts to her “favourite theme of probing into the consciousness of an introvert and sensitive woman” who tries in frustration to “escape into purposeless and unproductive loneliness”7. Darshan Singh Maini further say that whereas “the childless Maya’s angst
is existential and metaphysical, Sita's ache is essentially domestic and temporal ...

It is worth taking into account Anita Desai's own views with regard to the theme of this novel:

The idea behind that was ... more the theme of rejection. In many ways her experience of life had been bleak and drab, grey ... harrowing and depressing and she couldn't bear the thought of bringing the child into a world as dreadful as this ...

It is based on this observation that this study has taken up as the main theme of this novel the theme of vacillation between reality and illusion for it is seen that the protagonist Sita, seeks to reject the reality of life and seek refuge in an illusory world. S. Indira's mention of the theme of escape and reconciliation can be related to the main theme here, for, by rejecting reality, Sita wishes to escape from it. However, towards the end, she opts for reconciliation. Certain factors contribute to Sita's rejection of reality. Marital discord resulting in loneliness and brought about by two different temperaments is only one such factor. The theme of marital discord has therefore, not been considered as the main theme in this study.

It is seen that certain circumstances make Sita realize that her expectations of life cannot be fulfilled. The actual reality of life comprises the co-existence of disappointments and joyous expectations, the strong and the weak and in fact life and death. Unacceptance of these
facts makes Sita reject the world of reality and consequently become alienated from it. Sita therefore, seeks refuge in an illusory world. Finally, however, she awakens to reality through her realization regarding the duality of existence and the necessity of compromise in life. In her difficulty to accept the harsh realities of life, Sita resembles Maya of Cry, the Peacock. But unlike Maya who is ultimately propelled into insanity and murder. Sita is able to reach a state of indifferent acceptance and consequently a "reluctant compromise".

Sita — an extremely sensitive individual — is pregnant for the fifth time. This time, however, she is determined not to give birth to her child but to keep it unborn in the security of her womb. What provokes this "mad"(35) decision of hers are the very surroundings in which she lives.

Sita is unable to cope or accept the childish pranks of her young sons or deal with the moods of her adolescent daughter. Even the ayah and the cook's loud talking sound to her to be a fight, Menaka's careless crumbling of a "sheaf of new buds"(45) assumes the proportion of violence. Small Karan's act of throwing over a tower of blocks with a great clatter is regarded by her as his "overpowering desire to destroy"(46). These small ordinary acts make her wince in fright and horror. The sight of the city crows attacking a wounded baby eagle causes her to attempt to drive away the crows with a pop-gun the whole evening. Even the guests that come to her house are termed by Sita as animals.
interested only in "food, sex and money" (47) much to the astonishment of her husband, Raman. She is also frightened and appalled by the people around her for they appear as "pariahs" (47).

It therefore appears that Sita is estranged from the everyday life and happenings of the ordinary person in the city. Sita also views the "insularity and complacence" (49) of the family of her in-laws as another "affront" (50) and as an act of revolt, had taken up the provocative act of smoking.

Unable to therefore accept either complacency or the tedium of everyday life, Sita finds life to be meaningless and ugly. Her face reflects only "melancholy and boredom" (54) and her activities comprise smoking while viewing the sea and "waiting", although in anticipation of what, she could not tell. This fact that she doesn’t know what she is waiting for is significant as it denotes her inner urge – then still in the subconscious stage – to retreat to illusion as an escape. This sub-conscious urge surfaces to the conscious level when she has to wait for the fifth baby. As she views her family’s actions to be violent, this – combined with the news headlines of the Vietnam war – so fills her with utter hopelessness about her survival that she agonises over how to keep her children – especially the unborn child – safe. She comes to believe that death would surely visit them all. In spite of her fears being unfounded – as the world and life continue as usual and the children grow healthier – the movement of the growing child within her makes her admit:
... destruction may be the true element in which life survives and creation merely a freak, temporary and doomed event (56).

These thoughts serve to make her more muddled and confused till – in a moment of losing control over reality – she finally decides not to give birth to the baby at all. Now, in her highly confused state of mind, Sita wonders whether child-birth would be “an act of creation” or whether by “releasing it in a violent, pain-wracked blood-bath”, it would be an “act of violence and murder” (56). This confusion makes the demarcation between the “creative and the destructive” (56) become very hazy and unclear. Sita therefore, slowly starts to lose touch with reality. This in turn makes her suffer an aberration of psychology leading to her abnormal wish to keep the foetus remain unborn.

Unlike Raman and his children – for whom life continues to be ordered – Sita, now apprehends a sense of disorder – “a crashed pile of debris” (58) – behind the ordered surface of life. Therefore, life now becomes for her dull and disappointing.

It also makes her start lacking both nerve and optimism to continue life any further with the unborn baby and so she decides to retreat to the island of Manori – “the island of miracles” (31) – and therein safely contain her unborn child within the safety of her womb by preventing childbirth. This unnatural and unrealistic decision makes it obvious that Sita has been totally cut off from the reality of life. Birth and death are
natural processes over which man has no command and Sita fails to accept this fact.

Having reached this decision, Sita “kidnaps”(36) Menaka and Karan and leaves for Manori. The boat ride across the monsoon sea is highly uncomfortable and frightening to the skeptical children. In fact, Menaka’s scorn and contempt for her mother’s highly emotional nature becomes very obvious during the boat ride to and arrival at Manori. For instance, when Sita points out the stars to Karan, Menaka retorts scornfully about the lack of electricity. Their very tone of conversation makes Moses realise about the presence of “rifts and dissensions”(20) in the family.

What serves to elevate this distance and isolation between Sita and the children is the very island itself. Sita’s magical island is in reality “flat, toneless, related to the muddy monsoon sea” rather than to the “gorgeous” and “brilliant” sky and cloudscape (21). The Manori village appears to be dilapidated with its battered mud huts and gaping thatched roofs combined with overflowing drains. That Sita is estranged from reality becomes evident when the filthy village pond with its “solid green layer of germs and disease” (23) – so obvious to the ordinary on-looker – appears to be beautiful to her.

On reaching the house, the very atmosphere seems to speak for itself for the “hissing and clattering palms” seem to convey a “menace”(26). The pitch darkness of the house initially makes Sita and her
children despair. With the flicker of the first lamp, Sita finally faces the true condition of the house in her absence from it for the past twenty years:

... a waste of ashes ... the cold remains of the bonfire her father had lit here to a blaze. Ashes, white and waste ...(28).

While the accusing eyes of the children make Sita feel guilty, the never-ending incessant monsoon makes her wonder in confused despair about the “magic” she had promised herself and her children. As the children are in touch with reality, they view this escapade of the mother as total madness. These bleak and dismal surroundings now further serve to heighten Sita’s alienation from Menaka and her emotional outbursts are greeted by Menaka with only a highly disapproving and bitter grimace.

The incessant monsoon, the lack of proper food, water and hygiene – even the well with a dead drowned cow in it – combined with the children’s accusing looks bring to Sita the slow realization that her escapade was starting to resemble the “horror stories” of newspapers – “of women giving birth in tree tops during floods, in the middle of an earthquake or inside an aeroplane”(112). Doubt invades her mind about her self-imagined “magic” of the island for, if at all, it had existed in her memory, in reality:
... it was now buried beneath the soft grey-green mildew of the monsoon, chilled and choked by it (103).

In other words, Sita is slowly awakening to reality, that it was no place for child-birth and that “there was no magic here – the magic was gone” (112) thus indicating that she couldn’t shelter the baby in her womb forever.

Sita’s gradual realisation of reality coincides with the gradual subsidence of the monsoon. Taking the children out to the beach, Sita comes across a jellyfish. Seeing its helpless condition, Sita is reminded of her own baby and feels equally helpless and defenceless. To her, the jellyfish appears to resemble:

... the brain or the opaque “mind” of some gigantic undersea creature that had lived all its life far beneath the level where light penetrated (124).

Sita’s estranged state from reality is akin to this undersea creature as both are removed from light or “reality” in Sita’s case. This jellyfish thrown off from its natural habitat is “mindless and helpless” (124). Similarly, Sita feels that the birth of her child in her alienated and estranged state would reduce the baby to this position of the jelly-fish. Although fearful, Sita yet continues to harbour some faint hope to possibly stop the baby from being born. This vacillation between the fear of reality and a clinging faint hope
to her world of illusion makes her lead a “lulled life, half-conscious, dream-like” (126).

However – most unexpectedly and unwillingly – Sita feels a great “tumult of life and welcome” (128) – after the initial momentary pang of grief – at the news of Raman’s arrival. Thus, unbeknown to Sita, her awakening to reality and her slow departure from her previous estranged state starts taking place sub-consciously although she has yet to acknowledge this openly.

The thought of Raman’s quiet company gives her a sense of pleasure but the children’s extreme excitement dilutes this delight with a sense of bitterness. Even then, with Raman’s entry, Sita feels “comfort, security and dull, safe routine walk in “(130). Sita yearns to be told that her other two boys had wanted and missed her although her escapade then had stalled any thoughts about them. When Sita is told by Raman that his arrival had been prompted by Menaka’s call, she feels a sense of “shame” and “disappointment” (133). She then wonders as to why her family had all conspired to “betray” her forgetting her own lack of involvement with them earlier. Then, she had shied away and isolated herself from them but now she feels with bitter jealousy that they had all got together to “fight ... reject ... run away ... and hide from her” (137). These thoughts arise because neither Raman nor the children talk or enquire about the island as they comprehend reality unlike Sita.
Sita compares herself mentally with Raman and finds herself "escaping" from "duties and responsibilities, from order and routine, from life and the city" (139) and withdrawing into the illusory island. Yet she feels that this withdrawal into illusion is justified and requires courage. She feels that she had the imagination to offer an "alternative" to the unborn baby — "a life unlived, a life bewitched" (139) — little realising that such a life is illusory, unrealistic and abnormal. Thus, Sita's clinging on even now to her illusions causes a psychological impact which is totally negative. To justify her wish she recounts again to Raman the so-called violence of her life in Bombay. This time, Raman's exasperated query of whether she had never been happy takes her aback. In general, life to Sita in Bombay had been trivial — "bored, dull, unhappy, frantic" (144) and hence, meaningless. Her children offer her no joy or solace. Rather, they mean "anxiety, concern — pessimism. Not happiness" (147). Ironically, the happiness that she had gained only once concerned a "vision" that she had had of an "inhuman, divine" love shared by a "fatally anaemic — or fatally tubercular" (146) young woman and her much older companion. The man's caressings of the young woman had been both tender, loving and gentle yet it was "inhumanly so". Their expressions were "intense, quite divine — or insane" (146). Beside the bench, where the two sat — the woman stretched out on the bench with her head on the man's lap — on the ground, two little round and rather dirty girls were playing. This moment was the only time that she had ever seen that life had meaning. This vision is
significant as it symbolically brings out to Sita the co-existence of life and
death in man’s life. The two girls symbolise the continuity of life while the
woman’s appearance “white as one dead, dead”(146) suggests death. Yet,
the man’s tender love suggests man’s need to compromise and accept all
realities of life.

Inspite of having that vision, Sita fails to comprehend its full
symbolic import. Instead, finding that her life lacked meaning while the
couple’s life conveyed “a strange, divine secret”(148), Sita feels that in
order to remain “whole”, she had to “run away” to the island(148).

In her lack of the desire to make compromises, to face
reality, she therefore actually becomes a “deserter”(148). Denying this she
terms it as an act of “positively saying No”(149). In other words, in her
defiant refusal to accept reality, she revolts against the accepted norms of
society. Of course, this revolt is aggravated by her less than satisfactory
relationship with Raman, her lack of friends and considering her children
to be objects of sentimentality. To her deluded mental state her refusal to
conform, to rebel also requires courage – the “courage of being a
coward”(139). Feeling herself akin to the “stranded” jelly-fish on the
shore, Sita realises:

There’s just the sea – it drowns us or strands us on the
sand bar – and there’s the island. That’s all (149).

These words are again symbolic. If the sea is suggestive of life then one is
either “drowned” or absorbed in it totally like Raman. For him, life in all
its aspects must be continued and lived. Others, like Sita, who refused to accept and turned away from all realities of life are left “stranded” on the shore. That is, they remain on the fringe of life estranged from people and life itself. In such an estranged state, they might try to seek relief in an illusory world – like the island of Manori here. However, once the illusion disintegrates they find themselves left stranded once again.

This “dark, muddled drama”(149) of Sita is totally incomprehensible to Raman who walks away from her in pure weariness. This act is again a symbolic release for Sita. In this act, she feels that finally, she has been set free from all the bonds tying her to life. Surprisingly, this freedom makes her feel rootless and anchorless. In other words, she realises now that the bonds of one’s existence are too strong and hence, cannot be broken so easily. As long as there is life, these bonds would be present. Neither can one remain in an estranged and alienated state from reality. This fact is also borne out symbolically by Sita’s act of searching out Raman’s footprints so that she can place her feet in them in order to make “walking back easier”(150). Her footprints “mingled with his, sometimes accurately and sometimes not, made a chain of links…”(150). These links made by the footprints indicate her decision to compromise with life by accepting its reality.

This realisation is further re-inforced when at the time of her packing to return to Bombay, she re-lives in her imagination the scene of child-birth. It is in pain – “a grey sensation of death”(154) – that birth – an
Certain factors serve to aggravate Sita's estrangement from reality. First, is the very environment in which Sita lives — that is Bombay. The city here, although it does not assume the dimensions of a character as it does in *Voices in the City*, serves to instil a sense of insecurity and meaninglessness in Sita. When she had first come from the island to the mainland, it had implied "solidity, security"(58). However, with the passage of time, it comes to symbolise the destructive element of life where even nature contributes to make the city a dreaded entity as for instance, the sea litters the shore with carcasses of fish, bones, frayed tins and so on.

Similarly, it is the crows that form a "shadow civilization" in the city. To Sita, this "crow theatre" mirrors the destructive "black drama" of the city's humans for within them too, is rampant "murder, infanticide, incest, theft and robbery"(38). The incident of the baby eagle being attacked and then finally killed by the crows reflects symbolically the destruction of the weak by the pack or the multitude. Hence, Sita's desperate attempts at trying to save the bird from the clutches of the crows. To Sita, this destructive element of the city appears to foster a sense of destructiveness and violence amongst the children and servants. This arouses in her such a feeling of fearful despair that it leads to her estrangement from reality — that her unborn baby can be contained n
security within her womb and thereby escape birth into that violence-filled life of the city.

Secondly, Sita's electra complex or father-fixation also contributes to the creation of a comforting illusory world in the island of Manori. Sita associates the island’s 'magic' with her father. Hence, her turning to Manori in the belief that her father might be able to work another "miracle" (31) posthumously – the miracle of keeping the baby unborn.

Sita's father – a freedom fighter – had come to Manori with his disciples and founded *Jeevan Ashram* (60). To a young Sita then, the island appeared as a piece of "magic mirror" (63) – bright and brilliant. Her father’s founding an *ashram* was the result of his desire to put into practice his social theories. So infatuated were his *chelas* (67) that even the water of the well which he had his followers dig was found to be sweet when in reality it was not. His "unorthodox ministrations" (69) of the village folk soon acquired the reputation of being "magic cures" (69) such as ridding a house of snakes and scorpions, making a woman – who had been barren for twelve years – bear sons, treating fits and boils with powdered pearls and rubies and so on. He was by turns a "saint", a "charlatan" and "wizard" (75) to his acquaintances. As Sita blossomed into womanhood this magical charisma of her father slowly revealed chinks when she came to know about the possible existence of a second wife or mistress, the desertion of her mother, the crushing of her mother’s jewels
into powder to be mixed with his medicines by her father. His was the figure Sita had "respected, admired and adored"(79) but his attention had always been reserved for her step-sister. When these shady aspects are slowly revealed to Sita, she struggles to free herself from remaining a "slave to his undefined magic"(88). But he could never be forgotten for he had imprinted on her "monuments"(88). She had only to smell jasmine or marigold to be flooded with the recollection of her father. In later years, none of his biographers could create the "magic" of his personality for her. While his wife had been able to escape from this "magic", many others remained caught by it till he lay dying.

Sita had left with Raman on her father's death with the longing for a "sane" and "routine-ridden"(100) life. However, when the everyday world grows to be insufferable to her, inadvertently, she begins to think of the "magic" island as a kind of "release". It becomes Sita's growing belief:

If the sea was so dark, so cruel then it was better to swim back into the net. If reality were not to be borne, then illusion was the only alternative. She saw that island illusion as a refuge, a protection. It would hold her baby safely unborn, by magic(101).

Finally, Sita's very nature and temperament formed by the peculiar nature of the circumstances of her upbringing brings about her estrangement from her family. This in turn, brings about the lack of her
much-needed emotional support. Had Sita not been emotionally “unloved” and “rejected”(133), it would not have made her turn to illusion with such a vengeance. Sita had grown up leading a strange unusual life. Being the youngest daughter of a freedom fighter, their lives – prior to coming to Manori – had been lived in jails, crowded assemblies, mobs, slums, tenements and villages where life had been “harsh and barbaric”(63). They had been acquainted with all the “tensions” and “cruelties” of political life like the long separations combined with fear and austerity. It had always been made clear to Sita that, it was “no age for games or sweets but one for prayer and sacrifice”(63-64). Thus, Sita had a warped childhood like Maya of Cry, the Peacock. However, unlike Maya who had always lived in comfort and opulence, Sita had lived in austerity. Maya’s opulence had made her isolated and estranged from the harsh realities of life while Sita’s fearful austerity and cruel political life makes her become estranged in later years from the realities of life. In fact, Sita suffers total neglect and indifference from her father for inspite of her adoration for him, he has an obvious leaning towards the elder daughter. Sita is also bereft of the love of a mother who has run away. She had imagined that she had come motherless into the world. However, when her indifferent brother informs her once of their mother’s abandonment of them, Sita finds herself questioning as to “who, what was she?”(85).

Further, Sita is married to a man who is totally opposite to her nature. B. Ramachandra Rao describes Raman very aptly:
Raman represents sanity, rationality, and an acceptance of the norms and the values of society. He is a typical conformist. Intelligent ... extroverted ...

Raman's reaction to his wife's frequent emotional outbursts is a mixture of puzzlement, wariness, fear and finally a resigned acceptance of her abnormality ...

... whatever shocks his wife is something natural and normal for him ...

Thus, the highly emotional and sensitive Sita remains estranged from her husband.

These factors turn Sita in later years to a "very unpredictable, excessively emotional and intolerant woman". These negative traits are kindled further by the hostile and depressing aspects of Bombay city life and make her totally unable to cope with life or accept its realities.

It is because of her inability to distinguish reality from illusion that she is able to identify with a foreigner the family meet on their way back from the Ajanta caves. The tall, blonde man was standing on the wrong side of the road with a placard that read "Ajanta". To Raman, he appears a fool, not even knowing which side of the road to wait on. To Sita, however he appears "brave". Her identification with him is symbolic of her own confused state. Like him, she too, doesn't know on which side of life she should stand.
In conclusion, Sita's highly unusual - almost nomadic - childhood gives her a sub-conscious insecurity. Lacking a proper home with proper familial emotional support, she turns into an uncertain "cripple, without crutches"(93). Seeking security and safety, she returns to Bombay with Raman and marries him. However, even there, the everyday 'ordinary world grows "stiff, static and petrified"(100). Apart from lacking emotional support from her family, she also does not have any special talent to acquire meaning for her life. As she says:

... If only I could paint, or sing or play the sitar well, really well, I should have grown into a sensible woman. Instead of being what I am ...(117).

The visit to Manori awakens Sita to reality albeit reluctantly. Her acceptance of reality prompts her decision to return to the mainland. This return is an act of "reluctant compromise" which had till then been an unwanted act. Yet this reluctant acceptance is not without its confusions and she concludes:

Life had no periods, no stretches. It simply swirled round, muddling and confusing, leading nowhere(155).

It should be noted here that Sita's reluctant compromise with life and the acceptance of her situation lends a positive note to the novelist's overall vision of life. This is in contrast to the earlier pessimistic
note brought about by the destruction of Maya and Monisha in *Cry, the Peacock* and *Voices in the City* respectively.

Anita Desai, once again makes use of omniscient narration in this novel. However, as before, the emphasis is on the projection of the thought-processes of the protagonist, Sita. As in *Bye-Bye Blackbird*, the narrator's comments help to create the mood of the novel. For instance, the description regarding the palm trees helps to heighten the sombre and brooding atmosphere of the island:

> The palms reared up in their path, hissing and clattering their dry leaves together harshly, like some disturbed, vigilant animals ... There was menace in their warnings, and vigilance, also a certain promise.(26)

The last sentence of the above passage is the narrator's comment on the scene described by the narrator. Again, there are also instances when the narrator's voice projects the character's perspective. For instance:

> Sita felt a spasm of fear at her bravado ... It was no place in which to give birth. There was no magic here ... she laid her hand protectively on the swelling stomach. What if, as her husband had warned, something happened? ... Sita felt ill ... trying to drive away the blood-tainted picture ...(112).
This passage shows the inter-mingling of the narrator’s voice and Sita’s perspective. It is worth noting that whereas this sort of introverted narration is common to *Cry, the Peacock* and this novel, which are introverted novels, the narration in the other two, is not so inward looking – these two novels being comparatively of the outer life – social life.

As in the previous novels, characters are revealed here too by their thought-processes as well as the points-of-view of the different characters and from the narrator’s perspective as well. This is particularly significant in the comparisons made by Moses between Sita and her illustrious father. Sita’s ordinariness and temperamental behaviour is contemptuously dismissed by Moses as against the reverential tone adopted by him when speaking about the father. Again, for instance, Sita’s point-of-view projects Raman as a responsible husband and father and herself as the opposite:

> He never hesitated – everything was clear to him and simple : life must be continued ... There was courage ... in getting on with such matters from which she herself squirmed away, dodged and ran ... That was why the children turned to him, sensing him to be the superior in courage, in leadership(138-139).

Similarly, Raman’s point-of-view reflects the true state of Sita:
He stared at her with distaste, thinking her grotesque.

Her face was so grey ... it was the face of a woman unloved, a woman rejected (133).

The thought-process of Moses regarding Sita is also revealing:

... he had expected someone ... who had inherited the dignity, the mystery and the ascetic splendour of the fabled father. She did not have it – had nothing, in fact ... seemed quite empty, vacant, stumbling (14).

Anita Desai makes use of time and memory of the modernist novels in depicting the events of this novel too. The novel -- which is divided into three parts -- has Part I and III in the present while Part II is in the past. Although Part I and III are in the present, Anita Desai uses the technique of flashback by which the characters especially the main protagonist Sita, goes back to a past incident by means of her memory.

The external action of Part I titled “Monsoon’67” comprises the waiting of Moses for his mistress Sita, their boat-journey to the island and then the bullock-cart ride to the house and their preparations for their stay that first night. So the whole action externally comprises only one day which takes place in clock time. The rest of the action takes place through the use of flashback in memory which reveals the different facts of Sita’s life as well as the incidents that culminate in her arriving at Manori with the abnormal wish of keeping her baby unborn. Thus, the incompatibility
of Raman and Sita, her vacillation between reality and illusion and her exaggeratedly viewed "small incidents" are narrated in the first flashback.

The mention of the incidents starts the chain of these incidents all in flashback – the attack of the eagle, the fight of the ayahs, her sons playfully fighting, Menaka's carelessness, her dislike of people as well as her inability to mix with anyone, her identification with the foreigner, her activity of waiting and finally her rebellious act of going to Manori. Thus, the external physical arrival at Manori attains full circle with the internal decision taken in memory to go to the island once more.

Part II as indicated by its title "Winter 47" takes place entirely in flashback. Again, the two parts are linked by the picture of arrival at Manori. But whereas in Part I, this decision to land at the island is internal, Part II begins with the arrival of the father along with his entourage on the island in the past – in 1947. Whatever little external action there is, it takes place in clock time. The internal action of course takes place in the mind of the protagonist thus revealing her father-fixation, the gradual shadiness of her father's activities, his death and her return with Raman to the mainland. Although the action takes place in linear time, what is shown is not the gradual passage of days and time but only selected incidents that highlight different aspects like character traits and their thought-processes. Although the past has been narrated by the omniscient narrator, there is a subtle hint that the past is also running through Sita's memory. This is shown by the linkage between the end of
Part I with Raman’s habitual query during summertime — “Where shall we go this summer?” to the end of Part II. Sita’s reply in Part I had been an unspoken one — “Manori” — and so also her silent decision “she would turn, go back and find the island once more” (58).

Towards the end of Part II, the narrator projects Sita’s perspective:

She always remembered how he had set down, on the terrace ... It was as though he had been expressly sent by providence to close the theatrical era of her life ...

(100).

This is an indication that the past has been replayed in Sita’s mind. Similarly, her acceptance of the true colours of her father is in the present, “He had been a wizard, she accepted that now, her father” (100). However, her silent decision taken before this recount of the past is substantiated after the recollection in the present:

Knowing that, accepting that, she knew it was because ordinary life, the everyday world had grown so insufferable to her that she could think of the magic island again as of release (101).

Thus, in reply to her husband’s query once again in Part II, she promptly replies “Manori” (101). Of course, this scene is also a recollection in memory as it had taken place in Bombay prior to her arrival in Manori.
Part III, titled “Monsoon 67” is once again in the present, that is, in Manori. The action that takes place externally is in linear time with the abatement of the monsoon, the arrival of Raman and the family’s departure back to Bombay. But as usual, the inner action is also depicted. The only flashback here is of a scene that had been witnessed by Sita once in the Hanging Gardens of Bombay.

The novel has a psychological structure as the three parts show the psychological stages by which reality is reached. Part I – Monsoon ’67 – shows how and why the protagonist is disillusioned with the reality. Part II – Winter ’47 – makes it gradually clear to the protagonist the illusory nature of her vision. However, her doubts and confusion still continue to plague her. In Part III – Monsoon ’67 – this cloud of confusion slowly evaporates and the protagonist is able to comprehend reality and reach a state of compromise.

Unlike the previous novel, Anita Desai has made a greater use of symbols in this novel. It is possible to conclude from here that in her novels that reflect the inward life, she depends mostly on images and symbols. This may be because inward feeling can hardly be expressed in words.

In this novel, what is of particular significance is the symbolic use of setting especially that of the island and the house. At first sight itself, the island appears to be dark. The path to the house is in a “great mass of surrounding darkness” and the house itself is “pitch
dark"(26). This external darkness is suggestive of the island’s true state –
decay and stagnation. The description of the “hissing and clattering
palms... like some disturbed, vigilant animals”(26) symbolises once again,
the hollowness of Sita’s illusory picture.

The monsoon mirrors the internal vacillation, doubts and
confusion of Sita. It is worth noting that this symbolic use of the monsoon
had been adopted in the case of Nirode too, in Voices in the City. Here, for
instance:

The monsoon flowed – now thin, now dense; now
slow, now fast; now whispering, now drumming then
gushing. There was never silence – always the roar
and sigh of the tide ...(102).

This rhythmic ebb and flow of the monsoon is symbolic of the flux within
Sita – the vacillation between illusion and reality – her slow realization of
the reality of the island and yet her refusal to acknowledge it openly to the
children.

However, as her awakening to reality becomes stronger and
clearer, the monsoon too undergoes a break:

Then the solidity of the cloud ceiling showed cracks –
rips of soft, white, rips of weakness – that widened
into pale channels so that the clouds separated at last,
drifted free ...(119).
Sita’s vision of the jellyfish which has already been mentioned reminds her of her estranged state. Her recognition of the negative impact of her illusions is reflected in the lull of the monsoon rains:

The days swung by to a slower pace now – the lazy, idle, leisurely pace of a relief, a lull ... Evening would rustle up through the casuarinas, clatter the palm leaves together and start up a murmur of pleasure, of animation ...(125).

So, the earlier “menace” is now replaced by “pleasure”. Again, earlier, Sita had felt spasms of fear at her “impulsive action”(112) and wanted her children near her. Now, her gradual acceptance of reality removes her fear of loneliness. Now she feels:

... surrounded by presences ... of the island itself, of the sea ... the palm trees ... In the beginning they had seemed harsh ... yet ... she came to see how extraordinarily responsive they were ... so alive as to seem birds rather than vegetable ... so Sita never felt alone or unsafe ...(126-127).

However, as she still has not reached a state of accepting reality in totality, she still at times fears the grove of trees and then “unquiet heaved”(127) inside her. Yet, as Sita is progressing from her state of illusion, the return
of the monsoon no longer oppresses her as she knows now that it would "ebb away and sink into the sea" (128).

Another pertinent symbol is Sita’s wish to keep her baby unborn. This wish symbolises her state of recoil from reality – her state of being engulfed in illusion.

The killing of the baby eagle by the city crows is symbolic of the destruction of the weak by the multitude. In the city, the struggle for survival invariably causes the weak to be always defeated. This symbol has as its precursor the killing of the fallen horse by the city crows in *Voices in the City* and is thus another example of the predator-prey image.

This association of crows with the city has been commented on by Madhusudan Prasad as depicting one “important aspect” of Bombay where “cannibalism is a commonplace and the crows, symbolic of this everyday cannibalism from a sort of ‘shadow civilization’ ”13. S. Indira considers the killing of the baby eagle by the crows to be a “vivid visual and acoustic image”. She rightly feels that the vivid description of “murder and mutilation is reflective of an all pervasive violence and victimization”14.

Mention has already been made of the vision of the lovers – one tubercular and the other old – and the two small girl as being symbolic of the duality of existence – life and death – and the need for acceptance of it. Kajali Sharma rightly feels that the scene of the Muslim couple
"suggest that life and death are inseparable, and closely follow each other; where there is life, there is death."\(^{15}\)

S. Indira observes that "the same image of lovers in the park" is also found in the short story, *Studies in the Park.*\(^{16}\)

The city and the island symbolise the two different points of Sita's mental vacillation. The city symbolises reality while the island symbolises illusion. Hence, Sita's return to the mainland symbolises her acceptance and return to reality.

As in the other novels, Anita Desai uses imagery in delineating characters. Thus the voices of Moses and his neighbours are the 'neighings' of goats(11). Moses is also a "dusky ox"(15). Miriam's cry is a "strident cackle, rasping and shrill, yowling in a tomcat's voice"(25). Young Sita's enthusiasm on her first arrival at Manori with her father, makes her "kick up her heels and prance like a pony"(63). In her happy state at Manori, her father resembles a "white water bird"(67) to Sita. Her sister Rekha's singing is like "the bird that heralded the day"(77). Her father's movements were regal "like some lion in his lair"(90). The unborn foetus lies in her "frail goldfish bowl belly". Sita feels the child there "play like some soft-fleshed fish in a bowl of warm sea-water"(55).

Images of decay and darkness characterise the island on Sita's return thus conveying the fact that all was not well on the island - that it was in reality not at all magical. As has already been mentioned it appears "flat, toneless"(21). The water of the village pond was not "brown
with mud but green as spinach, thick, viscous”(23). Reaching the grassy knoll, Sita and the children see trees “rearing up about them like columns of darkness”(25) while “dense darkness” pours onto them from trees(25). Sita’s retreat into an illusory world has been depicted by images of theatre. Her decision to go to Manori is termed by Raman as the “running away—like the bored runaway wife in—in a film”(36). Her life at Manori prior to her marriage was “the theatrical era of her life”. Raman had led her out of the “ruined theatre”(100) into the ordinary and everyday. As magic is illusory, that is why, Sita’s life on the island with her father had been “theatrical” as her father had been associated with magic. This is also why, on realising the need to compromise and accept reality she feels that the “part of an actress in a theatrical performance” which she had been performing at Manori was now over and her return to reality would be her turn “to a life of retirement, off-stage”(152-153).

Sita’s hyper-sensitivity and temperamental behaviour is also viewed in terms of theatrical images by Raman and Menaka. Theatre and drama suggest an element of unreality and at times even excesses of emotion and moments of exaggerated, unexpected action. Thus, Sita’s distress at her imagined “violence” is viewed by Raman as a performance of “the drama of her distress”(36). Similarly, her attempts to drive away the crows with Karan’s pop-gun is viewed distastefully by Menaka as a theatrical performance “created willfully ... to embarrass her family”(40-41).
There is the preponderance of grey colour in relation to Sita in the novel. Sita is “over-forty, grey and aging”(32). The “layers of experience and melancholy and boredom” settle on her face like “grey sand”(54). She could not inwardly accept that life would always leave her “in this grey, dull lit, empty shell”(54). The world for her is a “grey egg-world” and all of them “tiny grey sand-lice”(54). This use of grey colour shows the darkness of Sita’s life. Similarly, the “sparkling and glamorous” picture of the “magic” island now lies “buried beneath the soft green-grey mildew of the monsoon”(103). The colour grey is also associated with Raman’s steadiness, his “quite, grey strides”(131). Again, her face that is “so grey” with “sharp grooves” running from her nostrils to the corners of the mouth gives her the appearance of an “unloved” woman(133).

Anita Desai personifies the monsoon and the palm trees into animals. For instance:

The monsoon had temporarily withdrawn to the horizon, there to lie, visibly panting, collecting itself for another, stronger, return(7).

This conveys the impression of an animal retreating but getting ready to pounce all over again. The palm trees are “disturbed, vigilant animals – stiff bats, sharp cranes or dire geese ...”(26). Similarly, the strands of seaweeds that float and toss on the surface of the sea are the “extravagant writhings of reptiles”(18).
Anita Desai has made very evocative use of language in depicting the scene of the monsoon:

... to watch the massed clouds, Kohl-black... now engulfing, now releasing the sky, casting a shadow over the salty sea, turning it to a trough of green-black chill, then moving on to let a shaft of white sunlight stream down and scatter its dull silver coins upon the waves...(119).

Finally, another innovative fictional device adopted by Anita Desai here, is the symbolic use of poetry. This was used earlier in *Bye-Bye Blackbird* also. However, unlike in *Bye-Bye Blackbird* – where it is verse and whose origin is unknown – here, it is serious poetry. The two poems are of C. P. Cavafy and D. H. Lawrence respectively. Cavafy’s poem comes as a revelation to Sita when she compares herself to Raman mentally and finds herself lacking his courage in getting on with “meaningless” life’s mundane activities:

To certain people there comes a day
When they must say the great Yes or the great No.
He who has the Yes ready within him
reveals himself at once, and saying it crosses over
to the path of honour and his own conviction.

But Sita feels that she too possesses a different brand of courage – “the courage of being a coward” and this is reflected in the second part:
He who refuses does not repent. Should he be asked again, he would say No again. And yet that No—the right No—crushes him for the rest of his life.

The other poem is a stanza of D. H. Lawrence’s *End of Another Home Holiday*. This stanza occurs at the time of her realization to accept reality and thus is indicative to her of the need to accept life and her situation in it. In her muddled state, the lines “... even the slumbrous egg as it labours under the shell/Patiently to divide and sub-divide...”(57) come to her mind and baffle her. They continue to haunt her and much to her dismay she cannot recall the entire stanza till the moment of her realisation. This recollection is a revelation and the “words of explanation clamoured inside her mouth. The heifer, the grain, the slumbrous egg and she herself”(151).

Anita Desai herself has commented upon the significance of these lines in an interview:

... if one is alive in this world one cannot survive without compromise, drawing the line means certain death and in the end, Sita opts for life with compromise – consoling herself with Lawrence’s verse with the thought that she is compelled to make this tragic choice because she is a part of this earth, of life, and can no more reject it than the slumberous egg can or the heifer or the grain.”17.
Anita Desai's use of Indian words is quite less here and are those that are untranslatable. For instance, lungi, memsahib, sari, ayah, chelas, kho, tanpura, bhajan, and sitar.

Charmazel Dudt has sought to add a new dimension to the novel by commenting that the novelist has "succeeded in enlarging the function of the traditional psychological novel to include not merely an individual's struggle with his past but also a nation's conflict with its history". Dudt feels that Anita Desai here "projects the national anxiety in its search for identity and meaning". In this connection, Dudt comments that the father's character has been inspired by the figure of Mahatma Gandhi himself and the novel challenges the "authenticity" and "workability of the Gandhian way of life". Dudt also claims that the "vulnerability" of the Indians is reflected in the "unhesitating acceptance" of the "saint" father's magical potions. He also says that what the author "succeeds in calling to national attention is focused in the central character" whose future too "depends on her confrontation and analysis of the nature of her past".

It is true that the father's figure has been inspired by Gandhi – he is in fact called the "Second Gandhi" – and the waste and decay of the island can indeed challenge the 'authenticity' of the Gandhian way of life.

It is also true that the 'vulnerability' of the Indians is reflected in the gullibility of the islanders. However, to equate the
“nation’s conflict with its history” to an “individual’s struggle with his past” appears to be a bit far-fetched. It is obvious that Sita’s past life on the island was illusory and she turns to it in later years because she fails to confront the reality of life. It is pertinent to remember that initially – after her father’s death – she had returned to the mainland with Raman, relieved and longing for a sane and regular life. The second time too, after her realization of the island’s illusory nature, she reluctantly decides to return to the city.

Thus, while it is true that Sita’s future is determined by her “analysis” and “confrontation” with the nature of her past, it cannot be said so for India. India being an ancient land has had a rich and varied history with nothing illusory about it. The coming of Gandhi comprises only one milestone in it. Gandhi no doubt, helped India to achieve Independence in 1947 but by the time this novel came to be written in 1975, the country already had an identity without much reason for “conflict with its history”.

Again, except for Part II – “Winter ’47” – which refers indirectly to some of the events surrounding independence, especially in relation to Gandhi, no mention has been made in the novel about either the country or its past. Even Part II is concerned more with projecting the illusory nature of Sita’s life in – as she had believed then – the magical island. Parts I and III are concerned entirely with Sita’s mental state.
What Dudt perhaps had in mind was the prevailing state of political affairs and the "corruptibility of power" at the time of the novel's writing for as he has said, the novel has published in the year when "the powers of democracy were wielded by a single authority (1975)." Hence, Dudt's call for an analysis of the nation's past.

But as has already been mentioned, this equation of the nation's analysis of the past with an individual's analysis of her past appears unconvincing.

Notes


6. ibid., p 70.


10. Atma Ram, "A View of Where Shall We Go This Summer?", *Journal of Indian Writing in English* 9.1, 1981, p 79.


19. ibid., p 67.
20. ibid., p 73.
21. ibid., p 71.
22. ibid., p 71.
23. ibid., p 71.