WHERE SHALL WE GO THIS SUMMER ?: A STRUGGLE FOR REPRODUCTIVE FREEDOM

Anita Desai's fourth novel, *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* (1975), has been commented upon by different critics from different points of view. Vimala Rao and N. Pratima have given an analytic study of it (R.K. Dhawan (ed.) Vol. 3, 1991 : 171-189). T.S. Anand has tried to trace out the novelist's stance against negativism in it (Ibid : 166). K.P. Ambekar has focused on its symbolism in comparison with that of Virginia Woolf's *To The LightHouse* (Ibid : 201). Again, Usha Bande has re-examined it in the light of existential philosophy (Ibid : 165-206). But what is interesting is that many critics have criticised its conclusion as too unassertive and negative, a few feel that it suggests lack of finality, while others claim that it denotes a defeat of the individual. Darshan Singh Maini finds the ending weak. As he says, 'It does not connect. Nor are we prepared for the sudden glow and the decision to return to Bomaby and to sanity' (K.K. Sharma (ed.) 1977 : 229). But there are others who praise the ending as 'life-enhancing' and appreciate Sita for accepting the realities of life. However, the novel has not so far been analysed in a Foucauldian feminist perspective. I use this perspective to explore and resurrect the novel's subjugated knowledge in the figure of a middle-aged pregnant mother who refuses to accept the medical solution to her pregnancy offered by her husband.

Like *Cry, The Peacock*, the novel has a triptyche structure : Part I is entitled as Monsoon'67, Part II Winter'47 and Part III Monsoon'67. Part I and Part III highlight Sita's existence in Bombay and Part II her life on Manori, an island. Again, Part II is dovetailed into Part I and Part III in order to make her undertake a see-saw journey between the island and the mainland in search for a salubrious condition for her new child. As S. Indira observes, 'her life in the city is depicted mainly through the images of violence and her life on the island is teemed with images of sea, sunshine, colour and flowers' (1994 : 70). However, from a feminist point of view, her life on two different regions may be construed

as her plight under two forms of Indian patriarchy : the life on Manori seems to represent her plight in traditional form of Indian patriarchy and her life on the mainland representing her plight in Indian patriarchal capitalist society.

In Part I Sita is seen to adopt a critical position to provide us with the critique of the Indian patriarchal capitalist society. Here it is pertinent to note an interview of Yashadhara Dalmia with Anita Desai where Anita Desai asserts that 'she is not interested in characters who are average, but in those who have been driven into some extremity of despair and so turned against, or made to stand against, the general current' (The Times of India, 29th April, 1979). The novelist's claim is considerably true in this context because Sita, the protagonist, is not an average woman. She is conscious of what she is. In other words, she is conscious of her surroundings, of the period and the precise moments in which she is living. In a sense, she has the capacity to analyse the present situation and her self in relation to others. In providing us with a criticism of the post-independence Indian patriarchal capitalist society, she articulates her critical attitude towards its culture. Foucault defines the notion of critique in three ways – 'the art of not being governed in such a manner, the art of voluntary inservitude and a thoughtful indocility, in opposition to Kant's enlightenment, defined as the courage to use one's own reason, though Kant's concept of autonomy is grounded on obedience to Sovereign power.' (Michael Kelly, 1994 : 289-90). Adapting Faucault's views on critique, in this context we may say that in refusing to accept the male-defined medical solution to her pregnancy, she shows her art of not being governed by her husband and thereby takes a position of resistance to patriarchal medical interference to female experience of delivery.

Sita, a highly sensitive middle-aged woman, has had four children 'with pride, with pleasure – sensual, emotional, Freudian, every kind of pleasure – with all the placid serenity that supposedly goes with pregnancy and parturition' (31-32). Her husband is puzzled therefore when the fifth time she tells him she is pregnant. He stares at her with a distaste that tells her it is not becoming for a woman now in her forties, greying, ageing, to behave with such a total lack of control. All through their married life they preferred to avoid a confrontation. But now Raman finds her giving vent to her fears, her rages and her

resentments that she has allowed to accumulate inside her for long seven months. What infuriates her is his attempt to put the entire blame upon her for the pregnancy. However, he tries to persuade her to undergo parturition under the supervision of a doctor in the hospital :

> You must stay where there is doctor, a hospital and a telephone. You can't go to the island in the middle of the monsoon. you can't have a baby there (33).

But she refuses to comply with his diktat with a declaration : 'I don't want it to be born' (35).

She has now become conscious of the meaningless life around her. She cannot reconcile to Raman's acceptance of life's ordinariness and feels discontented with women's life in post-independence India. She manifests her sense of freedom through her identification with a foreigner whom she meets on the roadside while returning with her husband from holiday at Ajanta and Ellora caves. While Raman thinks that the foreigner who wanted a lift to Ellora is a fool in that he does not know which side of the road to wait on, Sita refutes him by saying that it is not his foolishness but innocence that 'made him seem more brave not knowing anything but going on nevertheless' (52). Sita identifies herself with him because 'like her, the foreigner is so vulnerable – vulnerable to violence and criticism in the society' (K.P. Ambekar, in R.K. Dhawan (ed.) Vol. III 1991 : 204).

Moreover, for Sita, Raman's friends, acquaintances, relatives and business associates are no better than animals, because their life is concerned with 'nothing but food, sex and money' (47). Sita calls them animals who are neither pet, nor wild beasts but 'pariahs ... hanging about drains and dustbins, waiting to pounce and kill and eat' (Ibid). Not only this, she also feels suffocated by the 'vegetarian complacence' (49) of the well-fed women and rebels against 'their sub-human placidity, calmness and sluggishness' (48) by starting smoking :

> A thing that had never been done in their household by any women and even men only in street – and began to speak in sudden rushes of emotion, as though flinging darts at their smooth, unscarred faces (Ibid).

Through her acts of smoking and wearing the garments of a demoralised washerwoman, which are 'so limp, so faded, so bedraggled and ragged', she abrogates Indian patriarchal family norms for the women and asserts her position in opposition to compliant women.

More interesting is that what is normal to her husband and her children is abnormal to her. The 'small incidents' that are nothing but trifles to them seem to threaten her existence. The sight of the crows forming 'a shadow civilization in that city of flats and alleys' (38) and making a feast of a wounded eagle unnerves her to the point of tears. Her husband's remark – 'they have made a good job of your eagle' (41) – seems inhuman and callous to her. The small incident, as K.P. Ambekar observes, highlights the total absence of communication between Sita and those around her (R.K. Dhawan (ed.) Vol. III, 1991 : 203). Again, as S. Indira states, 'this scene of murder and mutilation is reflective of an all pervasive violence and victimization, the two basic elements, the world seems to gloat over' (S. Indira, 1994 : 76). But Meneka, Sita's daughter, thinks that her mother's reaction to the eagle and crow incident is a mere act of drama to 'embarrass the family' (41). Here lies the difference between the mother and the daughter in their attitude to life. In order to find out the cause of their difference it is worthwhile to note Virginia Woolf's comment in *Three Guineas* which builds around three causes : first to prevent war by helping a pacifist society; second, building of a woman's college and third, establishing a society dedicated to helping women to enter the professions. For her, the three causes are interrelated and might help prevent war and eradicate fascism. Woolf observes that women have never made war, 'scarcely a human being in the course of history has fallen to a woman's rifle; the vast majority of birds and beasts have been killed by you, not us' (Virginia Woolf, 1963 : 6). Opposing militarism and fascism Woolf proposes a society that would encourage the development of women's ethic that is holistic, anti-militarsistic and life-affirming. Sita seems to be in search of this sort of society and therefore she stages a symbolic protest against cannibalism and violence in patriarchal capitalist society which is misinterpreted by her daughter as an act of drama to embarrass the family. Actually, Sita envisions something

beyond the patriarchal capitalism while Meneka hopes to fulfil her aspiration with the appropriation of modern means existing in the civil society.

The newspaper 'headlines about war in Vietnam, the photograph of a woman weeping over a small grave, another of a crowd outside a Rhodesian jail; the articles about the perfidy of Pakistan' (55) lead her to understand that almost the whole world is involved in war of destruction. The war of destruction appals her to such a great extent that she begins to think how can the civilization survive, how can the child? She begins to lose all feminine and maternal belief in childbirth because she thinks that childbirth would be one more act of violence and murder in a world that has already had enough of it. However, she struggles inward to offer herself and her unborn child an alternative, 'a bewitched life'. She gains in courage from the Greek poet Cavafy's verse :

> To certain people there comes a day
> When they must say the great Yes or the Great No (37).

She realises that the day has come to say 'Great No' to violence in favour of a 'bewitched life' on Manori where her fabled father created magic. She believes that the magic still is there and that it will help her keep the child unborn. and retrieve the sense of wholeness. On these assumptions she shows her courage to say 'No' to Raman's diktat :

> I will go. I am leaving tomorrow on the island – it'll be different (36).

Sita brings her two children, Karan and Menaka, to the island. But after twenty years the island too appears to her to be occupied by dilapidation, artificiality, drabness and tonelessness. Everywhere she is engulfed by a picture of despair :

> The fields were only pits of mud and slush ... The Manori village was an evil mass of over-flowing drains, gaping thatched roofs and huts all battered and awry (22).

The picture of despair on the present island forces her to take shelter in the island of her memory. But through her review of it she discovers that the island of '47 did not have

magic of its own, it was created by her father on it. As she reviews her relationship and those of her sister, the villagers, his chalas, her mother, with her father, the unpleasant truths about him loom large before her. As S. Indira observes, 'the starred footprints of the white water birds on the sands give indication of her father's hidden desire to leave behind him a name for himself after his death' (1994 : 71). Sita recollects how her disillusionment with her fabled father began while she failed to find 'the well-water sweet'. But the villagers were hypnotised by his act of digging well and tasted the water sweet. However, she now realises that her father deprived her of good education and friendly advice. That 'she emerged as a moth from its cocoon not into sunlight, but into a grey nonlight that does not warm the damp wings or give them strength for flight' (76) implies that she was not made self-reliant but dependent. This consciousness of her victimization by her father makes her vicious. She becomes more vicious when she envisages that her father had a second wife, that there was an uncanny relationship between her father and her step-sister Rakha and that her mother was a run-away from her father's oppression. Sita's rage and anger that are articulated symbolically through the fury of Nature might be construed as the feminist rage and anger against the women's victimization by their sovereign-fathers in traditional Indian patriarchal society :

> The sound of the dry palm leaves clattering and clashing together–suddenly, precipitately – in the salt wind (80).

Sita's fury and horror do not cease to rise in crescendo as she remembers how her father would crush her mother's jewellery and mix it in the medicine. Following Nimmie Poovaya's observation, it may be said that her father's use of the pulverized jewels in the medicine has a two-fold implication : he is symbolically avenging himself on the wife who had dared to defy him by running away, thus placing her actual person outside the orbit of his control; simulataneously he is using the jewellery to enmesh the women folk of Manori even more firmly in his power (Nimmie Poovaya in Narasimhaiah (ed.) Commonwealth Literature, Problems of Response, 1981 : 208).

Besides this, it may not be an exaggeration to argue that Sita's father may have been delineated to expose the contradiction between Gandhiji's vision of women's emancipation

and the Gandhians' exploitation of the ignorant and innocent village women. Sita's father who claimed himself to be a true Gandhian is discovered to have exploited, in the name of their welfare, the ignorant and innocent villagers, particularly the women :

> He had cast an illusion as a fisherman casts a net, with the faintest sussuration of warning, upon a flock of fish in the sea. His chelas were the first to be caught, then the villagers, most inescapably the women (100).

However, the unplatable past about her father that has so far been unearthed does not create trouble to her so much as the Manori of '67s does because she finds the place devoid of magic :

> It was no place in which to give birth. There was no magic here – the magic was gone (112).

This harrowing realisation makes her feel a spasm of fear at her bravado. She lays her hands protectively on her swelling belly. She begins to think what if, as her husband warned her, something happens? For all her inspired words, she knows she cannot shelter the baby inside her forever. And she is worried as to who would help her when the time of parting comes. Mariam's name occurs to her. But at the thought of Mariam's burly arms plunging into her, handling the fragile skull of the infant with her fat, smacking hands, she gets horrified. Her escapade is as though beckoning one of those horror stories that appear in newspapers, of women giving birth in tree-tops during floods, in the middle of an earthquake, or inside an aeroplane. The vision of these horrors fragments her feminine self. She is in a dilemma as to whether she should meet the demands of her children by going back to the mainland or face what may come. She feels to be isolated from the children, although she sustains an inner struggle to come out of the torments and isolation. At last she makes a positive attempt to reach out to the children and establishes a relationship with them through playing mud-modelling with them. Consequently, she learns to identify herself with Nature and begins to get back the sense of wholeness.

In addition, another change comes upon her as she encounters Raman on Manori island. She observes that it is not only she but Raman too who has suffered :

> During these weeks that she had been away – had suffered from worry and anxiety about her, the unborn child, Meneka and Karan, living alone on the island in this wild season. His boys at home must have worried him too, while he was at work in the factory which was not without its problems either – he never told her of them and she never gave much thought to it but the possibility struck her now. He looked worn, much older than his years. Nor could he stay here, resting, as she was doing (138).

With this sympathetic feeling towards Raman, she for the first time endeavours to connect her self with that of Raman. But as she comes to know that Raman has come not for her sake but for her daughter who had written to him, she feels to be betrayed by all of them. However, on Raman's query if she has never been happy, Sita refers to the only happy moment of her life when she encountered a Muslim couple in the Hanging Garden in Bombay :

> So strange – that love, that sadness, not life anything I have seen or known. They were so white, so radiant, they made me see my own life like a shadow, absolutely flat, uncoloured. That, that was the happy ... (146-47).

This suggests her relation with Raman has been vitiated by a kind of internal negation. As Usha Bande puts it : 'Sita's ideal seems to be a kind of love in which she could stay whole and yet be in complete harmony with her lover. She cannot find this divine harmony in reality' (Usha Bande in R.K. Dhawan (ed.) 1991 : 198). However, what is noticeable is that Sita's confession draws only a bewildered response from Raman. Sita then realises that they run on parallel lines. Still she is not ready to give up her battle against Raman's logic. She argues that even though she is a mother of four children, she thinks that children are a source of anxiety, concern and pessimism, they do not provide happiness but sentimentality. Countering such ideas of Sita, Raman emphasises the value of sentimentality that, he thinks, makes one human. But Sita, dismissing his argument, valorises the love of the Muslim couple because it has enabled her to see that life has a

meaning. However, Raman can no longer argue with her : he releases her 'out of pure weariness with her, weariness with her muddle' (149). Thus maintaining a position of resistance to Raman's diktat she shows her mettle not to be governed by him. Now she is free to choose what is best for her and her unborn child. And exercising her full autonomy she resolves to accept life on the mainland.

Critics like N.R. Shastri and S. Indira look upon Sita's final attitude to life as healthy. They find in it the reflection of the novelist's new and positive attitude to life :

> The novel seems to acquire a new idiom in that the death/suicide syndrome of her earlier fiction gives place to a sober, balanced acceptance of life (S. Indira 1994 : 69).

On the contrary, the critics like D.S. Maini find the ending too unassertive and negative because it suggests, in their view, Sita's defeat. But the fact is otherwise. Sita has an ideology that opposes violence, corruption and destruction in patriarchal capitalism. She hoped that her holistic and life-affirming ideology would be materialized on Manori '67. But her hope has been dashed to the ground. To stick to her stubbornness, she, like Monisha in *Voices in the City*, might have committed suicide, but she understands that the suicide would entail the destruction not only of her life but also that of the unborn child. Sane and brave Sita cannot allow herself to be accused of infanticide and thereby contradict her own ideology. She suspends the idea of refusal to medical treatment to parturition in favour of negotiation with it. Besides this, Sita refuses to be dominated by Raman in terms of power/knowledge relations. One may argue that it is Raman who has taught Sita to be grateful to life and accept the terms of life. But it is otherwise. If Sita has learnt the lesson of acceptance of life, it is from Nature:

> Neither sea nor the sky were (sic) separate or contained – they rushed into each other in a rush of light and shade, impossible to disentangle (153).

What she has learnt from Nature is that as in Nature everything is inseparably linked to one another, in a heterosexual society man is incomplete without woman or vice-versa. In this sense, Sita should not be treated as the other of Raman in the power/knowledge

relations. As free subjects, both of them can claim to be the knowers and equal to each other. Again they are different from each other in their respective ways of acquiring knowledge of life. While Raman has learnt that life is only a matter of disappointment, but not disaster and that one should be grateful to it for that, Sita has learnt that one should accept the terms of life since nothing in the world is self-contained. Even her own self is not fully autonomous, its autonomy being contingent upon relationships. Hence keeping her relationship with the unborn child in mind, she comes to negotiate with Raman. Above all, her negotiation is premised upon mutuality that ensures her that she would be treated not only as body, but also as human subject with fears, desires, needs and so forth. Thus resurrecting the subjugated knowledge of a pregnant woman-wife-and-mother, the novelist creates resistance to the male-defined medical control over childbirth in patriarchal capitalist society.