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Women's Quest for Isolation, Identity & Liberation in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*

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Abstract: *Where Shall We Go This Summer* is a novel depicting the tension between a sensitive wife Sita and the rational and worldly husband, Raman. Sita is a highly sensitive, over-emotional middle aged woman, already saddled with four children while the fifth is on the way. She is isolated from her husband who fails to understand the behaviour of her children. Sita and her husband symbolise two different worlds. Sita's condition is depicted through the symbol of a wounded eagle. Her physical and mental state deteriorates each day. She does not like to deliver her fifth child because she is afraid of the violence in the world. She wants to retain it in her womb; so she escapes from reality to the world of fantasy, magic and miracle. The basic fragmentation of her "self", with its incoherence and trauma, baffles her and she gives in submissively. The structural division of the novel into three sections is concerned with three stages in the development of Sita's character during the course of the novel. Section one depicts her life in Bombay and by implication her contact with reality, the second section describes her escape from reality to the world of miracle, and the third and last section portrays her return to Bombay, which is by implication her return to the world of reality. The temporal dichotomy corresponds to the psychic ambivalence of Sita. In fact, a typical conduct of a normal sensible person cannot be fully expected from a character like her.

Keywords: Anita Desai, individual, emotion, self-realization, identity.

The individual is the subject of discussion in Anita Desai’s novels. She is deeply concerned with the outer world. Socio-political or economic issues hold no fascination for her. She explores the Indian sensibility especially that of women. Her sense of understanding of the minds of her characters gives her the opportunity to bear the fears, turmoil, doubts, and frustrations. She can thus probe into the dark interior of human psyche. In an essay published in 1983, and initially presented at the Commonwealth Institute, London, she stated: “Whereas a man is concerned with action, experience and achievement, a woman writer is more concerned with thought, emotion, and sensation” (Desai, quoted in Sharma 581).

The chief cause of alienation and loneliness of her female characters arises from emotion or rather the lack of it. The woman has to bear the brunt of changing values of the world of today. No one has the time to stop and ponder that she has her own requirements and that she is a person of her own identity. She feels isolated and eventually builds a barrier that no one can cross. The woman in Anita Desai’s novel is confined within the cyclic parameters of home - womb - tomb. Her woman characters eventually exhibit an overpowering urge to realise themselves and to liberate themselves and to establish their own identity. Being stamped and trodden on, she feels an agonizing desire to restructure her life, even in a small measure to assert her lost identity.

Anita Desai’s treatment of her theme begins with a simple personal story of an individual woman gradually developing into a wider conflict of her identity and ends up exploring possibilities of tradition and change, in the tradition bound Indian society residing in metropolitan surrounding. She brings out a new dimension to the Indian novel by drawing upon the troubled sensibility of a woman’s absurd world. Anita Desai finds the existentialist theory, compatible to her themes. Her characters like, Maya, Sita, Lotte, and Nanda Kaul are lonely, anxious and strange, and suffers from a sense of alienation that is not merely physical but psychic. Anita Desai has not simply created situation and characters to populate her pages but is seriously concerned with the

predicament of an individual woman character in each of her novels trying to explore her inner self for realization.

Where Shall We Go This Summer? (1975) has a central female character Sita, who suffers from intense delusions of her being separate and different from others leading to an ostensibly normal life, living with her husband and mothering her children. Suddenly she finds reality unpalatable and decides to return to Manori, an island where once her father lived like the legendary Prospero, during her childhood. There, she intends to freeze her foetus – neither aborting the embryo nor delivering the child. The process of her resolution, experimentation, and restoration in the society is discussed in the novel.

The story of the novel is told in a series of flashbacks with a clever ordering of past events. The division of the novel orders the events. The first section is devoted to Sita’s coming to the ‘magic island’, Manori, along with her daughter Menaka and son Karan. The second part deals with Sita’s life at Manori for twenty years before her second visit to the island. The third part is about her choice of the future course. Desai adopts the pattern of monsoon winds to convey the tumult in Sita’s mind. In her interview with Atma Ram, she says:

I wanted the book to follow the pattern of monsoon together darkly and threateningly to pour down wildly and passionately and then withdraw quietly and calmly.
(Ram 97)

This enables her to delineate the inner life of her heroine who is the central figure of the novel.

Sita faces the loneliness of a woman, a wife, and a mother and her marital discord results chiefly from the dichotomy between two irreconcilable temperaments and diametrically opposite viewpoints represented by Sita and her husband Raman. Sita, a sensitive over-emotional, middle-aged woman saddled with four children, feels alienated from her husband and children and undergoes an unbearable mental agony because of her high strong sensibility and explosive emotionality.

In *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* Sita has a “dry, worn face” (17) which has assumed “the aged stillness” (18) owing to her mental condition, she “continually broke apart into violent eruptions of emotion” (19) giving frequently a “paranoiac show of rage, fear and revolt” (32) for “control was an accomplishment that had slipped out of her hold” (32). Her husband, however, was made of different stuff. His face was “Usually as stolid as soundly locked gate,” (34) and this would give an idea of his practical, commonsense approach to life: “People were to him, friends, visitors, business associates, colleagues, or acquaintances. He regarded them with little humour and with restraint. With some he did business, with others he ate a meal. Some came to see him, others he visited...middle way” (47).

Sita is suffocated by the vegetarian complacency stolidity, insularity, and unimaginative way of life of her husband and his people. She never gets used to anyone: “She could not inwardly accept that this was all there was to life, that life would continue thus, inside this small, enclosed area, with these few characters churning around and then past her, leaving her...apart and burst” (54).

Sita has a strange and unusual childhood spent among crowds, without having any sense of identity or belonging. Her father, a freedom fighter, who settles later in an island to carry out his social and spiritual experiments, her sister and brother are all alien and enigmatic to her. The neglect, the confusion and the isolation she suffers during her formative years make her a very unpredictable excessively emotional and intolerant woman. Sita’s neurosis results from a case of total neglect and indifference.

Her hopelessness regarding her marital life makes her insensitive, cruel, and alien to her husband and children. Her insanity drives her back to preserve the sense of sanity by escaping from her routine life in a Bombay apartment to rush to Manori, an island in the west coast. She tells her husband: “What I am doing is trying to escape from the madness here, escape to a place where it might be possible to be sane again” (35).

Manori Island may provide a refugee camp safe from her family life, away from the humdrum life of Bombay. By going there, she tries to connect the changes, distortions and revelations between the present and the past in her middle age. For a change in her present existence, she desires shelter in the island. Showing this desire of Sita, the novelist writes: “She saw that island illusion as a refuge, a protection. It would hold her baby safely unborn, by magic. Then there would be the sea – it would wash the frenzy out of her, drown it. Perhaps, the tides would lull the children too, into smoother, softer beings” (101).

Though the island holds no magic now, for the illusion tramples upon her. She was shocked to find that the island had totally changed and that it had no resemblance to her earlier life. Manori village was an evil mess of overflowing drains, gaping thatched roofs and huts all battered awry. Her house and the atmosphere of the island only worsen her isolation. A poem by Cavafy reveals her moral perplexity in the following way: “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 he crosses over to the path of honour and his own conviction. 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” (37).

The magnitude of Sita’s loneliness needs to be analysed in order to understand her predicament in the proper perspective. She feels as if she were a cripple without clutches. A new awareness, a new consciousness arises in her mind. She realises that like all human relationship, marriage was also a farce. She even begins to doubt the relevance of her existence in this world: “Life seemed complete, full without her, there was no reason for her to exist” (84).

She tries to weave a pattern in her life but failed. Once Sita tells Raman that the only one happy moment in their married life was in the Hanging Garden where a Muslim woman laying her head over her husband’s lap shows love in the eyes of the old man. Sita has never shared such kind of tender and gentle love with her husband. In her view, life without love is meaningless. Sita has her romantic vision of life and shows her immense interest in her ill-fated life. She does not

like any kind of violence whether in nature, society or personal life. To her disgust she finds it pervasive. Anita Desai depicts the gulf between Sita and her family and the episode of eagle and crows, with an emphasis on Sita’s sensitivity to violence. She is shocked by the sight of the death eagle as Maya, in *Cry, the Peacock* is shocked by the sight of the dead pet dog. Sita identifies herself with the dead eagle in a society which is full of violence and destruction. Raman, her husband has a totally different view and takes sadistic delight in Sita’s failure to protect the eagle. The trivial incident creates a gulf, separating Sita from her husband and children. Sita’s sensitivity is evident in the incident which describes the fight of ayas in the street. Sita thinks that there is no security to anyone in this violent society. Her sensitivity is also evident in the incident where Menaka unconsciously crumbles a sheaf of new buds in the small potted plants, telling her mother about a party. Again, her husband’s indifference towards the picture of Vietnam in the newspapers, Menaka’s tearing Sunday water colours into long strips of meaningless colours, Karan’s demolishing his toys with Karate boys, articles about perfidy of Pakistan are like hand grenades hurled at her frail gold fish bowl belly. Instinctively, she laid her hands above her belly feeling the: “...the child there plays like some soft-fleshed fish in a bowl of warm sea water. She folded her hands over it, frightened, certain now that civilization had been created by the godlike efforts of the few, in the face of a constant, timeless war of destruction that had begun with time and was now roaring around her, ...in the midst of this bloodshed? They would surely be wounded, fall and die” (55-56).

She develops a traumatic experience which is the result of the incidents that occur to her in her family and society. She decided to go to Manori Island to relive the sensation of greatness which was denied in her childhood. J.G. Masilamani says:

The escape to the island of Manori and its primitive condition is an attempt to capture the carefree days of her childhood where time stood still and yet it was no paradise. Corruption, selfishness, egoism have all had their place there. (1978, 29)

When she arrives at the island with Karan and Menaka, she found her old house full of dust and cobwebs. Her old servant Moses and his wife Meriam, have become lazy. She realises her disillusionment and she says: “It was no place in which to give birth. There was no magic here – the magic was gone” (112).

Sita feels that self is attacked by self-alienation. She regrets for having wasted her life and not giving it a direction and meaning. She reflects: “I should have known how to channel my thoughts and feelings, how to put them to use. I should have given my life some shape then, some meaning. At least, it would have had some for me – even if no one else had cared” (117).

During her stay at Manori, Sita once saw a dead jellyfish. She is suddenly struck by the similarity of the jellyfish to the foetus inside her womb. Like the creature which lives, “far beneath the level where light penetrated” (124). She has lived so far refusing to see the light of the realities of life. She realises that she cannot rewrite Nature’s law to prevent the birth of her child.

While Sita is passing through such an important crisis in her life, Raman visits the island to fetch her away. Sita, who spent her childhood without a proper family, suddenly finds Raman likeable for all that he does for the family. Her recent life at Manori Island makes her realise the hard facts of life and awakens to the truth of her situation. Her quest for isolation, liberation, and identity results in compromises. Therefore, she takes the final decision to follow Raman to Bombay:

The wild young heifer, glancing distraught
 With a strange, new knocking of life at her side
Runs seeking a loneliness.
 The little grain draws down – the earth, to hide.
Nay, even the slumberous egg as it labours
 under the shell
Patiently to divide and sub-divide,
 Asks to be hidden, and wishes nothing to tell. (150)

She realises that escapism is no answer to life’s problem and that life must flow on. “Life must be continued and all its business” (138). Therefore, betrayed, defeated and humiliated, she is forced to come back to Bombay. She is compelled to the violence and suffering but married life, as Chesterton remarks, “It’s a perpetual compromise, or sacrifice for a greater good vindicates one’s victory and greatness.” On being asked about the fate of the fifth child, Anita Desai in an interview with Atma Ram mentioned:

It is born. It lives. It compromises.
It accepts the dullness...
It leads an ordinary life. (98)

Sita’s self adjustment is the answer of her problem of self-alienation for which she is responsible. Therefore, her journey to Manori for self-alienation was better but her journey to Bombay for self-adjustment is for comfort. T.S. Anand aptly finds her reason for her return and says:

Sita had realised the difference between the necessity and the wish, between what a man wants and what he is compelled. Her desire to bear the child and return with Raman to the mainland signifies her return to life, community and society inspite of the debased, dullness of life, the calamity, the lies and moral buggery, the odium, the detritus of wrong and sorrow dropped. On every heart, for existence is not possible in an insulted state of being, rather existence implies being with other’s. (27)

Thus, Sita identifies herself at last as a social being to live, thrive and exist with the society.

To conclude, Mrs. Desai’s novels have the recurring themes of woman’s struggle for self-realization and self definition, woman’s quest for her identity, her pursuit of freedom, equality and transcendence, her rebellion and protest against oppression at every level. There is a quest for feminine style and syntax. Anita Desai’s treatment of the women characters looks to the past to anatomise the pain inflicted on women

down history to the present in a passionate affirmation of female identity and experience. The hall-mark of Desai’s fiction is “to focus on the inner experience of life” (Kanwar 71). She expresses “a uniquely Indian sensibility that is yet completely at ease in the mind of the west” (Alcock 33). Anita Desai deserves all these significant remarks.

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