

RESEARCH ARTICLE

SENSE OF ALIENATION: ANITA DESAI'S *WHERE SHALL WE GO THIS SUMMER*

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ABSTRACT

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Anita Desai, one of the most significant writers, explores the disturbed psyche of the modern Indian women and also tries to strike a balance between instinctual needs and intellectual aspirations. *WHERE SHALL WE GO THIS SUMMER?* is a commendable attempt by Desai at probing deeper into the extraordinary inner life of its protagonist, Sita. The protagonist is a nervous, sensitive, middle-aged woman who finds herself alienated from her husband and children because of her emotional imbalances. As the very title of the novel suggests, this is a novel born out of frustration. The question mark at the end of the title is a question mark with universality about it. What the novel aims at is the revelation of the inner self of Sita—a sensitive, tormented and lonely wife of Raman who is easy going and a typical bourgeois.

This paper tries to reveal Anita Desai's persistence concern with the protagonist's anxiety, anguish, psychological adaptation necessitated by the threats to the protagonist's identity, and relation to reality. It throws light upon the way the protagonist withdraws from reality into her inner world and search there for ways and means of living through this hastily, unknowable world.

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INTRODUCTION

Desai's fourth novel *WHERE SHALL WE GO THIS SUMMER?* depicts the mental tension of its near-neurotic heroine Sita who wishes to escape the mundane reality of her existence in the company of her husband Raman and her four children and tries to discover peace in her childhood home in the island town of Manori. She suffers from a gnawing sense of aching void. As a house wife, her shocking isolation makes her revolt, against her vegetable existence, and in the process, she under goes a split

in her personality. Throttling and choking sensations cripple her island life. She feels alienated not only from her husband but from the children too: "they had betrayed her." She prefers to "with draw into the protective chrysalis of childhood." Feelings of hollowness and waste, futility and nothingness grow upon her. She is yet to attain consummation as a human being. By escaping to the island, she begins to shed her inhibitions and see that part of herself she had not realized before. In fact, the escape

suggests an attempt at self-identification. She finally reconciles with life, accepts it and allows herself to drift with current of life. Her final identification is not with death but with life. Sita identifies her quest for undifferentiated life in the jelly fish and with this identification; she realizes that all reality is existence, that there is no reality beyond the one that lives. The world she abhorred so much brings to her awareness and an epiphany. She realizes the strange knocking of life at her side and is able to see beyond despair, to connect and identify with the wholeness of her being.

The novel depicts the aching void in the life of Sita, who is to face the loneliness of a woman, a wife and a mother, by probing deeper into her inner life. The marital discord results chiefly from the dichotomy between two irreconcilable temperaments and diametrically opposite view points 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 unbearable mental agony because of her high-strung sensibility and explosive emotionality. She has a 'dry, worn face,' which has assumed 'the aged stillness.' Owing to her mental condition, she continually broke apart into violent eruptions of emotions giving frequently a paranoiac show of rage, fear and revolt, for control was an accomplishment that had slipped out of her hold. Her husband however was made of different stuff. His face was usually as stolid as soundly locked gate, and this would give an idea of his practical, commonsense approach to life. Sita felt suffocated by the vegetarian complacency, stolidity, Insularity and unimaginative way of life of her husband and his people. As a result of her experiences, boring and monotonous, she never got used to anyone.

Accompanied by two of her children, Sita escapes to Manori, 'the island of miracles' off the Marve mainland, in desperation and disillusionment. Unable to bear the anguish of another pregnancy, she comes here in order not to give birth. The island house, deserted for twenty years, symbolizes her temperamental condition. As Vimala Rao aptly suggests," The Island concretizes the feeling of isolation of Sita. She retreats into it as into a womb, with an obsessive desire to recapture once again her childhood innocence and purity. Obviously, her own

frustration with her life in Bombay drives in her desire to provide her unborn infant with a world that is uncorrupt." Sita was, however, shocked to find that the island had totally changed and that it had no resemblance with its earlier life.

The island on which they had arrived seemed flat, toneless, related to the muddy monsoon sea rather than to the sky and cloudscape....and Manori village was an evil mess of overflowing drains, gaping thatched roofs and huts all battered and awry.(20-22)

The house and the atmosphere of the island only worsened her isolation. The drama of Sita's spiritual impasse and her hopelessly bruised life is beautifully suggested. The one happy moment she can recall in her wearisome married life is the moment when she saw a young Muslim woman and her aged man in the hanging gardens. Sita remembers, "They were like a work of art-so apart from the rest of us. They were not like us-they were inhuman, divine." Beside their tender, loving kindness, her own life looked like a shadow, absolutely flat, uncolored.

It is necessary to appreciate the magnitude of Sita's loneliness to understand her predicament in the proper perspective. She feels as if she were "a cripple without crutches." Again and again she comes to the realization that her marriage and, in fact, all human relationships were just a 'farce.' At times she shows symptoms of serious psychological confusion, and tries to live in a world of make-believe. "If reality were not to be borne," says she, "then illusion was the only alternative." The unwholesome feeling of schizophrenia is the natural end in such cases, and Sita is no exception. She is incapable of deciding as to "which half of her life was real and which unreal? Which of her selves was true, which false? All she knew was that there were two periods of her life, each in direct opposition to the other." The two periods mentioned by her are: her early life in the island with her charismatic father, and her married life, 'the life of pretence and performance.' She develops in due course a strange persecution mania. She feels that not only her husband but also her children had nothing to do with her. She complains: They had all betrayed her. They had all got together....to fight her, to reject her, to run away and hide from her. It is not that Sita is painfully conscious of her limitations. She knows

that she lacked her husband's greater capacity for accommodation. To her daughter Menaka she says:

I wish I had your talent. I would nurse it carefully – like a plant-make it grow...I should have grown into a sensible woman. Instead of being what I am...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 cared. (117)

Towards the end of the novel, we find her tired, dishelved and vacant...like a player at the end of performance, clearing the stage, picking the costumes, in equal parts saddened and relieved. She is called upon to leave the stage with the following final impression about the exciting and teasing ambiguity of life:

All was bright, all was in a whirl. Life had no periods, no stretches. It simply swirled around, muddling and confusing leading nowhere. (154-55)

A careful study of the novel reveals that by the time Anita Desai wrote this novel, a characteristic change had come in her attitude towards life and its challenges. This change has already been noticed by some perspective critics of the novelist. Suresh kohli, for example, opines, "There is one distinct change: Sita neither dies in the end nor kills anyone, nor does she become mad. She simply compromises with her destiny. "The new positive approach is indicated by the protagonist herself. Sita says, "I was saying No-but positively, positively saying no." There was a time when she could indulge in nihilistic musings:

Holding her breath, she admitted that destruction may be the true element in which life survives, and creation merely a freak, temporary, and doomed event.(56)

But now she realizes that escapism is no answer to life's problems: she had escaped from duties and responsibilities, from order and routine, from life and the city. Sita's consciousness develops through the process of consideration, rejection, and then acceptance of the terms of life within its structure. She makes a new life for herself and is eager to let new life in her be born into this world. She is convinced that life must flow on and she too must have courage to flow on with the current of life:

Life must be continued, and all its business-Menaka's admission to medical college gained, wife led to hospital, new child safely brought for, the

children reared, the factory seen to, a salary earned, a salary spent. (138-39)

In Sita's struggle and final acceptance there is thus this sense of defeat for the individual. Sita is not very happy for having made a compromise, which she takes to be her defeat. But married life, as Chesterton remarks, is a perpetual compromise, and any compromise or sacrifice for a greater good vindicates one's victory and greatness. Only by 'connecting' extremes one can arrive at an acceptable path in life. This is the positive solution that the novel offers to the present-day temperamental maladjustments and consequent alienation. The basic perspective that finally emerges is that life defies strict codification and definition. Individual identity can be maintained only through deliberate efforts which explore the meaning of its mysterious and enigmatic nature.

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