



ABSURDITY OF EXISTENCE AND REALISATION OF SELF IN 'WHERE SHALL WE GO THIS SUMMER'

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ABSTRACT

At present many Indian women writers like Shashi Deshpande, Anita Desai and Kiran Desai have worked on the issues of family problems and conflicts in the life of Indian women. Anita Desai dives deep into the unconscious and subconscious psyche of her characters and their nausea, nostalgia and longings to their identity. Desai highlights the physical and psychological problems of Indian women and explores the adjustment difficulties that they face in their lives. The psychological issue in her character's life affairs the dimensions of existential agony because it is rooted in the existential loneliness and corrodes her being and makes it possible for her to find meaning in an arid existence.

Anita Desai projects the alienation and identity crisis of male dominated female characters 'Where Shall We Go This Summer?' is a heart-rending story of a dejected female. The story ends leaving the feeling of an intense pain of a young middle class wife who so passionately desires to bid goodbye to the hypocrisy and boredom of her daily existence.

Indian women writers are one of those shimmering stars whose writings have created a niche in the world of literature. According to Susie Tharu, "these writers contested the structures that were shaping their world. They tactically redeployed dominant discourses, held on to older strains, and recharged them with new meanings and even introduced new issues and new emphasis, new orientations."¹

Among the Indian English women novelists, Anita Desai occupies a unique place and has caught the imagination of readers in a fascinating way. This Indian novelist and short story writer is eminent for her sensitive portrayal of the inner life of her female characters. She explores the tension between the family members and the middle class women's lack

of correlation in several of her novels. Her female protagonists try to discover and rediscover meaningfulness in life through the known, the established. These characters are not normal but different from others. They do not find a proper channel of communication and thus become alienated and start brooding about their lives. All their wanderings and reflections finally bring them into new vistas of understanding, which they had formerly ignored and rejected.

Desai's 'Where Shall We Go This Summer?' describes the tension between a sensitive wife Sita and the rational husband Raman. It emphasizes the triumph of life over chaos and of art over life. The protagonist Sita's main problem is maladjustment with her husband, Raman who ignores her desires

and misunderstandings between them; she is fed up her husband, his business, surroundings and his friends. Raman's lack of love and feeling brings her to the verge of insanity. P. F. Patil in his article titled "The Theme of Marital Disharmony in the Novels of Anita Desai" comments that the novel provides "a passionate commentary upon the maladjustment that spiritually renders Raman and Sita totally homeless. Disaster inclines from the very beginning" (Dhawan, 136).² Sita's search for self ends in wholeness of life. For Atma Ram the novel 'seeks to unravel the inner mystery of life, to discover the energy that nourishes the spirit, and discards pettiness, horror and hypocrisy of everyday life'(Halperin,133).³ The title, *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* is highly sensitive. The interrogative feature of the title is symbolic of the uncertain state of heroine's mind, of her awareness and of her indeterminate fate. Obviously, Sita re-establishes her contacts with her soil and gets over her loneliness by learning to laugh. It is the story of the boredom and loneliness experiences of a sensitive, over emotional middle-aged married protagonist, Sita who is alienated from her husband and children and refuses to give birth to her fifth child in a world of destruction. She escapes to the island where she realizes the life in spite of its nastiness, brutishness, madness, tedium, and boredom should be lived. The island forms the core of Sita's conscious existence. The protagonist, Sita is sick of everything, everybody, her husband, her children, their way of fight, Menaka's cutting of flower buds, insensibly and tearing of Sunday water colours, Karan's senseless joy, at the dismantling of the tower of clocks by throwing his body over it, and the servants talk in the kitchen, all disturb her mind. She expresses her resentment through smoking, abusing her children for trifles, losing her temper at the servants talk. None of these leaves any impact on her husband. An incident which accentuates her sense of alienation is the street fight of Ayahs. Sita's own servant maid, Rosie fights with two other ladies in the street. She is irritating to hear those words and she rushes to the street where she drags her Ayah out of the knot. At the same time, she places Karan at a safe distance. Sensitive Sita feels distress to narrate the whole incident to her husband. But

Raman takes it as another instance of her drama and asks her to stop the story. Besides, there are many incidents which intensify her sense of alienation and search for identity. Prasanna Sree emphatically comments that Desai "penetrates psychologically deep into the inner working of women and externalizes their passive reaction" (Sree,22).⁴ Sita can no longer endure the violence around her. So, she decides to search a place for her peaceful life, Sita tries to escape from her duties and also dismay of her husband Raman. It seems an absurdity of the plan that a pregnant woman is leaving for an unreal place.

Sita is unable to live in harmony with the members of her husband's family during the first few years of her married life, for she cannot bear "their almost subhuman placidity, calmness and sluggishness."⁵(where Shall we go). In despair, her husband moves to the other flat in hope of living peacefully with Sita. But his hope is thwarted because she fails to change even in her new surroundings.

Sita's husband, Raman is a practical person. He is neither an introvert nor an extrovert, but an average kind of man who believes in logic and rationality. He is engrossed in his business and fails to understand the emotional needs of his wife. A mother of four children and expecting a fifth one, she becomes alienated from even her children who are growing independent and consider her wilfulness dramatic. She feels lonely and spends her time on the balcony where she smokes all day looking out at the sea. Her loneliness and boredom distort her mind to such an extent as she begins to read macabre meanings in the everyday incidents of life. The novelist employs the stream of consciousness technique to communicate her outraged emotions. Mrs. Desai reveals Sita's existentialist sensibility and despair through a series of ordinary incidents. One such incident occurs on a Saturday morning when Sita finds an exceptionally large number of crows hovering on her balcony. She discovers that the crows are attacking an eagle which is "wounded or else too young to fly"(p.25). unable to bear this act of violence, she tries to keep the crows off with a long-handled brush. But her attempt proves unsuccessful as ".....the crows were

used to certain amount of opposition and aggression from the human population of the city....”(25-26). Sita asks her youngest son, Karan, to fetch his toy gun. He runs to bring his gun, but falls down and cuts his chin. She herself fetches the gun and tries to scare the crow away with it. It is an instance of irony that she, in her attempt to save the bird from crows, is unmindful of the injury of her own child. The novelist reveals her ignorance in regard to the practical reality of life as she contrasts her vain effort to save the young eagle with the continual efforts of the crows to kill it:

“But they had the persistence of the ignorant---if she could stand on the balcony fixing them all day, then they could attempt, whenever she paused, to fly through the hail of pops and get at the eagle that lay so still that it was, in all probability dead”(26).

Sita’s irrationality and lack of practical wisdom are further highlighted by the manner in which different members of her family react to her childish attempt at saving the eagle. Both of her older sons soon become bored with the attempt of their mother as they perceive that the bird is dead. They shock their mother by declaring that the eagle is dead. Menaka, her daughter, is astonished to see her mother engaged in the sentimental act, but at once dismisses the scene from her mind and goes away without a word. The next morning her husband comes out to the balcony with his cup of tea and he laughs away the incident with the remark that the crows have “...made a good job of your eagle”(27). Sita cries and deceives herself into believing that “perhaps it flew away”(27). This incident reveals the wide gulf that has already alienated her from the other members of the family.

What is common and normal for others is uncommon and abnormal for Sita. She begins to fear that by giving birth to the baby she will release it “in a violent, pain-wracked blood-bath”, and thereby will destroy what is at the moment “safely contained”(38) in her. Therefore, she wants to keep the baby inside her safe from the onslaughts of the outside world. Her husband, Raman is puzzled when she tells him about her strange wish. She decides to go to the island of Manori “in order to achieve the

miracle of not giving birth” (20) to her unborn baby. She believes Manori to be an island of miracles because her father once worked miracles on it. But behind this apparent wish there lurks in her subconscious mind a desire to escape her present surroundings and meaningless existence. She herself is surprised at the suddenness with which the idea of escape to Manori strikes her. She fails to realize that this idea of escape “...had been simmering inside her so long although she was herself the pot, the water and the fire.”(38). She arrives on the island with her daughter Menaka and the youngest son Karan. The novelist suggests a comparison between the thwarted hopes of Sita as she reaches the island and the thwarted hopes of Moses and the other islanders who hope to find her as great and miraculous as her father was. Like the rustic characters in Hardy’s novels, Moses and his fellowmen provide a commentary on the main characters and foreshadow the coming events. They praise Sita’s father for his magic cures of diseases and for other heroic exploits associated with him. Their indifference to Sita and her children foreshadows the disappointment she meets on the island. She discovers the island to be different from her own image of it. She finds the island “...flat, toneless, related to the muddy monsoon sea rather than to the sky and cloudscape which steadily grew more gorgeous and brilliant by the second” (13). Her face becomes distorted “with disappointment and dejection”(13).

The trip for Manori becomes for her a voyage of self- discovery, revealing and recognition of reality. She gets a shabby welcome into her dilapidated island home. The house, revealing the darkness inside, symbolises Sita’s inner void. As an individual, she is tolerated because of her father. She is as much an outsider here as she was on the mainland. The key to unlock the past is not there. In the words of Madhusudan Prasad, “the house imagery is rich in symbolic evocation and is artistically contrived in such a fashion as to link up the theme with the psychological character of Sita.”⁶

Desai dramatizes two opposite conflicts in this novel. The protagonist is a nervous, sensitive, middle-aged woman who finds herself alienated from her husband and children. Her sense of

alienation is because of her emotional imbalance. She feels dullness, boredom and deadness in every individual and they pose the greatest threat to her existence. She intensifies her desire to recapture the experience and excitement and as such she is in a dilemma to decide as to where she should go that summer. In the words of Madhusudan Prasad, "An uncrowned queen of the inner emotional world, she dexterously transcribes the subconscious of her highly sensitive protagonists terribly bewildered by the burden of living helplessly in the contemporary society bristling with absurd realities."⁷

Anita Desai reveals her heroine's dejection and helplessness through a symbolic description of the dark atmosphere that pervades both the land and sky:

"So they stood despairingly in the deep veranda, the white doors of the house all swinging outwards, revealing the crowded darkness inside. Below them was the shifting, sighing darkness of the palm leaves leading down, she remembered, to the sand dunes and the sea. All the roses had faded out of the sky as from wet paper. A nest of bats somewhere close to them squeaked and the palm fronds slithered about them in the rising breeze."(17)

Both Menaka and Karan sit bewildered in the dim light of the lamp. Sita gets busy in unpacking her luggage and making beds for them to sleep. Whenever she meets the eyes of her children, she finds "accusation in them" (19), which makes her "turn abruptly away" (19) she feels guilty of removing the children from the joys and comforts of their house in the city and dragging them into the dreamy atmosphere of this house at Manori. Her effort to escape the tedium and disappointment of the city life is defeated at the very outset of her adventure.

Mrs. Desai portrayed her female characters in a peculiar manner; she did not want to portray them in traditional manner. They withdraw into a life of seclusion and loneliness. Their maternal needs are fulfilled but their emotional needs remain unfulfilled. They are dissatisfied women who hope for a better life, but fail to achieve it. Consequently,

happiness eludes them and peace never comes to them. In her novels, the woman is no longer passive but a rationalist who questions ceaselessly. The discrepancy between what she aspires to or sets out to do in life and the harsh reality confronting her plunges her into deep anguish. Thus, the woman in her novels is a loner and inevitably a loser who grapples to win some understanding out of an intensely privatised world of personal emotions. Yet these characters are attractive figures, realistically portrayed and credible enough.

The last section of the novel deals with Sita's anxiety, despair, her realization of the duality of life and her painful choice. In this part of the novel, she recovers from her plunge into existential nullity. But before she comprehends the reality of existence, she passes through a painful conflict of emotion in her mind. She struggles to find an answer to her existential predicament. She feels guilty when sees that her children are bored with their dull stay on the island. They are bored because they find nothing to keep them occupied. The heavy monsoon rain prevents them from going out to play. The noise created by the fierce wind and the roaring sea frightens them. The fear of their uncongenial surroundings turns them almost speechless. They speak "...only to point out, bitterly, another leak in the roof, or a whole window frame come loose from its hinges."(75). The accusing looks of the children tell her that she is responsible for their sufferings. She senses her defeat in their expression.

"Whenever she turned or looked up, she saw them staring at her, watching her as though waiting for her to break down and admit failure. To them, she realized with a painful sloughing-off of disbelief, it was life in their flat on Napean Sea Road that had been right and proper, natural and acceptable; it was this so-called "escape" to the island that was madness."(75)

She tries to alleviate their misery by suggesting to them that the island will not disappoint them after the rain ceases. She tries, in vain, to reassure herself that she has not committed a mistake in coming to Manori. Harshness of the weather and of her surroundings impinges on her consciousness:

Besides its palms, its deserted beach, its wild silence, there was that most squalid of villages, with its open drains, its magpie dogs, drunkards. The atmosphere of that fishing village, of which Moses and Miriam, too, reeked, penetrated her own knoll, her palm grove and even the house.....”(77).

She wonders at the change that has come over the island in her absence of twenty years. She perceives that this long interval of time has bloated Moses and Miriam “into two heavy purple presences like two aubergines on legs”(76). She is similarly astonished at the transformation of the beautiful Phoolmaya into an ugly woman “with cataract lurking in one eye like a white fish” (77).

It is an irony that Sita brings Menaka and Karan to the island on the promise of a joyful adventure, but fails to provide them even proper meals. Monsoon not being the fishing time, she is compelled to feed them on jackfruit. The water of the well has been contaminated by the drowning of Ali’s cow in it. Through the ordinary happenings of life, the novelist adroitly suggests that the children are denied the basic necessities of life to which they are accustomed. She worries about the baby she is carrying and feels that she has committed a mistake by coming to Manori. She feels rejected by her own children who do not sympathise with her values of life. She perceives that unlike her they believe in a secure mode of life governed by logic and common sense wisdom. She feels that she does not belong to anyone and suffers in her loneliness:

“Sita was left on the bed, smoking, rubbing her toes in the ash, feeling them draw away from her, into other regions, regions safer and duller, shutting themselves in with the barbed wire of prudence, caution, routine and order, leaving her in her own disorderly region that smelt of raw tobacco, was lashed by the monsoon storm that swept so freely over the desolate island, leaving her their out of disapproval, horror even, and an instinctive rejection of her wild values and wild searches....”(87).

The news of Raman’s arrival gives a blow to Sita’s false sense of complacency. But the next

moment she feels a warm expansion of relief from the fear of security. She wonders at the mixed feelings of joy and surprise which the news of Raman’s arrival produces in her. The children are also very excited. When Raman reaches, he is so much engrossed with children that he forgets the presence of Sita. The joy that Sita experiences on Raman’s arrival vanishes. She feels frustrated at being ignored and asks him why he has come. He tells her that menaka has written him to come and take her to Bombay because she wants to apply for admission to the Medical College. She feels betrayal by Menaka and Raman because he has come for Menaka’s sake and not for her.

Sita realizes that children turned to him because he is “superior in courage, in leadership”(101). She analyses Raman’s character and discovers that the secret of his courage lies in his pragmatic approach to life. But suddenly she grows aware of the kind of courage she possesses. She defines it as “the courage of being a coward” (101). She visualizes that “she had escaped from duties and responsibilities, from order and routine, from life and the city, to the unliveable land” (101). She thinks that she has tried to achieve the impossible by refusing to give birth to her baby. She realizes that it requires courage to reject life of routine and comforts. She feels that she has cried out her great “No” in rejecting the life of order, routine and responsibilities. She is conscious of the agony and suffering which her rejection of the accepted mode of life has brought her.

When Sita packs her luggage and prepares for her return to the city, she feels “.....like a player at the end of the performance, clearing the stage, packing the costumes, in equal parts saddened and relieved.” (110). She visualizes her stay on the island as a dramatic episode. Sita contrasts her life in the city with her experience of uninhibited life on the island. This contrast puzzles her. She wonders whether she has not been playing roles in her city life, while her days spent on the island have given her an experience of authentic experience:

“But was she sure it was not the other way around after all? Had not her married years, her dulled years, been the false life, the life of

pretence and performance, and only the escape back to the past, to the island, been the one sincere and truthful act of life, the only one not false and staged?" (111)

She fails to understand "which half of her life was real and which unreal? Which of her selves was true, which false?" (111) in her attempt to discover which of the two parts of her life is true, she achieves a solution to the mystery of existence. She perceives that illusion and reality cannot be separated from each other. She discovers that "Neither sea nor sky were separate or contained—they rushed into each other in a rush of light and shade, impossible to disentangle." (111). She learns that existence is possible only by synthesizing the illusion and the reality of life. Her existentialist exploration of the self ends in a positive understanding of life. The island has become a symbol of private refuge and is her only route to escape. Jasbir Jain points out:

"Her return allows her to see the face of reality in this world of illusion, and she realizes that in essence there can be no running away from reality"⁸

Sita becomes the representative of the modern woman who has become a helpless victim caught up in the vortex of illusion and reality. The fearful sight of jellyfish stranded on the sandbar makes her withdraw in fright. She identifies herself with the unfortunate creature, slowly suffocating, slowly dying, unable to recede into the ocean and unable to survive on the sands. She cannot cope with the present, full of violence and sufferings. Nor can she go into the past and live in a world of illusion. R.S Sharma says,

"She realizes that all reality is existence, that there is no reality beyond the one that one live."⁹

Sita realizes that escapism is no answer to life's problem. She realizes that she had escaped from her duties and responsibilities, from order and routine, from life and the city. And now she is convinced that life must flow on and she, too, must have courage to flow on with the current of life.

Her final identification is not with death but with life. Though neurotic at the outset, she compromises with life. The world she abhorred so much brings her awareness and an epiphany. She realizes the strange new knocking of life at her side and is able to see beyond despair to connect and identify the wholeness of her being. Her return to Bombay is a foregone conclusion. Meena Belliappa is of the opinion that Anita Desai tried to recreate the Sita myth in the modern context. She writes:

"she writes to live on the island but, like Sita of Ramayana, she feels unprotected, rootless on the island and as her desires for protection is most powerful her nervous escape to the island ends in the following the firm steps of her husband Raman to the mainland like Sita in the epic. Her escape from the Sita-image ends in her return of it."¹⁰

She is not happy for having made a compromise, while she takes to be her defeat. But married life is a perpetual compromise, and any compromise or sacrifice for a greater good vindicate one's victory and greatness. Only by connecting to the extremes one can arrive at an acceptable path in life. This is the positive solution that the novel offers to the present day temperamental maladjustment and consequent alienation. Suresh Kohli rightly points out:

"Sita neither dies in the end nor kills anyone nor does she become mad. She simply compromises with her destiny."¹¹

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