

## Frustration to Suffering: A Reading of Anita Desai's

### *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*

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In *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* Anita Desai writes on the boredom and loneliness experienced by a married woman when she feels ignored and unwanted. It is a crucial period when one feels the dilemma of existence. The children grow up and become independent, while husbands are increasingly busy with their routine work. In this novel the searchlight is inward focusing on the mental make-up feelings of Raman and Sita which bring out the mental trauma to the two caused by their different attitudes.

B. Ramachandran Rao points out: Sita and Raman represent the eternal opposition between the passion and the prose of life. Raman, the husband, says that “great yes” and follows the path of honour and social success. Sita says “no” and, although she is not destroyed by life, she is compelled to arrive at some kind of a compromise with life. Anita Desai examines the issues of familial ties from the view point of a woman who is ill equipped of seeing anything beyond the family and the limited arena of domestic ties.

Anita Desai has explicitly presented a sense of alienation in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* Sita's mental condition epitomizes the loneliness of a woman, a wife, a mother – a void, conditioned by family and society. Sita's disturbances are the direct result of a clash between the hypocritical world her and her inherent honesty that resist any adjustment from her side. Desai in her emotionally charged *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* provides a passionate commentary on the maladjustment that virtually renders Raman and Sita totally homeless.

Sita's marriage to Raman is not cemented through proper understanding and love between them. Her marriage was saved “finally – out of pity, out of lust, out of a sudden will for adventure and because it was inevitable – he married her” (p. 99). Sita is highly sensitive, emotionally and touching. Carelessness on Menaka's part in breaking all the buds unconsciously disturbs her mental peace. They are in the habit of throwing their bodies at each other playfully. To Sita, it is virtually an act of violence and destruction. Sensitive to the core such unthinking destructive acts are unbearable to her. As a consequence, she finds it extremely difficult to cope with Raman and his relative.

Initially Sita lives in Raman's joint family which is willing to accept even such an outrageous outsider like Sita. But because of Sita's haughty supercilious, unadjusting nature, Raman decides to live separately with his family in a flat. He tries to make Sita happy but she is hard to be pleased and is always seething with anger discontent and apathy. When Sita becomes pregnant for

the fifth time, it is an ordeal for her, and she does not want to deliver the child. Manori Island seems to her a refuge, the enchanted island of miracles and she decides to go there, against the same advice of Raman, along with her two children Menaka and Karan even though she is in her advanced stage of pregnancy.

On her island she expects a miracle that never comes about because miracles hardly ever take place in real life. They only exist in the fantasy world of children. Actually her going to the island is symbolically her retrogression to childhood and to her father who was a God to illiterate islanders. The children get annoyed and are fed up with the primitive life on the island and Menaka asks her father to take them back to Bombay. Raman comes and takes the family away though Sita goes only grudgingly. However, by the end of the novel revelation comes to Sita and she accepts the world of reality and becomes mentally prepared for the delivery of her child. The novel ends establishing victory of reason over fantasy.

He stared at her with a distaste that her it did not become her – a woman now in her forties graying, aging, to behave with such a total lack of control. Control was an accomplishment that had slipped out of her hold, without his noticing it, over the years, till now she had no more than an infant has before he has begun the process of a acquiring it, and so she wept and flung herself about, over-forty, grey and aging. (p.p. 20-21).

Sita is averse to having the baby. At the same time she dismisses the idea of an abortion. Raman, the aging husband cannot make any sense out of this illogic. He can only conclude that she is hysterical or perilously close to insanity. There is something like a repeat-performance of Maya's tantrums in Sita's reactions to similar situations.

*Where Shall We Go This Summer?* portrays in psychological terms, the feelings of ennui, boredom – and meaningless existence experienced by a middle – aged woman. Though Sita is married to a prosperous businessman and has four children, she has no sense of achievement fulfillment or satisfaction to make her life worth living. An abnormal childhood environment and frustrating human interaction turns her into a disintegrated personality. The atmosphere in which Sita grows as a child is that of neglect and hypocrisy. She had a motherless childhood and to make matters worse, her father also neglects her completely. He has special affection for Rekha, his eldest daughter. Sita ascribes this partiality to the talents Rekha possesses and brood over this inadequacy in herself.

The disclosure that Rekha is not her real sister scalds Sita. This information drops on her “skin like acid and she felt them burn whenever she caught an exchange of that heavy lidded look between father and daughter, or his arm in its fine white sleeve lie fondingly across her round shoulders” (p. 79). Some other strange secrets in her father's life, also influence the development of her mind. Psychologists emphasise the parents' role in determining the character – structure of the child and maintain that “parental defaults of one kind or another neglect, indifference, display of favouritism to another child, over concern, pampering can produce basis anxiety, the feeling a child has of being isolated and helpless in a potentially hostile world”.

Without an affectionate, understanding mother to take care of her, Sita is a victim of emotional security needed for the development of a wholesome personality. The social psychologist believes that:

The central element of personality is acquired in the bosom of the family, and men continue to need the warmth, security and intimacy they experience as children. The primary group – especially although not exclusively, the family – provided these psychological needs.

The mystery about Sita's mother and the circumstances in which she left her children and went to Benares are all a puzzling riddle to her. Unconsciously, she is in search of a solution. When she hears that her mother was not dead but had run away to Benares, she is shocked "Runaway? And left us?" Sita stood clutching her hair about her ears and feet sinking rapidly into the sand" (p. 83). This is the externalization of a deep sense of betrayal that overwhelms Sita. Here one has to agree with R.D. Laing who writes:

It seems that loss of the mother, at a certain age, threatens the individual with loss of herself. The mother, however, is not simply a human thing which the child can see, but a person who sees herself in the child. Therefore we suggest that a necessary component in the development of the self is the experience of oneself as a person under the loving eye of the mother.

The emotional crisis that overtakes Sita, in her middle years, is the consequence of the dubious part played by both the parents, father as well as mother. Sita engages herself in a schizoid pre-supposition and imagines "she came into the world motherless" (p. 84). Sudhirkakar emphasizes that:

Late childhood marks the beginning of an Indian girls' deliberate training in how to be a good woman, and hence the conscious inculcation of culturally designated feminine roles. She learns that the virtues of womanhood which will take her through life are submission and docility as well as skill and grace in the various household tasks.

Sita's peculiar childhood has denied her this vital opportunity to be groomed into a complete woman. Sita's life is characterized by an existential search. She is always in pursuit of something. Having no clear idea of this something, she hankers, after she turns into a wonderer. "Who? What was she?" is the obsessive thought in her mind. She is unable to identify her own self. The disturbing feelings of meaninglessness and loss of identity, are the results of the various impressions which have been "fixated" to a particular portion of her life. She has not acquired the competencies essential for a successful adult living, viz, marriage, parenthood, citizenship and getting along with other people.

It is a psychological fact that friendship between girls is of great importance. Identification with a similar being can strengthen the young girls' consciousness that she has an independent ego. Her life at her father's house does not inculcate in her a sense of belongingness. During the traumatic transitional periods she gets no reassuring exchange of confidence. Her unpredictable temperament in later life, is a direct outcome of her unidentified and incomplete self.

The novel issues forth from the interaction among the characters. Chief among the characters is the miracle man, Sita's father. His eldest daughter Rekha, youngest daughter Sita, his son Jivan and his runaway wife are members of the generation along with Deedar, Raman's father and the servant Moses and Miriam and the village folks benefitted by the father. The characters of immediate concern in the novel are Raman, Sita and their son Karan and daughter Menaka. There are two kinds of familial relationships father may not have been a Rai Saheb pampering the child, yet her father created a magical aura around her. He is a freedom fighter whose wife has deserted him, living somewhere in Benares and Sita brought up in an atmosphere which cannot be, strictly called a family.

"But her father . . . too quite clearly for it was always the big girl heavy shoulders that he fondled her face that he scanned as she sat singing across the room from his . . . "Sister should be a little alike" . . . "But you are not sisters," . . . "She is only your step-sister" . . . But this words had dropped on her skin like acid and she felt them burn whenever she caught an exchange of that heavy-lidded look between father and daughter, or his arm in its find white sleeves lie fondling across her round shoulders". Perhaps because she never found him alone-always with Rekha silent at his side, or in the centre of a ring of saive, fanatic, brilliant eyed chelas who also were homespun, walked barefoot, and respected, admired and adored him. She told herself she could never approach him to ask of such private and somehow, secret matters. As an adult later, she asked herself, had there been no opportunity forever of talking alone to him? Ah! She remembered which an instinctive shrinking from the shock and pain, a few strange moments still unexplained". (p.p. 78-80).

The strange behaviour of Sita's father with his daughter fills her with deep distrust and fear of male in her unconscious mind. The negative feelings adversely affect her relationship with Raman. She knows of no other alternative, but to opt for a life devoid of mutual understanding and togetherness. Due to the restricted experiences of her early life she fails to understand the behaviour of her own growing children. Anxiety, nausea and meaninglessness that engulf Sita are directly related to her isolated childhood during which she did not enjoy the security, confidence and emotional fulfillment that a place called home generally has. Her trip to Manori and further to desire for the miracle of keeping her baby unborn shows that somewhere, in her consciousness, there is a blockage in her thinking process.

Anita Desai probes into the consciousness of Sita, a woman, who is catatonic schizophrenic and fails to adjust to the demands of her role as a wife and mother. Withdrawal from the outside world starts at an early age and becomes an important aspect of her adulthood. Jivan, her brother, talks about the mysterious ways of his father and the desertion by their mother. But Sita only hears all this without comment, without further probing. "She had always been subjective in her preoccupations" (Pg. 93). Sita is unable to relate herself positively to the people and environment around her. In her opinion, members of her husband's society lead lives of boredom and dullness. It is impossible for her to be one of them.

Sita because of the stubborn nature, refuses to adjust herself to her husband's family. Sita also suffers from ill-matched marriage but the fault lies more with her rather than with the husband

who is considerate and tries to make her happy. Raman is a businessman living in a joint family. Raman's family members are quite accommodative and considerate towards Sita but she is always grudging and takes perverse delight in teasing them. Raman's is a traditional Hindu family where even men do not smoke just openly but Sita smokes to spite her in laws and smokes openly. Her husband, who is a practical man wants to avoid daily bickering and tension. So he moves into a flat. Her smoking is symbolic of her unconscious desire to harm the fetus she is carrying. She is childish, irrational and petulant. She is worse than Maya. At least Maya has reasons to be dissatisfied but here is a woman who lives in her own world of fantasy putting all her family members to trouble. But even here Sita is not happy. She becomes upset even after reading the newspaper which is full of the news of brutality and destruction all over the world.

Being sensitive to violence and brutality in the world is one thing but, to be affected by it so much as not to lead a normal life is a different thing bordering on mental disease. In the novel there are other instances too. Once a wounded eagle sets on the ledge of window and is attacked by crows. Seeing this Sita becomes agitated and tried to scare-away the crows by using a toy gun. Sita feels relieved at the sight of a pale, weak Muslim lady being loved intensively by her anxious husband. The lady is about to collapse, but the husband embraces his hands around her in order to provide her strong protection. Sita regards these moments of love and sympathy as truly divine attributes and life spent during these fractions of time as an immortal bliss. For sometime, she forgets all her anxieties and cares about Menaka and Karan for she treats life as not a lengthy span of right and wrong actions, but as a little but beautiful, resplendent and satisfying experience.

Her daughter Menaka sometimes sketches and pictures them. Once she does not like one of her paintings and tears it away. Even this upsets Sita, as well as the usual fights and quarrels between the children annoy her and when "her son hurled their bodies at each other as if they were make for attack and combat" (Pg. 444). She screams but they do not stop. Raman appears to her not as someone to be hated and despised, but as a life-partner of very low and dull sensibilities. Her father Deedar, appears to her truly an incarnation of virtue, and her over-all view of life is that of a person who wants to fight the challenges with high spirits.

One can see the trait of theatricality in Sita. Her unchecked emotions and passions are looked at with distaste by both her husband and children but she cannot control herself. Her running away to the island also can be seen as one of her emotional outbursts. She has uttered her 'No' while rejecting her life in the city. Now she sees that her courage is the courage of a coward. She has tried to run away from responsibilities and duties, whereas Raman has accepted them. Now she comprehends that life must go on and one cannot shirk responsibilities. Sita's unhappiness springs from her inability to cope with the realities of life. The problems and the unhappiness in the life and Sita springs from her constitutional inability to accept the values and attitudes of society. Having understood the wisdom of Raman's practicality, she decides to accept life as it is. Sita understands that the truth of life lies in relatedness and not in escapism. The harmony in her life is achieved by balancing the negative and positive attitudes of life.

Sita's alienation is the result of her emotional imbalance and she learns the full meanings of life as she turns from negation to affirmation. Past and present, both form a part of life. She comprehends that life cannot be compartmentalized, for escape from either will leave her incomplete unfortunately, Sita lacks a mother's love and even friends'. She grows into womanhood, unprepared and unwilling to shoulder the responsibilities of a wife and mother. Her traumatic relationship with her father ruins all chances of a satisfying emotional bond with any other man in her life. The unwholesome and restricted nature of her childhood experience vitiates Sita's relationship with her sons and daughters too. She cannot understand the behaviour of her own growing children. "It's all madness – the boys acting out that scene from the film they saw, fighting each other on the floor, Menaka and her magazines and the way she's torn all those drawings . . ." (p. 41). Her sons are growing together as naturally as siblings in any normal household grow. When she sees her sons playing a game of attack and combat, she screams to stop them: "They are playing", Menaka tells her: "That is no way of playing", resorts Sita, "Get up, Get up, stop it". For her this is sheer violence and she gets worked up. Sita does not have maternal tolerance and patience because her motherless childhood hindered the growth and development of these qualities. When she herself becomes a mother she carries the vacuum with her which does not let her nurture her children baffled as she is by her own predicament as a woman and as a human being. It sums up that, Sita has superficial ungratifying filial bond with her children. There exists between them a complete lack of communication. Sita does not grow into a matured wife and responsible mother because of her emotional deprivation during her traumatic childhood.

Manori offers Sita and Jivan, her brother, a chance of recapturing their childhood, having passed through such bitter maturity they met it with greater abandon. On the island Sita and Jivan were with their father, but this physical togetherness is hardly enough for developing mutual understanding or emotional affinity. Sita, on the other hand feels ignored in favour of Rekha, because Rekha is attached to her father. Sita's father is proud of Rekha because she can sing melodiously. But after the death of her father, the real nature of Rekha is revealed. Rekha does not even shed tears for him, she leaves as though she has waited for and planned for this moment of release from the old man's love. Jivan disappears a couple of days before the death, as if he had a foreknowledge of the calamity. Only Sita stays on as she has not planned her future.

Sita involves herself in the fantasies of hallucinatory intensity in all sense modalities. Taking about these fantasies Anees A. Sheikh points out that the individuals: experience fantasies of hallucinatory intensity in all senses except vision they hear imagined sounds, smell imagined aromas, taste imagined food, and so forth, but the visual component of the fantasy is located either in the mind's eye". Where it can be "vivid" or in the external environment where it is more vague and "ghost like" and not "as real as real".

Sita's return to Manori reveals her desire to indulge in fantasy rather than face the reality. The moment she arrives here, she wonders, if she is really going to perform an act of creation or her own belly is going to protect the child forever. By closing her eyes to the reality and resolutely following her fantasy she achieves a kind of victory by rebelling against her bondage and



overcoming her weaknesses. Her thought of protecting the child from the callous world is, infact, a strategy to guard her self-image. She adopts the strategy of fantasy as a source of escape from the harshness and cruelty of her situation.

Raman's arrival on the island shatters her faith in the power of imagination to provide an alternative to, "a life unlived, a life bewitched" (Pg. 139). Raman somehow makes her understand the need to return to Bombay and wonders in, "What proportion her reason lay to her unreason. He seemed to have lost his knowledge of her . . . of her excesses" (p. 140). He also finds that, nothing was appealing in her world of fantasy. She finds that Manori is that the solution of ills existing in the society. Moreover, the magic of the island was directly related to the presence of her father. Once, he is no more, the enchantment of the island is over. Her imaginative attempt to escape reality proves to be self-analysing the reveals more about her own self than the object of thought.

Sita's escape to Manori turns out to be a blessing in disguise because it helps her in coming to grip with the realities of life. She now examines it objectively. A short stay in the island makes her heart grow fond of Raman. Her coming to the island and the consequent separation strengthens their waning relationship. Now Raman matters for her. She feels extremely happy on getting the news of his arrival. In a quick succession, the feelings of relief and joy come in wave upon wave making her wonder at her own emotional upsurge:

It's all over – and then a warm expansion of relief, of pleasure, of surprise oh happy surprise! She began to laugh for the children were already shouting, when? When? Has he come? Everything stirred, tumbled, rose around her strange, she thought – the man so passive, so grey, how could the very mention of him arouse such a tumult of life and welcome. She felt it herself – unwillingly - but she felt it. (p. 128)

Raman also undergoes some transformation during this separation. The monotony and boredom that had engulfed their relationship during the last twenty years give way to loving expectations of meeting his wife. It is an important event for them, and he expects it to be proclaimed he had developed for her untidiness during those long years of living together has weakened. Her appearance mattered in the earlier phase of their married life. "Yet now, having been separated from her for such a stretch, he was startled again by her appearance – she saw it on his face" (p. 130).

Sita now loves Raman and desires his intimate company. The children however, distract him and grab his attention. Sita feels disappointed and shrieks unknowingly: "Then why did you come? Raman "sensible but not sensitive", tells the truth that Menaka has called him. This is beyond her to tolerate. She feels hurt, deceived and disillusioned. She fears that Raman perhaps does not her. The rejections come as a bomb-blat; she feels betrayed. "He had not come to see her, to fetch, as she had supposed; he has come because Menaka had called him. He had betrayed her too. They had all betrayed her why? (132-133). The excitement and relief that had surged within Sita on seeking Raman gives way to harshness, wildness and anger. They all wince at this sudden change in her, Raman, too becomes harsh because in relationship we act and react: "You are cowards", she

murmured, dipping her head, “Sita!” he husband warned, “Let us have our lunch in peace”, he said, helping Karan to sit up table and arranging dishes for him<sup>21</sup>. (p. 135).

However in the island she becomes aware of the real worth of her relationship with Raman. Both of them are wiser now. They sincerely strive to achieve equilibrium in their relationship, by way of compromise, adjustment and understanding. Sita decides to follow the trails of Raman’s footprint as she realizes that “Neither sea nor sky are separate or contained – they rushed into each other in a rush of light and shade, impossible to disentangle” (p. 153). Sita chooses to return to Raman and his world of comfort, security, and dull safe routine. She has resolved her existential dilemma, had made a choice and has thus saved herself, Raman and her children from disintegration and chaos. At long last, the imbalanced relationship achieves balance and equilibrium. Sita finally rejects independence and opts for togetherness. She realizes that there are no values outside life and that an autonomous self can evolve only when the self flows out of the world in an effort to relate, belong and participate. When one is able to transcend the immediate personal problems, then alone one can face the human condition with all its limitations.

B. Ramachandra Rao studies the novel as a dramatization of the conflict between two irreconcilable temperaments of two diametrically opposed attitudes towards life. He concludes by saying:

The tragedy in Where Shall We Go This Summer? arises out of the inability of the characters to connect the prose and the passion in their lives. They have lived only in fragments. The novel ends with a defeated and despondent the passion of life and deciding to accept the prose of life. But the book ends with the implicit comment that this need not have been the only ending. It could have turned out otherwise. (N.R. Gopal, *A Critical Study of the Novels of A.D.*, New Delhi, 42)

Thus Rao finds *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* as an open novel. This is the novelist’s device of not being dogmatic or committed towards a conclusion but rather giving the reader a scope for his own reading and conclusion. M.K. Naik comments on Sita:

Through the character of Sita in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* Anita Desai has portrayed the feminine psyche of neurotic women. The cause of her mental imbalance is different. She might be called sub-normal, if not abnormal. In *Cry, The Peacock*, the psychological probing about Maya is more detailed whereas in Sita’s case it is not so. What is remarkable about Anita Desai’s psychological scouting of the women is that she includes females of different age groups.



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