

Women's Quest for self in Anita Desai's –Where shall we go this summer

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Abstract— Anita Desai is a prominent Indo-English novelist. She has added a new concept to the Indian English fiction. Her novel, 'Where Shall We Go This Summer?' brings forth the agonized self and feminine sensitivity of the protagonist Sita. The present study deals with identity crisis of women. Anita Desai's works significantly highlight the complexities of human relationships especially in women and also exhibit different facets of feminine psyche. The study focuses primarily on the emotional exploration of the inner mind of Indian women and the mystic tensions of women seeking their identity in male-dominated society. It describes the tension between a sensitive wife Sita and the rational Raman. The protagonist is a nervous, sensitive, middle-aged woman who finds herself alienated. The purpose of this paper is to show how feminine sensitivity, marital disharmony, family relations and socio-cultural atmosphere are responsible for creating the feeling of loneliness in Sita and compelling her to alienate herself from family and society.

Keywords— Identity crisis, feminine psyche, rational, disharmony, loneliness, alienation, mystic.

The emergence of feminism is a global phenomenon. The very basis of feminism is committed to understanding and improving the situation of women. The feminist literary tradition is grown out of the anxieties of woman's life. Women novelists of post colonial period cannot remain untouched by this movement. The Indo-Anglian fiction presents a consistent picture of the changing social realities during the post colonial period. An analysis of Anita Desai's novels reveals that she is 'feminine' in her perspective. The adjective 'feminine' when applied to literature indicates the author's preoccupation with intimate human relationships, and concern with emotional aspects of life and with the dynamics of the psychic realm of experience (Sharon Spencer, 1982: 157). The most recurrent themes in her novels are "the hazards and complexities of man – woman relationships, the founding and nurturing of individuality and the establishing of individualism" (Raji Narasimhan, 1976: 23).

Most of her protagonists are women characters. Her treatment of modern themes like alienation, isolation and quest for wholeness is considered to be quite successful. The purpose of the present paper is to discuss the tender sensibility of Sita, the chief protagonist in 'Where Shall we go This Summer'.

'Where shall we go this Summer' is divided into three parts in terms of time -part one 'Monsoon 67',

dealing with the present and earlier past of the protagonist Sita; part two 'winter 47' with her remote past, part three 'Monsoon 67' with her present and near future. Sita, the central character is a sensitive, middle aged woman. As Maya in *Cry, the Peacock*, Sita too looks for a life of fulfillment. Her mental disturbances are the direct result of a clear clash between the hypocritical world and her inherent honesty. As a critic points out -

Sita and Raman represent the eternal opposition between the passion and the prose of life. Raman the husband, says the '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 compromise with life. (B. Ramachandra Rao, p.87)

To understand Sita's feelings and emotions, it is necessary to trace her growth as an individual. Sita is over forty and is awaiting the birth of her fifth child. This unwanted pregnancy turns her so hysterical. Highly sensitive, over emotional, she feels alienated from her husband and is not able to understand at times the behavior of her children. Sita's life with her husband Raman in the city of Bombay is one of misery, isolation and loneliness. Sita and her husband behave as if they were, the denizens of different worlds. Sita's everyday life becomes aimless and meaningless for her and she cannot make any sense out of it. "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 always in this grey dull – lit empty shell” (Anita Desai, 1982: p.36)

The central theme of the novel is Sita’s effort to say ‘No’ to her life with her husband Raman. The moment comes when she realizes the significance of Cavafy’s verse implying the “Great No”.

To certain people there comes a day when they must say the great ‘Yes’ or great ‘No’ (Anita Desai, 1982: p.37)

Sita grows defiant in her behaviour and in desperation decides to leave the house and go to Manori an island near Bombay, where her father, had lived as a patriarch. Sita escapes to manori taking two of her four children with her, with a view to seeking solace and achieving the miracle of keeping the already conceived child unborn. Peace eludes Sita on this island. Actually a trip back to manori is a trip back to her childhood recollections of the past is an indispensable technique in Desai’s novels. Her journey to find a solace is not a success. She is shocked to see the miserable condition of this island which has been a golden place to her. Sita’s first journey, the journey made in childhood was full of excitement. She remembers her father, the legendary figure and his magical deeds. All the things in her dead father’s house look lifeless. Sita’s children Menaka, a young sensitive girl and Karan a little boy, reject completely the rude life in the island. The children get annoyed and Menaka writes to her father to take them back to Bombay. Sita realizes that the island has changed and that she cannot be happy there. Frustrated and crushed by this disenchantment she finds that the only course open to her is to return to Bombay with her husband and children.

Desai with her unusual skill of narration vividly depicts the hysterical denunciations of the middle aged woman Sita. Her sufferings and her ultra mundane sensation are not her own making. The routine existence in her father-in-law’s house begins to pressurise her mind. Her first entrance to her father-in-laws ‘age rooted’ flat infuriates her to revolt against their subhuman placidity and sluggishness. The initial restlessness as a wife turns into a quest for meaning of life. She is a mere wife no longer a woman. Her husband’s friends, acquaintances, relatives and business associates are for her no better than animals. “They are nothing - nothing but appetite and sex. Only food, sex and money matter, animals” (Anita Desai, 1982:p.47). Sita is also unable to face the reality of life with its violence suffering and pains. Ordinary day to day happenings make her react sharply and vehemently. She feels herself a stranger in such an atmosphere.

Marriage is not a civil contract. The domestic life of the woman is not a drudgery but an inner delight arising from her ministering to the husband’s needs and the upbringing of the children. The love shown by the husband to the wife is the real property of the woman and it is richer than earthly property and material life. Sita’s relationship with her husband, Raman is not deep and emotional. Sita feels suffocated by the “Vegetarian complacency”, “insularity” and unimaginative way of life of her husband and his people. Such were her experiences that,

“She never got used to anyone. When they lived in the first years of their married lives, with his family... she had vibrated and throbbed in revolt against their almost subhuman placidity, calmness and sluggishness. The more stolid and still and calm they were, the more she thrummed, as though frantic with fear that their subhumanity might swamp her”. (Anita desai 1982, P.48)

Sita’s fifth pregnancy upsets her and becomes the constant conflict with her husband. Raman cannot understand Sita’s frenzy about her fifth pregnancy. She dwells in the world of frenzy, feeling that going to the island and thereby to the world of childhood, she could prevent the biological process of delivery. Desai believes that childhood experiences usually leave a deep impression in the human mind. Sita shudders the idea of giving birth to a fifth child. For her-

“Children....through here mind floured a white, flapping succession in nappies, nests, and something quite extraordinary called ‘booties’ that would have to be gathered together. She could see the expressionless faces of the night nurses in the gynae ward.... in the greenish night light regarding her as she came in ravaged by the first pains. She could see the impassive face of nurse who would stay by her in the theatre now and then glancing at her large, flat watch, bored by at another woman’s panic stricken labour”. (Anita Desai 1982 153-54)

Traditionally motherhood is regarded as the greatest ambition of a woman. Her instinct of self sacrifice and service are fully brought out in the bearing and rearing of the children. Desai has explored the psyche of both childless women as of Maya in “Cry, the peacock”, and Monisha in “Voices in the city”, and also of women with children like Sita. Sita never discouraged motherhood. She had four children. Now she does not want to deliver her fifth baby and intends to protect her unborn baby from the cruel and violent atmosphere. That is why she wishes “it would not be born and nothing would happen” (Anita Desai 1982-p.55). Sita thinks to stay at the island because she finds the violence of the metropolitan city intolerable. Her life in Bombay is full of violence that she wants to

keep her unborn child away from it and hence she tells her husband, Raman – “*I mean, I want to keep it – I don't want it to be born*” (Anita Desai, 1982: P. 35) Sita wants to retain the baby in her womb. So she escapes from reality to the world of fantasy. In this context, a critic's observation appears quite proper – “*The incident in which a number of crows assault and kill an eagle becomes symbolic of Sita's own plight amid violence so much prevalent in society. By giving birth to a child she would only contribute to the violence of the world*” (Ramesh, K. Srivastava, 1984: p.36)

Sita's life in the city of Bombay is portrayed mainly through the images of violence, and her island life is delineated with the images of sea sunshine, colour and flowers. The city and the island symbolize the two different realms of Sita's existence and provide necessary contrast to the symbolic action of the novel. The comparison of herself with a nocturnal winged insect, that has viewed into a 'grey non-light' furnishes the key to unfold the occult of Sita's adult pathetic existence. In Desai novels there is always a close correspondence between the psychic state of a character and nature. The image of a magnificent sunset indicates the illusory nature of the island implying at the possible disenchantment of Sita. The island turns from 'white' to 'grey', when she was there before, but now it has become completely dark. The darkness of the island is a sure sign of the end of the hopes. The house imagery that appears in this novel has a tremendous significance in the fictional life of the protagonist. This imagery also symbolizes the psychological character of Sita. The darkness inside the house in the island of Manori symbolises Sita's inner emptiness. It is a symbolic representation of the protagonist's alienated self. The images of light and darkness, the sea and the wind of the island and the city are most significant in the novel highlighting the dominant themes of alienation violence and escape. As a critic points out -The images in the novel help us to trace the theme of escape and reconciliation through the spiritual voyage of Sita”. (S. Indira, 1994: P.70).

Desai's male protagonists are all indifferent and unconcerned about their wives. Sita's husband Raman does not understand the cause and nature of Sita's agony. He laments that she has no self control despite her matured age. Raman being busy with his other commitments does not get the opportunity to peep into her thought and feelings. He cannot understand Sita's frenzy about her fifth pregnancy. But her fifth pregnancy upsets her and becomes the constant conflict with her husband. Raman also discovers that there has been a lack of communication between them. Though married for over two decades they

do not have any mental affinity on feeling of closeness. Sita wants to “escape from the madness 'here', escape to a place where it might be possible to be same again” (Anita Desai, 1982 : p.35). In her assertion “I will go” lies her urge for freedom.

Sita thinks that her relationship with her husband is not based on true love but only on compromise. None of them try to touch the inner feelings of the other. As an example of true love she narrates to Raman a scene that she had observed in the Hanging Gardens. Sita saw a young woman dying of tuberculosis and being devotedly attended to by a old man who loved her. This true love impelled Sita to realize the hollowness of her married life. Sita's vision of this muslim woman and her old lover indicates mutual love without any compromise and selfishness. It is this kind of relationship which she wants from Raman, but which she is unable to achieve.

Her struggle symbolizes “*The intelligent and sensitive woman's revolt against the male smugness and philistinism trampling all finer values in married life*” (Shyam Asnani, 1990: p.66).

Sita's final decision is a compromise. Her decision to return to her husband is not a failure. On the contrary she returns with a new perception, a new understanding. She realizes now “*What a farce marriage was, all human relationships*” (Anita Desai, 1982, p.105.)

She realizes that 'escape' is not the answer. She is fully aware of her duties and family attachments. There is courage in the conviction that life must be continued in getting on with the mundane. It is a 'phase of self discovery' (Elain Showalter, 1977: p. 13). It is in this stage that the quest for freedom is turned inward and aimed at the goal of self-discovery. The novel tries to explain the dilemma of the modern woman as a house wife and also that of a human being. Desai dislikes radical attitude in women. Speaking of the ending of the novel one critic rightly points out that as compared to her earlier novels there is “one distinct change: Sita neither dies in the end, nor kills anyone, nor does she becomes mad. She simply compromises with her destiny” (Suresh Kohli, 1977: p.3). Sita resumes her return journey to adjust to the role of wife and mother. Marriage is a perpetual compromise.

Conclusion: To conclude, one of the main features of this novel is its positive ending which is highly encouraging and life-enhancing. Sita neither kills any one nor commits suicide, nor goes mad. She simply compromises with her fate and learns the courage to face life with all its ups and downs. Sita's compromise with life reveals on her part a step forward to accept reality and to quest for identity. The life of Sita is a study of feminine

consciousness, suffering and struggling with in the frame work of conjugal life.

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