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**THE PHILOSOPHICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL  
VISION IN ANITA DESAI'S WHERE SHALL WE  
GO THIS SUMMER?**

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# The Philosophical and Psychological Vision in Anita Desai's *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*

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**Abstract – Anita Desai (1937-) is unquestionably one of the most celebrated Indian –English writers. She is a prolific writer and has to her credit a large number of creative works and a coherently growing readership. Anita Desai stands distinctive among her contemporaries in terms of Indian English fiction. In her fiction she has denoted a psychological strand and in the process she has projected a sensibility, which is generally not encountered in other Indian Anglian Fictions. She depicts a significant literary dimension by laying emphasis upon the exploration of inner climate, as well as the nuances of sensibility. She explores all these aspects through her novels in a subtle manner. As a novelist, Anita Desai designs the pattern of her novel to bring out the interior conflicts and dynamics within the human psyche. Her talent is exceptional in terms of the exploration of innate sensibility.**

**The paper deals with the philosophical and psychological vision of Anita Desai. It throws light upon the basic themes incorporated in the novel *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* (1975). She depicts a new dimension to English fiction by laying emphasis upon the exploration of inner climate, the climate of sensibility; a typical Indian phenomenon. It deals with the plight of Sita, the protagonist, whose consciousness flows through three consecutive stages of perception, memory and dream. Being a mother of four children, Sita is pregnant with her fifth child. This pregnancy shatters her severely and she decides neither to give birth nor to undergo an abortive surgery, but to go to the island of Manori, expecting miracles to happen there. She escapes to this island with a view to seeking solace and achieving the miracle of keeping the already conceived child unborn. It presents an internal drama of Sita's withdrawal from the stark realities of domestic life. The Paper also reflects upon the inherent use of symbols, imagery, narrative style and language within the novel.**

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## INTRODUCTION

Anita Desai is one of the most outstanding writers in terms of contemporary Indian English Fiction. She is perhaps the first among the Indian English novelists to have forcefully expressed the existential problems of womankind: she is amongst the first to have laid bare the inner recesses of the human psyche: she has also introduced a deep psychological probing of her characters. What is remarkable about her is that she portrays her characters with their specific traits in her own peculiar style and language.<sup>1</sup>

The paper will focus on the philosophical and psychological vision embedded in select text of Anita Desai namely, *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* (1975). The paper will attempt to highlight the text of Desai on various aspects of the novel like the theme, style, technique and language in order to bring out the vision of the novelist in her novel.

Anita Desai in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* discloses the multifarious visionary aspects: the hardships of India's freedom movement, the beliefs in

miracles, magic, individual relations, the split of personalities and the clash of Indian ethos with modern attitude to life.<sup>2</sup> She depicts a new dimension to English fiction by laying emphasis upon the exploration of inner climate, the climate of sensibility; a typical Indian phenomenon.

*Where Shall We Go This Summer?* traces the flow of the protagonist's consciousness through three consecutive stages of perception, memory and dream and is structurally related to Virginia Woolf's '*To The Lighthouse*' (1928). Being rendered through a third person narration, the implied author intrudes in the guise of minor characters in the novel. However the authenticity of the narrative is not diminished as degrees of psychic and physical vividness are created. The novel is divided into three parts: *Monsoon 67*, *Winter 47*, and again *Monsoon 67*. Part One deals with the present and earlier past of the protagonist, Sita. The strained relation between Sita and her husband, Raman becomes the gist of this part. Sita's arrival to the island of Manori with her two children is also mentioned. Part Two deals with the remote past of the protagonist. The history of Sita's

mother and father is revealed. It reflects the participation of her father in the freedom struggle of the country. Part Three deals with the present and the near future. This part reveals Sita's endeavor to renovate her past and to discover her lost self.

The narrative denotes the dilemma of a young disillusioned woman, named Sita. A mother of four children, she is pregnant with her fifth child. This pregnancy shatters her severely and decides neither to give birth nor to undergo an abortive surgery, but to go to the island of Manori, expecting miracles to happen. This island has been named as the Island of Miracles because her father had made it an island of magic once, and had worked miracles of a kind, during their childhood days, back in 1947. Her husband, Raman could not understand her decision and he exclaimed:

"Don't be silly, Sita, don't behave like a fool.... I don't understand much, I understand you are having a baby and must not be allowed to behave like this. You must stay where there is a doctor, a hospital and a telephone. You can't go to the island in the middle of the monsoon. You can't have a baby there."<sup>3</sup>

Sita cried,

"But I don't want to have the baby."<sup>4</sup>

She herself does not find it fit for a woman "in her forties, greying, aging to behave with such a total lack of control."<sup>5</sup> This represents the internal drama of Sita's withdrawal from the stark realities of domestic life. The novelist artistically unifies two journeys as its theme: one is an immediate escape from surroundings; the other is towards the future. It is an expressive commentary on the plight of man trapped within the confines of human existence. Sita expressed her desire to escape from Bombay, because the city represents the world of reality:

"In those days", she explained, "I thought I could live with you and travel alone – mentally, emotionally. But after that day, that wasn't enough. I had to stay whole. I had to. Do you know?"<sup>6</sup>

She added hesitantly,

"I think perhaps that is the urge my mother felt when she ran away to Benaras. But what happened to her? I wonder, Raman. I had to run away, too, to the island."<sup>7</sup>

Here, the island represents the world of fantasy. And Sita's return to reality at the end of the novel is the beginning of her journey towards the future. But she is confused about which half of her life was real and which unreal. She reflected:

"Had not her married years, her dulled years, been the false life, the life of pretense and performance and only the escape back to the past, to the island, been

the one sincere and truthful act of her life, the only one not false and staged?"<sup>8</sup>

The central theme of the novel remains vested upon Sita's effort to refuse the demands of her husband Raman makes on her.<sup>9</sup> That is why the lines of C.P. Cavafy's poem firmly occupy her mind:

To certain people there comes a day

When they must say that great 'Yes' and the great 'No'

He who has the 'Yes' ready within him reveals himself at once, and saying it 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.<sup>10</sup>

Sita's problem is not 'simply a case of a liberated woman revolting against the slavish bonds of marriage,' it is 'a question of the basic reality that is bitter and nude and can neither be hidden nor be halved to suit individuals'.<sup>11</sup> The marital discord between Raman and Sita is based on the conflict of values, of principles, and of faith even, or between normal or double social standards. Raman has been a good- tempered fellow who belonged to the business world: 'Not an introvert, nor an extrovert – middling kind of man, he was dedicated unconsciously to the middle way.'<sup>12</sup> He tries to make Sita cheerful but she is hard to please and she is always boiling with anger. Thus this novel deals with the psychological probing of the mind of the heroine Sita.

The title of the novel, *Where shall we go this summer?* is highly suggestive. The interrogative feature of the title is symbolic of the uncertain state of the heroine's mind and of her indeterminate fate. The novel opens with the return of the heroine, Sita, taking two of her four children to her dead father's house in Manori Island after twenty years. She escapes to this island with a view to seeking solace and achieving miracle of keeping the already conceived child unborn. Being confused she flees to the haven that was the father's island, a place of magic and mystery. Her father calls it 'Jeevan Ashram', 'The Home of the Soul' and put into practice his social theories of simple life. But she is shocked to see that the island is not what it was before and what remains in the house is only coldness, white ashes and waste. Moses, the caretaker of her father's house receives her and notices that Sita is not like her father, and she lacked dignity. He finds that:

"She did not have it- had nothing in fact, not even one piece of valuable luggage, seemed quite empty, vacant, stumbling."<sup>13</sup>

In her 'From- To' movement, from the mainland to Manori; from Raman to her father, from the harshness

of reality to the safety of the womb, she learns that life is but 'a crust of dull tedium, of hopeless disappointment.'<sup>14</sup>

Sita's condition is symbolic of the loneliness of the modern woman. The sense of alienation as an existential problem is largely felt here in this novel. The 'small incident' that occurs in the mainland are symbolic and images remain vivid. Her attempt to acquire meaning is only a pathetic imitation of "her vain effort to save the young eagle from the rapacious crows crowded on the city's rooftops".<sup>15</sup>

The crows are the symbol of civilization, particularly by the city people who rejoice in exploiting the weak and innocent human beings... Sita represents nature that tries to save the eagle but with no success... It means nature cannot be saved from the savage seizing of cruel human being.<sup>16</sup> R.K. Srivastava remarks:

"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."<sup>17</sup>

Now and then Sita's deep-rooted inner fear seizes her, 'where shall we go this summer?'- these words, appearing out of nowhere, worried and plagued her. "Nowhere nowhere."<sup>18</sup> The news of Raman coming to the island surprised her in the beginning, but later, she is happy because Raman is the symbol of security for her. Sita's returning to the mainland is significant in this novel. A critic has pointed out:

"Sita neither dies in the end nor kill anyone nor does she become mad. She simply compromises with her destiny."<sup>19</sup>

The novel ends by establishing victory of reason over fantasy. Sita, thus, gains her release not from the marital bond but from the island.

One hardly finds any ambiguity and self-deception in Sita's vision of human relationships. The vision of the Muslim couple seen by Sita in the hanging gardens depicts the Indian principle of the cycle of life and death. The woman is young but 'fatally anaemic- or fatally tubercular...' <sup>20</sup> and the man is much older. They are close to death yet their love represents life. The mutual love becomes the "work of art."<sup>21</sup> Here Sita realizes that her own married life and all other relationships are based on compromise, duties, and selfishness only and this is the cause of discord and clashes in life. She thus expresses her frustration for want of an equal proportion of love in her life. She rebels against Raman by expressing her anger:

"In those days..., I Thought I could live with you and travel alone- mentally, emotionally. But after that day,

that wasn't enough. I had to stay whole. I had to. Do you know?"<sup>22</sup>

She added hesitantly:

"I think perhaps that is the urge my mother felt when she ran away to Benaras. But what happened to her? I wonder, Raman. I had to run away, too, to the island."<sup>23</sup>

The phrase 'I had to stay whole' brings forth the depth of human emotions. Sita aspires to share the 'whole' of her husband, in terms of mental, physical and spiritual love.<sup>24</sup> This becomes a little paradoxical in Sita demanding to have the 'whole' of her husband, yet to run away to the island. The symbol of the island here becomes Raman and what she really needed was love from her husband. Sita finally gives up the pursuit of her separate existence for the wider vision of human relations. The distressing conflict between external and internal obligation in Sita is between her external life on the island and her emotional life as a housewife. The interrogative feature of the title, 'Where Shall We Go This Summer?' is symbolic of the uncertain state of the heroine's mind, of her awareness and her indeterminate fate.

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