

# A Study of Anita Desai's Novels Where Shall We Go This Summer

Arti Malik<sup>1\*</sup> Dr. Rajesh Dager<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Research Scholar, Department of English, Calorx Teachers' University, Ahmedabad, Gujarat

<sup>2</sup> Assistant Professor, Department of English, RPS College Balana, Mahendergarh, Haryana

**Abstract – Anita Desai has explored different aspects of feminine psyche that also includes man-woman relationship. Almost all of her novels are family playmainly concerned with the theme of marital discord between husband and wife. Sita and Raman in Where Shall We Go This Summer Unlike the Western tradition, in the Indian middle class families, the couples generally go through arranged marriages and do not choose each other. Though times have changed, the tradition of negotiated marriage is still very much in vogue. Sita and Raman's marriage in Where Shall We Go This Summer.**

**Key Words: Anita Desai, Summer, Maya's Collapse and etc.**

-----X-----

## INTRODUCTION

The marital discord results chiefly from the dichotomy between two irreconcilable temperaments and diametrically opposite viewpoints represented by Sita and her husband, Raman. Sita, a sensitive, overemotional, 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.

The world of Anita Desai's fiction is largely a domestic one she is interested primarily in the lives of women in India since independence, the lives of women in the modern Indian nation state, rather than the history or politics of the sub-continent on a more extensive scale. Her early novel **Where Shall We Go This Summer?** Focuses in various ways on the disharmony and alienation women frequently experienced in marriage and the limitations the patriarchal world place on them as daughters, wives or mothers. Most of Anita Desai's works engage the complexities of modern Indian culture from a feminine perspective while highlighting the female Indian predicament of maintaining self-identity as an individual woman. Her novel, **Where Shall We Go This Summer?** Centers around a desperate wife looking to escape her marriage. This illustrious novel is a story of an oppressed mind. Like all her earlier novels this particular novel also illustrates the tensions between family members and the loneliness, isolation and alienation of the middle-class woman, Sita the female protagonists of the story. **Where Shall We Go This Summer?** (1975),

fourth novel is concerned with the theme of alienation and discord in married life. Sita lives in fragments. The path of honour and conviction is not the way for her. She refuses to accept the authority of society even though she knows that the result would be painful: "He who refused does not repent. Should he be asked again, he would say no again. And yet that he...the right no –crushes him for the rest of life (**Where Shall...p.33**)". The story of the novel covers Sita's wandering from Bombay to Monori Island on the West Coast and, finally, back from the Island to Bombay. In a deep sense, the entire novel is a journey of Sita from 'Alienation to Affirmation.'

The magic in the Island made others bow to her father. Her father's **miracle cures** were strange. The Island was a source of happiness to her. Her father was called **a saint, a wizard** and at the same times a "charlatan". Thus the Island offered her all the freedom and security. The magic Island was a release to her. Her childhood in fact is the reason of her misfortune. She was spoilt in her very childhood, and hence she faces misfortunes after her marriage. She is unable to compromise with her husband and other members of the family.

The second stage is the married life of Sita. She is married to Raman, the son of her father's friend. She thinks now that she is trust into the midst of a conventional family. When she goes to live with her in-laws she is unable to compromise with the placidity and sluggishness of the family. Here the conflict starts between the sensitive individual and the insensitive world. Here is a description of her husband's family: "She never got used to anyone.

When they lived, in the first years of their married lives, with his family in their age-rotted flat off Queens Road, she vibrated and throbbed in revolt against their almost subhuman placidity, calmness and sluggishness. ...Woman had never smoked in their household. And she began to speak in sudden rushes of emotion as though flinging dirt at their smooth unscarred faces (*Where Shall...p.43*). The women of the family spend their time planning, cooking and eating meals. Coming from Manori, Sita finds this obsession with food and food alone too fantastic to be real as compared to the life in her parental home. Like Maya and Monisha, Sita is high strung with an abnormal sensitivity and imagination that make her emotionally vulnerable. She sees the world around exulting in destruction. Her husband and her children thrive in a world where wanton and cruel destruction is the main element and where creation is merely a freak, a temporary and doomed occurrence. Indeed, so oppressive are the surroundings that at moments she wonders whether she has gone insane or the world around her has. She loses all faith in femininity and maternal belief in child birth. She queries whether child birth is an act of creation or a violent pain-wracked act that destroys what safely contained in the womb by releasing it into a violent murderous world.

She is pained to see in the normal life of the household some act of unthinking violence: her boys fighting a duel like their heroes in the films, Menaka wantonly ripping buds off a plant or shedding her paintings, the youngest, Karan, demolishing his toys with Karate blows, Raman stolidly munching his breakfast while she battles with a popgun to frighten away the crows while they are bent upon feasting on a fallen eagle. Each act is more horrible than the other and makes her shrink into herself. It frightens her and appalls her with its cruelty.

The violent news in the papers, the endless fights in the block of flats and the streets outside sicken her and she longs to protect herself and her unborn child from them. There are other incidents which haunt her and she cannot forget those incidents. One of them is the ayahs fighting like cats. While they fight, the children play beside them but these ayahs remain unaware of the crying and frightened children in their midst. Sita describes this scene to her husband and says that all this represents the myriad faces of a mad and violent society. There is another situation which brings her into contrast with her husband: Sita sees a whole crowd of crows attacking an eagle. The eagle was perhaps wounded or else too young to fly. The crows mock at it and tear it into pieces with their beaks. Sita tries to scare away the crows with her son's toy gun and keeps a watch over the eagle until the night falls. She identifies herself with the proud and defiant eagle because this situation objectifies the conflict in her own life. The eagle does not survive. Her husband's reaction to the death of the eagle is in sharp contrast to Sita's.

While she regards it as a projection of her own sense of victimization, to her husband and children all this is nothing but an act of normal life. They announce the death of the eagle with gloating and triumph. They behave in this manner unconsciously but it pinches Sita too much. Thus this small incident further creates a wide gulf between Sita on the one hand and her husband and the children on the other. She feels alienated from her husband and children. In this way the normal and usual incidents of everyday life become abnormal and unusual for Sita.

There is another small incident. Sita sees that her sons are wrestling with each other: "One buckling the other beneath him being overthrown, then both rolling, both enmeshed thrashing grunting (*Where Shall...p.40*)". When she asks what they are doing, her daughter coolly informs her that they are only playing.

All these expressions of his distaste towards her emotional outbursts, and 'productivity' to emotional drama trigger further explosive outbursts on her part. There is a total lack of communication between husband and wife and between mother and children. Thus though Sita lives in an average good family yet she feels alone in the midst of her own people. There is marital discord.

There is repeated tension between husband and wife. Like Gautama, in *Cry, the Peacock* Raman cannot understand the way Sita reacts against every incident. Her attitude is that of violence and passion, while his attitude is downright practical. Her husband cannot comprehend her abnormal boredom and her frustration with life. He exclaims: "Bored? How? Why? With what? (*Where Shall...p.45*)".

She wants freedom. She behaves strangely and says a bold 'No' to her life in Bombay and flees to the Island. She seeks shelter in the illusory world of her childhood and youth against the oppressive reality of her life with her husband: she sees that Island illusion as a refuge, a protection. It would hold her baby-safely unborn, as if by magic. Then there would be the sea, it would wash the frenzy out of her, drown it. Perhaps the tides would lull the children too into smoother softer beings. Thus Sita wants to re-live and re-create the past. She wants to recapture the rains and springs of her childhood. But her quest is doomed to failure because the past cannot be ruled out. She does not want to live in reality, nor can she re-create it, she wants to remain within the romantic nostalgia of her childhood. She had not wanted to face the reality even in her childhood. She was unwilling to grow up and to accept the responsibilities, from what she feels is the dull order and deadly routine of a soulless life in the city. The romantic protest of Sita has another serious aspect. She is going to have her fifth child. She feels that she has no right to subject another soul to the cruelty of her

surroundings. So she musters up the courage to protest against giving birth to a child in a cruel unsympathetic environment totally unsuitable for a child. Her The pattern of dissonance is completed between the husband and the wife. Sita tells him: "Children only mean anxiety, concern pessimism. Not happiness. What other women call happiness is just sentimentalism (**Where Shall... p.31**)". Raman thinks that she is inhuman to deny motherhood and sentiment. She, however, is nothing if not a painfully honest being who is willing to face the issues, who baulks at effete sops offered to dam her sensitivity, who finds her husband on a different wave length altogether. He could not travel with her mentally and emotionally. She thinks that in order to stay whole and sane, she has fled to the island. With him, she associates a dull safe routine in quiet grey doses, whereas she yearns for a higher and throbbing life of the consciousness. He accuses her of desertion, of running a way, while she finds her act of escape a way of confronting, of saying no to her treadmill of life. The novelist however in her depiction exposes another face of feminine desire, without being judgemental about it. The in-depth analysis of Sita's growth explains why she refuses to give birth to a child in a world not fit to receive the child. Obviously Sita represents the category of men and women with whom Desai empathizes in an interview with Yashodhara Dalmia, "whose hearts cry out 'the great No', who fight the currents and struggle against it, they know what the demands are and what it costs to meet the

Nowhere is this alienation more powerfully communicated than in the scene where Raman and Sita discuss their attitudes to the stranger they had once encountered while they were returning from Ajanta and Ellora: "He seemed so brave," she blurted out when Raman asked her why she had once more brought up the subject of the hitch hiking foreigner, months later. "Brave? Him?" Raman was honestly amused. "He was fool- he didn't even know which side of the road to wait on." "Perhaps that was only innocence," Sita altered "and it made him seemed moiré brave not knowing anything but going on nevertheless (**Where Shall...p.47**)". The incident reflects the schism between the two more convincingly than anything else in the novel. Sita's unconscious identification with the stranger's irrationality is expressive not only of her own quest for a life of primitive reality but also of her alienation from Raman who considers it practically as an act of infidelity. Sita herself is aware that since the "infidelity was only mental," it was so much more immeasurable for that. Raman's caustic comment that he was fool-he didn't even know which side of the road to wait on has an ironic ring about it. For Raman reality has only one way the logical way. For Sita, the logical has lost the meaning. The incident alienates Sita from her husband further and, later, when Sita looks at her marriage album she is touched with a sense of self-justification: "She is ... amused to turn from the album to the mirror and see the layers of experience and melancholy and

boredom that had settled upon her face since then, like so much gray sand. She was not dismayed-on the contrary, she felt a kind of pride (**Where Shall...p.48**)".

Sita's alienation is reflected in another scene also. While strolling with her children in the Hanging Gardens she finds a pale, **fatally anemic or fatally tubercular** but beautiful young Muslim woman and an old man looking at each other in a loving and tender manner. She fails to recognize this love as **divine or insane**. Instead, and by contrast, sadness is printed on her mind like a **work or art that makes her own life appear like a shadow, absolutely flat, uncolored**. The scene, captured as a fragment of floating consciousness, becomes the mirror of Sita's loneliness in a loveless violent world. In that moment alone Sita seems to have lived. It is therefore, significant that she recapitulates it at a time when an existential choice is forced upon her by Raman's arrival on the Island. "Their betrayal had torn her open with which violence, now violence poured from her like blood. It was also the shame, the disappointment: he had not come to see her to fetch her, as she had supposed: he had come because Menaka had called him. He had betrayed her too. They had all betrayed her. Why? (**Where Shall...p.112**)" She finds both the children eagerly responding to his presence. But she feels evermore diminished and forsaken. Narrow-mindedness and petty jealousy has overpowered her personality. All these features, put together, prove that Sita is abnormal of a raw stuff even at this stage of life. Being a raw girl she suffers from a peculiar hastiness, strange enthusiasm and myopic attitudes. She lacks practicality though she is certainly eager to know the truth of life. But as a matter of fact she remains thoroughly self-willed, one who has a wrong notion of nobility, maturity and greatness. It is due to this reason that she does not come to realize that her pitfalls, intellectual jugglery and high-mindedness are ill-formed. The trip to Manori is actually a trip back to her childhood. But this trip in effect becomes for her a trip of self-discovery and recognition of reality. Her Island home is not as she had remembered it. The house is in a dilapidated condition. The new perspective on the return allows her to see the face of reality in this world of illusion. She realizes that in essence there can be no running away from reality.

The magic of the island, if it had ever existed was now buried beneath the soft grey-green mildew of the monsoon, chilled and choked by it. Jasbir Jain sees a polarized world in the novel and endeavours to come to terms with Sita's situation: "There is a Rousseautic opposition between the world of island and the city, but this opposition is not allowed to remain unquestioned. The contrast is underlined, the different worlds are demarcated, and the focus shifted from outside to inside, from the surrounding to human relationships and from the collective to the general. Sita is perhaps, at heart, an islander.



Sita has to accept the fact that she is a woman unloved. Through this acceptance of her condition she also realizes that Raman is brave, while she is not. He had said 'yes'. While saying it Raman has crossed over to the path of honour and his own conviction, but she had escaped from duties and responsibilities, from order and routine, from life and the city, to the unbelievable Island. "She had even refused to give birth to child in a world not fit to receive the child (*Where Shall...p.128*)". But now she realizes that escape is impossible. Unlike her conviction of things in the past, she now accepts a degree of self-distrust in matters of experience. She decided to go back to Raman. Thus there is at this stage a conflict between her need to withdraw in order to preserve one's wholeness and sanity and the need to be involved in the process of life. She tries to escape, she fails. To live and be a last of life, in the whirlpool of existence, that is the need, the real need. This is a revolution which leads in a step forward from *Cry, the Peacock*. Escape into the past is impossible. And this not exists. It cannot be recreated nor experienced.

In *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*, there is the realization that there is no escape possible into the past from the present because the past is dead. But the present is, it exists, and its existence cannot be denied. So where shall we escape to? Where, this summer? The only answer possible is: Nowhere. There is nowhere other than this present, Now to live? Each one has to find out for himself; there is no actual prescription. The interrogative in the title has positive implications: live in the present, whatever it is and wherever you are. From the above analysis it is clear that the main reason for Sita's neurotic condition had been her own inability to comprehend and tolerate the complex situations in life. The implicit contrast prepares us for the rejection of Sita, for the novel seems in the ultimate analysis, to be about the rejection of Sita, about the rejection of her point of view. Sita's illusion of a possible escape from the cycle of experience is constantly shattered by the intrusion of a reality, she desperately seeks to avoid. Right from the moment she talks of sailing across the sea and is curtly reminded by her daughter of its being "a rowing boat."

Anita Desai makes a deft use of irony to suggest a tension between illusion and reality. In this context the author seeks to highlight the idea that to be human is to accept, to accommodate, and to live amidst the ambiguities and uncertainties of life. It is this modified vision which enables Sita to enter into a meaningful pattern of life by deciding to go back to Raman so as to be able to "stay whole. It is certainly a moment of self-realization when one gets true wisdom in terms of real life. Consequent of such a decision and realization, Sita feels: "released and freed" from the absurd situation of life in which, she felt convinced, she was nothing beyond as "actress" in a "theatrical performance (*Where Shall...p.136*)".

She felt, awakened from slumber and got the capacity to reconsider things clearly in a healthy manner. Some of the incidents and factors include her disillusionment with the Island of magic, betrayal by her own children while living on the Island and her fluctuating feelings about her husband's character.

Thus Sita's visit to the Island of Manori, after a lapse of twenty years, does not prove futile. The Island no longer offers her the same freedom and security as it had seemed to do in her childhood. Still the trip to the Island becomes for her a medium of self-discovery and recognition of reality. Significantly, she discovers certain cracks even in her memory of her father. She finds her father's "miracle cures (*Where Shall...p.63*)", strange and unbelievable.

She is confused by different aspects of her father's personality when she comes to know that he is called a **saint**, a **wizard** and at the same time a **charlatan** also. This continuity in change is communicated by the pervasive presence of the sea as a mystic backdrop which reminds us of the concluding pages of Lawrence's *The Rainbow* and the evocative sea imagery of Eliot's *Four Quartets*. Her visit to the Island, which she had designed as a private refuge and a source of happiness, now convinces her that it is not possible to run away from reality. Hence she wakes into a new realization of the acceptance of reality

Secondly, betrayal by her own children, Karan and Menaka shocks Sita into falls reality. She cannot tolerate the unbearable excitement of her children on the arrival of Raman to the Island. Intermittently she grows reminiscent of her lapses such as emotional eroticism, fallacious reasoning and baseless suspiciousness. At this stage the intensity of her ego takes the form of mature and realistic understanding in all matters. This sort of maturity comes to her particularly in regard to conjugal relationship and companionship.

At this stage the wisdom Sita gets is also in the form of a grasp of the true sense of the exigencies of life in the practical world. She feels that she can achieve a meaningful pattern of living only by going with Raman to Bombay.

She realizes that she can possibly redress her shattered personality only by reuniting with Raman.

Sita decides to surmount, and she did overpower, these lapses in her personality. But the jealousies disappear slowly and she plays a very constructive role by trying to convince her husband of the inadequacy of her judgments and ultimately by enabling herself to cultivate broader sympathy and universal respect. Thus Sita's renewal and regeneration are rendered in a prose of exquisite beauty. Sita discover her contact with the soil of the Island. Sita once again learns to laugh. Ironically the very hour of her defeat marks her triumph over

loneliness. Her discovery leaves Menaka dissatisfied, for Menaka seeks something which the Island is incapable of offering her. The dialogue between the mother and the daughter brings into focus the theme of the novel. There is no reality except the one that one lives and faces. Finally, Sita seems to have perceived the reality. She is all easing now without any tension whatsoever disturbing her mind. Packing up her things, she reflects on her sojourn as a dramatic episode. Her time on the Island had been very much of an episode on a stage, illuminated by gaudy sunset effects and played to thunderous storm music. The ending of the novel is return to reality. One is reminded of Keats' last Stanza *Ode to Autumn*. It seems as if Sita's recollections of spring spent in Manori have something in common with Keats' question "Where are the songs of spring?" What Keats discovered through his personal search for truth and beauty seems to be reflected in Sita's search for the beauty of spring in life. Keats found the answer: "Think not of them thou hasn't thy music too." And that precisely is the moment of truth for Sita at the end of the hectic onstage action.

#### CONSECUTION:

Anita Desai has explored different aspects of feminine psyche that also includes man-woman relationship. Almost all of her novels are family play mainly concerned with the theme of marital discord between husband and wife. Sita and Raman in *Where Shall We Go Thus*, Anita Desai makes effective use of this technique to portray the loneliness of her central character. The title itself deals with nature. The fire and the mountain both are natural phenomena.

#### REFERENCES:

1. Anita Desai (1982). *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* (Delhi: Orient Paperbacks) 79.
2. Darshan Singh Maini (1977). *The Achievements of Anita Desai*, Indo English Literature, ed. by K. K. Sharma (Ghaziabad: Vimal Prakashan) 228.
3. Anita Desai, *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* (Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 1982) 31.
4. *The Fiction of Anita Desai*, ed. by R.K.Dhawan (New Delhi: Bahri Publications, 1989) 100.
5. Asnanai, Shyam Mohan (1975). *Contribution of Women in Indo-English Novel*. Treveni.
6. Asnanai, Shyam Mohan (1981) *Anita Desai's Fiction: A New Dimenstion*. Indian Literature, Vol. XXIV.

---

#### Corresponding Author

Arti Malik\*

Research Scholar, Department of English, Calorx Teachers' University, Ahmedabad, Gujarat