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Feminist Perspective in Anita Desai's *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*

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Anita Desai is one of the prominent novelists of Indian English fiction. She is not only concerned with the social realities, but also explores the hidden niches of human consciousness and meditates upon the existential question of women and their quest for identity in a complex patriarchal world. Her novel, *Where Shall We Go This Summer* is a story of a middle-aged, over-sensitive woman, Sita who is trapped in familial relationships and finds herself lonely in her own family. She suffers from identity crisis, but towards the end of the novel discovers her real self and solves the question of her existence.

The novels of Anita Desai are mainly women oriented. Her heroines are presented as victims in the male dominated Indian families. She has depicted both submissive and powerful women, and also those who have the ability to change and cope with situations. She tries to explore the psyche of Indian women emphasizing their solitude and alienation. Those characters who have doubts about their existence and identities go through transformation and find solutions to their problems towards the end of the novel.

Desai's entire fiction traces the changing image of women in the face of existential dilemmas. These female protagonists assert their right to exist not as shadows of their male counterparts but as independent human beings with a will of their own. (Tandon 111-112)

In *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* (1975), the protagonist Sita who in the beginning is a victim of loneliness and alienation and lacks identity, changes and recognizes her true-self with the course of time. Sita is a sensitive middle-aged woman who feels alienated from her family due to her emotional attitude towards day today happenings. She is inflexible and incapable of adjusting to her family and also to society.

Sita's childhood was not a normal one. Her father was a freedom fighter and a social activist who had an incestuous relationship with her elder sister. Deprived of the love of her father, she could also not get the love of her mother as her mother had left the family long ago. Moreover, she was also not satisfied with her married life. Thus due to all this pessimism, there developed a negative attribute in her personality. "The text presents her over wrought mental condition as the cumulative outcome of a difficult childhood followed by a stressful marriage." (Kohli 86) Her life was not infected by the problems of dowry and poverty, but still there was a void and a vacuum, there was something wanting and missing. She was actually facing the problem of identity and existence.

Coming from a small island where everything was quite magical and holy, city life seemed to her unattractive and evil. Her over-reactions towards small happenings such as the playful fights of her sons, her daughter's destruction of her paintings, fights of maids on the

street, attacks of blood thirsty crows on the eagle, made her unprepared to give birth to her fifth child. Survival seemed to her hopeless.

She is an unconventional woman, neither passive nor submissive and has the ability to stand alone and take the initiative. But her incapability to recognize her true self made her a pessimistic and a melancholic woman. She is neglected by her family and is bored with everyday routine. She wanted her family to pay attention and respect her ideas, but when she could not get enough attention she decided to move back to the place associated to her childhood, i.e. the Manori island. Shubha Tiwari points out:

Sita is an uprooted woman who wants to regain her primitive self. Her escape to the island is a biological, not an existential necessity. Ironically, Sita's pilgrimage with its promise of renewal and regeneration is the result of her social alienation. There comes a change in Sita's identity. But the children refuse to share the life of primitive reality which is the very identity of the island... The island is a projection of her other self, her other identity. She knows there exists a close tie between herself and the island, but she knows too that it is the island that alienates her from her instinctive drives. (Tiwari 322)

Sita goes through some psychological trauma for being ignored. Her strange attitude is also not welcomed by her husband and children. She is once considered mad by her husband. She is mentally weak and is not able to cope with the situation. "It is like living in the wilds", she said to her husband at night. "One may be attacked_ one's children may be attacked in the streets." (WSS 29) Her habit of smoking, sitting on balcony and looking at the sea for long hours is reflective of her inner pains. There develops a feeling of insecurity within her of which 'escape' was the only cure. Each time she is maladjusted, each time she runs away. After her marriage she was incapable of adjusting with her in-laws in Bombay and thus, shifted to a separate apartment along with her husband. And again when it was the turn of her family, she decided to escape to the island of Manori. There occurs a tug of war between Bombay and Manori, between reality and illusion. Her voyage to the island is a psychic journey back to her childhood. And her decision not to give birth to her fifth child and keep it safe in her womb is also one of the reactions of her mental state. Sita visualizes the island of Manori as an enchanting place where once her father used to perform miracles. Her idea of not delivering the child and keeping it safe in her womb after reaching the island was an illusion. And it is quite ironical that Sita came to realize her real self and was disillusioned about the charm and spell of the island (that has not existed any longer) at the very place where she was living in her fancy. Towards the end of the novel she realizes that she could break away from her role playing as a wife but not as a mother.

The idea of pregnancy seemed to her as a means of deforming a woman's body and making it look ugly. Once she mocked at a woman of island, who was barren and came to her father for some miracle to happen. Surprisingly, she bore a son and became deformed. "Phoolmaya was pregnant. She had a son. She lost her beauty and her poignancy, she began to look coarse and the wear and tear to show, but she had her son." (WSS 51)

Through the character of her heroine Sita, Anita Desai criticizes patriarchal cruelty to infertile women.

Sita bore four children submissively, but could not restrain her emotions when got pregnant for the fifth time. Her conversation with her husband illustrates it clearly.

...when the fifth time she told him she was pregnant, she did so with a quite paranoiac show of rage, fear and revolt...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 acquiring it, and so she wept and flung herself about, over- forty, grey and aging. (WSS 20- 21)

She has been depressed for a long period of time and it took her twenty years to unleash her emotions and break out into a rebel. She did not want to present her mother image “as a passive transmitter of the Father’s seed or word” (‘Feminist Literary Criticism and Motherhood’ 12) Her pregnancy seemed to her as the symbol of sexual appetite of husbands forcing their wives to become mothers against their will. Once she considers the business associates of her husband as “they are nothing_ nothing but appetite and sex. Only food, sex and money matter. Animals.” (WSS 31- 32)

Through this speech of Sita, Desai conveys that it is the attribute associated to men to consider their wives as sex objects and a machine to deliver babies, while they themselves enjoy their lives without thinking about their wives’ pains and boredom.

Motherhood is the key feature of an ideal woman. But Desai reverses this definition and presents the protagonist as a rebel who discards the idea of becoming mother for the fifth time due to her pessimistic view point towards life. Kohli and Just are of the view that:

It is this reified image of maternity that Desai’s texts seek to challenge in a variety of ways. In *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* Sita’s attempt to defer the moment of child birth expresses a desire for control over her own body and, by implication, her destiny...The critique of societal norms implicit in her representations of the mother is offset by a rejection of versions of freedom that are either escapist or solipsistic.” (Kohli 85)

Sita’s aspiration to upset the normal biological cycle depicts her desire to challenge the decreasing recognition of femininity with the reproductive role of a mother. After postponing her child birth she tries to bring forth her femininity which has once been suppressed under motherhood.

During her childhood she had witnessed endless speeches on ‘swaraj’ i.e. ‘freedom’, and thus, it went deep into her sub- conscious, and came up as one of her desires after she found herself getting chained in the bond of relationships, either with her in- laws or her own husband and children. “Only connect they say. So she had spent twenty years connecting, link by link, this chain. And what is one to do with a chain? It can only throttle, choke and enslave.” (WSS 63) Sita has always felt suffocated within the knot of relationships as she has never experienced the love and care one gets from her dear ones. For her relationships always meant enslavement.

Her repetitive admiration for the foreigner who goes on and on without knowing his way, and the glimpse of a young lady and an old man looking passionately towards each other symbolizes her desire to be free, as a woman’s sexuality is after trapped by the bonds of marriage and motherhood.

Family relationships outline the female psyche in Desai. She seeks answers in reconciliation with the family, but that reconciliation does not signify total submission. Her escape to Manori represents her agitation which she was incapable of showing while living in Bombay. And her submission to him and resettling in Bombay is basically associated to her self-discovery and the identification of her real- self. The mystery of the conflict going on within her is now resolved and she has come through as a maturer woman cleared of all doubts and fears.

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