

ISSN: 0976-8165

The Criterion

An International Journal in English

Vol. 7, Issue- 4 [August 2016]

The Criterion 

7th Year of Open Access

Editor-In-Chief: Dr. Vishwanath Bite

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ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

www.galaxyimrj.com

Portrayal of Women as Compromisers in the Selected Novels of Anita Desai: *Bye, Bye, Blackbird* and *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*

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Abstract:

Anita Desai is a perfectionist. This can be confirmed by her handling of situation and characters. In her earlier novels, the women characters are psychologically disturbed, morbid and tragic characters. They are introverts and fail to manage with their surroundings, families and society. Desai's women give much consideration to individuality above everything else. Their craving to live and love clash so violently in them, that their interpersonal relationships become discordant and dissonant and drive them to abandon their lives. But a positive change in the attitudes of Desai's woman protagonists is found in her novels *Bye, Bye, Blackbird* and *Where Shall We Go This Summer*.

Keywords: Anita Desai, women as compromisers, compromise

The present analytical study is aimed at illuminating how the protagonists understand that they want to survive in the world, they must have to compromise with life. The women, rising out from stereotype search for freedom from the social values, structures which put the characters in a conflict with their immediate human context. The empowered women unlike the stereotypes arise from the ignorance or rather lack of understanding. The curiosity to know and to overcome the suppression gives rise to agony overpowering them all over. They try to adjust to circumstances both internal and external danger. In spite of hardships and differences of opinion, some of Anita Desai's protagonists learn to be a part of existing life. They realize that existence is possible only by compromising life by overcoming the barriers. If one has faith in life and individualism, one must compromise with it. All these new women become aware of their rights and responsibilities; finally emerge out of the crisis as strong women willing to compromise with life as it comes. They start questioning their norms thereby demanding equality and recognition for their individuality.

Desai's novel *Bye, Bye Blackbird* deals with the theme of intercultural marriage. The story revolves around the main character Sarah, who has married an Indian named Adit. The novel describes the complexity faced by Sarah the English wife who married the 'Blackbird' Adit. The novel focuses on the theme of alienation and adjustment. And also it portrays the struggles in the minds of the main characters to take an ultimate resolution. Desai meticulously explores the psyche of the protagonist Sarah and reveals her inner conflicts, rejection, frustration and longing caused by interracial marriage. This novel is entirely unlike her earlier two novels. Desai has shown a foreigner cum working woman for the first time in her novel. Sarah is entirely different from other female protagonists of Desai's novels. The title *Bye, Bye Blackbird* means the London says good-bye to the blackbird Adit.

Sarah, Adit's wife suffers from identity crisis in her own country after her marriage with an Indian. She has grown up in a strict and plain atmosphere. Her parents do not lead a happy marital life. After the retirement Sarah's father becomes a reserved old man because of her mother's hostility. But he was an enthusiastic physician earlier. The superior nature of her mother makes Sarah humble and submissive. Sarah is an obedient daughter according to her parent's wishes. She is fascinated towards Adit because she feels worn out of the restricted world of her parents. Adit is impressed with Sarah's shyness. Adit praises:

You are like a Bengali girl," he told her. "Bengali women are like that - reserved, quiet. May be you were one in your previous life. But you are improving on it -you are so much prettier!(b.b.b.73)

Sarah is like a typical Indian wife. She is very polite and she doesn't want to spoil her marital life. She is working as a head secretary in a school and she performs her duties sincerely and efficiently. Even though she has her own job and is financially independent, she doesn't want to give more importance to her own self. She never involves in decision making. She has to make numerous adjustments. The cooperation and compromise come naturally to Sarah. Adit is a conventional Indian husband. He expects his wife to be like him. He dominates her wife like a typical Indian husband. Sarah also allows her husband to dominate her. Adit loves her as long as she submits to his commands.

After their marriage, Sarah is compelled to prepare Indian food. Because Adit is fed up with British food items and furtively longs for Indian food. She also stops cooking English food. She learns enthusiastically to grind spices for a curry. Whereas she does not want to eat it. Sarah is not able to cook to the entire satisfaction of her husband. Adit does not relish the food prepared by Sarah. Most of the time, Adit prepares food in the kitchen. Both of their attitudes towards cleanliness differ and they have difficulty in adjusting to each other's concept. He doesn't want to eat the food sniffed by the cat. But Sarah doesn't mind that. It is a tough task for her to adopt Indian culture. She takes efforts to come to terms with reality. Unlike her English people, she is very gentle and submissive. She never shows racial superiority. She hears Bengali music, which she does not understand and enjoy. Even though Adit settles in England, he fails to forget his Indianness. Adit forces Sarah to wear Indian saree and jewels, because he wishes to see her as an Indian bride. It shows that in his mind he tries to maintain his Indian identity. Adit also has his own hopes and disappointments in his marriage with an English lady.

Sarah lives a dual life in the two different social worlds that do not meet. She is in a condition to operate in a two different worlds. Her mind wavers between her public self and private self. Sarah's self torn between two worlds. She desperately needs liberty from this duality. She desires to get rid of these disguises and wants to be in her own self. She feels herself inadequate for her own culture. At the same time she strongly feels that she is insufficient for her husband's culture. Her psyche is collapsed totally by the alteration because neither she can adjust herself with her own people nor she can wholly involve herself in her husband's culture. As a result she is splitted by the two incompatible cultures. As Meenakshi Mukhjee observes, "Sarah is the most typical of Mrs. Desai's characters, complex, hypersensitive and intelligent"(Mukherjee 227). Sarah's strong intention is whatever she adopts either Indian culture or British culture, she wants to be sincere in that.

The dual roles torment her. She feels isolated in her native land and even from her own mother. She wants to be amongst strangers who can't identify her. She is often irritated by her colleagues. They often discuss about her personal life. She avoids their inquisitive enquiries. She feels reluctant to talk about her Indian husband in front of her colleagues. The comments from her friends and colleagues make Sarah feel socially alienated and she withdraws herself from her English society. They feel that she has crossed her social code of their country by marrying an Indian. Her parent's reaction to her marriage is not at all described in the novel. But we can see their hatred in her father's unhappiness and mother's obvious hostility towards Indians.

As a Bengali man's wife she loses her name, identity and ancestry. Sarah suffers a lot and becomes anemic. She starts to lose interest in her life. She often wears dull coloured clothes. She prefers solitude to company. She is in search of her identity and self- fulfillment. The solitude is the main cause for her suffering. She wants to avoid curiosity, questions and contact of her own people. This makes Sarah mechanical and depressed. At last, she becomes emotionless and dissatisfied. She wants to overcome the emptiness and frustration in her life after her marriage. She desperately needs a solution to this problem. So she decides to go to India with her husband. She hopes that there in India she will be recognized as Adit's wife. But it is hard to forget her real identity.

Due to her true love for her husband, she doesn't even hesitate to leave her homeland. Sarah is ready to sacrifice her identity as a British woman for the sake of her marriage with an Indian, Adit. On the contrary, Adit doesn't show any love and care towards Sarah. He never makes a single attempt to know about her problem and often ignorant of her needs. He fails to comprehend her mental predicaments. He doesn't encourage or inspire courage in her. He even doesn't ask about her problems. Her marriage does not offer her anything great and impressive.

Hostility and rejection in the country oppress and compel him to make a frantic search for his root and identity. He feels strongly that he can't put up with the cultural diversity any more. Sarah also faces cultural diversity for getting married to an Indian in her own country. Adit couldn't bear the hostility of Sarah's parents towards him. Sarah's mother Roscommon- James treats Adit as inferior. She even doesn't serve his supper properly. Adit tries to impress her but he fails. He realizes that nothing on his part can change the English people's attitude towards the Indians. Sarah's father is oblivious to his son-in-law and always works in his garden.

Adit feels himself as an outsider. He thinks that he cannot overcome this feeling ever. The sense of alienation makes him highly apprehensive. Now he is haunted by the reminiscences of his motherland land. So, Adit decides to return to India. Sarah is pregnant yet she doesn't refuse to go to India with her husband. Her compromising and adjusting characteristics make her able to prevent her marriage from being broken. Her silence is evident of her will to save her marriage. Here after she has to live in India. There she has to face cultural disparity, sorrow, heat and rage. She will miss her homeland which is friendly and private. Sarah is ready to sacrifice her identity for the sake of Adit's love. It is possible for Sarah to adjust herself in India. She tries to compromise with her husband and maintain

harmony in her marital life. So she is willingly losing her identity.

Among Desai's woman characters, she is the most adjusting and compromising person. Though the disharmony overcomes Sarah's marital life and seems to threaten her marriage, She takes her best efforts to establish familial harmony and smooth relationship. Even she sacrifices her own interests and tastes yet she feels isolated and dejected. She is able to manage herself as a working woman and also a house wife. She is able to conquer troubles in her two different roles. Because she accepts whatever comes on her way.

As a devoted wife, she tries to adjust with the tantrums of her husband. Even though she suffers, she endures her mental tortures and never loses her patience. She loves Adit very much. She never makes any complaints against him. She breaks her own social code by her marriage with an Indian. She can't blame Adit for it. She always attempts to keep him happy even while, she suffers from identity crisis. But she can't openly share her problems and mental agonies with her husband. Though she is not accepted totally by her own society, she is not a neurotic character like Maya or Monisha. She is not at all hypersensitive and introvert like them. She is sensitive but rational in her approach.

The novel doesn't end with pessimistic note. Sarah accepts to take some needful decision regarding her life. This is her acceptance which can save her from her doubts and strains. Even though, she suffers a lot in her homeland, she doesn't take a negative step like Maya or Monisha. Yet, Sarah is ruffled by her own society, Sita struggles due to the violence of the city, they try to live their life completely. They struggle to react to their problems in different ways. Sarah decides to go to India with her husband where she will be free from her natives who taunt her. Sarah is a courageous woman. She doesn't allow any worries or differences arise between Adit and her. If someone wants to live, one should accept whatever comes to him or her. Sarah as an educated woman takes effort to get back her identity in India.

Anita Desai's fourth novel *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* is a story depicts the tension between a nervous, over-emotional, middle aged woman Sita, and the practical ,worldly husband Raman. He is always sane, rational and passive whereas she is peace loving, sensitive introvert. Her 'sensibility and explosive emotionality' makes her to feel herself distanced from her husband and her four children. And also she feels ashamed of her fifth pregnancy. She undergoes acute psychological pain and anguish. Through the image of the predator and the prey, the novel expresses the discord between a sensitive self and an insensitive society.

The theme of *Cry, the Peacock* and *Voices in the City* is continued once again in *Where Shall We Go This Summer* with a solution to the problem. Like Desai's other protagonists, Sita tries to balance the troubled life and death and at last succeeds in the struggle. Sita like Maya and Monisha continuously struggles hard to achieve harmony in her life. She is in search of self and her identity. She achieves self-realization by procuring her capability as a wife and mother. In this level Sita differs from Maya and Monisha. Her initial aspirations are the same as a hysterical woman's outburst like them. But she stands apart from them when she resolves her lost self.

The circumstances that lead to Sita's marriage foreshadow the disintegration in her

marital life. Sita is a prey of loveless marriage. The marriage between Sita and Raman was an unintentional occurrence. After her father's death, she was marooned all alone in her ancestral home in Manori. At that time Raman, the son of her father's friend

came cremate her father, shut the house, fetch her away, send her to college, install her in a college hostel and finally out of pity, out of lust, out of a sudden will for adventure, and because it was inevitable- married her. (w.g.s 99)

When Raman proposes her, she eagerly agrees to marry him with a sense of relief from the melodramatic existence in the magic island. Raman feels that there is none more suitable than him to take her responsibility and he marries her but not out of pure love. Sita longs for a full involvement in life with her husband. Obviously such a union with Raman does not provide anything to her emotional life. Sita's marriage is similar to that of Maya. Both of their marriages are not rising from spontaneous love and affection. Eventhough it sounds as if both are arranged marriages, there is an inevitable difference and compulsion. Like Maya and Monisha in Anita Desai's early novel, she also suffers from the anguish of failure with her husband and her in-laws.

Soon after her marriage, she shifts from her familiar island Manori to the unfamiliar mainland in Bombay with Raman where she suffers from a strange sense of alienation. Sita goes to live with her father-in-law and mother-in-law. Shifting to strange place after marriage into the world of strangers is always a cause of nervousness and trepidation for woman. She requires confidence to adjust to the new conditions. But adjusting to new conditions and new human beings is a complicated mission. This kind of difficult times and turbulent conditions reveal her potential. But very shortly, she regards life as a soulless existence. She is vexed by her life in Bombay. She feels isolated and completely disgusted with the unfamiliar surroundings. She regards the colourless and soulless existence of the men and women of Raman's family intolerable.

Sita finds that family life is unbearable. They live in an age-rotted flat and lack good communication. Sita begins to live in that house, but she feels like a square peg in a round hole. She struggles to accustom herself, with the family. Her heart is filled with unfulfilled desires. Even though they live together, they never understand the fundamental fact of her existence that she is bored, dull, dejected and abandoned. Their "subhuman placidity, calmness and sluggishness" infuriate Sita. The lack of communication and understanding with her family members increases her distress. They neglect her totally. Even they rarely answer her questions. This infuriates Sita to the utmost level. Sita completely isolates herself from the family and locks herself in her room. The family members are always engaged themselves in cooking and eating. She is sickened by the kitchen smell soon. She finds it very hard to survive in the strange atmosphere of Raman's family circle which is quite unfamiliar to her temperament.

As a result she suffers from psychological disorder. Sita strongly feels that marriage and all human relationships are fake ones with no reality in it. This fragmented thought leads to many unpleasant happenings in her life. In order to defy and upset them, Sita behaves strangely – she revolts by smoking in the household and begins "to speak in

sudden rushes of emotions, as though flinging darts at their smooth, unscarred faces". (w.g.s32) The family members feel it is a disgrace and unthinkable. On the other hand, marriage does not bring with it the companionship and intimacy she longs for. Truthfully her sense of being a misfit is provoked by her experiences in a middle-class joint family. Her depressed childhood has not prepared her for this kind of life.

One can see Sita's suffering in each and every frame of the novel. She has a depressed childhood there were no mutual relationships developed. So her childhood is fated to be desolate. She is unable to cut off herself completely from the reminiscences of her childhood. Sita believes it to be inseparable. Her high sensibility and lack of ability to mix up with the people are the main reasons for her terrible loneliness. She undergoes extreme loneliness and she feels herself to be "a cripple without crutches".(w.g.s.93) Her disappointments, dissatisfaction and unpleasant situations are not clear even to herself. Even, Sita feels the uninteresting act of her mother-in-law's family as an insult and interprets mild violence on the part of her children as brutality. The main reason for her suffering is her introversion and inability to accustom with the society. She suffers from an acute sense of alienation in the infamiliar city. Madhusudan Prasad points out rightly:

The Agony and unhappiness in Sita's soul spring from her inability to flow with the general current of society, she uncompromisingly makes a strong stand and refuses to accept the cruel dictates of society to which the average people submit so uncomplainingly .(w.g.s.68)

The protagonist Sita is a woman in search of identity and aspires to triumph over the chaos and suffering. She continuously struggles hard to achieve harmony in her unusual existence. Her dilemma is a complicated one originated partly from her loveless marriage and partly from a sense of sexual guilt. A conversion comes over her through her fifth pregnancy. The wife of an upper middle class factory owner, she blames herself for not being careful in conceiving a fifth time at this advanced age. In a half-neurotic state, she feels that she already has four children are too many for this contaminated world. And now, at forty, she hates her fifth pregnancy. The middle-aged Sita imagines her fifth pregnancy as a crime and undergoes acute psychological pain and agony.

The continual violence in the society disturbs Sita so much. So, she desperately needs a change in society and also in nature. The refusal is symptomatic of her frustration and disappointment with life. Sita's abnormal unwillingness to deliver her fifth baby creates disorder in her life. She suffers from neurosis, because of her unequal companion and his negligence. Unknowingly he neglects and shatters her feelings. So, she faces many painful experiences. Raman evaluates life only in terms of physical needs and is not aware of Sita's psychological needs. She thinks that not only her husband but also her children are alienated from her. The children not only separate themselves from her but also reject her.

The frightful loneliness in the city makes her to flee to this island. Her journey over here paves way for her self – discovery. She becomes aware of her emotions and gets a deeper insight into herself. Very soon Sita realizes that illusion is more troublesome than reality. Sita gets disillusioned with Manori. Now, she learns to handle her own problems and

ready to face the reality. Like her children she is also ready to go to the mainland. She prepares herself to return to Bombay.

The futility of the illusion is realized and she now compromises with the harsh realities of life. Manori, like a mother has given her courage to face all realities of life with its ups and downs. And also she realizes that she has only one choice and accepts life as it comes. Finally, it is Menaka secretly write to Raman to come and take them away. She brings about the unity in their family.

Sita is shocked to see her children move and talk with Raman with ease. She suffers from a kind of fear that Raman will reject her. But the fear awakens her senses and she understands the truth. Her escapism from the responsibilities is the main cause of her suffering. She cannot live without her children and husband. The marital bond between Sita and Raman makes her to follow the footprints of Raman on the seashore. It denotes her willingness to face life with its realities. She follows him:

She lowered her head and searched out his footprints so that she could place her feet in them, as a kind of game to make walking back easier, and so her footprints, mingled with his, sometimes accurately and sometimes not, made a chain of links, wet and muddy hollows, across the washed and brushed sand. (w.g.s.150)

She now realizes that showing love to others is more important than willing for being loved. So, she is ready to deliver the child and adjust with her family. She is prepared to live a life in the world of reality. She abandons the world of illusion. She, now becomes more mature than before. This is all because of her compromise with Raman. A transformation comes over her only after her fifth pregnancy. She suffers from alienation. It is a temporary suffering; the distance she keeps from Raman makes her heart grow fonder. She understands that this is her true nature. Unlike *Cry, the Peacock* and *Voices in the City*, this novel has a positive ending. Sita's decision to compromise with life gives this novel a positive ending. Moreover, Raman is an ideal man. He is loved by his children. The positive step taken by Sita makes this novel an encouraging and life enhancing one. Her stay in Manori helps to refresh herself. At the end, Raman shows his willingness to come and live in Manori. He agrees with Sita, the island is not so bad a place that they could live together on the island.

Women are mentally powerful, they can change not only their male counterparts but also the society. They possess the power within them. This power is exhibited in the characters of Sita and Sarah. Unlike Maya and Monisha, Sita and Sarah are powerful enough to change the attitude of her husband. Sarah and Sita are entirely different from Maya and Monisha. They don't intend to end their lives instead they try to change themselves in the opposite atmosphere with their optimistic perception. At the end both the characters build a positive attitude towards their life, existence, its problems and challenges. They realized the potentiality that lies in the power of patience. So they take an avatar as compromiser.

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