



**ANITA DESAI'S *WHERE SHALL WE GO THIS SUMMER?* :
A STUDY OF FEMININE SENSITIVITY AND PSYCHOLOGICAL
CONFLICT**

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ABSTRACT

Anita Desai is a prominent Indo-English novelist. She has added a new concept to the India English fiction. Her main concern is to peel off layer after layer the human mind. She is interested in the psychic life of her characters. Her novel, Where Shall We Go this Summer? brings forth the agonized self and feminine sensitivity of the protagonist, Sita. This paper attempts to analyze the novel to find out the instances of feminine sensitivity in the life of Sita. Socio-cultural atmosphere of the metropolitan life will be noted in particular. Sita's family atmosphere will be studied. The purpose of this paper is to note the marital disharmony in the life of Sita and her husband Raman. The main focus 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. Finally, to mark how Sita becomes the victim of psychological conflict and leaves the metropolitan city for an island.

Keywords: *Indian English Fiction, Psychic Balance, Feminine Sensitivity, Marital Disharmony, Loneliness, Alienation, socio-cultural atmosphere, Psychological Conflict.*

Indian English Literature has earned widespread reputation not only in India but in abroad too. The place of Anita Desai among the Indo-English novelists cannot be overlooked. The Indian novels bring forth the micro cosmic India caught in the crucible of traditions, conventions and social changes. Anita Desai added a new concept to the India English fiction. Her works are different from those of other Indian women writers: Kamala Markandaya, Ruth Jhabvala and Nayantara Sahgal. In Markandaya's fiction, the stress is on the rural background; in Jhabvala's, the social background is more important; in Sahgal's the focus is on political and social awareness. But in the Desai's novels, it is the exploration of



sensibility, the inner workings of the mind that assume significance. Anita Desai is interested in the psychic life of her characters and her novels reveal that her real concern is with the exploration of human psyche. Her fourth novel, *Where Shall We Go this Summer?* brings forth the agonized self and feminine sensitivity of the protagonist, Sita.

Feminism is a world-wide cultural movement to secure a complete equality of women with men in the enjoyment of all human rights – moral, religious, social, political, educational, legal, and economic and so on. It means a sense of personal courage. The feminist consciousness or sensitivity is the consciousness of victimization. As a philosophy of life, it seeks to discover and change the more subtle and deep-seated causes of women’s oppression. It opposes women’s subordination to men in the family and society. It is a global and revolutionary ideology. A feminist is one who is awakened and conscious about women’s life and problem. The women novelists and poets such as Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Jai Nimbkar, and poets like Kamala Das, Gauri Deshpande and others have raised the voice against women’s oppression. Anita Desai has written by and large about women characters. She is preoccupied with the theme of incompatible marital couples. The novel *Where Shall We Go this Summer?* presents an incompatible marital couple in the form of Raman and Sita.

The novelist such as Anita Desai, Arun Joshi and Jhumpa Lahiri delineate psychological conflict in their fictions. In all their novels internal conflict of characters, conflict between characters and conflict of characters with society is deftly portrayed. The internal struggle is between a character and his/her own confusion and fears and their existential quest. External struggle is between a character and his/her societal norms/culture; it is about existentialism, their attempt to be true to themselves and consequently their revolt. About the psychological conflict in human mind Usha Rani remarks: “The psychologists believe that every individual has an intrinsic nature which is the outcome of different factors, and it is unique in itself. These different states of mind produce different reactions in different situations.” (Usha Rani 16) Any undesired situation in the life of a man produces a psychological conflict in his mind. The protagonists of Desai are not free of these mental agonies. They often come in clash with the outside life, with others at individual level or with the society at large. With the passage of time and experience their mental perspective changes and it produces a psychic strain in them. The novel *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* is replete with the instances of psychological conflict.

The study of Anita Desai’s novels reveals that she wishes to project the psychological temperaments of the human mind. Psychological conflicts are innate and natural processes of the mind. The conflict occurs when individuals perceive their thoughts, views, attitudes, goals and interests contradicted by other individuals or social groups. In *Where Shall We Go this*

Summer? Desai delineates Sita's feminine sensitivity and the other factors leading the psychological conflict in her.

Sita lives in the metropolitan city, Bombay, with her husband Raman and her four children. She is pregnant for the fifth time. She is not happy in the present surrounding. She finds modern life full of violence and commotion. Moreover, her husband, Raman, does not pay attention to her feelings. Her children engage themselves in such activities, which are disliked by her. The incidents which upset her are – the fighting of cook and her ayah, ayahs quarreling on the streets, breaking of buds by Menaka, and tearing the paintings to strips and dropping them on the floor by Menaka. All these instances upset and frighten Sita. It stirs Sita's feminine sensitiveness. It leads the way for psychological conflict in her mind. She decides to leave Bombay and go to the island Manori to save her fifth child from the din and bustle of metropolitan life. She doesn't want to give birth to her child in such atmosphere. Noticing Sita's reaction to the surrounding incidents, M.A. Waheed rightly remarks: "Sita is estranged from her husband and children because of her emotional reactions to the incidents that occur to her in society." (M.A. Waheed 155)

There is an incident of eagle-crows fight in the novel which reveals extreme feminine sensitiveness of Sita. From the balcony of her flat she sees that some crows are attacking on an eagle. The eagle is struggling to save himself from the attack of crows. Looking this scene, she decides to save the eagle from the attack of crows. She shouts for her sons and asks Karan to bring the toy gun. While fetching toy gun Karan falls down and his chin is cut; but Sita ignores it and she herself fetches the toy gun and shots it at crows. This shows how she is eager to save eagle. They reach to eagle to see whether it is dead or alive. The older boys declare it as dead. Next morning there is nothing on the ledge but some feathers and some stains of blood. It indicates that the eagle is eaten by the crows. Raman with his morning cup of tea says to her, "They've made a good job of your eagle." (WSWGTS 37) She replies to him "perhaps it flew away." (WSWGTS 37) But she is sure that it might not have flown away. Through this episode, the novelist wishes to reveal Sita's feminine sensitivity. This episode symbolizes Sita's conflict with her husband and her struggle for supremacy at a deeper psychological level. Here, eagle is the symbol of Sita and Rama is the symbol of crows that attack on the helpless eagle. Sita's desperate effort to save the eagle from the attack of the crows is her fight against the masculine values represented by her husband, Raman. On this eagle- crows fight episode Dr. M. Maini Meitei, aptly remarks:

Sita's words "perhaps it flew away ?" against her husband's caustic remark that her eagle has been eaten by the crows, suggests the future course of her action following her defeat and loss of identity. (.M.Maini Meitei 35-36)

After this incident Sita's urge to leave Bombay and go to Manori increases. She hurriedly packs and leaves for Manori Island in complete defiance of her husband's hostile and

hypocritical world. She returns to her father's island, charmed by him. This is, indeed, her last effort to try to save her identity by showing her faith in her father's magic world.

The theme of marital disharmony is also noted in this novel. The marital life of Raman and Sita is not smooth. Almost all female protagonist of Anita Desai are the victims of marital disharmony. Desai has presented marital disharmonies as they exist in Indian male dominated traditional families. Desai's forte is her handling of maladjusted marriages. Maya (in *Cry the Peacock*), Monisha (in *Voices in the City*) and Sita (in *Where Shall we Go This Summer ?*) are all women of deep emotions and fine sensitivities who are entrapped in marriages with men who are never out rightly cruel, who carry out their husbandly obligations assiduously but are impervious to their wives pleas for understanding, communication and respect for their individuality. Such emotionally incomplete relationships have a fatal effect on the finely turned female psyche and Desai's women find themselves tortured by a painful sense of alienation.

In *Where Shall we Go This Summer?* the marital disharmony results from the conflict between two irreconcilable temperaments and two diametrically opposed view points of Sita and Raman. Sita notices that her husband pays too much attention to his business without caring her feelings. Sita finds her life dull and monotonous. She anticipates Raman to be the life lover, making her realize how valuable she is to him. Raman however does not fulfill her wishes. Raman focuses his energies on his business and becomes an escapist. He has his own morals, and own standards. Consequently, the temperaments of Sita and her husband remain poles apart. Sita is quite disgusted with the friends and businessmen who come to meet Raman. She remarks about them: "They are nothing--nothing but appetite and sex. Only food, sex and money matter. Animals." (WSWGTS 43) Sita observes that the people in Bombay are just for materialistic life. When Sita finds her life lack of love of Raman, she starts smoking. It indicates Sita's psychic balance is disturbed. Over Sita's behaviour Dr. M. Maini Metei remarks: "Sita is a hypersensitive, an introverted personality and a pessimist." (M. Mani Metei 31)

When Raman does not fulfill her wishes, Sita feels marital dissatisfaction with her husband. She is not happy with her present life. Sita's problem seems to be due to maladjustment with her husband, the home life and the surrounding atmosphere nauseating her. The root cause of marital discord between Sita and Raman lies in the fact that Raman marries Sita not out of love but "out of pity, out of lust, out of sudden will for adventure, and because it was inevitable married her." (WSWGTS 89) After marriage Sita lives with Raman's family members for some days. But she feels uncomfortable with her in-laws. Noticing Sita's condition Raman comes to live in a small flat. But here too "people continued to come and be unacceptable to her." (WSWGTS 45) She is fed up with her husband, a businessman, whose complete lack of feeling brings her to the verge of insanity. She spends almost all her time on the balcony, smoking, looking out at the sea. Sita notices that her husband ignores her

instincts, and what she likes him to treat her in a gentle and tender way is what he cannot do. The people who come to visit Raman are his friends, visitors, business associates, colleagues or acquaintances. He regards them with little humour and with restraint. With some he does business, with others he eats a meal. Just for the sake of his friends, visitors and business associates he ignores the feelings of Sita. And that hurts Sita. Sita not only hates Raman for his lack of feeling but also derides the “subhuman placidity, calmness and sluggishness” (WSWGTS 43) and the routine manner of her husband’s family. As a reaction against these, when she speaks she speaks with rage and anguish, and with “sudden rushes of emotion, as though flinging darts at their smooth, unscarred faces.” (WSWGTS 44) This strange behaviour of Sita is the exhibition of psychological conflict created in her mind. Over Raman’s lack of feeling for Sita, Dr. M. Maini Meitei rightly remarks:

In the long-run the husband-wife relationship is dragged into difficulties that come out in the form of identity crisis, for both Raman and Sita stand for binary oppositions. (M. Maini Meitei 31)

As Sita is disgusted with the strange and insensitive nature of Raman, she finds a kind of pleasure in the common scenes she happens to see. Firstly, the sight of a foreign tourist who wants to go to Ajanta without knowing which direction he has to go. Once, Raman and Sita are coming “back from a week’s holiday exploring the Ajanta and Ellora caves.” (WSWGTS 45) Their car is stopped by a foreigner for the lift for going to Ajanta. Raman replies to the foreigner, “I’m sorry, we’ve just come from Ajanta we’re going the other way.” (WSWGTS 46) The foreigner apologizes. Raman advises him gently—“If you want a lift to Ajanta, you had better cross the road and stand on that side.” (WSWGTS 46) This reveals that Raman is a kind and co-operative person. After this incident Sita thinks repeatedly of that foreigner. Raman asks her “why she had once more brought up the subject of the hitchhiking foreigner, months later.” (WSWGTS 47) Over this, Sita blurts out: “He seemed so brave,” (WSWGTS 47) To this, Raman replies: “Brave? Him? He was a fool - he didn’t even know which side of the road to wait on.” (WSWGTS 47) Sita replies quickly: “Perhaps that was only innocence, and it made him seem more brave not knowing anything but going on nevertheless.” (WSWGTS 47) Here, Sita wants to compare the foreigner with Raman and thinks that foreigner is braver than Raman. When Sita says that the foreigner is a brave man, Raman replies to her with annoyance in his voice, “you seem to admire him a lot. You would have liked to know him better, it seems.” (WSWGTS 47) To this, Sita replies instantly, “I would. I would like to travel that myself.” (WSWGTS 47) This discussion between Raman and Sita marks that they do not tolerate each-other’s remarks very easily. And this creates a kind of rift between them. It leads their marital relationship towards disharmony. Furthermore, this incident also marks Sita’s firm decision to go to island Manori, like the foreigner who travels without knowing anything about the place Ajanta. Second instance is noted when Raman comes to Manori island, to take Meneka back to Bombay. Sita complains to Raman about her past life in Bombay and says to him: “Do you know in all these years

we've lived together, in Bombay, I have known only one happy moment?" (WSWGTS 132) She narrates the incidents of Hanging Garden to Raman. One evening she took her children to the Hanging Garden. There she saw a young Muslim woman in the lap of an old man, an unworldly sight. She says:

They were like a work of art - so apart from the rest of us. They were not like us - they were inhuman, divine. So strange - that love, that sadness, not like anything I've seen or known. They were so white, so radiant, they made me see my own life like a shadow, absolutely flat, uncolored. (WSWGTS 133-134)

These words of Sita indicate that she desires the love from Raman, like that of Muslim woman and the old man. But she is heartbroken as she doesn't get that kind of love from Raman. All these incidents make her think that her identity is lost in this kind of atmosphere, where she finds no feeling in Raman's heart and the metropolitan life of Bombay, full of din and buzle. It shatters the husband - wife relation. And she packs her things and leaves for Manori, the magic island of her father. Here Sita alienates herself from the family members and the society. It is also an aspect of psychological conflict. After analyzing this novel, we can agree with the view of B. Chitra about the novels of Desai. She remarks:

The novels of Anita Desai catch the bewilderment of the individual psyche confronted with the overbearing socio- cultural environment and the ever-beckoning modern promise of self- gratification and self-fulfillment. (B. Chitra 216)

Thus, like the other protagonists of Desai's novels, Sita also becomes the victim of socio-cultural and family atmosphere and loses her psychic balance. The incidents such as fighting of cook with ayah, quarreling of ayahs on the streets, disturbances of children at home, Raman not paying any attention to her feelings and her problem to adjust with Raman's family members, lead the way for psychological conflict in her mind. And in the attack of psychological conflict she desires for loneliness. She alienates herself from Raman and society and leaves for the island Manori with her daughter Meneka and son Karan.

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