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Artificialities and Disharmonies Exemplified in Anita Desai's *Where Shall we go this summer*

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Abstract

Anita Desai's fourth novel, *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*, was published in 1988 and received much critical acclaim in terms of its literary depth. Anita Desai is a renowned Indian diaspora writer, with three Booker Prize nominations and known for her work in Indian-English literature, particularly the addition of psychological insight to the genre. Known for being interested in unfolding the psyches of women, Desai's fiction delves into many complexities of feminine experiences. Sita, in this novel, has been the main female protagonist and her disturbed psyche and emotional unrest have been behind the narrative thrust. Disenchanted with metropolitan life as having artificiality and stultified with the loneliness that has crept into a distressed marriage, Sita oscillates between reality and illusion, while trying to put together her own inner conflicts. This paper explores Sita's psychological turmoil, especially the tension between the real and the imagined, as Desai vividly portrays the intricacies of a woman's inner world.

Keywords: diaspora, feminine, disturbed psyche, loneliness, tension, psychological turmoil, critical acclaim.

Introduction

On June 24, 1937, Anita Desai was born in Mussoorie, India. She is one of the leading post-colonial Indian-English novelists and a key figure in world literature. Desai was brought up in a cosmopolitan family, her father, Dina Nath Mazumdar, being a Bengali and her mother, Antoinette Nime Mazumdar, being German; she grew up speaking Bengali, Hindi, and German fluently but developed English as the language of her writings, publishing her first story when she was nine years old. She has said about her connection with English, "I first learned English when I went to school. It was the first language I learned to read and write, so it became my literary language." Desai is an educated Indian lady who started her professional career at the Max Mueller Bhavan in Calcutta and then in other institutions and finally became Emerita John E. Burchard Professor of Humanities at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), USA. She married businessman Ashvin Desai and has four children, including her daughter, Kiran Desai, who won the Booker Prize in 2006.

Anita Desai's *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* Brought her the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1980 and is a landmark of her excellence in literature. A member of the distinguished committees, such as the

Royal Society of Literature, and a receiver of many accolades, Anita Desai has played a great role in Indian-English literature. She is known to narrate the female psyche in most of her novels, especially the lives of women who survive intense, mostly oppressive environments created for them or by themselves. This novel tells the tense story of Sita, a middle-aged pregnant woman who refuses to give birth to her fifth child dissatisfied with the disordered modern world. She retires into Manori Island seeking a miracle for the unborn child. As *The Times of India* acknowledges, this is "a story precariously perched between myth and social reality." Sita, torn between hard reality and fragile illusion is a hallmark of the subtlety with which Desai has projected women's inner conflicts. This study goes to his struggles and their results, which will add to the huge list of critical analyses on his work ushering Indian-English into newer realms.

Anita Desai's novel, *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*, Sita is depicted as a hypersensitive and neurotic woman. As Raman's wife and mother of four children, the protagonist plays an entirely unique role in this story. She becomes fatigued while carrying these children. She is pregnant with her fifth kid, and the entire plot revolves around the fifth child's birth, which has yet to occur. Sita does not intend to have her fifth kid. Instead, she prefers to remain pregnant with care. "She had had four children with pride, with pleasure-sensual, emotional, Freudian, every kind of pleasure—with all the placid serenity that supposedly goes with pregnancy and parturition." (Page-29)

Raman's attempts to console Sita are all in vain because she decides to go back to Manori Island, which she believes is going to be the place of miracle to protect her unborn child within her womb. Sita declares, "I will go... On the island—it'll be different" (p. 33), and when Raman questions her belief in miracles, she confidently affirms her faith in the island of her childhood. For Sita, Manori Island is something that has the aura of enchantment and black magic surrounding it, for in her childhood years, she would see miracles occurring there. In this sense of wonder, a lot of association is drawn towards her father since he represents this magical aura.

Sita still lives in a fantasy world, as her childhood was filled with the stories and actions of her father, who was considered to work miracles by many people. She remembers that people from the

mainland used to come to him for help and called his treatments "miracle cures." She vividly recalls a fisherwoman running towards him saying she had boils healed and another, Phoolmaya, bringing gifts to him in gratitude since she conceived. She recalls her father curing a scorpion bites a child, and his mother declares to the villagers that he has performed magic.

The villagers were also convinced that Sita's father could remove death from any living being; thus, further entrenched in the minds of the islanders as miracle makers, her desire for Manori Island has only grown stronger with the realization that it could hold the miracle she now seeks, away from the corrupt and artificial world she must protect her unborn child from. Her realistic husband criticizes all of her ideas as ridiculous and refuses to support her plan, but Sita, undeterred by his rejection, departs for the island with her daughter and the youngest son. The author delves into the depths of Sita's psyche with stunning depictions.

Sita looks at the island as a sanctuary, a haven where magic would preserve her baby unborn: "She saw that island illusion as a refuge, a protection. It would hold her baby safely unborn, by magic" (p. 91). But as she arrives there, she is shocked to find Manori of her childhood no more. Despite its loss of appeal, Sita holds on to hope and attempts to cope with the island's underdeveloped conditions and infrastructure. Her children have a harder time adjusting and show her their dissatisfaction in addition to their mother's ordeal (p. 95).

The monsoon aggravates the wretchedness of life on the island, and Sita's children accuse her of everything that befalls them. They await her awakening to the fact that their real life lies in Bombay and that this so-called "escape" of hers to the island is but a kind of madness. Meanwhile, Sita waits every day for the miracle that she had expected from the island, which she had promised to herself and promised to the children. But nothing happens, leaving her confused and disillusioned: "Where was the magic of the island that she had promised herself, promised the children?"

"...as soon as she got home, she would have to begin to get together, then pack a suitcase full of infant's garments... She could see the expressionless faces of the night nurses in the gynae ward... Then, once the infant was born, she would faintly shrug..." (P139-140).

Anita Desai's fictions always focus on trying to find challenges of the female protagonist who goes against patriarchal terms of normalcy, thus bringing new insights into the existential fight women have as individuals. Most of her protagonists, like Maya, Monisha, and Sita, are plunged into a disordered family situation and escape the modes of conventional feminine roles. Emotional starvation creates psychological blockages that prohibit them from keeping up harmonious relationships. These women, not satisfied with their marriages, undergo severe torment in the face of deep emotional sensitivities and self-liberation cravings that leave them utterly conflicted within and separated from others.

Idealistic visions about their relationships and unrealistic expectations from those around them cause despair for the protagonists of Desai. For them, life becomes their love, yet temperamental incompatibility plays a card that shuffles them into some kind of "private world," alienation their constant companion. With so much time for thinking and procrastination, they try to bridge the gap between their idealism and the harsh reality that stares at them. This awareness drives them to the point of insanity because they seek to escape the incessant cycle of humiliation in human experience.

Where Shall We Go This Summer? (1975) is mostly focused with Sita's education at the school of life. The novel focuses on Sita's identity crisis as a result of her unpleasant and contradictory association with her husband, Raman. From a thematic standpoint, *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* differs significantly from Anita Desai's other works, *Cry, the Peacock*, *Voices in the City*, *Fire on the Mountain*, and *Bye, Bye, Blackbird*. Perhaps Anita Desai's most filling and musical novel is the one in which Sita, the female character, after much disorder, gains a real understanding of the complexities of human existence, which makes *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* stand out. Through her experiences, Sita develops a greater understanding so that she is able to look again at her life, her relationship with her husband and children, and her obligations in a wiser manner, which her precursors, like Maya, Monisha, or Nanda Kaul, in the earlier works by Desai, could not do.

To know Sita totally, it is necessary to consider her unusual childhood. Her idealized view of life springs from the time she consumed on the Island

of Manori with her father, who became a legend in his own lifetime. Being a child, Sita loved being neglected and unwanted, or not given much importance as when she saw her father's biased sensitivity toward Rekha. The fact that the family fell apart after her father died also makes the truth that there was no firm foundation to keep them together clear.

Sita was scarred forever by the unloving and uncaring childhood with no parental love. She passed her childhood with crowds, watched the chaotic swirl of life with calm detachment, collecting discarded garlands, playing with tinsel, and so on, and was carried off to yet another strange house to sleep. This permanent absence of family life left no sense of belonging in her. Her mother, had abandoned the family, leaving her children with a father who was so divorced from family concerns that his actions had planted a very deep seed of insecurity in the heart of Sita. But into this very maelstrom came Raman, visiting initially to see Sita's ailing father, staying on as support to her faltering emotions after her father's demise.

Sita easily accepts Raman as her manager of life with hope that he will provide her with much-needed emotional support, safety, and completeness that her father, Rekha, and Jivan had provided. This is a natural reaction from Sita since her emotional needs have been neglected for long. Marriage to Raman is the most decisive step into life, where she hopes to find stability and satisfaction in life by welcoming this chapter.

As UshaBande puts it: "They were like a work of art-so apart from the rest of us. They were no 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, uncoloured" (Ansani 198).

Sita, who yearns for love and affection, wishes Raman to love her so that she could feel worthy of his love, as the divine intensity of love that she feels is associated with the love of Muslim couples. However, she does not realize that she is just passing into another stage of alienation. Instead of finding fulfillment, her experience only allows her to experience this dangerous, violent, and destructive world more harshly than she ever did with her father. She becomes overwhelmed with the tedium and aloneness that many married women feel once they become overlooked and unwanted (Desai, *Where Shall We Go This*

Summer?, p. 85).

Raman, who symbolizes the civilized life of the city, channels his energy into his business to avoid interpersonal conflicts and struggle to tolerate Sita's lack of control and rebelliousness. What shocks Sita seems natural and normal to him, and their material bond is devoid of a deep emotional connection. Thus, Sita's highest need, a mutual understanding and effective communication, goes unfulfilled, and their inability to have an open discussion intensifies her stresses, which ultimately spill over in the emotional explosion. Most of the unhappiness in her relationship with him is also due to Raman's failure to realize the innate distinctions between Sita's nature and his inability to understand the inner strata of her being.

The extreme despising of Raman's family and friends shows her intense incapability of absorbing social values, to which she rejects totally. She treats them as false people, operating for base wants alone, reducing them to "nothing but appetite and sex. Only food, sex, and money matter. Animals" (Ram 74). Such false life hurts her the most, and as an extreme effort to bring a jolt into them about their real world, Sita herself gets provocative to that extreme extent. She begins smoking and speaking in short bursts of feeling, as if throwing arrows at their smooth, uninjured faces (87), challenging their complacency and exposing the emotional void she feels.

Sita's tragic plight, which begins with her silences toward Raman and her children and escalates to her fierce inability to tolerate ferocity and obliteration, is powerfully imaged through the eagle-crow event. Just as the dance of the peacock stands for love and death in *Cry, the Peacock*, the wounded eagle that Sita can sympathize with while the crows symbolize the oppressive society outside. When she sees three crows cheerfully screaming and striking at an injured eagle on the shelf below her level, she cannot stand the view of destruction. Desperate, she tries to rescue the injured eagle, although she knows deep down that it stands no real chance of survival against the relentless crows, a truth she refuses to acknowledge openly.

In this event, the bird eagle is used to symbolize Sita's weak and defenseless state and the fight to survive amidst the ravaging waves of modernity, the crows that symbolize Raman and her children in its very midst. According to Ramesh K. Srivastava, "The episode where several crows attack and kill an eagle becomes metaphorical of

Sita's plight amidst the violence so rampant in society" (34). The relentless crowing attack echoes the ongoing struggle by Sita with the hostile environment she experiences inside her family and, more importantly, within the bigger industrial scenario.

Conclusion

The study reveals that the novel combines elements of reality and illusion, where reality will ultimately prevail over illusion. The author effectively explores the theme that escaping from reality equates to avoiding one's duties and responsibilities. Thus, by the character Sita, an inner conflict becomes dramatized in the novel, where it is the big "No." Sita relinquishes her duty, running out of the groove of life and city to this island, refuses to give her fifth child delivery, and thus keeps him sheltered inside the womb. But the novel ends with Sita realising no miracle can postpone the birth of the baby so it was accepted that she must return to normal life, again confirming the dominance of reality over the myth.

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