

# Female Aesthetic in Anita Desai's *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*

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Anita Desai's *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* (1975) dwells on the theme of incertitude, alienation and incommunication in married life. It is the alienation of a woman, a wife and a mother, an alienation conditioned by society and family. The childless Maya's angst in *Cry, the Peacock* is existential and psychic, but Sita's anguish in this novel is domestic and mundane.

In *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* The central figure Sita's predicament is similar to that of Maya in *Cry, the Peacock* and Monisha in *Voices in the City*. She is also obsessed with her loveless marriage with Raman. Sita is a married woman and has four children, but in the very picture of misery and dejection. She feels herself to be a prisoner in a house which offers her nothing but a crust of dull tedium, of hopeless disappointment. Her unhappiness in married life finds expression in feeling of contempt for the friends and colleagues of her husband.

Sita's desire to achieve the miracle of not giving birth to a child in a world not fit to receive it, could also symbolize her desire not to continue the bond that existed between her and Raman; because that bond had come to represent life tied down to responsibilities and duties with a person who did not in the least understand or know her. She decides to live in Manori – an island which appears to be a land of magic. After spending quite a few months there, she realizes that her effort to be away from her husband and the other two children, whom she had left with him, is no more than fantasy. When her husband Raman arrives in the island and persuades her to go back with him, she agrees to do so and thus she makes a compromise with her situation. Sita's own attitude to married life must have been warped

by the knowledge and experiences in regard to her own parents. Her mother run away to Benares leaving her husband and children behind and gave no information about herself. The most shocking experience for Sita must have been that though her father had participated in the country's struggle for freedom and though after he had dedicated himself to service of the common people in Manori, yet he had incestuous desire for his own daughter, Sita's step sister.

Anita Desai's *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* Depicts before us a pattern of disappointment and disaster, but this time the pattern is reversed. In this novel we see Sita, the protagonist, returning almost from the brink of disaster to accept what to her has been the defeat of her life. Like Maya, Sita too is an emotional woman who fails to relate to her husband.

*Where Shall We Go This Summer?* "the shortest existential novel", by Anita Desai is particularly remarkable for its intensity and depth. Sita, the protagonist, fails to communicate with her husband. In many ways Sita is a reminder of Maya. She too, like Maya, suffers from an existential neurosis. Like Maya again, Sita too is obsessed with a bizarre thought about the impending disaster. Highly sentimental and totally alienated from her husband, Sita too, quite like Maya, suffers the pangs of an incoherent and fragmented matrimonial relation. But it is here that the similarities between these two women come to end and what looks more important to the reader is their being different individuals. If Maya is passive and withdraws from action until she pushes Gautama in a hysterical outburst, Sita believes in action right from the beginning.

In fact the novel begins with her deciding, rather obstinately, to stage the most unthinkable adventure of a woman—not delivering the baby that she carries in her womb at Manori, a utopian land where her late father once produced several minor miracles in his life. Obviously expecting to do the unbelievable, Sita is quick to run herself into trouble and refuses to wait for the tragedy to strike her. Again unlike the childless Maya, she happens to be the mother of four children and carries the fifth one in the novel. Thus she seems to suffer from a surfeit of something which Maya desires so ardently. Moreover, Maya fails to bare the disaster though she tries hard to avoid it whereas Sita successfully negotiates a disaster by taking it by horns.

Maya knows that the disaster is one day going to swallow either Gautama or herself, but rather than doing anything to avert it, she becomes an instrument in its execution. Thus Maya waits for the things to happen. She even allows disaster to overwhelm her. But Sita refuses to bow before a decided pattern of life. She surprises one and all as in the normal course, it is absurd for a woman to believe that she can retain her child in her womb and not let it die or be borne. Of course, it illustrates not only Sita's obsessed vision, and her unsettled psyche, but a convoluted revenge as well that she decides to take on her husband and his society. Further, it also demonstrates her will to fight out the established patterns of human life.

Unlike many other women, Sita is endowed with a peculiar vision and sets herself on a search for self. She always questions the usually unquestioned one. Her cynical but realistic observation cannot be missed out as she summarizes the littleness of human existence saying: “They are nothing—nothing but appetite and sex. Only food, sex and money matter, Animals.” (Ram 74). In Sita, the novelist exhibits the frustration of a woman who is sick at having to repeat the process of delivering a baby in a routine, uncomplaining manner. Angered at the callous immunity of her husband, she decides to slap on him her subtle, convoluted revenge which is neither to

abort nor to deliver the baby she carries. Thus unlike Maya, she imposes her wishes on others rather than letting others impose their wishes on her. Her revenge thus, though fantastic and psychic, looks convincing enough.

The relations with the in-laws are another yardstick that determines the difference between Maya and Sita. While Maya craves for the company of her mother and sister-in-law, Sita, it seems, does not get along well with them. She “soon finds the atmosphere at home too stifling and her husband buys another flat for them to live separately” (Sanjay Kumar 29). But it fails to give her peace as she continues to realize the futility of her life and feels bored with it. Fed up with the repetitive pattern of life she is pained to see “what a farce marriage was, all human relationship was” (89). The chasm between her husband Raman and Sita widens as he fails to comprehend the meaning of her boredom and exclaims “Bored.... Why? How? with What? (132)” It is the moment when Sita realizes that they both belong to different worlds. The novelist clinically portrays her alienation in the following words.

Then it was her turn to be puzzled, so pained—she could not believe that he had really believed that all was well not known that she was bored, dull, unhappy, and frantic. She could hardly believe that although they live so close together, he did not even know this basic fact of her existence.

Already dissatisfied, and now totally disillusioned, Sita decides to subtly avenge the futility of human relations. She decides neither to abort nor to deliver the baby she is expecting. When she tells Raman “...I don't want to have a baby” (30), he is stunned and thinks that Sita has suggested an abortion as he asks in a surprised tone “What do you mean—abortion? But he goes nonplussed as Sita brushes the idea aside—“Mad! It's all I want! I want to keep it, don't you understand?” (31) Raman can just express his exasperation: “What's up? What is up! at this bizarre proposition from his wife. Raman is forced to

conclude in a bitter charging: “You've gone mad”. (33) But Sita retorts: “I think....what I'm doing is trying to escape from the madness here, escape to a place where it might be possible to be sane again” (35). Sita has set her eyes on Manori village where once her charismatic father produced miracles like removing women's sterility and curing people of their deadly ailments. Sita believes that Manori, once being the land of her father's miracles, would not disappoint her as well. With its touch Manori would help her produce a miracle herself-her not delivering the conceived and developing baby inside her. She seems almost obsessed with the idea of doing the unthinkable- by neither terminating her pregnancy, nor letting her produce a baby, but just by retaining it inside her.

Driven by such a bizarre passion Sita takes her two children Menaka and Karan with her and sets out for Manori village. Raman can spot this cause and tries to mock away her bravado: “So, you're running away—like the bored runaway wife in-in a film.” (33) But Sita stabs her with a glare: It can happen in real life, Raman:, and declares stoutly: “I will go. I am leaving tomorrow. On the island—it'll be different” (33).

It is obvious that Sita does not wait for things to happen. An aggressive and active lady by nature, she runs herself into troubles rather than letting things happen to her. However, her ambitious flee from a bored matrimonial alliance takes inspiration from her late father as she is overwhelmed by the memory of the charismatic man who she believes “did magic... he knew magic”. Savouring in her memory of her father's erstwhile glory, Sita looks much like Maya who reminisces her father's compassion all too ardently and fails to accept Gautama's nature as he, to her, terribly lacks her father's optimism and self belief. The way however, she darts into an adventure most unexpected of a woman; it appears she is made of a stuff different from that of Maya.

Now both in the life of Maya and Sita the disaster seem inevitable. They both know that there is no

escape from a tragic fate that awaits them. While Maya foresees the death either of hers or her husband's, Sita reels under the anxiety of having to produce another baby in a hostile world. Another reason why she repels another birth is the fact that her relation with her husband is a bored, finished reality where no revival is possible. Like Maya and Gautama, Sita and Raman too make a loveless, estranged couple. Anita Desai summarizes the listlessness of their relationship when she portrays the feelings of Raman who while looking at the face of Sita thinks:

It was the face of a woman unloved, a woman rejected, He shook his own head a little, with a equine movement it was hard to believe now that he had married her, in a romantic whim, not only out of a cavalier's pity for a maiden's distress, but for her fire and beauty.... (134).

Desai dramatizes the conflict between two irreconcilable temperaments and two diametrically opposed attitudes to life. Sita, the protagonist, is a nervous, sensitive, middle-aged woman who finds herself isolated from her husband and children because of her emotional reactions to many things that happen to her. She is an introverted character, whose suffering springs from her constitutional inability to accept the authority of the society. Hence her alienation is natural and dispositional. Unable to put up with her in-laws, she withdraws herself from the milieu into her own protective shell. She withdraws herself from her husband which is suggested through the crows preying on the eagle. Thus her alienation is biological and physical.

Raman, Sita's husband, like Gautama in *Cry, the Peacock*, fails to understand her violence and passion. Raman is sane, rational and passive. Sita is irrational and hysteromaniac. Through Sita, Anita Desai voices the awe of facing all alone “the ferocious assaults of existence” (Times of India 13). The conflict between two polarized temperaments and two discordant view-points represented by Sita and Raman, sets up marital discord and conjugal misunderstanding as the key-

motif of Desai's novels. The interrogative and inquisitive title of the novel is a pointer to the ennui of Sita's anguished soul. Her introversion, like Maya's in *Cry, the Peacock*, leads to her psychic odyssey. Fed up with the dreary metropolitan life in Bombay and tormented by the 'paranoic' fear of her fifth and reluctant pregnancy, she leaves for Manori Island off the Marve mainland. Sita's father-fixation hinders her contact with her husband. Here, once again Desai returns to the elusive father-figure. She demonstrates Sita's temperamental disaffinity with Raman through the scene where they talk about the stranger encountered en route from Ajanta and Ellora: "He seemed to be brave," she observed 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 a fool [...]. He did not even know which side of the road to wait on."

"Perhaps that was only innocence," Sita faltered, "and it made him seem more brave, not knowing anything but going on nevertheless" (52).

Sita's unconscious recognition of the irrationality of the stranger is illustrative of her own longing for "a life of primitive reality" (152) and the distance she had travelled away from her husband. She feels a frog out of water in her father-in-law's "age-rotted fiat" where they all live like pariahs "a life of sub-human placidity, calmness, and sluggishness" disinclined to introspection and introversion. She regards their soulless existence as a menace to her own marital and conjugal identity and boldly flouts the dehumanizing and destabilizing norms and values of a society whose stranglehold it is difficult to escape. The disintegration of their human identity is emphasized through the recurrent images of prey and predator. Sita says: "They are nothing [...] nothing but appetite and sex. Only food, sex and money matter. Animals" (47).

The first section of the novel is profusely loaded with images of brutality and violence. Raman's sadistic delights in Sita's failure to protect the eagle, Menaka's indifference to the vegetable life or even her senseless destruction of her dilettante paintings are all symbolic of a subterranean fury. Unable to reconcile herself to this violence, Sita leaves for the island of Manori where her father had created enchantment out of emptiness. Sita, in fact, wants to escape the tyrannous grips of a cannibalistic urban milieu. She wants to escape the forces of fear and destruction which breed archetypal urges. Her alienation from all experience is due to her love for life and her reluctance to accept violence in any form. Thus her flight to the island forms the focus of the novel.

Sita deems the flight a holy pilgrimage, a journey for spiritual purification, a search for identity. The theme of estrangement and violence is projected in terms of social and psychic forces moulding individual identities. As a result, the novel is based on a very narrow canvas, too narrow to reflect the intricacies of Sita's aloofness. Yet had Desai probed deeper into the sources of Sita's alienation, much of the fictional value of the novel would have been lost. 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. Hence their alienation has very little or no impact on their individual identities. The island forms the core of Sita's conscious existence. The sea and the island which suggest two different polarities of existence provide a picture in contrast in the symbolic design and movement of the novel. Sita's other identity finds expression on this island. It represents that part of her self which she had failed to realise earlier. 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. The parallel existence of these two levels of awareness in her mind gives rise to her identity crisis. It keeps on tormenting her till she discovers that undifferentiated life is like a jelly fish, live and objective, but without form, without definite identity.

Through the objective correlative of the jelly fish, Desai depicts Sita's amoebic and shapeless life. Through this, Sita realises the existential nature of all reality. From now onwards, she cuts herself off the deceptive, elusive and quasi-mystical world of her father. Sita's escape to the island is an escape from the 'madding crowd,' from the dictates of her social conscience: "He who refuses does not repent. Should he be asked again, he would say No again. And yet No [...] the right No [...] crushes him for the rest of life" (47). Sita's refusal to live life as it comes motivates her journey to the island for the second time after a lapse of twenty years, a self-conscious journey made to revive and recreate the past. But this quest for the forfeited charm and simplicity of her past identity is an illusion. Her frequent return to her childhood days impedes her refusal to grow up and accept the responsibilities of adult life, and her inability to comprehend the past conspires against her marital harmony.

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 regards it practically as an act of infidelity. Sita knows that since the 'infidelity was only psychic,' it was so much more immeasurable for that.

Desai delineates the physical and psychic states of her characters through objective correlatives. For instance, the pathetic sight of an old man and a fatally anemic or fatally tubercular but beautiful woman looking lovingly at one another suggests the alienated plight of Sita in a hard, harsh world beaming with lust and violence. Sita's return to Manori is, like the withdrawal of Monisha and Nirode in *Voices in the*

*City*, an act of alienation. To the father, the island has the identity of an ashram; to the daughter it has the identity of a magician, a necromancer. The father lives a non-committed life, indifferent to the milieu. Sita feels that her father's daylight-pragmatic wisdom and charisma had its nocturnal aspect. Her envy of Rekha gives an uncertain clue to a possible incestuous link between Rekha and her father. We, however, miss the true identity of the man. The shifting point of view suggests the transition of human experience and the impracticability and implausibility of a permanent illusion or a permanent reality. Sita's alienation from her father blurs her vision about his identity. She is able to decipher only a fragment bridge between her own emotional life and the life on the island. She is unable to recover the true identity of the geographical milieu. Hence the island eludes her imaginative vision. These implicit contrasts between the lives of the father and the daughter show that Sita merely serves as a foil to her father. The horrors she experiences on the island are shadowy and unreal. They resemble the illusory snakes Karan had seen.

Desai describes the tension between illusion and reality through the use of irony and the shifting of focus. Sita's reversion to the past, to her childhood identity is but a continuity of her present identity that persists despite transformation. The island figures as a haunting and obsessive presence in her psyche. She is conscious of the isolation not only between her and the island but also between the island and the sea. The pervasive presence of the sea in her psyche forms a mystic backdrop to the setting of the novel. She is able to recover her natural affinity with the soil through a ritualized mud bath. Through Desai's predilection for mythic reality we see Sita's maiden contact with the soil. The concomitant change in her behaviour is objectively correlated with the change in natural phenomena.

Sita stands surrounded by the island, the sea and the palm trees. She merely participates in their awfully majestic splendour; she is not much involved with them. There is just the sea; it drowns them or detains

them on the sandbar, and there is the island. That is all.

Everything linked to her twilight existence seems ambiguous and ambivalent. Her marital life is a series of emotional chiaroscuro. She is uncertain of her own self. How could she tell, how decide which half of her life is real and which unreal? Which of her selves was true, which false? All she knew was that there were two periods in her life, each in direct opposition to the other (...) (153). Moses traces the temperamental alienation between Sita and her father: "After all, [...] she is not like her father. She is 'plain' compared to him who was like a god [...] a magic man" (156). Madhusudan Prasad in his book *Anita Desai: The* novelist finds Sita a square peg on a round hole in her father-in-law's house. But he fails to consider Sita's biological and physiological urges. He only takes into account the temperamental drives which are but a part of an individual's identity. Sita is the symbolic equivalent of the modern housewife whose sensibility is perpetually under stress. Her mental agony is the outcome of her inability to cope with the modern society. The conclusion carries the focus of the novel beyond the resolution of Sita's obsessive identity crisis. It points to a transcendental reality.

Desai's heroines often act violently, but here, is a positive change. Sita reconciles herself to her lot. She strikes a balance between her inner self and the outer world, her prosaic self and her poetic sensibility, her individual self and the societal consciousness. Unlike Maya's, her alienation is bio-psychic, not temperamental or environmental. Rightly does B. Ramachandra Rao observe: "The novel may, thus, be seen as a parable on the inability of human beings, to relate the inner with the outer, the individual with the society [...]" (Rao: 59). "Only connect" says Desai recalling Margaret Wilcox, in Forster's *Howard's End*. Wilcox remarks, "Only connect the prose and the passion, and both will be exalted, and human love will be seen at its highest. Live in fragments no longer. Only connect, and the beast and the monk,

robbed of the isolation that is life to either, will die" (Forster 188).

*Where Shall We Go This Summer?* is an answer to temperamental incompatibility and the resultant alienation. Sita's hope for consolation from the island is but a frantic and desperate bid to relieve the boredom and hypocrisy of her bourgeois existence. All she gets from the island is a cold welcome and, thus, remains an island on the island. In the words of Madhusudan Prasad, "[...] it is a memorable piece of Fiction which provides us proudly with a panacea for an endemic existentialist predicament, threatening to assume epidemic proportions in our country" (Prasad 77). It is a testament of psychic turbulence, the very image of poetry which Ezra Pound could have called "an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time" (Desai). Unlike the other works of Desai, here is a novel where the quest for identity does not end in death and desolation; it closes with compromise and conciliation.

Thus like *Cry, The Peacock*, *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* too depicts the tragedy of a fragmented married life. A matrimonial boredom and an alienation mainly of women obviously are the keynotes of both these novels. But like all skilled writers, Anita Desai reverses the pattern in her latter work. If *Cry, The Peacock* (1963) moves from disappointment to disaster, *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* returns from a wild disaster to a normal disappointment. Sita manages the disaster by running into it deliberately. Maya, on the other hand, reels under it and fails to do anything until it envelops her. Consequently then, she is overwhelmed by the tragedy in the end. For Sita the tasting of tragedy beforehand, works as a safety-value which releases her tensions, relieves her of her darker, tragic, suicidal mood as she returns to embrace her disillusioned self. She thus undertakes a journey from disaster to disappointment while for Maya it is the other way round.

Broadly speaking, Desai's themes, characterization and commitments deal with confinement and lack of freedom. In addition to existentialistic reality of life she evokes the sentiment and sensibility of women for their role and respect in society. The efforts of the feminist critics resulted in a massive recovery of almost forgotten women writers and also re-reading of literature by women with a view to understand the evolution of the "female aesthetic".

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