



# The Creative Launcher

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## **Feminist Psyche in Anita Desai's *Where Shall We Go This Summer*: A Study in Neurosis**

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### **Abstract**

The outburst of feminism throughout the world was not a matter of chance, but the natural corollary of centuries of struggle for woman's rights. In this context, Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* is the landmark which can be regarded as the manifesto of modern feminism. Incidentally, in the same period some women writers in England, Fanny Burney, Maria Edgeworth and Jane Austen and others came out of the obscure, suffocating shell and presented life and art from the point of view of women. They accentuated the importance of social life centered upon women and demonstrated it as significant as a subject matter as any other so far treated in literature. With the rise of feminism in India in the 70s, the feminist literary critics came to believe that women had to create a literature of their own, in which the feminine sensibility could consider and confront the peculiarly feminine issues and experiences. It was essential to do so, because a large part of the feminine experience is out of the reach of male psyche and, therefore, an authentic and sensitive portrayal of the conflicts and traumas, in all their nuances, ambiguities and contradictions could be achieved only by women writers. Through these female writer's works one can observe a clear picture of women in flesh and blood with a distinct mind of their own.

**Keywords:** Feminism, Ambiguities, Psyche, Predicament

Anita Desai is considered the writer who introduced the psychological novel in the tradition of Virginia Woolf. While many people today would not classify her work as feminist. She believes that due to changing time:

The feminist movement in India tends to be rather impatient of my books and to think of them as books about completely helpless women, hopeless women, they find it somewhat that the women do not fight back, but they do not seem to realize how very new this movement is. (*Indian Women Novelists*, 45)

Desai's novel spans an extensive range of issues. They map the evolution of a writer from obsession with the unrevealed inner-world of her female characters to themes of perennial interest to all. Her preoccupation with the female psyche gives way to issues of larger human interest imagining the authors own growth to maturity.

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When one interact with the gallery of female characters in Desai's fictional world, it can be observed that her intention as a writer is to see her women characters as human with their weaknesses and potentialities who are indeed caught in the web of their own compulsions. Her novels have been examined as the manifesto of feminist predicaments and anxieties and creative release of the feminist consciousness. Her feminism cannot be considered as anti-male because her woman desires man's love, affection and craves for the bliss and thrill of life which are ever denied to her. She perceives the dilemma of fair-sex and visualizes life of a female as a series of obligations, compulsions and commitments. In addition to existentialist reality of life she evokes the sentiments and sensibility of women for their role, status and respect in society. She minutely observes the emotional world of them. She sets herself to voice the mute miseries and helplessness of millions of women, particularly married, tormented by existentialist problems and predicaments. She focuses on how her heroines in the contemporary urban milieu are bravely struggling against or ultimately submitting to the relentless forces of absurd life.

Desai thus obviously stands ahead the group of female writers of contemporary age, and throws light on the life, inner-climate and strained relationships of female which hamper their normal growth. She delineates the women characters that are non-conformist and anti-established and do not effort to get attuned to the social values and human bondages. They are mere cog in the machinery called society. They feel observed and trapped when society imposes its norms on them and demand conformity and on refusal by them ostracized them. Her characters play this existential drama but none of them outlines the situation. She has explored various aspects of feminine psyche which include their isolation that leads to them to the verge of neurosis. A. Hariprasanna, in his critical scrutiny of Desai's novel rightly argues:

Her novel is concerned with the emotional world of women, revealing a rare, imaginative awareness of various deeper forces at work and a profound understanding of feminine sensibility. (*The Indian Journal of English Studies*, 81)

Desai's female protagonists all belong to the upper class of urban India. Economic independence is not an important issue for them. Yet all of them directly or indirectly question the accepted codes of a patriarchal society. They refuse to unquestioningly accept the rules ordained for them by traditional social conventions. To them even seemingly benevolent institutions like marriage or the joint family can become farcical or coercive. The women in Desai's novels reside in a world of delusions like the cocoon of childhood. They do not possess "homeostasis" or the capacity to adjust and adapt easily and naturally to a changed set of circumstances. Consequently many of them meet a very violent unnatural end.

*Where Shall We Go This Summer?*, an illustrious novel by Desai is a story of an oppressed mind. Like all her earlier novels this particular novel also exhibits the disintegration between family members and the loneliness, isolation and the disturbed mental psyche of the middle class woman Sita, the protagonist of the story. Her

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frustration of the suffocative four walls is seen taking refuge from her marriage at the utopian land of magic Island. When Sita feels that she is again pregnant for the fifth time then the irritation and grittiness of life becomes somewhat heavy to bear for her. She makes an attempt to shut down emotionally and isolates herself from the daily chores. Gradually Sita returns to reality and comes to term with her own situation. The useful condition of life is skillfully crafted in the novel. The story ends leaving the feeling of intense pain of a young wife who passionately desires to bid bye to the hypocrisy and boredom of her daily existence.

Anita Desai's fourth novel, *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* is her shortest novel. But it has been welcomed as "an interesting addition to Anita Desai's achievement as an Indian novelist writing in English" (*Common Wealth Quarterly*, 50). A characteristic variation on the theme of the first novel, this novel depicts the aching void and disturbed psyche of Sita by probing deeper into her life as a woman, a wife and a mother. Sita, a sensitive, over-emotional, middle aged woman, saddled with four children, feels detached from her husband Raman and her family and undergoes intolerable mental agony because of her high stung sensibility and explosive emotionality. She has a "dry worn face" (17) which has assumed "the aged stillness" (18). Owing to her mental condition, she continually broke apart into violent eruption of emotions (19). She feels suffocated by the vegetarian compliance, solidity and unimaginative way of life of her husband and his people. As a result of her experience of her boring and monotonous life she never got used to anyone. As Desai writes:

. . . she could not inwardly accept that this was all there was to life, that life would continue thus, inside this small, enclosed arena, with these few characters churning around and then past her, leaving her always in this grey, dull-lit empty shell. I'm waiting. She agreed - although for what, she could not tell: for the two halves of this gray egg - world to fall apart and burst. (54)

The novelist has been able to draw a very interesting and complex portrait of Sita, mother of four children, who suddenly becomes rebellious to the birth of the child in her womb. While creating a character like Sita, Desai admits in her interview with Ramesh K. Srivastava:

It is a long story about a woman packing up, shutting the house and going off with her three children to spend a holiday in their shack on Manori. Her husband busy in his own life seems hardly to notice their departure, leaving her frozen in anger at her neglect and loneliness. On the island she wonders about the beach, sleeps under the eashrihas, concentrating upon this loneliness with such intensity that is burns away, burns her up leaving a cool, gray detachment like a flake of ash where her heart has been. (*Anita Desai at Work: An Interview*, 215)

The novel exhibits Sita's predicament and her imbalanced psychic status: she stands up to say 'No' to the dull tedium of a meaningless existence and ends up by realizing that 'Yes' is the sensible world to accept, face and live life. She resents her fifth pregnancy. In order to give birth to her fifth child by revoking the magic, she goes to

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Manori, her maiden home. The island house deserted for twenty years symbolizes her temperamental condition. As Vimala Rao aptly suggests:

The island concretizes the feeling of isolation of Sita. She returns into it as into a womb with an obsessive desire to recapture once again her childhood, innocence and purity. . . . Obviously, her own frustration with her life in Bombay drives her in her desire to provide her unborn infant with a world-that is uncorrupt. (*Commonwealth Quarterly*, 50)

Though she knows the joy of motherhood and is comparatively contented. But she is emotionally hurt in the recent years; her shock comes from modern town culture, heritage and life style. The strain involved in the child-birth earlier was not felt, but being hurt in several ways she feels herself not prepared for the delivery of the child. Therefore, she seeks an escape from the predicament. Her stay on the island awakens her to life's reality. And finally she chooses to accept the routine of her existence. Sita's mental, moral and emotional issues oscillate between the two polarities of 'Yes' and 'No'. As a critic, Atma Ram observes, "the novel dramatizes two kinds of courage: struggle between the positive No and a potent Yes" (*Journal of Indian Writing in English*, 76). Albeit afflicted by a torpor brought on by the fifth pregnancy, she acts neurotically. Her wish to hold back the birth by magic - is an outcome of a sick mind. In this concern, she seems to be nearer to Maya and Monisha. The betrayals, treacheries, confusions and compromises lead her into intense suffering. Her anxiety, concern and pessimism produce emotional outburst and she undergoes a search for an escape to be alive to sensitivity. Her arrival at Manori has given her a new life, a new awareness and a new consciousness, she now realises "what a fare marriage was all human relationships" (105). She visualises the world of her dreams once again. She intensifies her desire to recapture an experience, an excitement and innocence. Her instant question as to where shall we go this summer? and her decision to go back to the Island of Manori after twenty years is in quest of the lost innocence. Not only Sita is longing in her heart to go to the Island but the Islanders are also waiting for a person for twenty years in whom they can see the image of her father. But they felt disappointed to see her. There are impossible expectations on both sides. Naturally she is unable to maintain conformity with the established norms of society. Though she tries to encounter it affectively but she misses to communicate her reaction against every incident. Thus she is left like a stranger longing for a life of primitive world.

The childhood experiences of Desai's women have left an indelible impression on their minds. For most of them their childhood holds the key to the type of adults they have grown into. Maya's instability in *Cry, the Peacock* and Sita's rebelliousness can both be traced back to their childhood experience. Usha Pathania rightly remarks:

. . .their experiences and interactions during this formative period when combined with their congenital hypersensitivity contributes towards their inability to establish and maintain harmonious inter-personal relationship in later life.

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(*Human Bonds and Bridges: The Fiction of Anita Desai and Kamala Markandaya*, 106)

Consideration of Sita's unusual childhood is necessary to arrive at a proper evaluation of her psyche. A motherless child, she experiences partiality, neglect and uncertainties right through her childhood. Her situation is just the reverse of Maya's in *Cry, the Peacock*. If Maya's father is over-protective, who creates a conflicting situation, Sita's father neglects her completely. Maya and Sita both exhibit the ill effect childhood experiences which cause their imbalanced psyche. Pathania asserts:

Both the extreme hamper a smooth transition from childhood to adulthood. Because of her father's over-indulgence, Maya remains a child, craving for parental pampering even after marriage. Sita does not grow into a responsible wife and mother because of her emotional deprivation during her traumatic childhood. (*Human Bonds and Bridges: The Fiction of Anita Desai and Kamala Markandaya*, 64)

Sita's father, a public figure, admired and rewarded by the people, he is too far - off and formidable person for Sita to approach with filial affection Usha Bande rightly comments:

This experience breeds feelings of worthlessness. Sita cannot corroborate her father's dubious way. It seeps down her psyche as a bad human experience (*Indian English Novelists*, 107).

Attachment or belongingness is a subjective feeling in which an individual experiences personal involvement. The most damaging situation for Sita is complete want of parental matrix. Hypocrisy and partiality apart, her father cannot provide her a home. As Sita does not have a home, she has no feeling of belonging. "Belongingness...means a subjective feeling of one's personal involvement to the extent that one feels himself to be an integral and indispensable part of the system". (*Conflict Resolution Through belongingness*, 63-64). Involvement can be with another person, an idea or a group. Eric Fromm maintains that by uniting himself with other person in the spirit of love and shared work, man can hope to end his isolation. R.D. Laing considers family to be internalized in each one of us. It is like a flower, with mother as the center, the children as its petals around it. The most vital link the mother is missing in Sita's life. She remains as restless as a bird in a cage. She never finds peace neither in Bombay nor in Manori. Her condition resembles to a person in pain who shift from one posture to another with a vain hope of getting some relief. She becomes a victim of neurosis:

She becomes the victim of neurosis that destroys her mental equilibrium and threatens her sanity till she decides to run to Manori Island, seeking the miracle that will give her the power of not giving birth. (*Indian Women Novelists*, 165)

Husband-wife discord, inadequacy of their mutual love and dissatisfaction is a major cause for Sita's resented self and disturbed psyche. Raman marries Sita out of pity. When the initial stage of lust and pity wears off (Like Shelley's and Westbrook's Wedlock), Raman finds his mundane activities more fascinating and fulfilling. Raman

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shifts his energies towards his business so as to escape his intro-psychic and interpersonal conflicts. He has sets his standards and must strictly adhere to them. Sita secretly admires him for his courage and endurance. According to Horney, a perfectionist achieves behaviorist perfection and he insists upon other "living up to his standards of perfection and despise them for failing to do so" (N.H.G., 196). Raman, therefore, cannot tolerate lack of control shown by Sita. Whereas Sita expects Raman to be like the lover, making her realise how valuable she is to him. Raman, however, does not honour the claims of her bargain and the dream is never realized. Her neurotic pride is hurt and she turns vindictive. She feels that not only her husband but also her children had nothing to do with her. She complains, "They had all betrayed her (133). They had all got together...to fight her, to reject her, to run away and hide from her (137).

*Where Shall We Go This Summer?* is a subtle psychological study of a woman's personality which is at war. At a deeper psychological level Sita's quest for her identity is an outcome of her husband-wife relationship and her unusual childhood. Sita realizes that her own marriage and all other relationships are based on compromise, duties and selfishness only, and this is the cause of the ugliness, discord, incoherence, clashes and increasing violence in life.

By temperament and upbringing Sita's root is in tradition represented by her father and Manori Island. Her sudden encounter with Bombay following a hasty marriage to Raman threatens her. The betrayal of her unconscious inclination to preserve and uphold traditional values of an integrated life in face of the chaotic values of modern city civilization is at root of her unhappiness and dissatisfaction. The values she represents are rejected in modern waste-land because there is all around degradation. Life turns out to be a tale told by an idiot full of sound and fury and signifying nothing, as Shakespeare says in Macbeth, when the world is faced with tendencies of the lost generation. Sita feels lost in her husband's family. She must restore her damaged self esteem: so she tries to attract attention by being plantative and complaining of her restlessness. She openly rebels against all social and familial norms in order to feel triumphant.

She rebels against the vegetable existence lived by women in Raman's family initially, it is only a verbal attack, and then she takes recourse to a more flagrant disregard for this way of life by taking to smoking. Shocking them thus Sita enjoys a sense of superiority. Raman is startled when she describes his business associates as animals, her outburst vexes Raman. The strange and overtly insensitive nature of Raman causes serious libidinous problems for Sita. The whole situation is to aggravate her introverted nature that finds a kind of wish fulfillment in an evocating manner. In her state of perversion Sita gets pleasure out of the sight of strangers. The sight of the foreign tourist, who wants to go to Ajanta without knowing which direction he has to go, attracts her attraction much to the annoyance of Raman. To her the foreigner is an example of courage that Raman lacks. Another such situation is presented by the sight of a young Muslim woman in the lap of an old man in Hanging Gardens, an unworldly sight, a perfect work of art. This can be signed out as a situation having intense psychological

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pressure on Sita. A psychological clue to this particular fascination of Sita for strangers is three fold. Firstly for Sita such encounters are uncommon and are not a dull repetition of her routine life. Secondly they are the source of diversion from monotony and boredom and thirdly these incidents provide her emotional satisfaction which she lacks in her personal life. Sita's mind at such moments is governed by pleasure principle. Freud adds:

Hate, too rages unrestrainedly; wishes for revenge, and death wishes, against those who in life are nearest and dearest parents, brothers and sisters, husband or wife, the dreamer's own children-are by no means uncommon. (*A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis*, 365)

In order to study novel's feminine sensibility and Sita's psyche, some situations are worthy to be mentioned. One such is the eagle-crows fight, which testifies Sita's conflict with her husband and her struggle for supremacy at a deeper psychological level. R. K. Srivastava remarks, "The incident in which a number of crows assault and kill an eagle become symbolic of Sita's own plight amid violence so much prevalent in society by giving birth to a child, she would only contribute to the violence of the world" (*Perspective on Anita Desai*, xxxvi). The symbolic situation of the eagle-crows fight reveals very subtle personality clash between Raman and Sita. K.P. Ambeker has observed the use of bird symbolism in the novel. Sita sees herself as a wounded eagle:

Like Maya in *Cry, the Peacock*, for whom the dance of peacock is the symbol of love and death. Sita sees herself as wounded eagle. The crows represent the callous society around her. In the first incident of the novel, Sita finds that crows are joyously searching and pecking at something on the ledge below the balcony of her flat. It is an eagle, injured and unable to fly. She is infuriated at the crows and tries to drive them away with the help of a toy gun. But Sita knows that the wounded eagle has really no chance of survival against the attack of crows, though she does not admit it openly. (*Indian Women Novelists*, 2003)

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. Again the scimitar beaks are a symbol of phallus, and the attack of the crows with them is suggestive of male chauvinism unleashed against the female instinct. In the novel the drift of features in the beak of a crow is a psychological situation in which the triumph of Raman over his wife is strongly suggested. Defeated Sita's weak defence 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. She hurriedly packs up and leaves for Manori Island in complete defiance of her husband's hostile and hypocritical world. This is indeed her last effort to try to save her identity by showing her faith in her father's magic world. Perhaps she is searching for a great revelation or a miracle to happen. She wishes to achieve the miracle of not giving birth to a child in a world, not fit to get it, and could also suggest her desire not to continue the bond that existed between her and Raman.

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Sita's final moment of realization comes ironically not when her husband is with her but at a time when he has given her up. Realization dawns upon her identity are not quite independent of her husband's, that life with him is real and the future is more important than the past. She decides to return to Bombay with her husband in order to give her fifth baby a normal birth. T.S. Anand points out:

Her desire to bear the child and return with Raman to the land signifies her return to life, community and society, inspite of the debased dullness of life, the calamity, the lies and moral buggery odium, the detritus of wrong and sorrow dropped on every heart, for existence is not possible in an insulted stage of being rather existence implies being with other. (*The Fiction of Anita Desai*, 100)

Sita's compromise with life constitutes a sure step forward to recognise reality. The awareness that life is not meant to be shunned but to be experienced, is significant. Participation is the act of living that leads to the acceptance of a fuller responsibility. In this kind of realization one can discern advancement in Desai's vision of woman struggle to find her identity. One may logically suggests that the name of the heroine recalls name of her nobler namesake in *The Ramayana*. Like the mythological Sita, Desai's modern Sita swallows her semiotic urges to determine her subjectivity through her compromise. Bidulate Chowdhary comments:

Between two uncompromising attitudes of Maya's madness and Monisha's suicide, Sita is the only heroine of Mrs. Desai to understand and succumb to the world 'only connect', the only compromising link between the prose and passion of her life. Her reaction proves that it is very difficult for a woman, however modern to get rid of the situation she is once placed in. Inspite of her dislike to the ways of the world, to the traditional life of royalty, she resumes her return journey to adjust to the role of a wife and mother. Hence she accepts defeat, crumbles her passion and mingles with the prose of life for betterment of human relationship. (*Women and Society in the Novels of Anita Desai*, 77)

Whatever the advocate of the feminist view point may have to say, in each case, the decision to return to Bombay or accompany her husband through life's trials appears right because the men in most of Desai's novels are practical, down to earth, considerate and above all sane unlike the women, who in most cases exhibit a tendency to go insane under the light pressure. In case of Sita it can be asserted that the lonely furrow is not always rational, but sanity lies in returning to a normal family life and obligation. Unlike the other novels of Desai, this is the novel, where quest for identity and the disturbed mental psyche of a woman does not end in death and desolation; it closes with compromise and conciliation.

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