

**Resignation in Anita Desai's *Where Shall We Go This Summer?***

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Commerce & Science College, Lonavla**Abstract**

Anita Desai is one of those foremost women writers who made her presence felt in Indian English fiction with her distinct style of writing, original characters and realistic subject line. She made it very clear from her first novel that her interest lies not in political or social issues instead in probing the psyche of her female characters. Anita Desai's novels are a critique of patriarchy which has always taken a passive and cold stand to the pathetic cry of women trapped in loveless marriage. Anita Desai's *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* is the story of Sita, a married woman with four children and the fifth is on the way, living in Bombay in a flat with her family. Desai's "*Where Shall We Go This Summer?*" describes the tension between a sensitive wife Sita and the rational husband, Raman. It emphasizes the triumph of life over chaos and of art over life. Sita is fed up of her husband, his business surroundings and his friends. Raman's lack of love and feeling brings her to the verge of insanity. She wishes to escape the mundane reality of her existence in the company of her husband and her four children. She goes to Manori in search of a miracle and meaning for existence. Soon she realizes her folly that escape is not the answer to her problems. She has learnt patience and can face life with all its ups and downs courageously.

Keywords: *Reconciliation, Escapism, Protest, Agonized Soul, Identity Crisis*

**Introduction**

Patriarchy represents the domination of the females by the males. It literally means the rule of the father. The man in a patriarchal set up is considered central and the woman peripheral. The identity of a woman revolves around her father, brother and husband. Rigid gender roles which have been thrust on women from times immemorial are difficult to set aside. This may be due to the fact that humans receive gender education right from birth and this gender role socialization continues throughout life. Sociologists believe that more than even biological traits, conditioning is responsible for gender specific behaviour. The acquisition of gender specific behaviour is an integral part of who we are how others respond to us and we in turn respond to them. It is one of the most important aspects of the socialization process. Simone de Beauvoir in her book "*The Second Sex*" says that "one is not born, but rather becomes a woman". She explains that gender differences in the society make the man superior through his role as the bread winner. It gives him a position of power in the society and family. Women are confined to particular roles framed by men to limit their freedom and oppress them from one generation to the next.

Literature mirrors society but woman's voice could not be heard for long as Indian literary scene was dominated by men. Their focus was on a man's world where woman's presence was only incidental. Women were a necessary tool used by men. There were writers such as R.K.Narayan and Mulk Raj Anand who bothered to take up secondary women characters but the depiction was far from being real because of two reasons in the first case men did not have access to the insides of a house which was the only space women moved in and secondly howsoever sensitive these writers may have been they still did not consider women's lives as exciting enough to become apt material for fiction. There were writers who chose women protagonists, but their portrayal of them was too romanticized to compare with the real women. The suffering wife, the weeping widow, or the sacrificing mothers were the only images found in fiction. In these novels the "*Sita*", "*pativrata*" images of women found acceptance, and submissiveness was still considered a virtue. There was no room for a woman who was not virtuous. Women either upheld conservative ideals or they were labelled immoral. Traditional moral aesthetics dominated these narratives.

Women's entry into the writing arena made way to shatter the *Sita* and *pativrata* image. Suddenly there was a shift in the traditional virtue syndrome. Instead of extolling the so called virtues of the sacrificing, submissive woman with tears in her eyes but not a word of complaint on her lips, these writers started presenting the fighter spirit of women in their novels. The suffering wife now gave way to the demanding one. The shift from women as seen and projected by men, to women as lived and experienced by women was most welcome.

Indian English Fiction has witnessed a galaxy of women writers who expounded women's suffering and asserted women's position in Indian context. Women writers such as Kamala Markandaya, Shashi Deshpande, Nayantara Sehgal, Anita Desai and many more women writers championed women's cause in their novels. Anita Desai stands apart from other women writers as her novels do not show any interest in social condition, political events or mundane habitat of her characters. Her novels are psychological reverberations of women characters trapped in loveless marriages. They are paired with not cruel but callous and insensitive men who do not have faintest idea of their women's expectations. Their marriage is marked with a long silence. Her women are in a quandary whether to submit before the ruthless patriarchal forces or assert their identity. Her women are no ordinary being but highly intellectual and sensitive. Consequently, they suffer from psychological conflict. The present paper is a study of Sita's tussle with the hostile environment that surrounds her and how she comes to terms with her life.

In *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* there is an aching void in the life of Sita as a woman, a wife and a mother. Sita, the protagonist of the novel, lives in Bombay with her husband Raman, and four children. She is pregnant with her fifth child. She seems to be under the problems of maladjustment with her husband, the home life and surrounding atmosphere of the family. She is fed up with her husband whose complete lack of feeling compels her to leave her home, husband, two children and the urbanized life of Bombay for Manori Island, where she thinks:

She saw that island illusion as a refuge, a protection.

It would hold her baby safely unborn, by magic (for she

is in her advance stage of pregnancy). Then there would

be the sea-it would wash children too into smoother, softer

beings. The grove of trees would shade them and protect

them (78-79)<sup>1</sup>

Like many of Desai's heroines Sita's childhood plays an important role in shaping her personality. Sita's father carried a magical aura around her. He was a freedom fighter who had spent most of his life in jail. Sita's mother had deserted him; and was living somewhere in Banaras. Sita had no mother to look after her. She was denied the regular life of a normal child. There was no schooling to discipline her nor was her father free to educate her in a systematic manner. Sita was brought up in an atmosphere which cannot be strictly called a family. Mother who is said to be the most vital link in a family is responsible for teaching, protecting and preparing her daughter for motherhood. Unfortunately, mother is missing in Sita's life. Without a mother, Sita fails to internalize womanhood. She grows into womanhood, unprepared and unwilling to shoulder the responsibilities of a wife and mother. This absence of a mother sows the seed of insecurity in her life. Sita always feels discarded and unwanted. Due to her father's partiality she is deprived of his sister Rekha's company.

There are also vague suggestions of incestuous relationship between Sita's father and Rekha, her step sister. As a consequence, Sita develops a fear psychosis and avoids physical or emotional proximity to her father. She harbours deep distrust and fear of the male in her unconscious. She thinks that, like her father, Raman deliberately neglects her. Such feelings adversely affect her relationship with Raman.

Disintegration set in Sita's family with the demise of her father. Rekha did not even stop to shed tears while her brother Jeevan disappeared a couple of days before the death of his father as if he had a foreknowledge of the event. This indicates that there was no unifying force in the family nor was there any sense of belongingness. Sita was left alone. Sita desperately needed someone to belong to, after her father passed away. It was Raman who gave her the much needed security – social as well as psychological. Sita as a result unconsciously looked upto him as her messiah and leaned on him. She left the island along with him with great relief.

Sita and Raman are very different from each other with regards to their temperament and taste. They are so different from each other that pleasures of Raman are pain for Sita. The hypersensitive Sita is dissatisfied with Raman who has married her probably" out of pity, out of lust, out of sudden will for adventure and because it was inevitable" (31)<sup>2</sup> Raman is an expansive person who wants mastery over life. By nature he is not aggressive but a perfectionist. He has set his standards and follows them strictly. He is meticulous in fulfilling his obligations. According to Horney, a perfectionist achieves" behaviourist perfection" and insists upon others" living up to his standards of perfection and despises them for failing to do so."(Horney 198)<sup>3</sup>

Raman is fair, just and dutiful and expects the same from Sita. Adaptability or adjustment is alien to her. Nobody pleases her, nobody comes up to her expectations when after her marriage she goes to live with Raman's family. She finds them intolerable. Sita rebels against the "vegetable existence" of the women of Raman's family. Sita's in-laws are accommodating and considerate but she takes pervasive delight in teasing them. She shows a total disregard for her in-laws way of life by taking to smoking. She baffles Raman also by her behaviour and enjoys annoying him. Raman cannot understand her rebelliousness. Their contradictory drives drag them apart, making it difficult for each to comprehend the motives of the other. They do not have any mental affinity or feeling of closeness. Though they are married for over two decades, they are like strangers. Sita's melodramatic behaviour disappoints him and the children. But Raman compromises and continues his relationship with her.

Sita yearns for a life of fulfillment and happiness. She has seen a woman dying of tuberculosis being devotedly taken care of by the man who loves her. Sita is perhaps trying to find in Raman this kind of love which transcends the self and brings perfect harmony between a man and a woman but sadly Raman fails to give her this love. He considers it morbidity. He has his own morals and standards. He

focuses all his energies on his business. Sita is quite disgusted with Raman's friend and his businessmen. Finding no love from her husband, Sita takes to smoking. She stands all day at the balcony smoking and looking at the sea. He is hardly aware of the basic aspects of her emotional life. Raman measures happiness in terms of achievement, not in terms of fulfillment. In Sita's view what Raman considers happiness is shallow sentimentality? This does not mean that Raman was an uncaring husband. Though practical, Raman is concerned about Sita. After marriage when Sita comes to stay with Raman's family, she is quite uncomfortable with them. Noticing this discomfort, Raman decides to shift in another flat. He is indeed an affectionate husband who cares for his wife and this is evident in his reluctance to send Sita to Manori. When she wants to escape to Manori, Raman with all care for his wife and baby says, You must stay where there is a doctor, a hospital, and a telephone. You can't go to the island in the middle of the monsoon. You can't have a baby there. (33)<sup>4</sup>

Sita's incomprehensible behaviour is perhaps the result of her childhood experiences. Family plays a vital role in the growth and development of individual and broken home definitely has its worse effect on an individual. Sita is one such victim who because of her bitter experiences in her childhood alienates herself from everything around her. Bitter experiences that she had during her childhood have made her hypersensitive, introvert and pessimist.

Sita knows that her children, her husband and all others tolerate her out of a sense of responsibility. She, therefore, develops no sense of belongingness and feels fragmented. She wishes to escape the mundane reality of her existence in the company of her husband and her four children and hopes to find peace in her childhood home in the island of Manori. She goes to Manori in quest of the beautiful innocent and miraculous after twenty years along with her daughter Menaka and son Karan. To her surprise the magic and the special charm that once belonged to the island are no more to be found. The roads, the bullock-cart, the field, the men and women now symbolize the ravages of time. They all now seem to irritate Sita who arrives here leaving behind her husband and children in search of peace and tranquility. She admits there was no magic here – the magic was gone. She came to the island with a hope that its magic would give her some respite from the din and mundane existence of city life but she could not achieve it in the island. She is unable to achieve temperamental compatibility with her husband at home and now with her children in Manori.

Menaka is now grown-up enough to retaliate to her mother's strange moods by defiance. She realizes that she can rely more on her father than on her moody mother. Sita is never normal with her children so they are attached to Raman.

Women have been traditionally brought up to regard motherhood as the highest fulfillment of womanhood. But Sita seriously questions the role a woman is assigned. Children to her means anxiety, concern and pessimism not happiness. Soon she comes to realize through conscious reflection on these problems that escape is not the answer. Sita's decision to return to her husband is not an admission of failure rather it is a sign of maturity.

Sita now examines things objectively. A short stay in the island makes her heart grow fond of Raman. Now Raman matters to her. Her reaction proves that it is very difficult for a woman, however modern she may be, to get rid of the situation she is once placed in. Sita accepts defeat, crumples her passion and mingles with the prose of life for the betterment of human relationship.

Anita Desai's Sita is a rebel who breaks the *Sita* image and breaking all bonds escapes to Manori Island, but that is only for a while. She has to come back to her husband's home when she fails to revel in the 'magical space' because the magic is fled. Also her need for protection and concern for children's

comfort overpowers all other considerations and she comes back, a more mature person. She realizes that she could break away from her role-playing as a wife but not as a mother.

( R.S. Pathak's 20)<sup>5</sup> comment aptly sums up for Desai's women: Anita Desai has conveyed her women characters' fundamental dependence on men through her lexicon and tropes of mastery, command and domination. Her women sometimes do attempt to assert their independence and self-sufficiency, but their quest for identity is thwarted at significant junctures . . . No woman in Anita Desai's novels. . . has been fortunate enough to free herself from the shackles of femininity.

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