

## **Inner Conflict in Anita Desai's *Where Shall We Go This Summer***

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**Abstract:** Indian English novel has drastically changed in the postmodern period in the choice of subjects and language of expression. In this era characterization is focused more, therefore, unraveling the conflict in modern man's mind is significantly portrayed with insight and seriousness. Anita Desai is one of the most significant contemporary Indian novelists, who majorly focus on the inner life of the female characters in her writings rather than the superficial social, economic or political problems. Desai takes us on a journey into the minds of her characters that are sensitive, brooding and complex. What they all have, in common is their sense of unease with their immediate world and their consequent efforts to withdraw from it. Their inner turmoil is a result of this dilemma, both of wanting to belong and of yearning to be separate and alone. In her novel *Where Shall We Go This Summer* she depicts, the hyper-sensitive, emotional protagonist, Sita, who undergoes the painful experience of being tossed between reality and illusion: intense emotional involvement resulting in pain and frustration and forced detachment accompanied by loneliness, isolation and withdrawal. The main focus of this paper is to show

**Keywords:** Inner Conflict, Isolation, Loneliness, Reality, Illusion.

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Conflict is an important feature of post colonial Indian English literature. The changing life styles of people bring about a conflicting situation. Societies with inherent traditional and cultural values become fragile and accommodate the changing values. However, the outcomes of conflict are not always negative. There are both positive and negative connotations to conflict. If the conflicting situations are not handled properly it may have unfavorable consequences such as damaging relationships, increasing differences and disaster. On the other hand when conflict is tackled sensibly it can have positive effects leading to better understanding and problem solving. Inner conflicts are innate and natural processes of the mind which occurs when individuals perceive their thoughts, views, attitudes, goals and interests contradicted by other individuals or social groups. This conflict can be described as a struggle between opposing forces of desire or emotions within a person. These opposites can be a mixture of clashing feelings like anger, hatred, and love, and incompatible goals, desires, uncertainty, pressure, uneasiness, etc. Whereas 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.

Endowed with prodigious talents, Anita Desai is undoubtedly a distinguish novelist on the contemporary commonwealth literary scene. She holds a unique place amongst the contemporary women novelists of India. She differs from other Indian novelists such as

R.K.Narayan, Mulkraj Anand , Bhabani Battacharya, Raja Rao in her set of language and style that she employs to portray the inner crisis and tension existing in the life of a character. Desai has gained recognition for the uniqueness of her themes and techniques. In all her novels there is inner conflict, on the part of the protagonists towards arriving at a more authentic way of life than one, which is available to them. She is mainly concerned with the absurdity of human mind and meticulously shows the confrontation between inner and outer reality in her characters. Through her fiction she gives fresh insights into the ambivalence of change in women and men and in human nature. She creates a world of her own which she fills up with extraordinarily sensitive beings. Her novels delineate the inner lives of hyper-sensitive women who are in eternal quest for meaningful life in a way-‘the true significance of things.’ Desai’s fictional world narrows down to the human minds whatever flits across it. She not only tells us what she thinks but makes us feel the innermost, conflicts of the character concerned. She has made a judicious use of psychological insight for her recording the psychic reverberations of her characters. She excels particularly in highlighting the miserable positions of highly sensitive and emotional women.

Desai’s novels lay emphasis on interior than on exterior characterization, on motives and circumstances, the why and wherefore of the external action rather than the action of itself, on the invisible rather than visible life. In the novel, *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*, she makes an effort to probe deeper into extraordinary inner life of its protagonist, Sita. To convey the tumult in Sita’s mind she adopts the pattern of monsoon winds:

“I wanted the book to follow the pattern of the monsoon to gather darkly and threateningly, to pour down wildly and passionately then withdraw quietly and calmly.” (Atma Ram, 97-98)

This enables Desai to delineate the inner life of her heroine Sita. Here is a case of incurable existential angst and agony, boredom and ennui. The very interrogative title of this novel, *Where*

*Shall We Go This Summer?* is a pointer to the very angst and ennui of her anguished soul. Any undesired situation in one's life produces a conflict in one's mind. And the protagonists of Desai's novels are also not free of this inner turmoil. They often come in clash with the outside life, with others, at individual level or with the society at large. Gradually, with the passing of time their mental perspective changes and it produces a mental agony in them. The novel *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* is replete with the instances of inner conflict. It is divided into three parts. The beginning section entitled "Monsoon 67" presents Sita as a rebel and depicts her departure to the island of Manori. It deals with the present and immediate past of Sita's life. The second part, "Winter 45" shows Sita's recollections of her life with her father. And the concluding section named "Mansoon 67" evinces what she has accepted as her future as her fortune.

Sita, the protagonist of *Where Shall We Go This Summer*, is a hyper-sensitive and emotional, middle aged woman. She lives in the metropolitan city, Bombay, with her husband Raman and four children. When she becomes pregnant with her fifth child, she suddenly feels unloved and experiences a strange loneliness and restlessness in her existence. Because of her high strung 'sensibility and explosive emotionality', she takes the modern life full of violence and commotion. The mainland which implied solidity and security – the solidity of streets, the security of houses- only become a crush of dull tedium and hopeless disappointment for her now and makes her upset. She questions the futility of bringing another baby into a meaningless world where indifference and violence are rampant. She just not wants "to keep it, she does not want it to be born" (WSWGTS23). That is why abandoning Bombay under terror, leaving her husband Raman in despair; she comes to Manori island in a mood of doubt and desperation to "beg for the miracle of keeping her baby unborn". (WSWGTS20) Earlier she had been afraid of island's magical qualities which were frequently displayed by her father. Now she is drawn to its magic precisely because she thinks it will enable her to achieve the miracle of not bringing forth her fifth child in to a violent and cruel world. The island represents that parts in Sita, which she had left, unexplored and suppressed in the earlier days. So, she now goes to the island to discover

the magic and see its effect on her own-self. Here, she hopes to realize her exclusive identity that seemed thwarted in the Bombay world. She had begun to identify herself with the unfortunate and the helpless victim, for instance, like the wounded eagle, which had been attacked by the hungry crows. Then on another occasion she likened herself to the foreigner who had been endlessly waiting and imagined that her life seemed to take on the colour of waiting. “She herself was turned to the colour of waiting, a living monument of waiting”. (WSWGTS 55) Sita’s flight from the experience of the ‘civilized world’ to the ‘pristine island of miracles’ originates from the fright of creation which could be explained as “an immaculate conception in reverse”. (WSWGTS 37)

Sita is the daughter of a well-known freedom fighter who was called by his followers, ‘the second Gandhi’. As her father, most of the time was in jail and her mother had left them, she was denied the regular life of a normal child. She ‘lived a strange life’. She is completely disillusioned about the image of her father. There was no elderly person to advise and guide her. Being neglected and unwanted she felt rudderless and insecure as a child. She seldom if ever had the company of her father; is not able to communicate with him. Her father remains a puzzle for her and she, throughout her life, is incapable of having a definite and clear impression about him. She doubts how her father cured the people by magic, not by medicine. She is also suspicious of her father’s relation with her step-sister, Rekha, across whose stolid shoulders he placed his arm while walking and whose fingers he squeezed fondly while sitting by her side. All these impressions and experiences led to the development of uncertain and unrealistic attitude towards life in Sita’s mind. The neglect that Sita suffered in childhood at the hands of her father who treated Rekha as his favourite gave rise to a tendency for defiance as an attention-attracting device in her until she developed persecution, paranoia and became sure that her family had got together “to fight her, reject her, to run away from her”. (WSWGTS 137) she feels that all human relationships are farce and children mean just “anxiety, concern, and pessimism”. (WSWGTS 147)

Sita's husband Raman is a good, even-tempered fellow, who conducts his business as everyone else does, and who has not the slightest inkling of the depth of his wife's despair. Sita, on the other hand, cannot get used to the vegetarian complacency of his household or the subhuman placidity of his business associates. For her the majority of people living lives full of dullness without trying to probe for a deeper meaning. For her, such people cease to be human: "they are nothing ...nothing but appetite and sex. Only food, sex and money matter Animals" (WSWGTS 1). She had not been able to adjust with the complacent routine of life and had longed for the sensitive approach in others. Her defiance had been manifested in her provocative attitude towards the women of her husband's family, his friends, visitors, business associates, colleagues or acquaintances. When Raman regards his friends, visitors and business associates, she finds herself ignored and becomes irritable. She not only hates the attitude of her husband but also fed up with the drab of life. So whenever she speaks, her words are full with rage and anguish, and harshness with "sudden rushes of emotion, as though flinging darts at their smooth, unscarred faces" (WSWGTS 44). This strange behaviour of Sita expresses the very beginning of inner turmoil and the hypersensitivity in her.

Desai very aptly unfolds the inner world of sensitive and emotional women who have been deprived of the basic rights. K.R. Iyenger is rightly once said about the world of inner conflict of Anita Desai's protagonists:-

"In Anita Desai's novels, the inner climate, the climate of sensibility that pours or clears or rumbles like thunder or suddenly blazes forth like lightning is more compelling than the outer weather, the physical geography or the visible action". (K.R. Srinivas Iyenger, 464)

The fact is that, the situation from which Sita seeks escape is existential. Raman, who had initially given her refuge from the island by marrying her, could not later keep pace with her seemingly absurd demands. She longs for free, unquestioning love which would envelope her. She has in her memory the picture of a young woman who was suffering from tuberculosis and

was being devotedly attended to by a person who loved her. She expects this kind of love from Raman because such a love, according to her, transcends the limits of the self and human finitude and makes no claims. It is love in the face of death, in the face of human finitude. It is this kind of relationship which she wants from Raman, but to her utter frustration she is unable to achieve it. She tells Raman about her sin in the park, the lovers who seemed to have shared Holy Communion of spirits denied to them both. Raman, as ever, cannot partake in her world of imagination. He sees and takes life in an easy going manner, to be lived and continued, in all its business, in all its dealings with the people. But he is hardly aware of the basic aspects of her emotional existence. Her distresses at the tedium of void, meaningless life does not bother him. There is total lack of communication between husband and wife, between mother and children.

In Sita we see the boredom loneliness experienced by married women when they feel ignored and unwanted. Her ache is, essentially domestic and temporal, though there are moments of pure terror and void even in her life, giving her state an existential dimension. In her we see a desperate woman unable to control her nausea and hysteria, and panicking out of the house in a whirlwind of confused emotions. Obviously, some deep and dark upheaval is taking place in her mind. The pent-up misery of her isolation and loneliness in the family has spilled over. A busy indifferent husband and the grown-up children, distrustful of her melodramatic outburst, have driven her to the edge of the precipice. As the cavafy poem under cores her moral perplexity, she must say “No again—“the Right No,” even though it ‘crushes’ her for the rest of her life.

The clash between the sensitive individual and the insular, complacent world around her is objectively in terms of a series of situation and incidents which effectively dramatize the seething tension and the compulsive withdrawal of Sita’s festered and decrepit soul into its own protective shell. Even insignificant incidents happening around her upset her deeply. The boys fighting with each other enacting a scene from a movie, the tearing up of the sketches by Menaka who will have none of her mother’s sympathy or advice, her own failure in saving the eagle life, Her and Raman’s contrasting opinion about “the hitch-hiking foreigner” (WSWGTS

33) whom they had met on their way back from Ajanta and Ellora, the references to war in Vietnam, Rhodesian jails, and perfidy of Pakistan these are the things that lead the way for inner conflict in her mind.

In the novel *Where Shall We Go This Summer*, Sita tries to connect the changes, distortions and revelations between the present and the past. Often she is lost in the perception of youth and childhood. Memories and veiled hints of incest, of lust and miracle associated with her father, elder sister and brother come crowding around to torment her vision further. Her anguish is inexplicable and unanswerable. She feels like a jelly fish stranded on the sand- bar slowly suffocating, slowly breathing its last, unable to recede into ocean of the past, and unable to survive on the sand of the present. With this final submission to the intangibility of the life she feels released and freed. "like the freed sea bird at evening she wheeled around and began to circle about and then dropped lower and lower towards her home".(WSWGTS 150)

A significant factor contributing to Sita's inner turmoil is a constant struggle in her between illusion and reality- one of Mrs. Desai's favourite themes. Sita's illusion of a possible escape from the cycle of experience is constantly shattered by the intrusion of reality which she desperately seeks to avoid. Her final disillusion comes when she discovers that the island did not offer her even the bare necessities of life. The experience makes her xenophobic. Sita's awareness of the island, and along with that of her own self, deepens as she comes to realize the distance between the island and the sea. The continuity in change is communicated by the pervasive presence of the sea as a mystic backdrop. The relation between identity and isolation keeps Sita disturbing till she discovers that undifferentiated life is like a jelly- fish, live and objective, but formless. Sita identifying herself quest in the jelly- fish and realizes that one cannot flee from the reality as she had to attempt to do. As we know that inner conflict implies that the character is struggling with emotional and mental obstacles within in or herself, *Where Shall We Go This Summer* is the story of that woman who has a scattered and unpredictable behavior and her over- sensitive nature and unrealistic expectations make it impossible for her to



accept the vagaries of her life. The picture of Sita's traumatic experiences and the pitiful disintegration of her psyche have been portrayed with a remarkable poignancy by Desai. She very intricately illustrates how, feminine sensitivity, marital disharmony, family relations and socio-cultural atmosphere are responsible for creating the conflict in Sita's mind.

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