

THE CRUELTY AND CALLOUSNESS: AN ANALYSIS OF *WHERE SHALL WE GO THIS SUMMER ?*

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Anita Desai's novel under study Where Shall We Go this Summer? (1975) is a story of a near neurotic heroine, Sita who wishes to escape the mundane reality of her existence in a bid to discover peace in her childhood home, but finally compromises with life as it is. Sita, though high strung, introvert and highly complex in nature tends to reconcile with life and its problems. This neutrality saves her from psychic disaster faced by earlier characters of Anita Desai. Sita rises out of her frustration, dejection and despair by reclaiming her power to "connect", in the forsterian sense.

Where Shall We Go This Summer ? Describes Sita's predicament; she stands up to say "No" to the dull tedium of a meaningless existences and ends up by realizing that "yes" is the sensible word to accept, face and live life. The novel, structurally divides in to three parts, narrates the story of Sita, who is a middle-aged heroine, who resents her fifth pregnancy. In order not to give birth to her child by revoking the magic, she goes to Manori, her maiden home. Her stay on the island awakens her to life's reality, and she chooses to accept the routing of her existence.

Sita's mental, moral and emotional levels oscillate between the two polarities of "yes" and "No" are motives of violence. Sita, at a later stage, tells her husband Raman, that she did not desert them-

"No, no-desertion, that's cowardly. I wasn't doing Anything cowardlyI was saying no-but positively, Positively saying No. There must be some who say No, Raman I"¹

(WSWGS, pp 148-49)

To borrow the words of a critic, Atma Ram the Novel –

"Dramatizes two kinds of courage: a struggle between the positive No and a potent Yes"².

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. Here she seems to be a rarer Maya and Monisha. With her paranoiac rage, enigmatic demands and querulous behavior that makes her family miserable, the insane obstinacy of her wish to hold back the child, and the overwhelming despair put her in the category of Desai's earlier characters, heading for a neurosis or psychosis . But her final resolution to reconcile with life saves her from a melodramatically drastic end. The "quiet note" with which the novel ends, speaks of the maturity of perception achieved by both Sita and her creator. Anita Desai in her interview observes that in order to survive in the world, one has to compromise with life-

"of course if one is alive, in this world, one cannot survive without compromise-drawing the line means certain death, and in the end, Sita opts for life with compromise-consoling herself with Lawrence's verse, with the thought that she is compelled to make this tragic choice because, she is a part of this earth, of life, and can no more reject it than the slumberous egg can or the heifer or the grain"³.

This compromise with life is gained after a prolonged period of Intra-psychic conflicts. Sita shifts from compliance to rebellion and then to withdrawal, again coming back to compliance. Since she vacillates between her changing strategies, her behavior is inconsistent and leaves much scope for disparity between her thinking and actions. In the first part of the novel, entitled “Monsoon 67”. Sita rebels against her family and decides to go to Manori,

“What I’ am doing is trying to escape from the madness here, eggs cape to a place where It might be possible to be same again”.

(WSWGS, P. 35)

Consideration of Sita’s unusual childhood is necessary to arrive at a proper evaluation of her character. A motherless child, she experiences partiality, neglect and uncertainties right through her childhood. Her situation is just the reverse then that of Maya’s in Cry, the Peacock.

Here is a clear hint of incest of the two cases of parental partiality one in Cry, the Peacock and the other in Where Shall We Go This Summer? Are quite dissimilar. In Maya’s case, a tender father’s harshness towards a rebel brother is an indication that any move towards independence or autonomy is punishable by withdrawal of love. Maya, therefore, clings to her father for fear of antagonizing him. Sita, on the other hand, feels miscarried and un-wanted when she notices her father’s tenderness towards Rekha. This experience breeds feelings of worthlessness and its consequent strategy is rebelliousness.

Sita cannot corroborate her father’s dubious ways. It sweeps down her psyche as a bad human experience. Her world is peopled with hypocrites, chelas, Deedar, Rekha, and her father .The disintegration of family, immediately after father’s death, testifies the bitter truth that they had nothing substantial to bind them as a family. Rekha does not even stop to shed

tears for him and leaves, “as though she had witted for and planned for this moment of release from the old man’s love”. (WSWGS, P. 99)

Jivan disappears a couple of days before the chemist as if he had a force knowledge of the calamity. Only Sita stays on, to Maya" Raman, the first man in her life. The family would both ace broken so abruptly had there been a sense of belonging. Belongingness is a subjective feeling in which an individual experiences personal involvement. The most damaging situation for Sita is complete lack of parental matrix. Hypocrisy and partiality apart, her father cannot provide her a home. Her life is as Sita does not have a home, she has no feeling of belongingness. As Usha Bande writes:

“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.”⁴

Involvement can be with another person, on idea or a group. Erich Fromm maintains that by uniting himself with other person in the spirit of love and shared work, man can hope to end his alienation. A family is the most important internal group to condition a person’s relationship to himself. Unknown to her, a deep seed of in-security is sown in her life. So is the remark of R.D. Laing about her:

“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”.⁵

This leads to marital discord and alienation from self. She seeks an abiding sense of dissatisfaction, nausea and mortal dread of taking a responsibility of the new-comer-all

point towards the sense of insecurity bred in childhood. A way out of this is the adoption of some psychological prop: She desperately needs someone to belong to. Deedar's son, Raman, is the first and, of course the only person to take her out of the shocking isolation after her father's death. Raman gives her the desired security-social as well as psychological. Naturally, Sita leans on him, unconsciously looking up to him as her messiah. She leaves the Island with some relief "worn out by the drama" of life. Raman appears to her as-"a tired manager drawing the curtains together looking up the empty.....empty and the meaningless." (WSWGS,P 100)

Sita has been playing a note to guard herself if from the crushing circumstances. She need for affection, suppressed so far, raises its head. She is a helpless, lonely young woman, in need of support, and Raman can fulfill the need.

With this unconscious desire in the background Sita makes a "bargain with fate" – if she is helpless, good and humble, she will be lovable; Raman will love her. As a self-effacing person she poses to be good, without proud and hopes that she will be treated well by fate and by others. We have the first liking of Sita's bargain when she submits to the marriage proposal of Raman, who marries her. Sita builds up a relationship in her mind with her husband, based on the "deal" she will be an obliging wife. I and Raman will honour her self-image for her lovable qualities. For her, love is an engulfing passion, like the vision of the Muslim couple she sees in the Hanging Gardens-"They were like a work of art-So apart from the rest of us. They were not like us-they Were inhuman, divine. So strange 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".

Such a love transcends the limits of the self and human limits. Suno, in Anita Desai's short story "Studies in the Park," sees the same vision of divine love. The muslim couple are real human being's belonging to this world but the intensity of their tenderness is

beyond human limitations. She tells Raman that it was the happiest moment of her life. This confession enrages him, though Sita means no offence. As we evade her defense-mechanism we discover the working of her glorified self image. She is like the helpless Muslim woman needing all attention and tenderness. She expects Raman to be like the lover, making her realize how valuable she is to him. Raman, however, does not honour the claims of her bargain, and the dream is never realized.

Raman has his own compulsions to deal with. He marries Sita out of pity, as we have discussed earlier, when this initial stage of lust and pity wears off, Raman finds his mundane activities more fascinating and fulfilling. He is an expensing person who wants mastery over life. Individuals like him resent those who depend too much because conversely they are scared that such person may exercise control over them. Raman shifts his energies towards his business so as to escape intra-psychic and interpersonal conflicts. By nature he is not aggressive but a “Perfectionist” he has set his standards and must strictly adhere to them. He is meticulous and punctilious in fulfilling his obligations: “Everything was so clear to him, and simple: life must be continued....,” (WSWGS, PP. 138-39)

Sita secretly admires him for his courage and endurance. Raman therefore, cannot tolerate lack of control shown by Sita. He is fair, just and dutiful, so Sita should also be fair to him. He cannot understand her rebelliousness. This contradictory drive drags them apart, making it difficult for each to comprehend the notices of the other. Raman’s failure to recognize Sita’s self-effacing drives and honours her capacity for surrender and love, it injures her self-image. Her hopes of getting love are frustrated. She tells him once: “I thought I could live with you and travel alone-mentally, emotionally. But after that day that wasn’t enough. I had to stay whole, I had to”. (WSWGS, P. 148)

The motive of saying “whole” requires a little elaboration. Sita, here, does not refer to the idea of individuation or self-realization. She does not bother about self-realization. All she wants is to

feel her glorified self. Raman's inability to honour her claim of love impinges upon her pseudo self. Her neurotic pride is hurt and she turns vindictive. She must restore her damaged self-esteem: so, she tries to attract attention by being plaintive, and complaining of her unhappiness; secondly, she openly rebels against all social and familial norms in order to feel triumphant.

She rebels against the "vegetable existence: lived by the women of Raman's family- initially, it is only a verbal attack, than she takes recourse to a more flagrant disregard for their way of life by taking to stacking. Shocking them thus, Sita enjoys a sense of superiority. Raman is started when she describes his business associated as animals-"They are nothing-nothing but appetite and sex. Only food, sex and money matter Animals." (WSWGS, P. 47) This outburst vexes Raman who is-"not an introvert, he is an extrovert-a middling King of man dedicated unconsciously to the middle way." (WSWGS, P. 52)

Sita shows "psychic-fragmentation" or compartmentalization which is described in psychiatric literature as a disintegrating process. In it a neurotic falls to see himself as a whole entity and experiences himself in piecemeal, which saves him from conflicts and tensions created by his inner contradictions.

Denying herself joy, enthusiasm, anger and fear- the whole range of sentiments that make us human – Sita loses the urge to assert and affirm herself. Devoid of these natural feelings, she becomes a melancholy, depressed woman, bored with life; nothing can instill zeal in her. She presents a gloomy picture to her children and a quizzical one to her husband – sitting on the balcony, smoking endlessly, staring blankly at the sea, as if she were waiting for something. Her entire life acquires the color of waiting.

On a deeper level, waiting presuppose, the beginning of a wish to reach beyond a scale of despair and transcend emptiness and apathy into constructive potentialities. In Sita's case, the vacuity exercised by her neurotic control system, blocks the possibility for assertion and spontaneity. The control imposed up to impulses and feelings is let loose; fear

disrupts her mental equilibrium. It may be pointed out, here, that automatic control system is a neurotic measure adopted to relieve the tension of self-alienation: where is a normal self-control imposed upon unwanted desires and wants is a healthy attribute. The failure of automatic control system produces “fright responses”. Sita becomes panicky with her fifth pregnancy.

The terror of the ensuing child-birth that Sita harbors has several psychological causes. Her confinement will force her to forsake he strenuously guarded strategies of detachment. It will entail getting involved in life once again-physically as well as emotionally. A deeper psychic reason, however, the fear of her guilt-feeling cause by the awareness that she has not exercised self-control in sexual-desires. Self-reproach in the form of a gnawing feeling, “I should have known”, make her feel small. Her rage indicates an externalization of the inner turmoil. Says the novelist: “It was as though for Seven months she had Collected inside her All her resentments, Her fears, her rages, And now she flung them Outward, flung them from her.” (WSWGS, P.33)

Sita thus gives vent to her furry in order to protect herself from the onslaught of her-self-hate. At the same time, there are visible signs of “self-tormenting intents” working within her psyche. Her desire to keep the child inside her is a kind of procrastination mean it to continue her suffering. Since her primary drive is self-effacement, the urge to magnify her suffering is a part of her mental make-up. Horney calls it “schaden fende” i.e. a vindictive satisfaction at the self-inflicted pain. This is confirmed by Anita Desai’s Observation in an interview with Jasbir Jain that in Sita’s wish to perpetuate her pregnancy there is a kind of “rebellion right through to the last moment. She goes to Manori revolting against all norms and advice. She becomes militantly aggressive towards all- Raman her children and later towards Moses.

This single motif-not to give birth-on which the entire structure of the novel is based shows the combination of her compounded solutions – withdrawal, expansion and

self-effacement. By closing her eyes to the reality and resolutely following her fantasy, Sita manages to make herself immune from the assault of her self-loathing she hermits a kind of victory by rebelling against her bondage, and overcoming her weakness. In protecting her child from the callous worlds, Sita is in fact, guarding her self-image.

To the world she appears crazy. Her attitude, her outbursts of anger, her appearance all substantiate her whimsical approach. Is Sita really “mad” as mosses and his friends describe her? why is she always angry ? The answer lies in the aggressiveness brewing within her as her self-effacing solution fails. She wants to master life somehow, and by her behavior she creates an atmosphere denuded of love. Menaka is grown-up enough to retaliate her mother’s strange moods by her defiance. The girl comprehends that she can rely more on her father than on her moody mother. Sita is never normal with her children: as such they are attached to Raman. Whatever solution Sita adopts – self – effacing, aggressive or resigned. She is always heavily charged under her own pride system. She either bores them by her perpetual misery, or intimidates them by her arrogant – vindictive drives. On her detached unconcern keeps them at a distance. Her capacity to give spontaneous love is seriously impaired.

When Sita’s compliant and expensive remedies, she resorts to withdraw. We see her mostly bored with and disinterested life. She neglects her appearance, grows defiant and difficult to approach. A mental and physical inertia pervades her spirit. “Her own children mean only “anxiety, concern, permission. Not happiness.” (WSWGS, P. 147)

She grows an onlooker on life, keen only to guard her freedom. The very idea of leaving the Island and going back to maintain means compromising her freedom. In moments of tension she tells her fetus, - “I’ll keep you safe Inside, we’ll go nowhere” (WSWGS, P. 127)

Sita does not have a healthy man’s concept of freedom. Spontaneity is the pre-condition of positive freedom. It over-comes loneliness and insecurity, and helps in affirmation of life. Sita, on the contrary, resorts to the “mechanisms of escape” as Erich Fromm

terms it. She attains only freedom from conflicts. The pathological side of her escape is an effort at forgetting the real self because she is desperate to maintain the identity of her glorified self image she succeeds in making her life setting. Fromm explains it as the “other course” before a man which is not conducive to integrity and self-realization, rather it is an escape from an unbearable situation and it’s characterized by its compulsive character. The other course open to him is to fall back, or to give up his freedom and to try to overcome his aloneness by eliminating the gap that has arisen between his individual self and the world....It assuages an unbearable anxiety and makes life opposable by avoiding panic, yet it does not solve the underlying problem and is paid for by a kind of life that often consists only of automatic or compulsive activities. That often consists only of fears, her inner violent tendencies. Sita’s perception clears only towards the end of the novel. In D.H. Lawrence’s verse she finds an answer to her problem. So far as she has considered giving birth as an act of violence but now she realizes that a shed fallen from the tree of life into the cosmic womb, must break open. There can be no life without growth in to a full organism. Bursting out of the enclosure of the womb is a violent activity, but in its impetuosity it is creative. In his fantasia, Lawrence maintains that pure passionate destructive activity and pure passionate constructive activity are the same religiously. Sita realizes that – “The strange, new knowing of life at her side.” is indicative of a flow of energy, which must be released, to fertilize a new life. With this awareness, her self-questioning consciousness gets busy in the task of self-improvement. This is her moment of inspiration; in it she establishes a contact with her authentic self. Sita achieves integration of her personality by arriving at a fusion with the world. When the self flows out in a spirit of creativity and spontaneity she grapples with her real self. On the island, in the midst of nature, she experiences oneness with her surroundings. She becomes conscious of ‘presences’ the presence of the island itself, of the sea around it, and of the palm trees that spoke to each other and sometimes even to her. She does not feel lonely. Even when the children are away, she feels are with them, “considering, how much and how close together they were, in that isolated house,” (WSWGS, P. 126)

One more experience small but relatively significant, enables Sita to recognize her sensibilities and prowess as the self in relation to the earth. It occurs when she plays with Karan with an 'oblivious joy, all soaked in mud. She loses all self-consciousness and regains childhood innocence. For Moslow, this denotes freedom from inhibitions, and is one of the paths leading to a real self. Sita's move from fragmentation to a cosmic awareness enhances her chance of self-discovery. Here we see a full justification of E.M Forster's phrase 'only connect' which remains buried in her consciousness for long. Forster employs it in three different connotations in 'Howards End' it implies the connecting of individuals within themselves to achieve a 'wholeness'. In, 'A Passage to India, it stands for establishing a connection between an individual and individual, as well as on the racial and national levels. The push in Sita's psyche at this stage is towards developing a harmony in personal relationship and establishing a contact with the earth. The cosmic and personal synthesis, so gained, help her in seeing beyond despair.

All along, Sita is severely depressed, but the saving grace of her situation lies in her not becoming will-less and wish-less like Desai's earlier protagonists-Maya, Monisha, Nirode and Nanda. Despair and dejection, the humanistic psychologists tell us, act as warning signals. If we need them we can check the disintegration of our personality. In Sita, there is a temporary blockage of consciousness, but she shows steady signs of humanism for constructiveness. There is no breakdown of her power to wish and will. It helps her in self-direction. The latent urge in her is to be creative. She tells Menaka that if she had the talent to paint or sing she would have nursed it to full growth, creativity would have lent meaning to her life:

“If only I could paint, or sing, or play the Sita's well, really well, I should sensible women.....I should have known how to channel my thoughts

and feelings, how to put them to use. I should have given my life some shape then, some meaning.”

(WSWGS, P. 117)

Conflicts and awareness of conflicts are fundamentals and sure sign of relative health. Sita has capacity to reach out for full humanness. We cannot say that Sita is a fully self-actualized individual. Only, she has a potential for that. She looks within. There are human limitations. She feels stranded like a jelly-fish, symbolically representing her inner self. In one image Sita sees herself as the jelly-fish; in another, the fish and her fetus become one as the “opaque” brain of a gigantic sea-monster. The fish symbolizes the amoeba of life. In recognizing the central point of the brain of the sea monster, she becomes aware of herself.

As Jung points out, the central points within the psyche is the core of personality; the source of energy which manifests itself in man’s urge to become the ‘self’. Sita’s compromise with life constitutes a sure step forward to recognize reality. Her awareness that life is not meant to be shunned but to be experienced, is significant. Her Participation in the act of living leads to the acceptance of a fuller responsibility. Symbolically, when Sita walks back home placing her feet in Raman’s foot-marks in the sand, she decides to contribute positively to their lives. Sita’s existential will against her wish is displayed in her thoughts, “life had no periods, no stretches. It simply swirled around, muddling a confusing leveling nowhere.” (WSWGS, P. 155)

Here, her personal problems transcend in to existential ones and her neurotic despair and anguish give way to a more philosophic perception of the absurdity of human condition. If human existence is so improvised it is better to affirm life, here and now. According to May Sarton:

“Private dilemmas are, if deeply examined, universal and so if expressed, have human value beyond the private”⁶

At times one finds Sita’s affirmation and reconciliation too unassertive, signifying a defeat of individuality. At the end of the novel we cannot tell whether she manages to lead a healthy life after her return to Bombay, or she simply strides back in to her former neurotic ranges and fears. When asked about the child, Anita Desai affirms in an interview that the child is born and learns to compromise: “It is born. It lives. It adjusts. It compromises. It accepts dullness, mediocrity, either roses its eyes to or else condor’s destruction, ugliness, rottenness. In other worlds, it leads according life of the king its mother tried so desperately to change only to find she could not”.

The above words convey acceptance, life ceases to be an absurdity and becomes a general fact of the human experience. By this implication we infer that it is a tangible expression of an inner change in Sita. Acceptance shows growth, ripeness, it implies the fragments of life and achieve an integration will perhaps enable her to realize her place and experience herself as a part of a larger whole.

Works cited

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