

***Where Shall We Go This Summer? A Journey from Self-negation to Self-affirmation***

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Literature reflects the society. Literary texts explore gender relation and sexual difference and thus challenge the gender biased power structure of the society. The fiction of all forms of literary manifestations, project the social situation and social consciousness and thus it becomes a tool of social criticism. Seema Suneel remarks: “The novel is considered the most socially-oriented because it depicts human relationships in its varied aspects. In other words, the novel may be considered a document of social criticism. It tends to reflect the contingent reality in an artistic fashion.” (Seema 198)

Human values and relationships form a significant part of a great literary work. The post-war phase in Indian English literature is unique in its upsurge of a luminary of women novelists whose impact in contemporary Indian society is rather astounding with their distinctiveness. The growing presence of the women novelists in the fictional world proves significant with focused consciousness on the changing patterns of relationships in women in the domestic forefront, more specifically with regard to men. A study of the portrayal of women and their condition of

lives by women novelists would help in the important task of re-examining our cultural history which had traditionally marginalized the dominant role played by women in the creation of social history.

The literary texts of the Post Modern women writers strive to project women's voice to break the silence attempting to confront the patriarchal values. A host of women novelists like Shashi Deshpande, Ruth Pravar Jhabvala, Nayantara Sahgal, Bharati Mukherjee, Anita Desai, Kamala Markandaya, Attia Hasan etc., have projected women as the central figure in their writings. Anita Desai's chief concern is human relationship which is presented with her exquisite craftsmanship. As a sensitive writer, Desai has wielded her pen to project the sufferings of the sensitive women who are often haunted by a desire to establish individualism within the orbit of family relationship and social obligation. Her write up gives us a glimpse of the women's world with all complexities and oddities and the unexplored female psyche of the frustrated housewives. The existential predicaments of her individual characters find projection through the incompatible marriages.

Published in the year 1975, *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* illustrates the tension between family members as well as the theme of loneliness, isolation, and alienation of the protagonist Sita. *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* that appeared twelve years after *Cry, the Peacock* is in many ways a repetition of Desai's first novel in the treatment of the theme. The suggestive note of alienation and escapism that justifies the core theme of the novel is aptly illustrated by the title of the novel. The world the couple exhibits is a world of difference with all their attitudes and interests each defining their competing egos in their incompatible relationship.

The incompatible couple Sita and Raman are confronted with the same male-female dichotomy characterized by a lack of emotional rapport and mutual understanding. Sita and Raman share nothing in common in their conjugal life. Sita is a representative of sensitive and feminine sensibility, whereas Raman is an ideal epitome of practical and rationalist outlook attributed with a positive view of life. Already saddled with four children and on the way to the fifth one, Sita's wedlock with Jiban turns out to be an unsatisfying one.

Desai's novels are an exposure to the greater tragedies and spiritual struggle who are victims of both physical and psychological abuse in the male authoritative Indian society. The marital fiasco between the couple can be attributed to diverse parameters resulting from different attitudes, individual complexes and fears that lead to the communion set back in Sita and Raman. Reality crushes the very selfhood of Sita when she realizes the emptiness of her marriage. Sita, tortured by the violence discovers the grim reality that happiness is impossible in her married life. Hope and aspirations turn meaningless under the pretext of the unreceptive setting of nature in which both Sita's husband and even her children become alien to her. Sita is sick of her mundane life. From a very loving mother of four children "sensual, emotional, Freudian" (Where Shall We Go This Summer? 31) she turns "a woman of rage, fear and revolt." (Where Shall We Go This Summer? 32)

The ache of patriarchal subjugation is not so prominent in this novel. Still, Sita has to struggle in adjusting with her husband who is a beholder of patriarchy and shows a nagging sense of discomfort with the members of the household. Though Sita later moves to a smaller flat with Raman, but she too experiences the bitterness and suffocative dullness of life living in the

conventional fold of a family where her rights and privileges are denied altogether. Whereas the traditional wives succumb to patriarchal subjugation, Sita stands unparallel to them in choosing her own individual view and taking life's decisions at her will. Her decision not to give birth to the fifth child is an act of her own decision, without the husband's approval. Her pregnancy totally shatters her. The growing tension between the couple leads Sita to make her decision neither to give birth nor to undergo abortive surgery, but to keep it undelivered fearing the violence of the world around her. Sita utterly frustrated in the suffocative world with her husband and the humdrum city life of Bombay retires to the island Manori by escaping the responsibility of life. Sita considers her visit to Manori as a pilgrimage, "to beg for the miracle of keeping her baby unborn." (Where Shall We Go This Summer? 56)

Men in the patriarchal culture are attributed with positive values and respectability whereas women as negative and weaker sex. Man's relationship with women is most often an object and she is essential to man which Beauvoir stated as "it is in seeking to be made through her that man hopes to attain self-realization." (Beauvoir 173)

The culture that has created the mythical characters like Sita and Gandhari has denied the position to women except the traditional image of a daughter, wife, and mother in law. The mythical Sita of the Ramayana and Desai's Sita are two projections of ideal womanhood and femininity. Though Sita in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*, bears the common mythical name of Sita, but in practice, she fails to keep up the ethical values which the mythical Sita of Mahabharata carried. The exile in the mythical Sita was conditional and even in her exile she had retained her identity glorifying the image of Hindu woman amidst all the hardships. Desai's Sita

is a transversal of mythical Sita. The exile of Desai's Sita is self-imposed to envision strength in her search for independence in life. Her decision to retire to the magical island Manori is just an act of escaping from the boredom and violence of the material world by withdrawing from all her responsibilities.

Patriarchal society considers women as physically weak to venture into the world outside the four walls of the house and to make important decision. Hence, women are relegated to the domestic sphere where they have to accept the hegemony of male counterpart. Since ages, they are subject to drudgery and lead a captive life confining themselves to domestic works and raising children. Still, they are discriminated in many aspects and deprived of all those pleasures which are prerogative of males.

In *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* Anita Desai has tried to probe the yearnings of a romantic and sensitive wife under the inconsiderate and insensible husband, who tries to escape into yet another purposeless and inproductive island from the humdrum and callous city life only to discover nothing but disgust and despair. Raman remains rigid and unchanged throughout the novel. The continuation of husband and wife polarity in the novel can be endorsed to Raman's male chauvinism which lacks his inability to explore the feminine sensibility and the feminine world. The women in Desai's novels are placed in such an awful position not because they are part of society but because they are chiefly women. In *A Room of One's Own* Virginia Woolf stated the condition of women as:

“She pervades poetry from cover to cover: she is all but absent from history. She dominates the lives of kings and conquerors in fiction, in fact, she was the slave of anybody

whose parents forced a ring upon her finger. Some of the most inspired words, some of the most profound thoughts in literature fall from her lips. In real life, she could hardly read, could scarcely spell, and was the property of her husband.” (Woolf 41)

Confinement is a major concern in Desai's fiction. No woman in her novels has been fortunate enough to break free from the shackles of femininity. Sita in *Where Shall We Go This Summer* is an epitome of irresistible yearning for the fulfillment of life. Sita's alienation springs from her oversensitiveness which evokes tension resulting to husband-wife alienation. The ingrained patriarchy attributes men with superiority to feel not only the masters of their lives but also make the destiny of women. Patriarchy often manipulates the right and role of women considering them as the most vulnerable section of the society. Simone de Beauvoir has stated in *The Second Sex* that: “sometimes the “feminine world” is contrasted with the masculine universe, but we must insist again that women have never constituted a closed and independent society, they form an integral part of the group, which is governed by males and in which they have a subordinate place.” (Beauvoir 608)

The conflict in the novel is caught between the wife's tragedy to be or not to be. In a confused state, Sita is unable to start her journey from the past and at the same time, she wants to retain the present. Sick of everything, Sita becomes too oppressive to leave everyone. The world becomes unbearable to her and she flies to Manori. Her ultimate rejection of the male dominated values gets outburst in her seeking exile to the island Manori. But the austerity and stark realities of life cannot be ignored. Life's fulfillment constitutes in harmonizing both the positive and negative attributes. Even the silence of Manori could not provide Sita her desired bliss. To Sita,

the escape to Manori is nothing but a discovery and realization of the critical truth about life one has to face.

A woman, however strong may be is expected to negotiate in life by shattering all hopes and aspirations. Sita's realization brings her to sense that there is no escape for her, no world of illusion for her to retreat and life must go on. As her island of desire holds no promise and scope for her children Sita, reverts from self-alienation to self-realization. Though the women in Desai appear to be modern and liberated, but they are constantly traumatized by extreme conflicts and hazards in relationships. Ultimately, Sita recognizes her fate and choose an accepted life by returning to the fold of her husband and children. Betrayed and humiliated, Sita is forced to come back with Raman. Critic T. S. Anand opines, "her desire to bear the child and return with Raman to the land signifies her return to life, community and society in spite of the debased dullness of life..." (Anand 100)

Sita after experiencing the continuou problems in marital life attain self-fulfillment by a sense of realization. She finds an answer to the question *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* to go back to her husband and submit to the demands of life with finer responsibilities. The novel ends on a positive note, but it throws ample light on Desai's aspect of negativity. Desai holds that life in spite of all odds, tedium, boredom and responsibilities should be continued and lived. This she has effectively conveyed through the irrational Sita, a mother of four children who deprived of love and communion from her husband escapes the dull and monotonous life and ultimately admits that life must go on with all its business.

Whatever the tragedy of life be that engulfs Sita, she exhibits more practical maturity than Maya and Monisha the early heroines of Desai. Sita rises above them in her capacity for a better and positive acceptance of life. Herein lies Anita Desai's skill in advancing the position of an Indian woman by infusing a spirit of consciousness in the establishment of individualism. Escaping from her daily chores of life, showing little concern towards her husband and children, Sita represents the modern woman with a newly acquired strength. In Sita, Desai has succeeded in portraying a modern woman with an awakened sensibility conscious of questioning self-identity which has been denied to her as a woman.

Marriage and family life is reinforced as a social institution where the happiness and relation between husband and wife are measured. Husband-wife incongruities and the consequent alienation and isolation seem to be inevitable when the couple fails to build up a relationship on the basis of true emotion, mutual co-operation, proper understanding, and equality. It is observed that most relationships explode as the males in Desai's novels are governed by self-glorification and ego-inflation. Males in Desai's novels are rationalistic and practical in outlook whereas the women are sensitive, dreamy and emotional. Desai, the novelist pleads for conjugal cooperation and mutual understanding as the basis of marital harmony. Marital happiness lies in shedding all egos, weaknesses, and complexes with a sense of compromise and equality between husband and wife. Raman and Sita too tried to unite and adjust and to live a better life harmoniously.

Desai, the novelist stands for a change. Desai moves a step ahead in the portrayal of traditional wives and created a heightened feminine sensibility in Sita. *Where Shall We Go This*



*Summer?* reveals Desai's stance as, "she does not advocate gyno-centric struggle, leading to woman's liberation in Western feminist terms." (Piciucco 143). Sita in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* does not conform to the act of self-destruction in her inability to cope with the world. Desai has infused in her women the spirit which seeks liberation, move from bondage to freedom with a sense of passivity from self-negation to self-affirmation. Though Sita lacks practical knowledge but she does not conform to her compromising nature though in the end, she realizes the reality of life. Desai's women have started to grow as self-conscious beings and it is through Sita that Desai has shown the act of defying the male predominant norms.

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