



Politics of Power, Scrappy Connubial Relationship and Manic-Repressive Psychosis: A Review of Anita Desai's *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*

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Abstract

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“The politics of sexuality throws into disarray the certainty of recognisably gender-coded bodies, the male-female bipolarity, the naturalizing of heterosexual desire and its institutionalisation in marriage” (Menon 28). Politics of power exists everywhere – in family, in institution and in each and every layer of society. Foucault says that power relations are the most invisible things in society. The fictions of Anita Desai persistently attempt to explore the invisible presence of power in family, an institution of social life and consequent marginalization is manifested at different fields in the society. There is no traditional consolation for Anita Desai’s tormented characters. Each man and woman is the architect of his or her own life and has his or her inevitable fate or destiny. Apart from satirical touches on the middle classes, phony artists and despotic parents, social conformity, the novel is mainly a tragic examination of individual suffering of a woman lost in the wilderness of contemporary India.

Keywords: Politics of power, marital bonds, duty, alienation, identity.

Anita Desai is indubitably one of the most influential and persuasive contemporary Indian novelists in English. She is immensely familiar with the contemporary Indian milieu from which she derives the background and characters for her novels. Desai’s characters in her novels *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*, *Cry, the Peacock*, *Clear Light of Day*, *Voices in the City* and *In Custody* are members of the Anglicized Indian bourgeoisie whose marital problems are in the forefront. Her characters often adopt escapist ways to cope with the boring everyday life or world outside comfortable living. “Anita Desai’s novels are identified-woman’s struggles for self-



realization and self-domination, woman's quest for identity, her pursuit for freedom, equality and transcendence, her rebellion and protest against oppression at every level" (Kumar 6).

"Traditional power has on its side the force of habit; it does not have to justify itself at every moment, not to prove continually that no opposition is strong enough to overthrow it. Moreover it is almost invariably associated with religious or quasi-religious beliefs purporting to show that resistance is wicked".(Russell 27)

In the light of gender theory Desai's novels can be examined as the manifesto of female predicament. Desai looks back to the past to anatomise the aches socially inflicted on women to hub the personal experience of life. "The key contribution of gender critics to the debate about the complex relationship between gender, language and literature has been to hold up to scrutiny some of the central notions of the nature of sexual identity and sexual orientation" (Padley 163). Desai's characters evince an urgent desire for personal fulfillment. They have their own particular dreams and aspirations and they suffer from psychological repression from the non-fulfillment of their desires, the lacuna, they experience by the hard realities of life. They wage war against traditional male-orientation for value-added re-orientation of their self (selves) at personal level. Idea of a purposive and collective struggle eludes their imagination. So in most cases they have their own way of resolution of their problems after self-revelation which are personal in nature.

Her novels are certainly reflective of social realities from a psychological perspective that closely examines the emotional world of womankind. In dealing with the interior landscape and psychic odyssey of her characters, Desai has extended and enlarged the thematic horizon of the Indian English novels. Dealing with the thoughts, emotions and sensations at various levels of consciousness, Anita Desai adopted stream of consciousness and flashback technique used by D.H. Lawrence, Virginia Woolf and Henry James.

Anita Desai's *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*, chiefly significant for its intensity and profundity, also illustrates before us a reverse pattern of aggravation and calamity. Sita, the protagonist of the novel, who suffers like other women protagonists of Anita Desai, falls short to be in touch with her husband. In many ways Sita is a facsimile of Maya. Highly sentimental and entirely alienated from her husband, Sita too, like Maya, goes through the aches of jumbled and scrappy conjugal relation. She is fanatical with the notion about looming tragedy. But the two protagonists are different individuals: if Maya is submissive and withdraws from action, Sita believes in action from the beginning. The isolation of Sita is the symbolic aloneness of a woman,



wife and a mother- a lonesomeness imposed by family and society. The diverse duo, Sita and Raman, in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* faces the crisis of male-female dichotomy. While Sita embodies a world of emotive and feminine responsiveness, Raman is a realistic man with strong vision of existence. Sita dangles between connubial existence and her self-fulfillment. Sita is oppressed and disheartened with loveless marriage with Raman. The temperamental incongruity of the duo exacerbates her dilemma and sense of barrenness gives it an existential facet. While she is waiting the birth of her fifth child, her experiences mount up in her deep anguish about marital life with Ramana and consequently, her despondency makes her insensible, pitiless and extraterrestrial to her husband and kids. Sita has “gone mad” (*Where Shall We Go This Summer?* 35) and entirely lost her common cord of life. She told her husband that “What I’m doing is trying to escape from the madness here, escape to a place where it might be possible to be sane again” (*Where Shall We Go This Summer?* 35). Her obsession coerces her back to conserve the sagacity of sanity by escaping from the day to day din and bustle of her routine life to Manori, an Island in the west-coast. She lost her equilibrium of life and cherishes in mind an impractical stance towards life. She desires to protect her unborn baby from the malicious ambiance in which she presently dwells:

She had come here in order not to give birth. An explanation she had repeated to herself and her husband so often that instead of acquiring lucidity...she was on the island, in order to achieve the miracle of not giving birth. Wasn't this Manori, the island of miracles? Her father had made it an island of magic once, worked miracles of a kind. His legend was still here in this house.... he might work another miracle, posthumously, She had come on a pilgrimage, to beg for the miracle of keeping her baby unborn. (*Where Shall We Go This Summer?* 31)

Sita dreamed to be saturated in the shower of human passion and love from her spouse instead of running after corporeal enjoyment and infuriating lavishness of life but unfortunately sourness, disillusionment and lifelessness of their conjugal relation forced her to recuperate her childhood place of happiness, Manori Island, far away from the madding crowd of Bombay, as well as, from her family:

She had left with relief, worn out by the drama of Manori, longing for the sane, the routine-ridden mainland as fro a rest in a sanatorium. It was only gradually, as the light of the ordinary world grew stiff, static and petrified around her, as the streets and walls ceased to offer security and safety but implied threats of murder instead,



that she once again began to think of the island. (*Where Shall We Go This Summer?* 100)

There she seeks to tie the changes and deformation of the past happiness and self-revelation of her present marital imprisonment:

She saw that island illusion as a refuge, a protection. It would hold her baby safely unborn, by magic. Then there would be the sea- it would wash the frenzy out of her, drown it. Perhaps the tides would lull the children, too, into soother, softer beings. The grove of trees would shade them and protect them. (*Where Shall We Go This Summer?* 101)

Manori, the land of heavenly bliss and peace, has provided her a fresh life, a new consciousness and a new wakefulness to recapture an experience, a thrill and innocence free from fretfulness, glumness, domestic suffocation, and self-banishment. Her quest for Manori after long twenty years is the quest for her lost innocence, lost childhood and lost identity. Duties and responsibilities to her children and husband, life of lovelessness, alienation, and exhaustion have left her like a foreigner pining for the life of a primordial world. She was lost in between the monotony of familial and conjugal life. Anita Desai portrays the monotonous existence of Sita as follows:

She sat there smoking, not even looking at the sea any more, till he exclaimed, “Bored? How? Why? With what?” and could not begin to comprehend her boredom. She herself, looking on it, saw it stretched out so vast, so flat, so deep, that in fright she scrambled about it, searching for a new of these moments that proclaimed her still alive, not quite drowned and dead. (*Where Shall We Go This Summer?* 50)

The sufferings, agonies and unhappy incidents of life have changed Sita to an audacious temperament who denied the patriarchal tyranny and dictates of the society. She wanted to escape from social and institutional confinement bestowed by male chauvinism to live a life like a saint, a magician and as the indigenous inhabitants of Manori with Moses and Meriam free from oppression:

She had escaped from duties and responsibilities, from order and routine, from life and the city, to the unlivable island, she has refused to give birth to a child in a world not fit to receive the child. She had the imagination to offer it an alternative, a life un-lived, a life bewitched. She had cried out her great “No” but now the time had come for her epitaph to be written *Che free per villate it grass rifiute*. Very



soon how that epitaph would have been written. (*Where Shall We Go This Summer?* 139-40)

Sita gradually blurs into insanity crossing the boundary of her sanity, because, Raman, “a middling kind of man” (*Where Shall We Go This Summer?* 47), married Sita “Out of pity, out of lust, out of a sudden lust for adventure and because it was inevitable, her married her” (*Where Shall We Go This Summer?* 99). The fantasy that Sita possess is over and she finds herself in the midst of “nothing but appetite and sex” (*Where Shall We Go This Summer?* 47). She realized the mundane reality of her married life: “It was as though he had been expressly sent by providence to the theatrical era of life, her strange career and lead her out of the ruined theatre into this sunlight of the ordinary, the everyday, the empty and the meaningless” (*Where Shall We Go This Summer?* 100). So the process of desensitization begins that threatens her sanity and pushes her towards death and draws her back. She was deeply moved and motivated by an old lover and a young beloved profoundly in love with each other in a park. She faced the truth of her life: “they made me see my own life like a shadow, absolutely flat, uncoloured” (*Where Shall We Go This Summer?* 147). A regular submission of body to Ramana stands for fidelity to him.

Marriage is an institution fails to appeal, since the wife is so essentially a non-person. Either she proffered partner in some contractual agreement in which mutual liking is not even considered or she is carefully chosen for her virtues of docility, devotion and dullness. On the other hand, the explorations of adulterous relationships have revealed a contrasting concept of vital, interpersonal encounter between covers, which goes beyond simple desire. (Kalpana *Feminism and the Individual* 67)

The women wait for something to happen, something to take place like Beckettian characters though they do not know for what they are waiting. While Sita is passing her days through stupendous crisis of life, Ramana suddenly visits Manori Island to take her back home. The life at Manori Island caused her self-revelation and awakens her to the truth of her situation that restores her to the world of reality. She feels agreeable and finally decided to come back to Bambay with Ramana. Since there is no alternative, she passively affirms life. She welcomes the child in to the world of violence and suffering. Sita accepts life what it is.

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