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NOWHERE TO GO: A JOURNEY OF COMPROMISE IN ANITA DESAI'S *WHERE SHALL WE GO THIS SUMMER?*

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Abstract

The ideal story weaver of the recent era, Anita Desai is a writer of her own class. Psychoanalysis of each and every female character makes her novel as if a journey to the maze minds. Born in the year 1937, Anita Desai with her deft characterization and with her remarkable anti romanticist approach so very eloquently brings out the dilemma, tension, fears, agony, frustration and love of the womanhood whilst making her each novel as if a saga of sheer realism. The idealistic world which each of her character wants to experience hence stands as the logo of that eternal longing of mankind. The story of Anita Desai ends but what remains is that lingering afterimage of the story. The evocative saga of escapism, the tuneful melody of the long lost songs of childhood is the central theme of the award-winning novel *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* The storyline with its bold strokes of realities is an effort to illustrate the happiness of escaping from the realities to the land of utopia; hence the title aptly justifies the core theme. The novel ends however the taste remains. It is an illustrious novel by Anita Desai is a story of an oppressed mind. Like all her earlier novels this particular novel also illustrates the estrangement between family members and the loneliness, isolation and alienation of the middle-class women, Sita, the female protagonist of the story. The central character Sita in this novel '*Where Shall We Go This Summer?*' feeling the frustration of the suffocative four walls is seen taking refuge from her marriage at the utopian land of a magic island.

Keywords

Anita Desai, *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*, Escapism, Compromise.

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Anita Desai has typically concentrated on the feminine psyche and feelings of loneliness and alienation. Her stories often involve troubled relationships between married couples or family members (Gopal 152). Desai's restriction to middle or upper class characters has sometimes been criticized; some critics find middle class characters "unrepresentative" of Indian women - or India generally. However, as Ho (99-101) argues, even though Desai's characters hardly suffer from poor conditions from a purely material point of view, they do face predicaments of other kinds: the social injustice hidden behind the bourgeois façade. One might also question whether it is realistic to expect a single writer to be able to represent India in a way that would be 'representative' of all the more than one billion people living in India (and whether this kind of representation is necessary).

In an interview in 2001, Desai described a change that was taking place in her literary production (Ravichandran 88-89). She felt that she was returning to the same topics again and again - to the portrayal of the lives of women, especially women "who are confined to home and family." This is why she deliberately wanted to broaden her horizons and started to write more about male characters.

The male characters act as a block in the women's process of finding their self and reaching at some sort of realization. In Anita's fictional world it is the males who rule over these women; they hold the reins of all the females in their family and this spoils the efforts on the part of women to find out on their own the core of life. In other words, the role of men is often interpreted as the oppressor (either as active or a faceless group in the background) and the role of women as the oppressed.

Where Shall We Go This Summer? (from now on: *WSWGTS*) describes a disillusioned woman named Sita who rebels against her present state and wishes to cut herself off from the stream of life and desires to return back to her childhood past, her parental house, Manori. She harbors grudge against her fifth pregnancy:

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The magic of Manori island, she thinks, will definitely be helpful to her in not giving birth to her child. She had come here in order not to give birth.... 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 ones, worked miracles of a kind. (WSWGTS 31)

She had enjoyed her earlier pregnancies:

She had had four children with pride, with pleasure—sensual, emotional, Freudian, every kind of pleasure – with all the placid serenity that supposedly goes with pregnancy and parturition. (WSWGTS 31-32)

Perhaps she wants her dreams to be fulfilled through children. But they not only separate themselves from her, they reject her also. Outwardly, anyone can feel jealous to see her happy world, full of children and a nice husband but for Sita it is a world of sufferings and tortures because she lacks a sense of belongingness. From the early childhood to her married life she does not have a home of her own. This damages her senses of belongingness. Anant comments, "Belongingness.... means a subjective feeling of one's personal involvement to the extent that one feels himself to be an integral part and indispensable part of the system" (63-64). But from her very childhood she is forced to think herself an outsider of the familial system by her own parents. Therefore, her frustration germinates from the very beginning of her life. In her early years, the absence of her mother leads her to alienation. She always misses mother's role as an indicator in her life. She recognizes her failure to radiate as a normal person:

Life seemed complete, full, without her, there was no reason for her to exit. She had imagined she came into the world motherless—and the world was crowded enough so. She had always lived in the center of the crowd, having been one of those flowers, children of the independence movement whose chins were chucked by chuckling freedom fighters in home-spun, who had spent hours at a stretch, mosquito-bitten legs dangling, at the edge of the dais on which politicians-in-waiting sat cross-legged before lowered microphones, addressing vast crowds beneath them. (WSWGTS 84)

Her disillusion with her father also sharpens her sense of belongingness. Sita's father is exclusively responsible for ingraining insecurity in her by his negligence. There is always an "impossibility of talk between her and her father." (WSWGTS 79) His two children Jivan and Sita mean nothing to him. Her suspicions are enhanced further by finding herself deprived from father's love which follows only towards Rekha to the point of suspicion of incest. Sita is also shocked to observe her father's shady side. None other than her sister Rekha fulfils the vacancy created by her mother. Rekha's approachability to her father disturbs her terribly. Now she longs desperately for her mother. During these particular moments, she finds nobody who can come closer to her to put a hand of love on her head and pacify her in her utter loneliness. She is bound to remain silent. She fails to open up. With this experience she fails to feel personal involvement in life. Erich Fromm feels that by getting attached ourselves to another person, alienation can be cured:

There is only one possible productive solution for the relationship of individualized man with the world: his active solidarity with all men and his spontaneous activity, love and

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work, which unite him again with the world not by primary ties but as a free and independent individual (29).

But Sita keeps rolling in the sphere of isolation. After her father's death Sita gets under way of thinking about her isolation to be relieved through deserting island at any cost and she does it by getting married. But Sita's destiny dupes her again.

As her new life begins on the mainland she becomes ecstatic. Sita being a lonely young woman, looks up to her husband Raman as her God. Raman, however, does not get ready to honour her respect. Instead of pacifying her, he enhances her mental tortures. Raman has his own ideas to deal with her. Normally, he does not react and he also dislikes Sita's lack of control instead of understanding her reaction. As Sita argues, "what do you know about my condition?" She flared, "I've told you-I've tried to tell you but you haven't understood a things"... (WSWGTS 33) Raman also accepts himself that "I don't understand much ..." (WSWGTS 33). Humanity is replaced by hatred in Raman with the passage of time: "He was repelled, he turned away, not being able to see her any more for hatred to her. He hated her, hated her talk" (WSWGTS 34). Sita also begins to realize that life is but "a crust of dull tedium of hopeless disappointment" (WSWGTS 39). Her married life is also proved to be an extension to continue her silence. And the only option to revolt against her frustration for her is to go back to the island.

Hence, Sita returns to the island to restore the magic and mystery of it. She considers her visit to the island as "a pilgrimage to beg for the miracle of keeping her baby unborn" (WSWGTS 20). Her desire of not giving birth to a child also reflects her desire of violating the marriage deed between her and Raman. She is of the view that if she reaches the island, every problem will be solved. On the island she dives deep inter the memories of the past. But how long can she be in the realm of memories. She cannot run away from her life as a mother and a housewife. She hears the echo of her children's silence:

Whenever she turned or looked up, she saw them staring at her, watching her as though waiting for her break down and admit failure. To them, she realized with a painful laughing-off of disbelief, it was life in their flat on Napean Sea Road that had been right and proper, natural and acceptable; it was this so called "escape" to the island that was madness." She realizes soon that revisiting the past in impossible: "If it had ever existed-black, sparkling and glamorous in her memory- it was now buried beneath the soft gray- green mildew of the monsoon, chilled and chocked by it." (WSWGTS 103)

But Sita's endeavours of getting rid of her sense of frustration, through the island, not only resulted in a futile exercise but also they give birth to some new opposite focus-existing between herself and her children: "... they had no memory of its past glamour and so she and they moved always in opposite directions" (WSWGTS 103). She is getting rolled on the way of failures in relationships as she has failed in the past. Now Menaka's comes on the forefront. Sita wants her to be a creative artist but Menaka does not accept her mother's eccentric temperament: "She had had enough of her mother's disorder and nonsense-she would escape it wholly" (WSWGTS 117). For Menaka, art is nonsense and boring. She stands against her mother: "...What she thought and said did not interest Menaka, stubbornly did not interest Menaka" (WSWGTS 117). As a young girl Menaka turns to the father's authority. She wants to take a leaf out of her father's book not of her

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mother. She wants to identify with her father. This very attitude of Menaka shatters all hopes of Sita. She has nothing to react but only to think haplessly:

I wish I had your talent. I would nurse it so carefully—like a plant—make it grow, grow. I used to think—after left this island and had to think to what I would do next—that if only I could paint, or sing, or play the sitar well, really well, I should have grown into a sensible woman. Instead of being what I am”. Through letter Menaka urges her father to take them back to Bombay without giving any prior information to her mother. Sita miserably says, “Menaka didn’t tell me she had written you. I don’t know anything about if (WSWGTS 140).

But instead of pacifying her Raman aggravates her through his dialogues: “There was nothing you could do for her...” (WSWGTS 140). And again he argues unsympathetically:

“But you know you must leave you will have to come back””you must”, he said, she shook her head. It seemed to her that he was always saying to her, “you must (WSWGTS 140-141).

She is full of self-contempt as she fails in playing her role as a mother, a wife, a daughter and a woman. Now she feels strongly against the social values imposed by the society. In the pursuit of emancipation, morality becomes meaningless. She loses all the sentiments as joy, enthusiasm, anger and fear that make us human. Without these different colours of sentiments she is merely a melancholy and depressed women. Her rage externalizes her inner turmoil: “It was as though for seven months she had collected inside her resentments; her fears, her rages and now she flung them outward, flung them for her” (WSWGTS 33).

A sense of belongingness and failures in life make her vindictive. As a result Sita becomes a rebellious. She rebels in her mind by refusing to give birth to the baby and by coming to the island. But in the end of the novel, it is clear that Sita compromises with her situation and gets ready to go back to the world in which she is nothing but a non-entity: “If all became harder than ever before, for me; very hard—this making of compromises when one didn't want to compromise, when one wanted to—to—(WSWGTS 101). She is disillusioned with her own thoughts and feels defeated. B. Ramchandra Rao studies the novel as a dramatization of conflict between two incompatible persons. He states:

The tragedy in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* arises out of the inability of the characters to connect the prose and the passion in their lives. They have lived only in fragments. The novel ends with a defeated and despondent Sita unable to rediscover the passion of life (60).

Obviously, she has to lead her life without living it to the core. Now she deeply realizes that all relationships are based on compromise, duties and selfishness which cause ugliness, discord, incoherence and clashes in life. Vimal Rao observes:

The triptych structure of the novel neatly forms the pattern of the thesis, anti-thesis and synthesis. Sita’s consciousness develops through the process of consideration, rejection and then acceptance of the terms of life within this structure. She makes a new life for herself and in eager to let the new life in her to be born in this world. It is said that she has to give up her individuality to some extent in order to accept, but only in this gesture is sanity (176-77).

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Thus, we observe that woman is in the compromising situation in any patriarchal society like India. Sita also finds no other way but to compromise with her situation and her husband being an active member of patriarchal system remains insensitive to his wife even on this critical time of her pregnancy. But being an Indian woman she finally decides to go with her husband who is absolutely ignorant to her agony. And sometimes compromises lead an individual to the world where life will be without life itself.

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