

Where Shall We Go This Summer: A Journey Of Acceptance And Adjustment

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Abstract: In *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* Anita Desai has probed the theme of marital discord which stems from the fact that the protagonist Sita and her husband Raman live at different planes of existence. Sita seems to live at a psychological and an existential level while Raman does not go beyond day to day material life. Sita's journey to the island is impelled not only by the desire to free herself from her husband but from an entire civilization of which he is the representative. But unlike Monisha, the heroine of the novel *Voices in the City*, who fails in life due to her negative stance, Sita comes out to be a character of a mature sensibility that succeeds in overcoming the disaster of life and death. *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* incorporates two journeys: one is an immediate escape from surrounding; the other is towards the future. Sita's stay at Manori is a return to the past which she hopes will make her present significant. Sita, pregnant with her fifth child starts feeling that life is nothing but uncertainty and wonders if she is going to perform an act of creation in giving birth to her child or the destruction of what is now, in her belly, perfect in her protection. Confused, she flees to Manori, to the haven that was her father's island, a place of magic and glamour and mystery, in the hope of finding a solution to the questions of her agitated mind.

Keywords - Acceptance, Stereotype, Adjustment, Vulnerable, Family

Where Shall We Go This Summer? The novel revolves around Sita, mother of four, and her unwillingness to deliver her fifth baby. Sita is "highly sensitive and high-strung"² in her early forties, and Anita Desai presents an intense identity crisis of the central character, and dramatizes the conflicts between two irreconcilable temperaments of two diametrically opposed attitudes towards life. The problems and the unhappiness in the life of Sita spring from her inability to accept the values and the attitudes of society. (Rao 49-50)

Sita questions the stereotype image of a woman as a wife, as a mother that has been accepted by the society since times immemorial but does Sita question the image and give up or does she stick on to be a rebel or she questions and comes back is what Anita Desai's creative vision deals with in the novel. Sita conjures up the image of exile and loneliness like the mythological Sita but unlike her, the modern Sita forsakes her husband and two children against the wishes of her husband. In the complex fabric of the Indian family, society and culture where a woman is supposed to pertain to certain norms and values, where a woman is not supposed to have a mind or personality of her own, Sita remains bound to the idea of individuality. She does not let her personality be capsized by the wanton male, and forsakes her husband and two children against the wishes of her husband, to realize the goal of seeking wholeness and meaning in life, carrying Menaka and Karan forcibly with her to be her companions in exile 'Manori island' to keep herself and her identity intact. "She saw that island illusion as a refuge, a protection." (Desai 101) Sita tries to identify herself with the past which is represented by her childhood on Manori Island. M. Mani Meitei feels that "the past becomes a psychic residue in her personal unconscious." (Meitei 48)

Her obsessive pre-occupation with her past gives her the strength to leave her home and go to Manori where she feels that her father might be able to work some magic and rebels against her husband, her in-laws and children and remains aloof from them and the society at large. Unlike a conventional woman who is supposed to adjust to whatever life style her in-laws have or to the needs of her husband or for that matter is supposed to take care of her children, Sita questions these images and rebels against the society, her husband, her children and is often given to emotional outbursts and lacks control over her senses. A change takes place in Sita, from a proud mother of four children, sensual and emotional, to a woman of 'rage, fear and revolt'.

Sita's problem seems to be due to her maladjustment with her husband as well, for in her sub-conscious mind, Sita has a father fixation. She worshipped her father and thought her father to be one without any flaw, but only when she goes to the island does she come out of the illusion and starts seeing her father in a different light. One can say that because Raman was different from the image that Sita had in her mind of a man, she is unable to relate to Raman. While Sita's father was a legend, a person believed to work miracles, Raman was an ordinary man. B.R.Rao says, "unlike the legendary 'Rama' and 'Sita', the couple does not represent an ideal husband-wife relationship." (Rao 54) When soon after her marriage, Sita goes to live with her husband's parents, she finds their company intolerable. To her they seem to be "leading inauthentic existences", who are incapable of introspection and lack self-examination which are the signs of an authentic existence. She regards their existence as a provocation and even a threat to her own existence. To shatter their complacency and to challenge them Sita behaves provocatively-she starts smoking and begins to speak in sudden rushes of emotions. The society represented by ayah, the "nameless multitudes", threatens the existence of Sita, but the greatest threat to her existence is "Boredom". The conflict between the sensitive Sita and the insensitive world is objectified in terms of a series of situations which vividly convey the tension, the conflict and the withdrawal of the wounded and bruised soul into its own protective shell. Her loneliness can be called the loneliness of a woman, a wife and mother.

A point comes in Sita's life when she says "till now, but no further". She had conformed to the image of a woman and had accepted her role of a wife, a mother, but a stage comes in her life where she feels that life is nothing but uncertainty. This kind of world provides little security to her, and when her husband asks her, "Where shall we go this summer?" She insists on fleeing from the mainland to the island. Sita is unable to accept the values and attitudes of society; her sensitive nature makes her react against violence, brutality and sordidness prevalent in the society. She as a child had led an unusual life and her childhood memories do not include the security of home but of violence, crowds, meetings, processions, jails mobs, slums and villages, where life was barbaric and full of political tensions and cruelties. Her father who was known as second Gandhi by his 'chelas' was against violence and his philosophies had left a mark on her psyche, making her hate violence so much so that it becomes an obsession in her adult life. She broods over this violence so much that people consider her to be insane

One such incident in the novel is the eagle-crow fight which highlights her obsession with violence. Sita watches the eagle being attacked by the crows. She is infuriated at the crows and tries to drive them away with the help of a toy gun. She associates the fate of the eagle with her own fate and takes the crows as representatives of the society around her. The situation objectifies for Sita the conflict in her own life. She identifies herself with the proud, defiant eagle. She scares always the crows and keeps a watch over the eagle till the night falls. To her husband and her children, her actions appear to be nothing but a carefully arranged and wilfully created act of drama", but it is not so. Sita feels that the way the crows are attacking the eagle, similarly she feels that she is also attacked by the society from all sides. Her act of trying to save the eagle is indirectly trying to save herself.

In the hurry of defending the eagle Karan falls down and cuts his chin. But even the hurt and crying of the child is ignored by her in this melodrama and restlessness to save the eagle which is ironic as it indicates her obsessive fears as well as verifies the lack of real care for the child by the mother. Her refusal to accept the fact that the eagle had been eaten by the crows symbolises her refusal to accept defeat. This small incident is an indication of the wide gulf that separates Sita from Raman, from her children and the society. Sita deems to be fighting against male chauvinism and masculine values with her feminine instincts. For Sita the gestures of togetherness made by her husband Raman acquire the dimensions of a physical assault. For her, every move made by Raman at the physical or emotional level is an attack on her identity, which she must resist at all costs. She feels trapped and victimized all the time and wants to break free from the conundrum.

What is normal and usual for others is abnormal and unusual for Sita. The mere 'play' of her sons wrestling, the mock fighting, Menaka's crushing the flower buds unconsciously, her coldly and methodically destroying all the beautiful paintings she had made so carefully, the ayahs fighting like animals completely oblivious to the crying and frightened children is enough to make Sita hysterical. To Sita they "all represent the myriad faces of a mad and violent society." Due to her abhorrence for violence Sita decides that the child in her womb should never be born lest he should become a victim of the misery and destructive forces prevalent in the world and opts for the island which holds out a promise of magic and escape from the

unnatural fears of hers. Anita Desai, in her interview with Jasbir Jain says that “Sita has had an unusual childhood,... her entire will is not to give birth to a child in such a world.”(Jain 11) Her desire to keep the foetus in her womb symbolizes Sita's fear of facing the reality of life and exposing her children to it. Her protectiveness is in fact annihilating and escapist in itself. Her unusual thoughts regarding violence make her mind muddled and inspire her to think on such unusual, impossible lines. Sita's escapade is ironical for it does not seem to be indicative of her reverence for life. It is rather her retreat from life which leads her to that existential plunge on the island. (Sharma 97)

Her want of individuality and being different from the rest can also be seen in the incident, when returning from a holiday at Ajanta and Ellora, Raman and Sita comes across a foreigner, who wanted a lift to Ajanta, To Raman the foreigner seemed to be a fool but to Sita he "seemed so brave". Sita does not regard him to be foolish but innocent and it made him seem more brave, not knowing anything but going on nevertheless, Sita identifies herself with the foreigner because like her he is also vulnerable - vulnerable to violence and criticism in the society.

Sita is in conflict with her husband and children due to her love for art and for being against science, for it involves labelling and because art is alive and spontaneous. Raman stands for prose in life and critics designate Raman and Sita as representatives of prose and passion respectively. (Ambedkar 105) Being ill-matched; result in disharmony in their marital life. Sita analyses Raman's associates as animals – “They are nothing - but appetite and sex” (Desai 47) whereas Raman who is a conformist finds his clients just like himself and finds, ‘Sita’ to be a non-conformist in everything.(Goel 39) They are different from each other because of being reared in two different environments. Raman was a product of a family which provided him security, love and all the comforts, material and emotional were taken care of, whereas Sita's father was a rebel and instead of providing her security, he abandoned the family. Sita fails to adjust in her in-laws' house and her introvert nature does not allow her to establish harmonious relationship with them. Sita detests their eating habits, because according to her they gave too much time to preparing, planning, eating food, whereas at the island, where she spent her childhood, nobody bothered about food. Though Sita's in-laws are ready to accept her in the family and are ready to adjust to her, yet the rift occurs due to her own aggressive and provocative nature. To Sita, her in-laws' vegetarian complacency is suffocating, so they start living separately in another flat in Bombay. Sita refuses to form any bonds of affection with people around her because they too repel her with their insularity, complacency, aggression and violence. Sita was a deprived child and as a result she became an introvert which was a resultant of lack of a mother and sister, broadly speaking a girl companion and a loving care and sympathy of a father. Her childhood experiences made her an introvert, and make her experience the loss of a sense of identity, belonging and confidence and as a result, she begins to suspect and reject all overtures of togetherness or communication by others. Raman's reaction to his wives emotional outbursts was a mixture of puzzlement, weariness, fear and finally a resigned acceptance to her abnormality. The meeting point between fantasy and realism, reason and unreason is so uncertain that she is often designated as 'mad' by Raman, (Goel 36) for whom reality has only one way the logical way. In contrast to Sita's non-conformity, comes the conformity of Raman who by nature avoids excesses, chooses the middle way, believes in order, regularity and safety of the daily routine. Sita herself observes this about Raman that life and business must go on.

Raman had made his choice to accept rather than reject the dictates of society, but Sita refuses to accept the authority of the society. Their diverse attitude towards life and their lack of understanding cause lack of co-operation. Raman tries to judge things from a male perspective and according to him Sita has no reason to be discontented with life for she had a comfortable home, children and a smooth life. According to him "a woman's role is limited to the archetypal role of a wife and mother” (Bande 180) and that her success as a woman is in her living thriving children. But limiting her world to the four walls of her house, to kitchen, bedroom, sex, babies and position in the society is not what Sita wanted. She feels it to be a threat to her existence and individuality and rebels against the stereotype image of a woman as wife, mother and strives to comprehend herself as a full woman with an identity of her own. Monotonous routine of domestic life gets on to her and to get rid of her boredom and as a rebellion, she starts smoking, which instead of improving her situation deteriorates it and results in her mental frustration and thus her desire to escape from her present day mundane life strengthens: Sita's hysteric outbursts and her inability to mingle with the society detaches her from her husband and children. Sita resorts to weeping to give vent to her emotions and goes berserk if she hears anything contrary to her views. Whatever shocks Sita is something natural and

normal for Raman, as they differed in their attitude towards life. "At the root of the husband wife conflict there is the theme of tradition versus modernism." (Dutt 182)

When it becomes difficult for Sita to exist in a state of mental solitariness, she steps out of the houses to go to the island-Manori. She fails to give false assurance to her children and is unable to tell a lie to her husband that she loved him the most but is candid enough to tell him that she had only one happy moment in her married life and that was the sight of a Muslim couple sitting together in the hanging garden. Sita fails to hide her attraction towards the foreigner whose attitude matches her own and who possesses her desired attributes. To Sita he seemed "so brave, not knowing anything but going on nevertheless." She speaks too often of his courage expressed through his unplanned direction, for she too longs to be free and not be bounds by the norms and values that the family and society demands. Her attraction towards the love of the Muslim couple brings out the fact that she too longed for an ecstatic moment, which was absent in her life. Her search for ecstasy and perfect love, instead of love based on mutual reciprocity symbolizes her love for art.

Age and motherhood alone do not give her mental and emotional security for she still longs for the resolution of her mental dilemmas and relives her childhood experiences in the hope that, may be a retrospective journey will provide relief to her tormented self. Manori island fascinates her for it would bring her enjoyment, music and laughter making her forget her anguish, though momentarily. She is beguiled by the idea of going back to the island for it will serve as a sanatorium after having lost the feeling of security on the mainland. "She tries to run away from the harshness of reality to safety of the womb." (Meitei 48) She is guided by an illusion that reality can be replaced by fantasy and that she may succeed in saving her foetus from being born. She escapes to the island at a time when she needs the services of a doctor. She hides her real purpose of going to the island calling it a religious mission where as she wanted to save herself from falling apart and retain her individuality. Her search for Identity is the outcome of a situation which contradicts her aspirations and annihilates her. There is also a clash between tradition and modernism. Sita's root lies in tradition followed by her father and existing in Manori island. Her marriage to Raman threatens her very root of existence. Sita's parents also set a wrong example to her. Sita leaves the mainland to practice his social theories on the island and Sita's mother deserts her husband to go to a religious place Banaras, which results in Sita's desertion of her family and its security in a moment of crisis Sita takes her children Menaka and Karan against their wishes thinking they will soothe her in her loneliness. She imagines that the tides of the sea would turn them into softer beings and the trees of the island would shade them and protect them. Raman's inability to accompany her to the island makes her happy for it symbolized freedom for her which is an indication of their inability to forge a spiritual relationship and that they were related to each other only at a superfluous level.

In her enthusiasm to go to the island, she becomes oblivious to the effects of the journey full of jolts and jerks, due to uneven path and the effect it will have on the child in the womb, whom she wants to protect. The journey full of jolts and jerks symbolises that the journey to the self is not going to be an easy one, as she wants to attain the unattainable. She ignores the dirt of the island and imagines it to be picturesque. The sight of the women wearing colourful dresses who come to the village tank turned green due to moss is also ignored by her. Sita who once disliked children playing in the dirt in the street in the absence of a park now neglects this aspect at Manori. The chattering geese and other aspects of nature in the form of hissing palm trees which are indicative of the ensuing hardships and difficulties of the island are ignored by her. But when Sita reached the house a kind of disappointment sets in because of the house being devoid of basic amenities. It is unkempt, full of ash, dust spider webs and is unfurnished. Without food and a servant and a comfortable bed and light she is constantly reminded of the Bombay flat but her ego takes on a stronger hold and she dismisses them as irrelevant, even though she is accused by her children through their actions and gestures. Depriving the children of basic necessities in life, she moves one step further away from them. The difficulty Sita faces in settling down in the island symbolizes the difficulties inherent in her effort to settle the doubts in her mind and reach equilibrium. When Sita collects rainwater to drink and cooks jack fruit which the children dislike, she starts feeling guilty and holds herself responsible for depriving them of life in their flat in Bombay, a life that is right, natural and is acceptable to them.

The magic of the island which existed in her memory disappears and her father who led an ascetic life was no more a legend. Sita is reminded of the other side of his life and recalls the incestuous relationship he had with Phoolmaya. Sita, though respected her father but she never dared to talk to him. Thus Sita “harbours a deep distrust and fear of the male in her unconscious mind” (Desai 76) which adversely affects her relationship with Raman. Sita is reminded of how he distributed powdered gold amongst the villagers and deprived her of her right as a daughter by not taking care of her. The existence of a mistress in his life and desertion of her mother further lowers him in Sita's eyes and then she realizes that his followers were outcasts, and they also left one by one and his only son Jivan also abandoned him. Rekha, Sita's step sister also felt relieved after his death.

Seeing her father's illogical unexplained and unmotivated ways, Sita too grew up to be an illogical being. Sita arrived at the island, to achieve the miracle of not giving birth because Manori was thought to be an island of miracles. She had at first believed that Manori is an island of magic and that he might be able to work another miracle, but the spell of the island ends and Sita starts seeing things in a different perspective. At one point, to Sita her flat in Bombay and its surroundings with its characters represented for her the prose of life while the island stood for spiritual peace and a manifestation of individualism, but now. Sita realized that at the island too, life was monotonous, dull and stagnant. The leaking roof of the house and falling parts of the building make her feel the importance, safety and security of the Bombay flat. Sita starts neglecting her children to such an extent that she could not even save Karan from Miriam who was so violent in showing her love to Karan and seeing the attitude of their mother, they eagerly wait for their father to bring back security in their lives.

When Moses and Miriam sense the rift between Sita and Raman they discourage Sita in this path of separation and non-chalance through their changed behaviour in the form of disobedience and neglect of duty, making her realize that life on the island was harsh and that she should return to her husband's house. Even Miriam and Moses expect Sita to conform to the age old traditional role assigned to a woman. Miriam and Moses represent the society in their actions for the society does not accept readily a woman who seeks identity and emancipation.

The tragedy of Sita is due to her “constitutional inability to accept the values and the attitude of society and her irreconcilable temperament.”(Rao 49-50) Sita the fulcrum of the novel represents the modern educated woman who wants an identity of her own. The poem of Cavafy urges her to say 'No' to compromises. Her ego does not allow her to tell her husband and children of her love for them but instead she wants to be acknowledged by them. When Raman reaches the island, Sita wants to express her happiness by wearing the sari Raman likes, but she does not do so, because that would show her weakness and defeat. She wants her children to tell her that they enjoyed their stay on the island, but instead they seemed too eager to go to Bombay, to their, “old routine, old friends, the city comforts and customs.”(Desai 137) This hurts Sita's ego and she starts speaking harshly to everybody after learning that Menaka has asked Raman to come and fetch them. Sita feels that she had been deserted and conspired against by her husband and children. Sita starts hurting her children and husband with her words saying that marriage is a farce. Menaka and Karan are shocked to hear from her that “children only mean anxiety, concern - pessimism. Not happiness.” (Desai 147) Ironically, the woman who hated violence uses the same herself because there is no greater violence than hurting the feelings of your near and dear knowingly and intentionally, for the sake of one's own ego. But her anger towards her husband and children is temporary. Sita realises that she is not the only sufferer, but her husband suffered from anxieties as well, and worries regarding her, the unborn child, the children in Bombay and the factory, but he never grumbled about it because of his choice to accept rather than to reject the dictates of society. Sita finds her final resolution in D.H. Lawrence's poem 'End of another Home Holiday. (Sharma 94) She feels happy to learn that Raman despite of all his responsibilities in Bombay, he leaves them behind and comes to fetch them. Even though she realizes that her escape to the island was an act of cowardice, but she does not accept it and says that she was courageous though negatively. She compares herself to a Jelly fish, objective but formless. Towards the end of the novel she agrees with Raman that "life is only a matter of disappointment, not disaster.”(Desai 143) She realizes that life means continuity and in spite of its nastiness, brutishness and boredom, should be lived. Sita is ready to accept the challenge of life, which is full of betrayals and treacheries and there is no escape from them, as these are elements that penetrate a person as air and water do.

She finally decides to give up her wish for secluded, isolated life and accept the world as it is. One could also say that she sees her triumph in Raman's eagerness to adjust with her by leaving his business in Bombay and live on the island. This assures her of Raman's love and concern for her. Raman's decision of giving priority to his family symbolizes the triumph of traditional values. Sita's decision to go back to Bombay symbolizes her acceptance of striking a balance between individuality and tradition, between self and society. Earlier on she behaved like a non-conformist by breaking social norms, by smoking and asserting herself. She called marriage and all other human relationships as farce but then she realizes that life is a continual process of sacrifice, of conforming, adjustment and compromises and that beauty lies not only in acceptance but in adjustment as well. She tries to strike a balance by accepting the institution of marriage and maternity. Sita realizes the difference between necessity and wish, between what a man wants and what he is supposed to do. Her desire to bear the child and return with Raman to the mainland signifies her return to life, community and society in spite of its debased dullness.

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