

Theme Of Reconciliation in Anita Desai's *WHERE SHALL WE GO THIS SUMMER* - A Study

V.Sridevi

INTRODUCTION

Anita Desai undoubtedly holds a prominent position among the contemporary writers of Indo – Anglican fiction. She is a bold and experimental novelist with a new sense and vibrant richness. Much attention is given to the emotional crisis of her protagonists who live in a chaotic society. She delves deep to find out the factors responsible for such a despair and attempts to suggest solutions to overcome it. From her novels, it is clear that she,

possesses one of the healthiest and psychologically most balanced minds in the realm of Indo – Anglican fiction and the sanity of her tastes and attitudes, is almost exemplary, a point worth emulation for her fellow religionists in the field of writing. (Tripathy 1)

As a woman writer she does not profess to be a feminist and yet she voices the fears and concerns, the hopes and aspirations of her characters in her own artistic way. She is deeply fascinated in exploring the social structure through the central characters in her novels. She is a minute observer of the society existing around her, perceiving everything minutely and delicately so that the situations can be presented in a poetic style.

Anita Desai differs from other Indian novelists such as R K Narayan , Mulkraj Anand , Bhabani Battacharya, Raja Rao in her set of language and style that she employs to portray the inner crisis and tension existing in the life of a character.

With her novel **Cry, the Peacock** Anita Desai entered the field of novel – writing and was shot to fame immediately. **Where shall we go this summer?** is her fourth novel which depicts the inner – outer world of its female lead Sita and her fatigue for life. The husband-wife alienation, temperamental incompatibility, feeling of despair and loneliness are recurring themes in the novels of Anita Desai. This novel deals with the discord in the family of Raman and Sita because of their failure to adjust themselves. Both of them differ in their attitudes of life. One is matter of fact, practical and the other highly emotional given to sentimentality making much of even ordinary incidents. Sita, the heroine suffers mental agony like Maya, in **Cry, the Peacock** or Monisha in **Voices in the city**.

This powerful work of fiction by Anita Desai represents the predicament of a lonely married woman who aspires to triumph over the chaos and suffering of her rather unusual existence. This is a deeply engrossing and disturbing novel with an inner fury which reflects the problems of life in this modern society. The novel which is shorter in size but deeper in meaning is divided into three parts: Part one, Monsoon '67; Part two, Winter '47; Part Three, Monsoon' 67; each section of the novel is concerned with the particular season, time and space.

The beginning section assimilates us on the island Manori and manifests the present time of Sita's life. The second section connects us with the events of her past life and the concluding section evinces what she has accepted as her fortune of future life. Sita, a sensitive, over-emotional, middle aged woman, saddled with her four children and pregnant for the fifth time feels alienated from her husband and children because of her high strung 'sensibility and explosive emotionality'. She is fed up with her life and could not tolerate the violence she sees in daily life. Her introversion and inability to adjust with the society makes her feel alienated and this alienation is quiet natural and dispositional. Raman, on the other hand is a 'practical' man always sane, rational and passive. Like Gautama, Maya's

husband in **Cry, the Peacock**, Raman, fails to understand his wife Sita as he is made of a different stuff. According to R. S. Pathak,

The marital discord results chiefly from the dichotomy between two irreconcilable temperaments and diametrically opposite view points represented by Sita and her husband Rama.(28)

Part One of the novel begins with the arrival of Sita and her two children Karan and Menaka to the island. She occupies the house in Manori. The reason for her coming to Manori is to achieve the miracle of keeping her baby unborn. The reasons which led her to her leaving the city are discussed. She is much agitated over even ordinary events of life. Her morbid fear of the people in the city and the emotional alienation from her husband led her to the island. She considers the world wicked and full of destructions and does not want to give birth to her baby in this cruel world.

Part two of the novel describes her life before marriage in the island. She spent her childhood with her father in a big house in Manori. As her father was a freedom fighter, he did not remain in one place and at last when freedom was achieved, they settled down in Manori. Everybody in the island had great respects for him. He set an ashram in his house and many followed his ideals and principles. He was considered to be a legend in Manori with his new ideas and magic cures. The people of Manori had immense faith on Sita's father and approached him for all their problems. As Sita's mother had deserted them, it is her father took care of Sita, her sister Rekha and brother Jeevan. The children lived in the midst of the crowd, as their house would be always crowded by men and women who come to their father for medicines.

Part Three of the novel is a continuation of the first one. Her initial enthusiasm that the island will work miracles on her is slowly waning. Her

children, who lived in the city comfortably, could not adjust with the life in the island, accuse Sita and regard life on the island as madness. They want to escape from that island to their ‘beloved’ city. So, Menaka without the knowledge of Sita writes a letter to Raman to come and take them home. When Raman arrives, Sita is reluctant in leaving the island and after much conflict, Sita, goes back to Bombay to live with her children and husband. Her expectation of a miracle in the island did not happen and she joined her family in the city . Sita and Raman are the two different poles where there is no attraction but repulsion always .Raman is an ordinary man who has a practical commonsense approach to life .But Sita is a woman who gets disturbed easily and fails to adjust with her family and society.

Anita Desai tries to show the anxiety of Sita who suffers because of her biased attitude towards life. Sita is over-sensitive who finds herself confined in the urban life after leading a carefree life in rural area under the protection of her father the artificialities , fast pace and harshness of city life nauseate her to such an extent that she longs to go back to island where she has cherished all the delicacies of rural life and where she thinks her roots are. After being taken away from her father and her place , she feels the void and expects more love and care from her husband Raman.

She feels insecure and finds everything wrong with Raman
He had nothing more to give her, or he was just unaware of
her needs and demands. He raised his hand and stroked Karan’s
hair with a gentleness she herself ached to attract, and stared
at him, bored into him with her eyes, wanting and not being
given what she wanted. (132)

Sita craves for love from Raman and wants him to pamper her like her father, whereas, Raman who is pragmatic in his approach fails to understand her. Sita

unable to understand this continues accusing her husband and dislikes her kids for being like their father – practical and insensitive. She is a bit abnormal and introvert. She wants to escape from the brutal realities and harsh facts of human life. She forgets that life is one part full of violence, suffering and pain.

Treasons, betrayals and treacheries are mixed up with pleasure, joy and happiness to colour it. She is not satisfied with her present life that she decides to leave for Manori. Raman tries to enlighten her mind about the ‘contraries’ in life, saying “other people put up with it – it’s not so – so insufferable.” (143) But she lacks courage, practical knowledge and wisdom which make others believe that “life must be continued, and all its business...why can’t you? Perhaps one should be grateful if life is only a matter of disappointment, not disaster.”(143)

Sita always prefers to live alone with her husband away from his friends and relatives. She could never tolerate Raman’s friends visiting them for she feels ‘appalled’ and ‘frightened’ by the guests. Their guests were his business associates who according to Raman are pleasant and tolerable. He regards them with little humour and with restraint. But to Sita, “they are ‘nothing’ – nothing but appetite and sex. Only food, sex and money matters. Animals” (47). She uses harsh words about her guests and calls them “pariahs... in the streets, hanging about drains and dustbins waiting to pounce and kill and eat” (47) She never got used to anyone, not with his friends or with his relatives. When they lived in the first years of their married lives with his family in Queens Road, she had great problem in getting along with his relatives and even after moving to this new flat in the city, too she has not changed itself.

She is a symbol of nature and cannot adjust with the mechanical world. She seems to be an ‘odd one’ where she is alienated from her family and society. She is upset by the sight of crows feeding on a young eagle. Immediately she rushes for a toy gun of Karan and uses it on the crows to keep them away from

the poor eagle. Her childish behaviour that she has exhibited in this incident throws light on her innocent nature. She failed in her attempts to save the eagle from the crows and later when Raman came to know about this, he took it lightly. In the morning, there was nothing on the ledge but some feathers and stains of blood. Raman said, "They've made a good job of your eagle. Look at the feathers sticking out of that crow's beak."(41)

Raman seems to have a very 'practical' view of life and nothing disturbs him in anyway. His nature is exactly opposite to that of Sita's who takes anything and everything seriously. She feels that the outside world is filled with cruelty and destructions .For her ,the city is nothing but a place of madness where children enact scenes from movies, fight with each other , even the grown up quarrel in the road side dumps. She is shocked at the behavior of ayahs, who in an uncivilized manner indulge in cheap quarrels in the streets. She is shocked when she sees the destructive element in her children's behaviour. She watches Menaka, her daughter crumble a sheet of new buds and unable to bear the sight of such destruction shouts at her. She is upset when Menaka destroys her paintings which she has drawn with great care and were really good too.

Sita as s symbol of nature finds herself a stranger in that atmosphere. She feels disturbed by this chaotic and violent society. She finds fault with everyone around her and even with her own children and husband. She feels that the world around her is not moving according to her whims and fancies and can no more offer security to her. As Jasbir Jain remarks, "whole aberrance of life in Bombay is triggered off by the violence around her."(79)

The husband wife alienation forms the basis of the novel as Raman and Sita differ a lot in their temperaments. Sita always accuses Raman for his lack of understanding and Raman, could never understand the emotional state of Sita and he considers her deeds as immature and foolish ones. Sita appears to be a

woman of contradictory thoughts. She is a woman of complex character and even Raman her husband could not understand her. She does not want her child to be born in this violence filled society. She says that she does not want her baby to be born.

When Raman asks her about abortion she shouts “mad! You’re quite mad. Kill the baby? It ‘s all I want. I want to keep it, don’t you understand.”(35) Raman is totally confused with her words and says, “You just said you don’t want it. Now you say you do want it. What’s up? What’s up?”(35) Raman is an ordinary husband who like any other man has great care for his family. He is indeed an affectionate husband who cares for his wife and this is evident in his reluctance to send Sita to Manori. When she wants to escape to Manori, Raman with all care for his wife and baby says,

You must stay where there is a doctor, a
Hospital, and a telephone. You can’t go
The island in the middle of the monsoon.
You can’t have a baby there.(33)

Sita loses all feminine, all maternal belief in child birth. She does not want her child to be born in this chaotic, violent society. She fears it as one more act of violence and murder in the world.

Srivastava observes:

The incident in which a number of crows assault and kill
an eagle becomes symbolic of Sita’s own plight amid violence
so much prevalent in society.(XXXVi)

Her neurotic fears and anxieties make her aware of the violence around her that she wants to escape to her island where, she believes a miracle could happen.

When Raman, as usual asks the question, 'Where shall we go this summer?', Sita immediately responds 'to Manori' and

Fed up with the dreary metropolitan life in Bombay
and tormented by the 'paranoiac' fear of her fifth and reluctant
pregnancy she leaves for Manori islet off the Moris mainland. (Swain 21-22)

Sita's character can be evaluated in the light of her childhood experiences. She is a motherless child and she experienced partiality, neglect, indifference right from the beginning of her childhood. Sita's father has no time for his children and especially Sita did not get even a drop of his love and care. It was Rekha, Sita's sister who was close to his heart. She always has a doubt about Rekha and her relationship with her, for there is no resemblance between the two sisters. When she learns that Rekha is not her sister, from Jivan she is upset that "his words had dropped on her skin like acid..."(79)

Sita always feels discarded and unwanted. Due to her father's partiality she is deprived of Rekha's company also. Her much suppressed emotions in her childhood is responsible for her perturbed mental state in future. The indifference of her father, alienation from sister, lack of love and care from her mother has made many psychological changes in her. Soon after their father's death the family disintegrates. Rekha, leaves, without even shedding a drop of tear, Jivan vanishes without any sign and only Sita remains to marry Raman.

Family plays a vital role in the growth and development of individual and broken homes definitely has its worse effect on an individual. Sita is one such victim who because of her bitter experiences in her childhood alienates herself from everything around her.

The betrayal of her husband, his family, her children and acquaintances violently tears her apart only, later does she starts feeling bad about her doings. Raman criticizes her for her wrong doings and tries to draw her attention to the trauma and tensions she has caused her family. When Raman prepares to leave Manori, she mends her ways and follows his footprints.

She lowered her head and searched out his footprints so that she could place her feet in them, as a kind of game to make walking back easier, and so her footprints, mingled with his.(150)

The magic and charm of the island has vanished and instead of silence and peace Sita experiences unrest. They are frightened by the threatening weather and feels that her visit to the island is an act of madness. She realizes that,

life in Bombay is the reality, the island represents a stage world, an act of imagination or make belief, a world which collapses on close contact.(Jasbir 87)

Sita is forced to accept the reality and she is confused.

how could she tell, how decide? Which
half of her life was real and which unreal?
which of her selves was true, which false? All she knew
was that there were two periods of her life, each in direct
opposition to the other.(153)

She believed that she could get satisfaction in the island, but she could not achieve it the island too. She is unable to achieve temeperamental compatibility with her husband at home and now in Manori she is unable to achieve the same

with her children. At last wisdom dawns on her and she wants to return to reality. She had come to the island,

...in search of some magical solution. But she realizes that
There cannot be a solution to man's indifference in the pervading
Menace around, she chooses to return and face life.(Singh 158)

Finally, Sita realizes that illusion and reality are two sides of life and they cannot be separated. 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 lines means certain death
and in the end, Sita opts for life – with compromise.(21)

Unlike Maya in **Cry, the peacock**, Sita neither commits suicide nor kills anyone but she simply gets compromised with her destiny.

As Hariom Prasad observes:

sita has come to accept the prosaic nature of life which runs
through difficult human situations in different ways. She finds
the courage to face life, in the end, with all its ups and downs.(119)

Sita's character has been portrayed in such a way that it represents the predicament of a modern married woman in the society. She initially escapes from reality and later reconciles to the circumstances.

Desai's heroines often act violently but in this novel there is a positive change. Sita reconciles herself to her lot. She strikes a perfect balance between her inner self and outer world. Unlike Maya's her alienation is not temperamental or environmental. Ramachandra Rao rightly observes:

The novel may, thus, be seen as a parable on the inability
Of human beings, to relate the inner with the outer, the
individual with the society.(59)

Anita Desai's novels are certainly reflective of social realities. But she does not dwell like others on social issues. She delves deep into the forces that condition the growth of a female in this patriarchal male dominated society. She observes social realities from a psychological perspective without posing herself as a social reformer. Her novels are studies of the inner life of characters and her talent lies in the description of minute things that are usually unnoticed. The novels of Anita Desai are 'modern' in the very sense of the word suggested by Irving Howe. Meena Belliappa writes "the focus of interest has shifted from girlish romance to a more complex search for value in human relationship." (52)

Anita Desai has handled the theme of reconciliation skillfully in this novel that it reflects our modern society in too many ways. Sita's character is a reflection of a modern woman in this changing materialistic world.

M. SRIDEVI
Lecturer in English
Velammal Engineering College
Chennai-66
sridevim2005@yahoo.co.in

References:

Desai, Anita. **Where shall we go this summer?** New Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 1982.

Belliappa, Meena. **Anita Desai: A Study of her Fiction**, Calcutta: writers workshop, 1971. 50-60

Jain, Jasbir. **Stairs to the Attic: The novels of Anita Desai**. Jaipur: Printwell Publishers, 1987.

Pathak, R. S. “The Alienated Self in the novels of Anita Desai”, **Indian Women Novelists**, set. I, vol.II, ed. R.K. Dhawan. New Delhi: Prestige Books, 1991.

Prasad, Hariom. “Anita Desai’s Where shall we go this summer?, As a critique of Existentialism”, **Studies in Indian Writing in English**, ed. Rajeshwar Mittapalli. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2004. 112-119

Rao, Ramachandra B. **The Novels of Anita Desai**. Ludhiana: Kalyani, 1977. 59-62.

Srivastava, Ramesh K. **Six Indian Novelists in English**, Amristar: Guru Nanak Dev University, 1987.(221-230)

Swain, S.P. "The Dialectics of Marital Polarisation in Anita Desai's Cry, the peacock", **Studies in Indian Writing in English**. ed. Rajeshwar Mittapalli. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2000. 95-111

Tripathy, J.P. **The Mind and the Art of Anita Desai**. Bareilly: Prakash Book Depot, 1986.