ALIENATION, DISINTEGRATION, AND SYMBOLISM IN ANITA DESAI’S ‘WHERE SHALL WE GO THIS SUMMER’

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ABSTRACT
Anita Desai, a great Indian novelist depicts the predicament of betrayal of men women relationship, female sensibility and quest for identity. Her works also portrays light on the contour of colour and image through which she engages the eyes of reader on the aspect of environmental reading. We find close connection between women and environment in her readings. The dualism between men/nature, nature/culture, women/nature, and men/women is studied in her one of the great novels “Where Shall we go this summer”. The novel paints the role of women character Sita and her extreme sensitivity, alienation from her husband and loneliness. The theme of alienation and disintegration, a result of maladjustment and incompatible mental attitudes. It is the story of Sita, who like her other woman protagonists is trying to balance life and death, withdrawal and attachment, sharing and withholding. This paper highlights women’s psychology on the grounds of stained glass landscape with the images of nature. I declare that it’s an original work and it has not been published anywhere.

Keywords: Mental Attitude; Women Character

INTRODUCTION
Anita Desai, a famous Anglo-Indian writer for whom writing is a form of self-expression. Through her writings, she does not only show her concern with women but she holds a mirror to assert women’s rights, identity, and equality. Desai herself comments about her works: “In countless small ways the scenes and settings certainly belong to my life. Many of the minor characters and incidents are also based on real life. But the major characters and the major events are either certainly imaginary or an amalgamation of several characters and happenings. One can use the raw material of life only very selectively. It is common among writers to pick out something from real life and develop their situation around it; while there are others who start from some real experiences… you use it as a base but don’t confine yourself to it”.¹

Where Shall We Go This Summer deals with the theme of alienation and disintegration, a result of maladjustment and incompatible mental attitudes. It is the story of Sita, who like her other woman protagonists is trying to balance life and death, withdrawal and attachment, sharing and withholding. Sita is a woman in search of self. It is a continuous struggle to achieve harmony between the inner and the outer world. With four children, a husband, a house, Sita is in search of her identity. Sita drifts from a young girl, from a familiar island, to a wife and mother, to the unfamiliar city where she suffers from an acute sense of alienation.

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Sita’s fifth pregnancy not only brings physical changes but deep psychological pangs. At this juncture she is able to reconstruct the past in her mind and it is only when the predicament of the present takes over that the time past is forced to resign itself to the time present.

Sita wants to retreat back to Manori, her father’s miracle island. She finds it tedious to live in the city which implies ‘solidity’ of streets and ‘security’ of houses. There is nothing but dullness and hopeless disappointment. She does not want to deliver her baby with the fear of the baby losing its innocence in this world. She retreats to the island with a strong faith of withholding the baby and keeping it away from the cruel world:

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 once, worked miracles of a kind… She had come on a pilgrimage, to beg for the miracle of keeping her baby unborn.

Sita had not reacted in this manner during her earlier pregnancies. She had looked forward to the time of giving birth and had enjoyed it. She had found self satisfaction through her children. They helped her to release her restless energies. But this time she perceives a terrifying feeling of loss with the birth. She does not want to lose the precious, pure self, so well protected in the womb, into this insensitive world where human existence in not given much importance. She finds too much of aggression in the indifferent society. Sita’s outbursts are not understood by Raman. He tries to reassure her but it has no effect. She displays an agony which he finds unbecoming of her and is puzzled with it, feels weary, but resigns to accept her abnormality. The children also accommodate to the practical world of their father and adapt to the dirt and violence. They not only separate themselves from her, but also reject her. Sita could not accept the world full of blood and violence. She feels “Destruction came so naturally; that was the horror”. The operative cannibalism that normally goes unseen and unobserved can no longer be tolerated by Sita. She is unable to reconcile herself to the persistent violence, she wants to change not only the society but the facts of nature too. Sita wants to offer her unborn child an alternative.

The theme of life and death is predominant throughout the novel. The images of brutality and violence are visible not only in explicitly violent acts, but in the forms of behavior which reflect violence. The violence operating within finds expression in subtler forms of cruelty. The conflict between Sita’s sensitive self and the insensitive world is objectified through a series of situations which convey tension and conflict, forcing Sita to withdraw her wounded and bruised soul in its protective shell.

Sita identifies herself with the proud defiant eagle. Her act of scaring the crows with her son’s toy gun appears to be a carefully arranged and willfully created ‘act of drama’ for her husband and her children. The death of the eagle is announced with triumph by her husband. “They have made a good job of your eagle,” … “Perhaps it flew away? She cried, knowing it had not”.

Sita revolts against this violence which Raman had accepted naturally. She refuses to accept the authority of the society where violence and danger are the inherent characteristics. Raman has no intention of rejecting the dictates of society but Sita wants to choose her own way. The long wearied years of marriage and motherhood, make her aware of the uselessness of life. She feels alienated as her husband and children are unable to understand her emotions. She finds no happiness in human relationships, so she desires to prevent the cycle of experience that make suffering and violence possible. Sita, is tired discharging her duties and obligations towards her husband and children. Her extreme frustration seems to be disintegrating her. Her children’s attitude towards her is terribly frustrating. In her extreme moments of depression, she finds no possibility of another torturous child birth, followed by the responsibility of rearing another being, who would, like her other children, reject her as a mad woman. The age factor, her being forty, also goes against her physical capacity.

Sita has reached a stage of “inwardness”, and her refusal is symptomatic of her frustration and disappointment with life. Sita does not want her baby to go through the torture of child birth. Infact the
reality remains that keeping the baby in her womb is an existential necessity for her. Sita knows the impossibility of her wish, but she wants to fulfill her desire to go to her father’s island. She has not been able to detach herself completely from the memories of her childhood. Sita thinks it to be inseparable. She wants to return to her childhood, to the island and one can say return to the mother’s womb as there is no peace outside the womb.

Sita finds the system of not giving birth perfect, as what is not real tends to be perfect, reality is full of lapses and draw backs. Her strange, insane impatience and hopefulness once again intensify in her the desire to recapture her imagined experience and excitement when she meets a foreigner, waiting in the wrong side of the road, for a lift to Ajanta. She finds him to represent an innocence, uncorrupted by experience. She identifies herself with him, as like him she too is waiting endlessly:

“I” am waiting, she agreed – although for what, she could not tell: for the two halves of this grey egg – world to fall apart and burst into festival fireworks, a woman’s seaweed hair or bloodstained feathers? For the revolution of the world to alter in one mighty swing that would fling them all, tiny grey sand-lice, into icy space? Somewhere such indiscretion, inspiration, and force. But, it, she came to tell, she would live on, smothered by this endlessly damp, soft grey sand, and it seemed that these years of her life were dyed, coloured through, with the colour of waiting. It was not a pure colour – it was tinged at times with anxiety, at others with resignation. Or with frenzy, patience, grimness, fear…she herself was…living monument to waiting.

Sita was waiting for a life without indifference and aggression. She wants to, withdraw herself from her husband’s home to her father’s island Marori. The temporal sequence of the text highlights her internal self and her anxiety. She goes to the island after twenty years. She makes a self-conscious attempt to recreate the past and retrieve the life on the island of more than twenty years ago. Her first journey was with her father in her childhood, immediately after India’s Independence. Her second journey explains her predicament and her disenchantment with life.

Sita is fully aware that her quest for lost beauty and innocence is bound to be doomed as a failure but she finds an urgent need to alter the present. She wants to live in the past. The island once again becomes her dream, a vision that would be able to fulfil her wish. The second section of the novel reflects on Sita’s childhood. She entered this island father, her siblings and her father’s disciples, in the winter of 1947, after India attained Independence. This entry to the island announces a peaceful life as contrast to the pre-independence life, full of turmoil and insecurity.

Sita’s loneliness and alienation set in when her suspicions are enhanced by her inability to enter his world, as he preferred incestuously, his eldest child Rekha. The father seemed to be obsessed with Rekha’s talent, her was always oblivion to the other two children.

Observing that it was always across the older sister’s solid shoulders that he placed his arm when they descended from the terrace to the casuarinas grove and strolled out across the beach to watch the sun melt into the sea and the ‘chelas’ pelt each other with sand-pies, observing how it was always her guarded eyes he met during a moving passage in the morning’s devotional songs, observing how he stretched out his hand and squeezed her fingers when and charades – perhaps it was no unusual prick of jealousy that chilled Sita.

Sita was always aware of how different she was from Rekha and Jeevan, her young brother. Sita proudly found herself and Jeevan a contrast to Rekha’s dragging jaw, thickly round shoulders, drooping eyelids. She and Jeevan, though ragged and wild, were quick and sprang and danced on the veranda, unlike Rekha, who never appeared to move. Sita had to admit Rekha’s superiority, her one glory, a gift, she could sing. Rekha’s singing, in the attic that was the prayer room, early in the morning, became a nightmare for Sita, as her voice kept her father involved with her always.
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Sita grows up with the mystery of her mother’s absence. The absence of the mother and father were taken for granted in the early years as the father spent a lot of time in prison. Sita fails to solve the puzzle of her absence when every thing else seemed settled and peaceful on the island.

Undoubtedly life seemed complete at the superficial level. Slowly she recognizes the lacuna created in her life by her mother’s absence. Her identification with her mother is incomplete because of no contact with her:

Sita was not really a child at the time – in another environment she might have already been regarded as a young woman, but she had lived a strange life, an unusual life, that had the effect of making her withdraw into the protective chrysalis of childhood for longer than is usual for most. She saw the island as a piece of magic, a magic mirror – it was so bright, so brilliant to her eyes after the tensions and shadows of her childhood.

Sita steps into youth in the absence of a mother. She finds her father a man with magic and wants to be close to him but the vacant place beside her father is taken by her sister. Rekha’s natural accessibility and her inaccessibility to their father sets in the ‘heterosexual’ jealousy which leads to her missing the mother. The desire of contact with the mother is intensified by the mystery around her absence. She identifies herself to her mother. “I think perhaps that is the urge my mother felt when she ran to Benares … I had to run away, too – to the island”. With a mother who ran away leaving her, a father who is obsessed with his elder daughter, a brother who is self-entered and escapes, Sita spends her childhood and youth in isolation.

Sita had an abnormal childhood firstly because of her mother’s absence and an aura of doubt around her absence. Secondly, as a result of Gita, her elder sister’s relation with her father. Gita could have helped Sita as a mother, but on the contrary it is Geeta who is responsible for Sita’s abnormal childhood and the prolonged time to come out of childhood to youth. One undoubtedly agrees with Freud who attributes a lot of emphasis and importance to the placement of siblings in an enlarged family. It is not true only at the time of birth but it has its effect on an individual’s life throughout. Freud gives equal importance to the father-daughter relationship as to the mother-son relationship:

Things happen in just the same way the girls, with the necessary changes: an affectionate attachment to her father, a need to get rid of her mother as superfluous and to take her place, a coquetry which already employs the methods of later womanhood-these offer a charming picture, especially in small girls, which makes us forget the possibly grave consequences lying behind the infantile situation. We must not omit to add that the parents themselves often exercise a determining influence on the awakening of a child’s Oedipus attitude by themselves obeying the pull of sexual attraction, and that where there are several children the father will give the plainest evidence of his greater affection for his little daughter and mother for her son. But the spontaneous nature of the Oedipus complex in children cannot be seriously shaken even by this factor.

Sita’s position of being the youngest unconditionally places her near her father but we find it not happening with Sita. It is always her sister Gita, the father’s favourite. There is an air of coquetry when the father with half-closed eyes listens and appreciates Gita. Sita is quite aware of this fact, thus making her childhood and youth miserable. This misery follows her in her adulthood, her frustrations and rejection of life seem to be a result of her rejection by the father in childhood. The jealousy for the insincere sister leaves her restless. She wants to go back to the island in hope of having a direct and private contact with her father.

The mother’s absence, the sister’s indifference are enhanced by Sita’s disillusionment with her father. The world considers him to be a messiah, a savior, with a magic wand but Sita’s image about her father is scarred when she knows that her father’s “daylight, practical charisma had its underlit night-
time aspect(76). The disparity between the idealized image and the identified one lessens her respect for him. She wants to communicate and clarify but it is not possible because of the elder sister’s presence. Sita gets a final shock in her supposed recognition:

The rubies and pearls shocked her. In that always murmuring casuarina grove, that always animated house on the knoll with its meetings, its gathers, its music, its shift and flow of ideas and activities, she now felt herself separated for them, the chosen one, chosen by the ghost for a flashing vision of its jewels although it remained invisible and fleshless itself. Sita found herself turning into a wanderer, always in search of the ghost. Who, what was she?  

Sita becomes a vagrant spirit, separated from her mother, she is in search of the ghost, who is undoubtedly her mother. The withdrawn and restless Sita is always waiting. The mother’s ghost is validated by the sight of her father crushing her mother’s jewels for the so called treatment of the poor and ignorant. The island engulfed her in her youth, and her father’s truth also frightened her to such extreme that she had left it with a sense of relief. Sita experiences a hidden guilt at this relief, now beckons her to return back if she wanted to save the child from being born. Sita finds an urgent need to fulfill her wishes and longing by entering the island. She wants to revisit the island and realize what was the centre of her past that was crippling her parents. The only way to reconcile herself to the past was to re-enter her father’s island for revealing the truth.

The third section of the novel confronts Sita with the present reality. The past had become a magic refuge from the deary mainland, and the day to day life. nostalgia had created a need to find a sense of belongingness in Sita. Her return to the island and her children adapting to the island, gives her satisfaction and happiness that was short lived. With the baby’s birth time drawing closer Sita becomes self-absorbed, She finds herself closer to reality:

The children stared about them …… it was clear they accused her of every mishap and misfortune. Whenever she turned or looked up, she saw them staring at her, watching her as though waiting for her to break down and admit failure. To them, she realized with a painful sloughing-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

Sita realizes the fact of the matter, the island had nothing much to offer to their growing minds, it was capable of offering all of them a short change and respite. Sita realizes her changed relationship to the island. Twenty years back, it had provided her and her family a shelter and refuge. She grew up in that environment but her present responsibilities cannot be fulfilled on the island, thus her return to the mainland becoming a necessity. The present-day reality cannot be sustained in the Manori of her past. 

Sita was bored with the tedium of life on the mainland and hence makes this trip ton Manori. Staying on the island she becomes aware of her disillusionment with her immediate surroundings that had eluded her to make this return journey. She realizes the opposing forces existing between her and the children as: “they had no memory of its past glamour, and so she and they moved always in opposite direction” She understands the futility and hollowness of her actions.

Sita’s stay on the island not only enables her to discover her old joys but also helps her to reconcile herself to the mysterious past and future uncertainties. Sita finds a co-ordination between her inner state and her physical appearance, her external self. Anita Desai through Sita conveys the importance of self-realization. Sita’s disillusionment of the island in overcome with her present encounter with the island, as the island like a mother, provides her inner respite which teaches her to respond to life practically. The island provides her a nexus, as if she were back in her mother’s womb, warm and well-protected. Sita’s comfort provides her an ability to see within herself, her inner self resulting in enabling her to look out, to look beyond herself, making her aware of her responsibility.
Sita takes a daring step of returning to the island where she realizes her mistake, gets over the father obsession, and returns to the mainland with her husband and children to discharge her duties and obligations. Doing so she made no compromises with the duties, with the demands and requirements of the husband and children. The second journey to the island brings with it ‘a plethora of memories’ and becomes a turning point in her ‘reassessment of filial ties’.

Sita’s return to the island helps her to learn to make a pact with life. We witness her ranging moods from despair to helplessness, her struggle to have a sense of belonging and in the end a calm and graceful reconciliation as a final decision. Experiencing the island in full details, she realizes the need of bringing order in her disorderly life.

The wild storm and subsequently disrupted life on the island, reveal the hard fact to Sita. It brings forth an awareness of the importance to rhythmic pattern in which the seasons move. The island, that stood as a symbol of security. The island was perfect for a dream but reality required much more. Probably this urge of going back to the island was one of the changes due to her pregnancy when a woman wants to discard her daily routine. In the normal course, the woman’s skin, eyes, undergo a change during pregnancy but in Sita’s case she descended much more, to the depth of her inner self where she found it necessary to go back to the island.

The island seemed to hold a promise for Sita to resolve the dialectics of her situation but this is fulfilled partially. The island and its inhabitants seem to be indifferent to her absence as they reject her and do not need her. They find her a contrast to her father.

Moses finds her coming back an intrusion in his life. She is an unwelcome guest:

“She was mad,” Moses explained. “Got angry, too, like that, for nothing, all the time.”
Drank deeply and shook his head as if a fly bothered him. “ So angry always. Angry with me, angry with Miriam, angry because there was no food—always angry.”

Sita’s withdrawal to the island is a pursuit to recreate and reconcile to be inside her own self and fulfill her passion of” divine inseeing”. The island provides her the inner, womanly space, which was not possible at the mainland. She seems to have reconciled with her mother’s wondering ghost, with an intense desire of her daughter forgiving her father and then resuming her role as a mother. She is satisfied metaphysically and ready for her return to the mainland to give birth to her baby.

While in Bombay Sita thought of Raman as having taken her there to lead a life full of tedium and boredom. Twenty years after that, her return to the island makes her realize that he was the man who had saved her from the island, as she was left alone, and provided her with the security of the mainland. When she had accepted his offer the first time, it was a mere compromise and reconciliation, but accepting his second offer after twenty years is an acceptance of the limitations and constraints of her thinking and actions.

Sita’s return marks an end to her “pilgrimage”, as she calls it. The pilgrimage that was associated with consent has proved to be successful. She feels she has paid tribute to the neglected island of her father. She had a desire to meet her parents during her pregnancy, being satisfied with the fusion she ‘jumps out’ to transform herself out of this centre to other centres – as a wife and a mother. Sita has now learnt to live with outwardly what she could not accept inwardly.

We find a disparity between her desire to refuse and her inability to do so. Sita successfully ‘jumps out’ to acknowledge of the whole family. Her temporary ‘No’ helps her to repair her injured self. She finds it important to be practical like Raman, the reason why her children turned towards him and found him superior in courage and responsibility. She realizes that she is after all she is a coward. It brings forth a realization of the importance of her external duties along with the requirement of her inner self. The external world of her household is full of companions, her husband and children where no stranger can step into her inner world, it is only the island, that has fulfilled her yearning. She must return to accept life as it is. This acceptance puts an end to the family disintegration. There is reunion.
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