



Where Shall We Go This Summer? : Damaging Impacts of Violent Urban Culture.

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Abstract

Women novelists necessarily have a special way of looking at things because they live in severely confined spheres. The study of isolation experienced by women in a male dominated society is a significant modern trend. In the Indian society women are not allowed to play any active role in decision-making. They are ignored or brushed aside. In such a situation Desai tries to focus on the predicament of women in Indian society. Her women characters appear to be exceptionally talented, but constantly disturbed by family ties. As a result, they experience discomfort and feel trapped in an oppressive environment.

The most significant social issue that Anita Desai focuses on is the institution of marriage—particularly in the novels where woman is the protagonist. When a woman is married, she has only one way left that is to languish in misery. Every attempt that a woman makes to redefine herself inevitably ends up in lack of communication. This leads to the theme of alienation and she is engaged in exposing the labyrinths of the human mind and in indicating the ways to psychological fulfillment. Anita Desai explores the inner working of her protagonists' minds by unfolding the inner recesses and reveals the fundamental human condition by placing individuals in situations of extreme tension.

Key Words: Husband, Wife, Marriage, Communication, Psychology, Escape, Manori Island.

Introduction

In *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* the author exploits “the terror of facing single handed, the ferocious assaults of existence”(Desai 13). This is her favourite recurrent existential theme: husband-wife alienation and their attempted reconciliation. The novel treats the estranged relationship between Raman and Sita, an exploration of relationship between logical and illogical temperaments.

The story revolves around Sita and successfully brings out the two diametrically opposed viewpoints represented by her and her husband, Raman. Sita is an extremely sensitive and emotional middle aged woman who is alienated from her husband and children because of her intensely emotional reaction to even the most trifling things around her. Her existential sensibility and emotionality make her suffer from loneliness and isolation. “Hers is a case of incurable existentialist angst and agony boredom and ennui that ineluctably grip a modern-sensitive person” (Prasad 64).

In her fourth novel, *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* Mrs. Desai once again focuses on the fate of a sensitive female Sita who opts to live on an isolated but peaceful island against the violent society. The protagonist Sita, is a happily married woman of over forty with four children. Her husband Raman is a successful businessman. But at this stage in her life, when her fifth child is on the way, Sita feels that there is strange loneliness, restlessness and boredom in her existence and that no one cares for her as an individual. She grows defiant in her behaviour and in desperation she decides to leave the house and goes to Manori, an island near Bombay where her father had lived as a patriarch. During the winter of 1947 Sita, then a young girl, lived on Manori Island where reigned her fabled father who was the legend but whether he began it by plan or acquired it by the force of pressure from the simple people around him, was a matter for debate. However, she saw the island as a piece of magic, a magic-mirror. Sita’s mother had torn a hole in the net and escaped into the dark depths of the ocean. Sita had four children with pride, with pleasure “with all the placid serenity that supposedly goes with pregnancy and parturition” (Desai 32).

Raman was puzzled when the fifth time she told him that she was pregnant. She did not want to give birth to the child though she admitted that destruction may be the true element in which life survived and creation merely a freak and temporary event. She arrived at the island, not to give birth but in order to achieve the miracle of not giving birth because Manori was the island

of miracles, her father had made it “an island of magic once... and he might work another miracle, posthumously”(31).

Though Sita brought her children, Karan and Menaka, to the island, the feeling of forlornness haunted her, she did not feel fully moored in it. The betrayal of her husband, his family, her children, friends and acquaintances had torn her open with violence which poured from her like blood. When Raman came to the island she thought he had come for her while he was there at Menaka’s instance, to take her away to the mainland for admission to the Medical College. When Raman and the children had gone to the beach Sita went out on the terrace and noticed the haste with which they ran from her.

In her celebration of freedom from duties and responsibilities, from order and routine, from life and the maddening city, Sita lacks comprehension and clarity. She does not want to go back to the mainland and find things all the same—boys fighting, screaming, and beating each other for fun, horrible things happening on the streets and in the flats, everything so ugly and cruel. Raman tries to disillusion her mind about the contraries in life, saying “other people put up with it it’s not so—so insufferable” (143) but she lacks the knowledge that the “life must be continued, and all its business” (138).

In portraying Sita who is opposed to society and forces of life and by stressing on her inner conflicts Desai gives the impression that life in spite of the contraries that assail it, has to be lived because, “the existent lives in content inter action with existents or existence is being with others“(Macquarrie 102). Life is full of reasons, betrayals and treacheries one cannot avoid, these are elements that penetrate a person as air and water do. It struck Sita then that Raman too had suffered from worry and anxiety about her —the unborn child— it was her consummate glimpse into the human psyche. Instead of living a life of primitive reality on a false stage, she “was now to return to a life of retirement, off-stage” (153). She had realized the difference between the necessity and the wish between what a man wants and what he is compelled 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 the debased dullness and meanness of life.

In this novel, Desai presents an intense identity crisis of the central character, a sensitive woman in her early forties. Unable to live in the strife torn present she is struggling with the task of identifying herself with the past, represented by her childhood on Manori island twenty years ago. The past becomes a psychic residue in her personal unconscious, the backdrop of her life, and her obsessive preoccupation with it gives her the strength to leave her home, husband, two

children and the urbanized life of Bombay for Manori Island. Sita's problem seems to be due to maladjustment with her husband, the home life and surrounding atmosphere nauseating her.

In *Where Shall we Go This Summer?* once again the writer dramatizes the conflict between two irreconcilable temperaments of two diametrically opposed attitudes towards life. The major protagonist of her latest novel, as stated above, is a nervous, sensitive middle aged woman who finds herself alienated from husband and children because of her emotional and explosive reactions to many things that happen to her. The problems and unhappiness in the life of Sita spring from her constitutional inability to accept the values and the attitudes of society. She finds that the majority of the members of society live life full of dullness, boredom, and deadness. As she puts it melodramatically. They are animals, —nothing but appetite and sex. Only food, sex and money matter. Animals” (32). She finds people unacceptable. “She took their insularity and complacency as well as the aggression and violence of others as affronts upon her own living nerves”(32). The greatest threat to her existence is “Boredom”, the error of the Bourgeois.

“She herself, looking on it, saw it stretched out so fast so flat, so deep, that in fright she scrambled about it, searching for a few of these moments that proclaimed her still alive, not quite drowned and dead.”(33-34)

This conflict between the sensitive individual and the insensitive world is objectified in terms of a series of situations which vividly convey the tension, conflict, and the withdrawal of the wounded and bruised soul into its own protective shell. Raman, the husband of Sita, represents the prose of life. Raman is unable to understand the violence and the passion with which Sita reacts against every incident. Unlike the legendary Rama and Sita, the couple does not represent an ideal husband-wife relationship. In fact, the names of the characters ironically suggest the complete lack of harmony in the lives of these characters. Names generally have some significance in the works of Mrs. Desai. Raman represents sanity, rationality, and an acceptance of the norms and the values of society. He is a typical conformist. Intelligent without any capacity for introspection, extraverted with the characteristic inability of an extrovert to understand a temperament diametrically opposed to it, Raman's reaction to his wife's frequent emotional outbursts is a mixture of puzzlement, weariness, fear, and finally a resigned acceptance of her abnormality. The 'normal' for Raman is represented by regularity in life, by familiar patterns, by “the quite regularity carefully arranged outside their bedroom door, so carefully arranged by him” (35). Whatever shocks his wife is something natural and normal for him. His usual reactions to his wife's outbursts are to say 'you've gone mad.' He has made his choice to accept rather than to reject the dictates of society.

“To certain people there comes a day. When they must say the great Yes or No. He who has the Yes ready within him, reveals himself at once, and saying it crosses over to the path of honour and his own conviction”.(101)

She wants to offer herself and her unborn child an all native-a bewitched life’.

How does Sita visualize this world of her dreams? The intimations of a life full of rich promises, and mysteries, based upon her recollections of her childhood spent on island of Manori with her father, a legend in his own lifetime. A chance meeting with the foreigner waiting on the wrong side of the road for a lift to Ajanta “with a kind of insane patience and hopefulness”(102), once again intensifies in her the desire to recapture an experience and an excitement which she imagines were once hers. The foreigner represents an innocence uncorrupted by experience, and a Courage ‘not knowing anything but going on nevertheless’. She identifies herself with him. Like him she is also a person endlessly waiting. “She herself was turned to the colour of waiting, turned a living monument to waiting”(101). Hence Sita’s sudden decision as to where she should go that summer of discontent. She decides to go back to the island of Manori—that peace—land in which she can live with memory and desire, romance and reality.

The point at issue is that her husband ignores her instincts, and what she likes him to treat her in a gentle and tender way is what he cannot do. As a result, in the long run the husband wife relationship is dragged into difficulties because both Sita and Raman stand for oppositions. Raman is a creature of society, more or less an extrovert, more accommodative and apathetic whereas Sita is hypersensitive, an introverted personality and a pessimist. She is a sensitive and emotional woman who finds herself alienated from her husband and the children. Strange, but then Sita is not one of the ordinary obedient, sacrificing types. On the other hand, her malaise with the world around stems from a deep inner void that is not easy to explain.

She finds the company of her husband’s family intolerable and is unable to accept their values and attitudes. In order to seek a means of escape she takes to smoking, abuses her children for trifles and flies into a rage when the servants talk in the kitchen because she thinks they are quarrelling. All this is the ultimate rejection of the values her husband represents, and she therefore, resolves to go to Manori as a kind of self-exile in her search for identity in silence and in her revival of the past.

The memories of Sita revolve around the island and her father. She had spent the impressionable days of her childhood on the island in the company of Rekha and Jivan with her father. In the mind of Sita, the island of Manori was an island of miracles. She had seen the glory of her father surrounded by his disciples, on the island. She believed that the magic of the island

would remove the evil spell and her child would remain forever unborn. In the world of her fancy, the impossible would become possible. In this state of mind, she took refuge on the island which lacked even the basic infrastructure required for leading a life of minimum comforts.

Raman's advice to Sita, regarding her perilous journey to the island of Manori for living in the old house where even the basic amenities of civilized life were lacking, did not produce any effect on her. What she wanted most was an escape from the humdrum life which bored her to the very roots of her existence. Sita found an answer to her existential problems on the island, but Raman had his own doubts about all this. He wondered what kind of medical help she may get during the time of delivery. He felt that Sita was being most unrealistic in her approach to the problem faced by her.

The act of going to Manori, in quest of magic, is fraught with 'Bad Faith' in existential sense. Instead of delving deep into her own self to find an existential fissure in her being, she deceives herself by filling in that gap with solidity. Sita knows that it is not possible to "keep" the child unborn and give it a "bewitched" life. Nonetheless, by insisting on keeping the child she hides a truth from herself. What she knows inwardly, she negates outwardly.

Anita Desai's creation of Sita is an example of repressed person. She hates her husband for not understanding her, dislikes her children for they are insensitive, and so on. During the journey on the sea Karan excitedly calls the sea weeds "Snakes", which enrages her. Of all the children she dislikes Menaka most because the latter cuts flower buds, tears her Sunday water colours and above all, calls her father onto the island to fetch her, save her from the boredom and the void of the island. Sita feels that she is betrayed by her children who turn to their father. But her unhappiness is that her husband comes there to take Menaka on receiving her letter, and not to take her.

All her life Sita has been searching for a father figure, and Raman is far from being so. Her agony is that her insensitive husband remains unchanged, dull and emotionally impotent so far as his response to her is concerned. A sudden sense of his getting old and grey and not wanting to have another child mark his unattractive role as a husband sexually, physically and emotionally. Sexually repressed, Sita remains isolated in the background while her children and husband enjoy their life. Her realization that hers was a "farce marriage" makes her unnerved because her husband does not know the basic fact of her existence, her soul's existence, her instinct's existence. But at the height of her frustration and self-defeat things come round.

The most common theme in her novels in the complexity of human relationships, particularly the man-woman relationship. D.H. Lawrence points out: "The great relationship for

humanity will always be the relation between man and woman. The relation between man and man, woman and woman, parent and child, will always be subsidiary” (Lawrence 52). Sita is alienated from her husband because of incompatibility of temperaments and lack of communication. Her withdrawal to an idyllic island does not give her happiness as she equates ayahs and cooks with animals concerned with food, sex and money. Atma Ram, the critic sees in her alienated being “the boredom and loneliness experienced by married women when they feel ignored and unwanted”(Chakranarayan 7).

A pregnant woman who is about to begin her journey towards birthing a new life is thrown terror-stricken into the womb of her past. The seemingly trivial question in the title of Desai’s novels is asked in houses all over India before the heat of mid-summer which disguises a desperate search for direction. Sita who is pregnant with her fifth child faces life with nothing but uncertainty. Time knots must be unraveled because the past provides only sinister memory, the present is filled with fear and the future. The future seems only a lengthening of shadows, themselves elusive. This world of incomplete pictures and half-hidden truths provides little security, less solidity. When her husband Raman asks the innocuous question, “Where Shall we go this Summer?” she insists on fleeing from the mainland to the island of her childhood. There, she believes, will be restored the magic that has gone out of her dreary, mechanical life. Unmistakably ironic in the tone, the novel is based on the experiences of Sita, the symbolic 'hero', whose poetic vision distorts the world of a housewife and throws it into a mad pursuit. After twenty years, Sita visits the island in which her father was a magic figure because she still believes that the place could work miracles.

“Ah! Oh, now I understand! it seemed steadily more strange, mistaken. Yet, she had arrived, she was on the island in order to achieve the miracle of not giving birth, wasn’t this Manori the island of miracles?”. (31)

The urban milieu provides an artistic backdrop to many of Desai’s novels and the city becomes an overbearing ‘presence’. Her characters are stifled by the constant pressure of the urban milieu which not only induces a sense of vacuum and chaos but also intensifies the sense of despair and alienation in the individual. The city of Bombay in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* is a place of violence and destruction where the creative impulse has no chance against the overpowering desire to destroy. Sita escapes from the “madness” of her husband’s house to Manori, an island where “it might be possible to be sane again” (32).

Conclusion

This escape in reality is an escape from loneliness and boredom that are the two dominant characteristics of city life. Looking at her bridal photograph in the family album, Sita feels she is no more the shy, graceful bride. The city and its people have left quite a number of scars of experience on it that has changed her into an aggressive, hysteric woman. She turns from the album to the mirror and sees the layers of experience and melancholy and boredom that had settled upon her face since then like so much grey sand. Sita's bitterness is in many ways akin to the acrimony experienced by hundreds of new women, who undergo inner turmoil of a strange, hitherto unknown nature, "If man wants to fulfill himself by making his own commitment to life, why not women be given their chance to realize themselves? This proposition inks women all over the world and so does it ink Sita who finds it impossible to be naively contented in a world of kitchen and bedroom, sex and babies, society and position therein" (Bande 181). She is unable inwardly to accept that this was all there was to life, that life would continue thus inside this small enclosed area, with these few characters churning around and then past her, leaving her always in this grey, dull-lit empty shell.

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