

FEMALE TRAUMA IN ANITA DESAI: A STUDY OF WHERE SHALL WE GO THIS SUMMER?

Naadiya Yaqoob Mir,

Research Scholar, Dept of English, University of Kashmir

Email: Nadiyahamirr@gmail.com

Abstract: Anita Desai (1937) is a pioneer of the psychological novel in Indian writing in English. She has explicitly stated her preference for the private rather than the public dimension of novel writing. For her it is “depth which is interesting delving deeper and deeper in a character or a scene rather than going round about it” (69). It is this involvement with the psyche of women and their reaction to the far changing situation that makes her the first psychological woman novelist in Indian writing in English. Her speciality lies in the exploration of the dark inner world, plunging into the limitless depths of the mind and bringing into the forefront the hidden contours of the human psyche. . Anita Desai is concerned with the dark, mysterious inner world of her extremely introverted characters who are emotionally fragile and often on the verge of psychological breakdown. They are alienated from the world, society and family around them because they are not ready to surrender to repressive social strictures and, the stereotypical roles ascribed to women by patriarchy.

Key Words: Psyche, fragile, social strictures, inner world, mysterious.

Discussion:

The word trauma acquires a very important place in Desai’s work due to which her novels can be called Trauma narratives in that they explore concerns about trauma on both the thematic as well as formal levels. The female protagonists of her novels experience traumatic events right from their childhood. Inner struggles, emotional stresses, conflicts and their sensitive nature lead to their neurosis. According to Jung, “neuroses arise out of a clash between an individual’s attempt to adjust to some situation and his constitutional inability to meet the challenge” (16). Anita Desai believes that disturbed childhood experiences determine conditions for neurosis in these protagonists but that is not the only source of trauma in them. She comments in an interview:

I agree that the experiences of childhood are the most vivid and lasting ones. But I am quite sure that even adult life contains many traumatic experiences, for instance fighting in a war may be traumatic experience for a soldier (43)

With the help of flashbacks or stream of consciousness technique, she reveals the childhood traumatic experiences of her protagonists in order to relate the present to the past. These protagonists- ensnared in their past pass through the difficult phase of alienation and finally lose all control over their selves and turn self- destructive.

Where Shall We Go This Summer? (1975) is a fine example of such an exploration of a socially conditioned and oppressed mind. Like all her earlier novels, it exhibits familial control, indifference, alienation and disturbed mental psyche of a middle-class housewife Sita. The novel describes the predicament of the female protagonist who is unable to accept the dictates and demands of a male-dominated marital life but ultimately comes to terms with

The female protagonist Sita is the daughter of a freedom fighter, a man of extraordinary capability who during his lifetime is considered a saint by many but also branded a charlatan by others. After India's Independence, Sita's father decides to retire from active public life to settle down in a calm and serene village to experiment his social theories. One of his followers, Dalwala, a Parsi millionaire, has given him his property in the form of an island as a token of respect. On this lonely island of Manori, he brings up his daughter Sita among the natives- loved, respected and even feared by them. He practices black magic and miracle-cure. However, he fails to provide a contented life to his children, as his wife elopes with her lover and he develops an affair with another woman. This atmosphere of a disintegrated family impacts Sita resulting in her withdrawal and introversion.

After the death of her father, Raman the son of her father's friend, takes her to Bombay and admits her in a hostel. After sometime, attracted by Sita's beauty he marries her. But as a husband, Raman fails to provide Sita with ideal companionship. She feels alienated and retreats into a shell whilst in the company of her husband and his family. She takes to smoking and is given to frequent fits of violent behaviour. Nevertheless, married life saddles her with four children and she reaches a breaking point when she is expecting her fifth child, and it is from here the narrative actually begins. Sita is completely repelled by the idea of giving birth to a baby in the suffocating atmosphere of the overcrowded city and a nauseating household. She decides to leave the city and sets off to the island of Manori, her childhood paradise. When she reaches Manori with two of her children, after twenty years she feels relieved. However, on the island, she is haunted by stories and memories of her dead father. She believes that her father might work another miracle posthumously. She subjects herself to the rigours and pleasures of island life. This brief escape from the routine of city life imbues in her a new awareness about life. But even her new life fails to offer her the emotional satisfaction she longs for. Finally, when Raman comes to take them back to Bombay, she returns with him as a mature, composed, confident and somehow resurrected woman.

Desai presents Sita as a victim of her marriage to Raman. The observations made by Moses, the caretaker of Sita's Island home, amply reveal this. On her return to the island, Moses is shocked to see Sita as she descends from her car. Having once known her as a spirited and jovial girl, Moses is hardly able to accept the present appearance of Sita compared to the one that still lingers in his mind. Is it the same Sita, he wonders, shocked by her "empty, vacant, stumbling" appearance (4). "The extraordinary brilliance" that was once her face has now become dry, (and) worn" (17). On the other hand, Sita is somewhat relieved from the burden of domestic life. In the city, she remains restless and dissatisfied with her 'settled' and dull domestic life. She often sits alone smoking as if waiting for someone. "Bored? How? Why? With what? And could not begin to comprehend her boredom" (45). Her marriage with an indifferent partner proves to be a source of perpetual trauma that she often confronts. Raman and Sita have irreconcilable attitudes to life. Sita represents a world of emotion and feminine sensibility, sensitive and idealist while Raman is rational, active and practical and accepts the norms and values of society. He is unable to understand the passion with which Sita reacts against every incident. Due to his neglect, Sita feels alienated from both husband as well as her children. She feels ignored in her childhood as well as after marriage. She yearns for love as a child from her parents but is denied and even after her marriage she is loveless. The marriage proves to be only a business transaction for her. Raman's failure to recognise Sita's capacity for love and submission injures her self-image. Her hopes of getting love and respect from her husband are frustrated. She comments: "I thought I could live with you and travel alone- mentally, emotionally. But, after that day, that wasn't enough. I had to stay whole, I had to" (148). Her sensitive self is hurt and her self-esteem damaged and she turns vindictive, making her almost a neurotic.

However, Sita's trauma is also embedded in her childhood memories of a broken family due to her parents' marital discord. Their relationship was one of estrangement, for her mother deserted her father. Even her father, who was a saint to his disciples and a charlatan to his critics led a strange life as far as his relationship with women was concerned. Sita's escape to the island is an unflinching echo of the earlier husband – desertion motif in her identification with her mother, a “ghost in white” (79) which cannot be exorcised by her. Going back to the past will reveal some facts about Sita's enigmatic nature as being a symptom of a lack of care and sympathy from a mother or a real sister. In her moments of joy and sorrow, she has no one to share with hence she is always absorbed in her own traumatized self. She becomes quite unpalatable to others, and it has its roots in her childhood trauma of a disjointed family. Her father's unusual tenderness towards her step-sister Rekha always confuses her but she always kept her confusions hidden. As Usha Bande rightly comments: “This experience breeds feelings of worthlessness, and its consequent strategy is rebelliousness. Sita cannot corroborate her father's dubious ways. It seeps down her psyche as a bad human experience” (107). All these childhood memories of trauma keep haunting her in her later life. Also, Sita's repugnant disgust with the birth of her fifth child is somehow an outcome of those memories too. Although an experienced and mature mother, who knows the joy of motherhood and is comparatively contented, she is emotionally hurt primarily by an indifferent husband. The process of hospitalization and the details of the procreative procedure are so traumatic for Sita that she is chilled by the very thought of it. Therefore, she seeks escape from yet another episode of trauma.

Raman and Sita are binary opposites to each other. Raman is an extrovert, more accommodative, apathetic whereas Sita is hypersensitive, an introverted personality and a pessimist. She not only hates Raman for his lack of emotions but also derides the subhuman placidity, calmness and apathy and the routine manner of her in-law's home. As a reaction against these, whenever she speaks, she speaks with rage, anguish, and disgust. Finally, she chooses three things – exile, silence, and cunning. All this is an ultimate rejection of the values her husband represents, and she resolves to go to Manori Island as a kind of self-exile in search for her real self in silence, away from home and civilization. She leaves the city with a vision to fulfill it on the island. She reveals:

She had come here in order not to give birth. Wasn't this Manori, the island of miracles? Her father had made it an island of magic once, worked miracles of a kind. His legend was still here in this house... and he might work another miracle posthumously. She had come on a pilgrimage to beg for the miracle of keeping her baby unborn (28)

Raman completely fails to understand Sita's sensitive nature and her predicament has been subtly hinted at and explicitly stated in several places in the novel. In this regard Bidulata Choudhury opines, “...the entwining dirt and deteriorating love, clash of desires, of justification of fantasy are open for introspection. Marital incompatibility and other domestic pressures turn her neurotic. Abraham Maslow in his theory of the hierarchy of basic needs emphasizes on an individual's fundamental desire to ‘belong’. He believes that all individuals have basic survival needs – need for safety, love, belonging and self- esteem. The fulfilment of these survival needs leads to self-actualisation while as their absence leads to neurosis. He comments: “most neuroses involved, along with other complex determinants, ungratified wishes for safety, for belongingness and identification for close relationships and for respect and prestige” (21). All these components are missing in Sita's life; she yearns for belongingness and respect from her family but both are denied to her. Her internal necessities to feel whole combined with external social pressures make her neurotic. Inner struggles and various oppressive social relations produce neuroses and conflicts and frustrations precipitate

them. Sita is unable to adjust in Raman's family and rebels against the "vegetable existence" lived by women of Raman's family. She rebels against all social norms and family values to feel triumphant. Social-psychologists believe that social and cultural forces play a vital role in shaping one's response to their surroundings. Erich Fromm affirms that "even the most beautiful and the most ugly inclinations of man are not a part of his biologically fixed nature, but result from the social process which creates man" (12). A threatening social environment evokes in her a dread of others and of the self. Sita loses the urge to affirm herself.

Sita's psychic trauma is symbolically conveyed in many forms. Anita Desai makes use of apocalyptic, demonic as well as natural imagery to depict her quest. The sea that Sita views from her Bombay residence, and then from her villa in Manori, is a beating reality that marks the mood of the protagonist. Sita's urge to cross the sea is, symbolically, the struggle of her soul to traverse the realm of chaos and violence in her domestic life. Crossing the sea, she reaches the island. It is symbol of both escape and refuge. Here she wishes to hide herself and her unborn infant from the grossness of the world. With the onset of the monsoon on the island, the torrential rain has the force of an apocalyptic symbolism. Consequently, Sita decides to give birth. Moreover, rain is the unifying agent that joins the sky with the earth, the upper and the lower worlds. Similarly, Sita's inner and outer being-the conscious and the unconscious aspects of her psyche are finally united and they influence her decision. During her journey towards "wholeness", Sita confronts her shadow many a time. The shadow is a personal unconscious of a person and an uncontrolled part of our personality. It is something that we hide behind our persona. Sita's instinctive dislike of her husband's family and his business associates is, in fact, the personification of her shadow. It forces her to seek the untouched world of the island. She wants to hide her baby in her womb. She is doing something unusual as she is under the impact of her shadow. She has even discarded her persona. Her carelessness with her dress and appearance is upsetting for Raman. The neglect of her persona creates difficulties for her in adjusting herself in society. Sita's desire to take care of pregnancy without giving birth symbolically represent her psychic inequilibrium and loss of contact with everyday reality. The unborn child represents her own inability to face the demands of life. A dark, mysterious island associated with the sense of lack, of responsibility and characteristic of childhood symbolically represent the womb to which she seeks to retreat only to evade reality. Sita's journey to Manori represents her psychic journey of self- delusion and escapism from her own self rather than liberation.

However, at the end of the novel, Sita becomes aware of the stark realities of life. The sudden happiness of her children on seeing their father again after a brief span of separation on the island makes her conscious of the fact that she has to put up with certain things at least for the sake of her family if not for her own sake. With this realization, she feels a sudden warmth towards Raman. She even feels pleased in his company: "When he asked her gently, "How are you?" She stood back so that he could enter. As he did, she felt comfort, security" (120). This new-found warmth and buoyancy towards Raman is a natural denouement of the marital discord that rendered her neurotic. A close examination of Sita's consciousness reveals that she is a round character who ends up an entirely different person from what she is at the beginning of the novel. So far, she had considered giving birth an act of violence but now she realises that she is bringing forth a life with the breaking of her womb. She realises that the bursting of a womb is no doubt a violent process but at the same time it is creative. This is her moment of growth, inspiration and contact with the real self. Her fragmented or disintegrated self achieves integration. She experiences oneness with nature on the island and becomes conscious of everything around- the sea, trees and everything else. She no longer feels alienated. Even when the children are away, she feels connected with them, "considering how much close together they were in that isolated house" (126). Further, one

more powerful episode that enables her to reach a maturation of herself is when she bathes in mud with her son Karan. She loses self consciousness for some time and ‘regains’ childhood innocence. Her movement from fragmentation to a cosmic awareness leads her to self-discovery. At this stage, Sita’s psyche has cast off all inhibitions and is trying to develop harmony in personal relationships. By giving vent to her trauma, despair and dejection, she is able to check the disintegration of her personality as all these acts as warning signals. Sita after struggling with the contradictory impulses of her disintegrated self, finally experiences a vision of inclusiveness which transcends all boundaries and divisions: “neither sea nor sky were separate or contained- they rushed into each other in a rush of light and shade, impossible to disentangle” (153). She realises that to survive in the world, it is necessary to transcend partial visions and come to terms with that which appears real.

Where Shall We Go This Summer? may be seen as a fable on the incapability of an individual to relate the inner life with the outer. The novel also suggests that a life of complete alienation or isolation is not the solution. Therefore, human happiness lies in balancing the opposites of life. Further, the novel shows Desai’s terrible image of life, in which the innocent female protagonist bears the trauma or pain and pays a heavy price for her honesty and virtue, while oppressive social values often push her over the edge.

References:

- Desai, Anita. *Where Shall We Go This Summer*. Orient Paperbacks, 1975.
- Bande, Usha. *The Novels of Anita Desai: A Study in Character and Conflict*. Prestige Books, 1988.
- Desai, Anita. “Replies to the Questionnaire”. *Kakatiya Journal of English Studies*, 3, 1978, pp.1-6.
- Desai, Anita. “The Indian Writer’s Problems.” *Indian Women Novelists*, edited by R.K. Dhawan, 1991.
- Gupta, R K. *The Novels of Anita Desai: A Feminist Perspective*. Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2013.
- Freud, Sigmund and Josef Breuer. *Studies on Hysteria*. Basic Books, 1957.
- Fromm, Eric. *The Fear of Freedom*. Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1960.