



Reality Versus Illusion: A Study of Anita Desai's Where Shall We Go This Summer?

Dr. Nalini Bora

Assistant Professor,

Department of English

Kampur College, Kampur, Nagaon

Abstract:

Where Shall We Go This Summer? is the fourth novel written by veteran author Anita Desai. This award winning novel was published in 1988. Anita Desai is a diaspora writer from India. She has been thrice short-listed for the Booker prize for her literary excellence. Anita Desai has introduced psychological novel into Indian- English Literature. She has always expressed her deep interest in unfurling women psyche in her writings basically fiction. *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* is a woman -oriented novel where the novelist deals with the disturbed psyche of the female protagonist Sita. Sita is fed up of all the artificialities of metropolitan life. She feels a kind of suffocation, living a lonely life because of her disharmonious marriage. Sita is swinging like a pendulum between reality and illusion. This paper attempts to analyse the novel to find out Sita's psychological issues. The prime focus of the paper is to bring out Sita's conflict between reality and illusion.

Keywords: Psychological, artificialities, disharmonious, reality, illusion, conflict.

Introduction:

Anita Desai is a prolific writer originating from India. She is one of the excellent women novelists of Indian English Literature of the post-colonial era. She has immense contribution to the world literature. This excellent writer was born on 24th June 1937 in Mussoorie, India. Her father was a Bengali businessman named Dina Nath Mazumdar and mother was a house wife of German origin named Antoinette Nime Mazumdar. She was brought up in a family where she got the access to learn Bengali, Hindi and German. She has adopted English as her pen language and published her first story at the age of nine. Desai herself said, "I first learnt English when I went to school. It was the first language I learned to read and write, so it became my literary language." Anita Desai studied in India and started working in the Max Muller Bhawan, Calcutta. Later on, she has worked in other institutions before finally joining

Massachusetts Institution of Technology, USA, as Emerita John E. Burchard Professor of Humanities. Desai has been married to Ashvin Desai, an established businessman from Calcutta. She has four children including Booker award-2006 winner Kiran Desai.

Anita Desai made her bold entry into the world of fiction with her maiden novel *Cry, the Peacock* in 1963 and all the readers wondered at her craftsmanship. Since then, she has produced more than a dozen novels of quality. Some of her remarkable novels are- *Voices in the City* (1965), *Bye-Bye Blackbird* (1971), *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* (1975), *Fire on The Mountain* (1977), *Clear Light of Day* (1980), *In Custody* (1984), *Fasting, Feasting* (1999) etc. *Clear Light of Day*, *In Custody* and *Fasting, Feasting* are the novels for which Desai has been thrice short-listed for the Booker Prize in 1980, 1984, and 1999 respectively. *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* bagged her the Sahitya Akademi award in 1980. Desai is associated with various committee including the Royal Society of Literature. Desai is the recipient of many distinctions in the field of literature.

Anita Desai concentrates on exploring the female psyche in all her novels. It is needless to say that her novels are women centric. All her female protagonists exist in a tense environment; sometimes self-created and sometimes by their relatives and Desai's novels grow on that. *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* is an intense story of a middle-aged pregnant woman Sita who insists on not giving birth to her fifth child in the critical and chaotic modern world. Instead, Sita wants to keep him unborn inside her womb and leaves for Manori Island of her childhood in hope of some miracle. About this novel the Times of India writes: "Skilful dramatization... the narrative is precariously perched between myth and social reality...". Sita, a wife and a mother stands between stern reality and illusion while she decides to keep her baby unborn. This paper studies the novel focusing on Sita's problems and outcomes.

Review of Literature:

Anita Desai is a very distinguished women novelist who has reshaped Indian English Literature. Many critical studies have been done on her novels. To illustrate, Madhusudhan Prasad writes on Desai's characters in the light of existentialism in Anita Desai's novels. Usha Bande writes on the psychological aspects of characters. Krishna Francine E writes a Review on 'A Lulled Life - A Review of Where Shall We Go This Summer?'. This paper attempts on 'Reality Versus Illusion: a study of Anita Desai's *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*'

Objectives:

1. To find out the elements of both reality and illusion in the novel.
2. To expose the conflict between reality and illusion.
3. To assess how the author deals with the tense environment of the novel.

Research Methodology:

The selected problem is directly related to literature. Hence, both primary and secondary data have been collected from literary sources. The methodology used is basically analytical and descriptive.

Reality versus illusion in *Where Shall We Go This Summer*:

Anita Desai's novel *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* presents the female protagonist Sita as a hyper sensitive and neurotic woman. Sita loses her identity as a wife of Raman and mother of four children. She is fed up of giving birth of children and raising them. She is pregnant again with her fifth child and the whole story is occasioned by this fifth child which is yet to be born. Sita does not want to deliver her fifth child. Instead, she wants to retain it in her womb carefully. "She had had four children with pride, with pleasure-sensual, emotional, Freudian, every kind of pleasure—with all the placid serenity that supposedly goes with pregnancy and parturition." (page-29) Sita informs her husband about her pregnancy 'with a quite paranoiac show of rage, fear and revolt.' Sita's husband assures her that everything will go well. But she replies that it is not easy but harder and unbearable. Raman hopes that Sita will soon get out of her discomfort and will enjoy her pregnancy period just as she did in her previous issues. But he is shocked to see her huddling, twisting her fingers and smoking bitterly through the nights and display an agony. When Raman questions her if she wants an abortion Sita says,

"I mean I want to keep it-----I don't want it to be born." (page-32)

Raman tries to comfort her in vain and Sita decides to go to Manori island in hope of some miracle which will help her to keep her baby unborn but safe inside her womb. Sita says,

"I will go...On the island ---it'll be different." (page-33)

Raman asks her if she is expecting some miracle on the island. Sita replies that she is sure of that, in the island of her childhood.

Sita believes that Manori Island has black magic. Sita firmly believes that Manori island is the enchanted island of miracles. Actually, Sita as a child has experienced some miracle happened in the island. It is Sita's father who carries for her magical aura around her. Sita lives in a world of fantasy even now. Sita recalls from her childhood memories how her father used to treat those people from the mainland. People called his treatment as 'miracle cures'. Sita remembers how one day a fisherwoman came running and flung at his feet saying that her boils had been cured. Sita recalls how another fisherwoman Phoolmaya conceived and brought so many gifts to her father. Once he had cured a child bitten by a scorpion and the mother of the child said to the villagers that he had done magic. The villagers believed that he knew magic for taking death out of all creatures. All the strange experiences and sensations on the island made Sita think that there is miracle in the island.

Sita's mind is preoccupied with illusion from her very childhood. Now she wishes to go back to Manori island expecting a miracle. Sita is sure of some miracle which will help her to retain her baby in her womb. She does not want to deliver her baby to a corrupt and artificial world. Sita's husband, a very practical person does not support her and asks her to give up such foolish idea. In spite of her husband's disapproval, Sita leaves for Manori island with her one daughter and the youngest son. The author has beautifully exposed Sita's psyche in the following lines:

“She saw that island illusion as a refuge, a protection. It would hold her baby safely unborn, by magic.”

(page-91)

Sita is sure that Manori will definitely bless her with some miracle. But to her utter surprise, Manori is no longer the island of her childhood. It fails to attract her the way it did earlier. Still, she has not lost hope. Sita tries to adjust with the limited resources and facilities she has found in the island. But her children find it quite impossible and they show their displeasure. The monsoon has made their life much miserable in the island. The children accuse her of every mishap and misfortune. They are waiting for their mother to realise that life exists in their house in Bombay city and her so called ‘escape’ to the island that is madness.

Sita waits patiently every day for some magic but nothing new happens. Sita stands confused,

“Where was the magic of the island that she has promised herself, promised the children? Was this it? If it had ever existed—black, sparkling and glamorous as in her memory—it was now buried beneath the soft grey-green mildew of the monsoon...” (page-96)

Sita has adjusted to the life of the island - a lulled life, half-conscious, dream-like. She has never felt alone. The island, the sea, the palm trees and the house are her companions. They are so lively that sometimes they speak to her. She assures her unborn child “I’ll keep you safe inside.” (page-117) Suddenly the news of Raman’s arrival in the island makes Sita feel one violent pulsation of grief inside her. Sita refuses to go back to Bombay first. She has many reasons not to return to the mainland. Finally, she realises that she can’t escape from the reality and decides to go back with her husband. While packing for their return journey, Sita’s mind is occupied with different thoughts. The author has used the stream of consciousness technique to expose her psyche. She writes, “...as soon as she got home, she would have to begin to get together, then pack a suitcase full of infant’s garments... She could see the expressionless faces of the night nurses in the gynae ward... Then, once the infant was born, she would faintly shrug...” (page-139-140)

Findings:

The findings of the study are:

1. The novel contains elements of both reality and illusion.
2. The study proves that reality prevails over illusion.
3. The author deals successfully with the theme and establishes that to escape from reality is to escape from duties and responsibilities.

Conclusion:

The novel is a skilful dramatization of an inner conflict where the female protagonist dares to say the great ‘No’. The author alludes a poem of Cavafy:

“To certain people there comes a day

When they must say the great Yes or the great No.” ...

Sita has said the great no to her duties and responsibilities. She has escaped from order and routine, from the life and the city to the island. Sita has refused to give birth to her fifth child but to retain him safe inside her womb. The last part of the novel explains how Sita accepts the fact that no miracle can keep her baby unborn. Finally, the novelist rightly establishes that reality rules over illusion and the novel end with Sita’s acceptance of reality and return to normal life.

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