



ALIENATION IN ANITA DESAI'S WHERE SHALL WE MEET THIS SUMMER?

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ABSTRACT

The 20th century, especially the Post-War Period, has witnessed great spiritual stress and stains, therefore, it has been rightly regarded as 'The Age of Alienation'. In this age, man is brought face to face with confusion, frustration, disintegration, disillusionment and meaninglessness in life. Though alienation made its first appearance in the classical sociological works of the 19th century and the early 20th century written by Karl Marx, Emily Durkheim, Ferdinand Tonnies, Max Weber and George Simmel, these writers look upon alienation as a social, psychological fact and believe that it is the experience of powerlessness and the sense of estrangement. On the other hand, there are writers who differ in their definitions and assumptions of alienation.

RESEARCH PAPER

Broadly speaking, the term 'alienation' refers to man's estrangement from someone or something with which he was attached or identified - his family, his group, his society, even his own self. The origin of alienation as a concept has been traced to Plato and Plotinus. Alienation is a term which has been in use in theological, philosophical, sociological and psychological writings for a long time. Originally alienation referred to some sort of mental illness but later on to man's estrangement from God. For Karl Marx, alienation meant man's dehumanization and his estrangement from other fellowmen, even from the product of his own labour. Sidney Finkelstein defines the term alienation as "a psychological phenomenon, an internal conflict, a hostility felt toward something seemingly outside oneself which is linked to oneself, a barrier erected which is actually no defense but an impoverishment of oneself."¹



In *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*, Anita Desai reverts to her favourite theme of probing into the consciousness of an introvert and sensitive woman who is bored and frustrated by her commonplace and human-drum life and tries to escape into purposeless and unproductive loneliness. Owing to her strange and unusual childhood experiences, Sita, the protagonist of the novel, develops certain complexes which turn her into an alienated and morose character, and in debilitate her to face the realities of life boldly. She is unable to grow into maturity and turns into a complete social misfit. As the ordinary life and the everyday world grow insufferable to her, she desires to release herself from them and seek refuge in the magic island of Manori where her old father is believed to have performed several miracles : “In reality were not to be borne, then illusion was the only alternative. She saw that island illusion as a refuge, a protection.”²

Anita Desai’s novels *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* and *The Village By the Sea* belong to a category which may be classified as *Alienation*. The protagonists of these novels have been bestowed with characteristics that may be referred to as Insular. Insular or insularity may be defined as that quality or state of being narrow-minded or circumscribed by outlook, mentality and character. The most important value to character formation for an individual is derived from the group experiences, by modification of elimination of egocentricity.

If the group experiences are not properly assimilated, the character or individual tends to be separate or estranged from the social group. This moving away from the group characterizes an individual behaviour as strange. His strange behaviour is constrained as insanity or psychic illness by the society which thrives on conformity. Psychologists perceive this behaviour of such persons given to this state of alienation as a consequence of repression or blocking of feelings. The blocked feelings or inhibitions, no longer, look effective to him or her driving the person to a compulsive psychoneurosis. In such cases, the affected person perceives that his organs or even the whole body is different from those of the others. The natural consequence is estrangement from the surroundings. Such estranged characters often move to Schizophrenia or rudimentary Paranoia. In simple Schizophrenia, the person develops psychic impoverishment which effects the emotions, the intellect, or the will. Chronic dissatisfaction or complete indifference to reality are characteristics of such isolated persons. The fears and hopes are also of an indefinite kind but of a strong and personal valuation of actual events, very similar to opinions of the one-sidedness of the normal individuals, the paranoid appears suspicious, jealous and envious, with an exaggerated sense of self-importance, who must always be right with tendency of blaming others.

Sita is the daughter of a political celebrity, a well-known freedom fighter, whom many of his disciples consider “the second Gandhi.”(62) Sita has thus “lived a strange life, an unusual life.”(46) After independence, her father comes to settle in beautiful natural surroundings of



Manori island accompanied by his disciples and his family. He calls his house *Jeevan Ashram*, the 'Home of the Soul', and tries to put on the island his social theories about simple life untouched by the comforts of machine age into practice. Having no opportunities for schooling, Sita loiters about the island sometimes alone and sometimes in the company of her brother Jivan, playing with clay and mud. With the passage of time, she finds her father turning a veritable legend on the island as its simple and gullible villagers and fishfolk respect and admire him for his miracles - "magic cures" - providing them sweet water of the well to drink, teaching them how to grow a rich crop, and ridding the land of snakes and scorpions. To Sita, her father remains an enigma. Not being able to communicate with him, she forms uncertain and vague impressions about him. She doubts if he cures by magic and not by medicine and faith. She also discovers that his father's "daylight, practical charisma" has "its underlit night-time aspect." (55) Once climbing to his attic, the prayer room, she finds him pounding pearls and gold to be distribute to villagers with their medicines. She learns later from Jivan that the jewellery belonged to their mother, her father's second wife. Sita is also suspicious of her father's relations with her step-sister Rekha. These experiences make Sita lose her grip on life and develop in her mind uncertain and unrealistic attitude towards life.

After the death of her father, Sita is taken to Bombay by Raman, the son of her father's old friend Deedar. She leaves Manori with relief, worn out by its drama, "longing for the sane, the routine, ridden mainland as for a rest in Sanatorium." (72) Raman arranges for her education and later, drawn by her beauty, marries her. Even though, Sita has four children from him, she remains restless and dissatisfied with her settled and dull domestic life. Bored with her dull-life, she often sits alone smoking as if waiting for someone, "Bored? How? Why? With What? and is in an advanced state of pregnancy of seven months, she is haunted by a strange idea : that she wants to keep the child, 'I don't want it to be born.'" (23) Her husband calls her a "mad child," and she retorts: "I think what I'm doing is trying to escape from the madness here, escape to a place it might be possible to be sane again." (23) Without heeding at the rational advice of her husband, she ultimately takes her daughter Menaka and younger son Karan with her and leaves for Manori, the island of miracles. Sita considers her visit to the island as 'a pilgrimage' "to beg for the miracle of keeping her baby unborn." [20] She also treats it as a place of refuge from the boring life of the town. When earlier, she had left the island after the death of her father and gone with Raman, the mainland implied to her the life of "solidity, security." She had then not realized that "living there would teach her only that life was a crust of dull tedium, of hopeless disappointment" [39] under the oppressive weight of which she would break apart.

She ultimately decides to return and accompany her husband. She is, however, unable to decide, "which half of her life was real and which unreal" (135) her half that experienced 'primitive reality' of the island or the other half which enjoyed manhood? Sita is placed in a



peculiar predicament that members of her family appear disjointed cogs of a wheel, always clamoring to exercise their own personal options. This healthy trend of offering options to children, so essential in the formation and growth of their personalities, is resented by the mother, as a slight to her centrifugality. Menaka, her daughter, wants to be a scientist; her sons often quarrel among themselves; and her husband, Raman, is a matter-of-fact person who pays little attention to his wife. She finds her family neglects her. She retires to Manori to escape from the hypocrisy and tedium of her middle class existence. She likes an island by herself wherever she lives. This novel is a triumph of atmosphere both insular and climatic with sea, wind and air in constant motion - a kind of spiritual turbulence and isolation in some ways strikingly reminiscent of Virginia Woolf, in particular, of *To The Light House*. Sita's with - to withhold that birth by magic - is an outcome of a sick mind.

Because of her abnormal reactions, the readers may get confused whether she is a schizophrenic or a paranoid. A Schizophrenic is a split personality, whose mental functioning borders on insanity. But a paranoid would suppress all evidence to the contrary and highlights petty things in support of her feelings, reasons or estimating personalities of other characters as in her favour or against. Sita in this state of tantalizing potential, faces life with nothing but uncertainty. She insists on fleeing from the main land to the island of her childhood to restore the magic, which can change her dreary mechanical life. The beginning of the novel is heavily loaded with images of brutality and violence, like the playful of her sons, quarrel and fighting of ayans, Menaka crumbling new buds on the plant or tearing her paintings. These small commonplace incidents are representations of violence to Sita. Sita's father neglects her completely in fact has no time for his children. The atmosphere in which Sita lives and grows is that of neglect, hypocrisy and partiality. She is uneasy. Even though, Sita moved to a small flat, away from the relatives who reminded her of feeding elephants, the boredom continued to envelop her. Sita's alienation from her husband is inherent in her relationship with her father. She draws compassion between her domineering father and her docile husband - father's powers and husband's incapacity. She considers her father as an ideal personality and her husband is always in the crucible of test. Nowhere, the alienation is more powerfully communicated than in the scene where Raman and Sita discuss their attitude to the stranger they have encountered while returning from Ajanta and Ellora. Raman thinks that he is a fool who didn't know which side of the road to wait on.

But for Sita, he "seemed to brave." She says that it was not his foolishness but innocence and "and it made him seem more brave, not knowing anything but going away nevertheless." (52) Sita identified herself with the foreigner because like her, he is so vulnerable - to violence and criticism in the society. Practical Raman has already dismissed him as a fool. Sita's unconscious identification with the stranger's irrationality is expressive not only of her own quest for a life of primitive reality but also of her alienation, from Raman who considers it "practically as an act of infidelity." (Sita herself is aware that since) "the infidelity was only



mental”... (it was) “so much more immeasurable for that.”(35) Her journey to the deserted island is a psychological journey into the past. She tries to find happiness in the past-running away from the dreary present, from the understanding unsympathetic husband what she gains is a release from her illusion. Her reconciliation with the present is an escape from the self-induced alienation.

Sita is brought to Manori as a child by her father and after his death she is taken away from Manori and installed in the insulted shelter of her husband’s home. Her decision to come to Manori under the thin guise of a summer vacation for her children is probably her first independent action and therefore important in the feminist context. Sita has her own brief vision of perfect harmony between a man and a woman, a scene so haunting that she feels compelled to constantly refer to it. Her father, who had been a saint to his chelas, led a strange life so far as his relationship with women was concerned. Going back to the history will reveal some facts about Sita’s enigmatic and mysterious nature - a healthy ground for lack of confidence in her later life. In her moments of joy and sorrow, she has none to share, hence she keeps herself to herself. It has its origin in her childhood-life and experience. Usha Banda rightly comments, “Sita cannot corroborate her father’s dubious ways. It seeps down her psyche as a bad human experience.”³ The most damaging situation for Sita is complete lack of parental matrix. The most vital link- the mother - is missing in Sita’s life. Unknown to her, a deep seed of insecurity is sown in her life. This leads to alienation from her. Sita knows that her rebellious attitude towards society and her ‘No’ would shatter her, crush her. She wants to have a bewitched life for herself and for her unborn child whose birth she wants to prevent by stopping the very flux of time on Manori. It is beyond human endeavour and so doomed to failure. She is not the mythological Sita at whose bidding mother Earth opened up to receive the afflicted daughter into her entails. Husband and wife accuse each other of madness because they look at reality from two different perspectives. Sita’s unwillingness to deliver the baby is symbolic of her desire to prevent the very cycle of experience that makes suffering and violence possible. She thinks that the world is bad and therefore no child-birth should occur into this bad world as the future of children is at stake and uncertainty and gloom may complicate their lives. “She had refused to give birth to a child in a world not fit to receive the child.”(133)

Until the fear of alienation crept into her, Sita has been a normal, balanced, good mother. She has given birth to four children and has proved to be a rather fond mother. She has a higher sensibility than common mothers and deeper worries, beatific vision. As a woman responsible for herself, perhaps, Sita should have accepted the world as it is but as a mother, the custodian of the interest of the unborn infant, she cannot. Sita has a natural affectionate concern for her husband’s troubles. This leads to free flow of affection between the two. But Sita is often despondent and unhappy fails to satisfy her husband by showing natural affection. Emotional and affectionate reassurances, so frequently needed to make life



pleasant, she regards as false reassurance. Free flow of love and sympathy may make marital life heavenly but Sita's higher sensibility fails to provide them.

There is no deliberate cause of element in their discord except those resulting from temperamental differences. Because of it, Sita does not open her heart to her husband and maintains a certain reserve, which is the inherent seed of permanent discord of a subtle nature between the two. Although they live close together, often they feel that they do not know each other. Lack of understanding causes lack of cooperation and love. At Manori island when Sita and Raman meet after a long time, Sita breathlessly waits for Raman to say that he needed her or missed her. But to her shock, she comes to know that Raman has nothing to say. It might be either because he has nothing to give her or that he is unaware of her needs and demands. Yet Raman wins Sita back and brings her to Bombay from Manori where she has gone in order to rebel against the type of life that she had in Bombay. But Sita's coming back to Bombay is not gesture indicating her realization of the existence of love and understanding between them. It is the result of her newly gained knowledge that there is no magic left in the island. So it is in a state of helplessness and due to a wish to compromise with her husband, she comes back to Bombay.

Where Shall We Go This Summer? emphasizes the universal need for human ties when Sita awakens to the fact that even sky and earth try to meet each other near the horizon. Neither sea nor sky were separate or contained - they rushed into each other in a rush of light and shade, impossible to disentangle." [153] Sita's frustration with her husband can be compared to the mythical character Rama and Sita, a unique pair of supernal understanding. Sita, the heroine in both the situations, is pregnant. The mythical Sita delivers twins and cherishes the idea of procreation to extend the dynastic descent whereas Anita Desai's Sita resists the idea of delivering a child. A careful study of the novels reveals that by the time Anita Desai wrote this novel, a characteristic change (as represented by her protagonist) had come in her attitude towards life and its challenges. This change has already been noticed by some perspective critics of the novelist. Suresh Kohli, for example, opines that there is "one distinct change; Sita neither dies in the end nor kills anyone, nor does she become mad. She simply compromises with her destiny."⁴

The new positive approach is indicated by the protagonist herself. Sita says: "It was saying No - but positively, positively saying 'No.'" (149) There was a time when she could indulge in nihilistic musings. Holding her breath, she admitted that destruction may be the true element in which life survives, and creation merely a freak, temporary and doomed event." (56) But now she realizes that escapism is no answer to life's problem : "She had escaped from duties and responsibilities, from order and routine, from life and the city." (139) But now she is convinced that life must flow on and she, too must have courage to flow on with the current of life : "Life must be continued, and all its business - Menaka's admission to medical college



gained, wife led to hospital, new child safely brought forth, the children reared, the factory seen to a salary earned, a salary spent.”(138-139) Sita is not very happy for having made a compromise, which she takes to be her defeat. But married life, as Chesterton remarks, is a perpetual compromise and any compromise or sacrifice for a greater good vindicates one’s victory and greatness. Only by “connecting extremes one can arrive at an acceptable path in life.”⁵ This is the positive solution that the novel offers to the present-day temperamental maladjustments and consequent alienation.

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