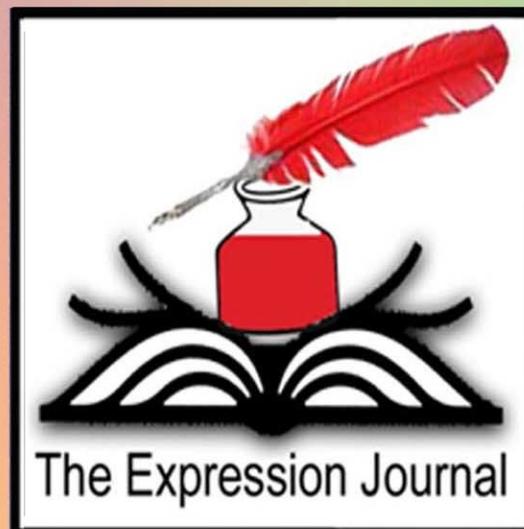


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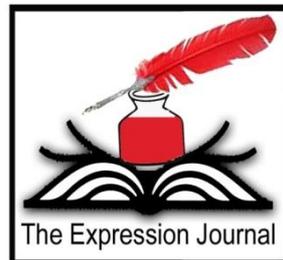
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A STUDY IN THE TEMPERAMENTAL INCOMPATIBILITY AND EXISTENTIAL PREDICAMENT IN DESAI'S NOVEL *WHERE SHALL WE GO THIS SUMMER?*

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Abstract

This paper as an article seeks to explore the theme of temperamental incompatibility and existential predicament in Desai's novel *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*. Anita Desai occupies a special position among women writers in that she has revolutionized the genre with her realistic portrayal of women characters addressing the contemporary, social and psychological issues. Anita Desai has been influenced by writers such as Emily Bronte, D.H. Lawrence, Virginia Woolf, Henry James, Proust, Dostoevsky and the Japanese writer Kawakawa, though she follows her own methods of creative writing. She has a theory of fiction though she does not want to be labelled a theorist. The aim of the research paper is to analyze the portrayal of temperamental incompatibility and existential predicament in the select novels of Anita Desai using accepted research methodology. The novel taken up for study is *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* The methodology followed in this paper is as per the norms stipulated in MLA Hand Book for Writers of Research Papers, Eighth Edition, Edited by Judy Goulding.

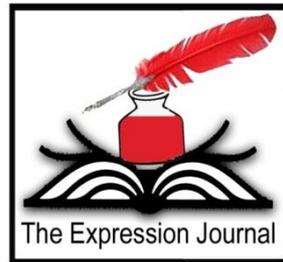
Keywords

Temperamental Incompatibility, Existential Predicament, Psychological Issues, Ontological Insecurity, Exile and Alienation, Marital Dissonance, "Magic Island", Values of Society, A Cripple without Crutches.

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Anita Desai occupies a special position among women writers in that she has revolutionized the genre with her realistic portrayal of women characters addressing the contemporary, social and psychological issues. Anita Desai has been influenced by writers such as Emily Bronte, D.H.Lawrence, Virginia Woolf, Henry James, Proust, Dostoevsky and the Japanese writer Kawakawa, though she follows her own methods of creative writing.

She has a theory of fiction though she does not want to be labeled a theorist. Anita Desai represents perhaps the finest blend of Indian and European sensibilities. Meenakshi Mukherjee's comment is apt: "Desai is a case of an Indian-English writer who achieves that difficult task of bending the English language to her purpose..." (Twice Born, 40).

Anita Desai holds the view that, a writer... follows flashes of individual vision and depends on a kind of trained instinct that tells him what to follow and what to avoid, how to veer away from what would be destructive to his vision. It is these flashes of vision, and a kind of trained instinct that lead him (Interviews with Indo-English Writers, 22).

Temperamental incompatibility and existential predicament is the most dominating and major theme in Desai novels. As an expert, Desai portrays the ontological insecurity, alternation and anguish of uprooted individuals in her novels. Her alienation of this problem is prevalent in most of her works. She remarks her conditions thus:

This has brought two separate stands into my life. My roots are divided because of the Indian soil on which I grew and European culture which I inherited from my mother (*The Book I Enjoyed*, 24).

Anita Desai's preoccupation as a novelist has been the existential predicament of characters. Each of her novels presents one or two memorable characters. In the character portrayal again, she is primarily interested in the projection of female protagonists living in separate, closed, sequestered worlds of existential problems and passions, loves and hates. Unlike most of Indo-English novelists, Anita Desai does something unique by portraying each of her individuals as an unsolved mystery. Her concern for the character alienation enables her to offer an unexpected glimpse into the deeper psychic state of her protagonists. She Says:

I am interested in characters who are not average but have retreated, or been driven into some extremity of despair and so turned against, or made a stand against, the general current. It is easy to flow with the current, it makes no demands, and it costs no effort. But those who cannot follow it, whose heart cries out "the great No," who fight the current and struggle against it, they know what the demands are and what it costs to meet them (*The Times of India*, 1).

Anita Desai's fourth novel, *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* has been welcomed as "an interesting addition to Anita Desai's achievement as an Indian novelist writing in English." (Vimala Rao, *Anita Desai's Where Shall We Go This Summer? An Analysis*, *Commonwealth Quarterly*, 3/9, December, 1978, 50). In this novel Desai returns to the theme of alienation and communication in married life. The novel depicts the tension between a sensitive wife, Sita and the rational, practical and worldly husband Raman. Husband-wife discord, inadequacy of their mutual love relationship and disaffection is the major theme in the novel. Like *Cry*, *The Peacock* and *Voices in the City* this novel also deals deeply with the theme of marital dissonance and isolation. The natural flow of affection between Sita and Raman is very often intact but more frequently it is blocked due to misunderstanding, lack of adequate forbearance and patience. The disaffection proceeds primarily from their temperaments.

Raman in *Where Shall We Go This Summer* is a successful businessman, realistic, and having a rather pragmatic view about life. Sita is over sensitive, keen-eyed, poetic and imaginative, having more than ordinary sense. If Raman is social and extrovert, Sita is introvert. If Raman thinks only of the immediate present, Sita is foresighted and has higher notions about life than the average woman will have. Because of their temperamental differences, many points of discord between them occur and their responses to life are different.

Sita, the protagonist of the novel has four children and is reluctant to deliver or to abort the fifth one. She wants to retain it in her womb because she is afraid of exposing the child to the violence in the modern world by giving birth. Fed up with dreary metropolitan life in Bombay and tormented by the paranoiac fear of her fifth and reluctant pregnancy, she goes to the magic island Manori, in the hope of preventing the delivery with the help of miracles. There on the island, her miracles fail and instead of finding peace, she becomes alienated. She realizes and returns home to continue her passive life. As VimalaRoa aptly suggests,

The island concretizes the feeling of isolation of Sita. She retreats into it as into a womb, with an obsessive desire to recapture once again her childhood innocence and purity ... Obviously, her own frustration with her life in Bombay drives her in her desire to provide her unborn infant with a world that is uncorrupt (Vimala Rao, *Anita Desai's Where Shall We Go This Summer? An Analysis, Commonwealth Quarterly*, 3/9, December, 1978, 46).

The story of the novel is told in a series of flashbacks with a clever ordering of past events. The division of the novel orders the events. The first section is devoted to Sita's coming to the "Magic Island" Manori along with her daughter Menaka and son Karan. The second part deals with Sita's life at Manori for twenty years before her second visit to the island. The third part is about her choice of the future course. Desai adopts the pattern of monsoon winds to convey the tumult in Sita's mind. In her interview with Atma Ram, she says, "I wanted the book to follow the pattern of monsoon together darkly and threateningly to pour down wildly and passionately and then withdraw quietly and calmly" (Ram, Atma. *Anita Desai: The Novelist who writes for Herself, (An Interview), The Journal of Indian Writing in English*, Vol. 5, No. 2, July, 1977, 3-5). This enables Desai to alienate the inner life of her heroine who is the central figure in the novel.

Sita is the daughter of a well-known freedom fighter who is looked upon by his disciples as "the second Gandhi". As most of her father's life is spent in jail, she has no mother to look after her. She is denied the regular life of a normal child. She lives a strange and unusual life. She was required to spend days on end away from home, at different places. There was no schooling to discipline her. Her sense of belonging was extremely tenuous:

She belonged, if to anyone, to this whole society that existed at that particular point in history like a lamb does to its flock and saw no reason why she should belong to one family alone (Where, 85).

After independence, Sita's father has selected Manori, a small island to settle. He is accompanied by his disciples and his family. He calls his house "Jeevan Ashram", "The Home of Soul". It is at this island that he tries to put his social theories into practice. Many social welfare activities are undertaken by him, including digging of a well for the villagers. He offers advice to the villagers in regard to agriculture. Many strange things happen on the island. Her father cures the people stung by scorpion. Childless people also approach for children. One of the villagers uses the word "magic" and all repeat it. In a short time he becomes a legend. His *chelas* who used to take care of his daughter, Sita, "called him a saint, his critics a charlatan, the villagers a wizard and each produced evidence to prove his theory" (Where, 75). Sita also used to spend her time in the company of her brother, Jeevan and sister, Rekha. In course of time, her father's admirers grow large in number lured by his miracles. To Sita, her father remains an enigma. She forms uncertain and vague impressions about him. It is a mystery to Sita whether her father cures people by magic or medicines. She is told by her brother Jeevan that her mother left for Benaras leaving her husband and children. She is upset by the sad news of her mother running away. Her mother's figure even haunts her and

turns her into a wanderer. All these experiences make Sita lose her grip on life and develop in her uncertain and unrealistic attitude towards life. It is a question before her why her mother left her husband who is said to be a Gandhi.

After the death of her father, she is brought to Bombay by Raman, the son of her father's old friend, Deedar. Raman arranged the funeral ceremony of her father. She is admitted in the college by Raman. Later on, he marries her "out of pity, out of lust, out of sudden will for adventure, and because it was inevitable" (*Where*, 99).

Sita's husband Raman is a business man with good public relations. He is busy with his vocational affairs and can spare little time for her. He represents pragmatism and an acceptance of the materialistic values of the society. He finds his activities more fulfilling than his relations with his wife. He wants to exercise his full authority over her. His wife, Sita finds her life dull, and monotonous. She anticipates Raman to be the life lover, making her realize how valuable she is to him. Raman, however, does not fulfill her wishes. Raman focuses his energies on his business and becomes an escapist. By nature, he is a perfectionist. He has his own morals, own standards. As a consequence, the temperaments of Sita and her husband remain poles apart. They suffer from marital disharmony like Maya and Gautama of *Cry, the Peacock*. Sita hypersensitive as she is; feels marital dissatisfaction with her husband. As a result of her experiences, boring and monotonous, "she never got used to anyone" (*Where*, 48). As we are told,

She could not inwardly 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. I'm waiting, she agreed, although for what, she could not tell: for the two halves of this grey egg-world to fall apart and burst (*Where*, 54).

Sita strongly feels that marriage is a farce and all the human relationship are false in the absence of love. Unfortunately, she feels very unhappy even in the company of her in-laws. Therefore, she flouts the norms and values of society. Besides this, Sita also observes that people in Bombay are just for materialistic life. They are "nothing-nothing but appetite and sex" (*Where*, 47).

It is necessary to appreciate the magnitude of Sita's loneliness to understand her predicament in the proper perspective. She feels as if she were "a cripple without crutches" (*Where*, 93). Again and again she comes to the realization that her marriage and, in fact, "all human relationship was just a farce." "Bored, dull, unhappy, frantic," (*Where*, 144). She is painfully distressed at "the tedium and ugliness of a meaningless life." (*Where*, 145). She even begins to doubt the relevance of her existence in this world: "Life seemed complete, full, without her, there was no reason for her to exist." (*Where*, 84). She tried to weave a pattern in her life, but she failed. Despite all her efforts, she could not find an acceptable solution to the "confusion, the muddle" of her life (*Where*, 153): *Only connect*, they say. So she had spent twenty years connecting link by link, this chain, again what is one to do with a chain? It can only throttle, choke, and enslave. (*Where*, 87).

A poem by Cavafy reveals Sita's moral perplexity. "To certain people," she quotes, "there comes a day/When they must say the great Yes or the great No". Sita

is eager to say her “great No” even if it “crushes her for the rest of her life.” Sita is also unable to face the reality of life with its violence, sufferings and pains. While the Hanging Gardens episode clearly points out her neurotic need for the tender attention of her father, the pregnancy provides an ideal occasion to think of the magic island as a source of release. So, when Raman casually asks, “Where Shall We Go This Summer?” she almost spontaneously suggests that they go to Manori, her father’s island. She says:

Perhaps I never ran away at all. Perhaps I am only like the jellyfish washed up by the waves, stranded there on the sand-bar. I was just stranded here by the sea, that’s all. I hadn’t much to do with it at all.”
(*Where*, 108).

It is not her “epitaph” but that of her “freedom”. She takes the “other course” open to human beings, that is as Erich Fromm puts it in *Escape from Freedom*:

...to fall back, to give up his freedom, and to try to overcome his aloneness by eliminating the gap that has arisen between his individual self and the world. The second course never reunites him with the world, in the way he was related to it before he emerged as an “individual”, for the fact of his separateness cannot be reversed, it is an escape from an unbearable situation which would make life impossible if it were prolonged. This course of escape, therefore, is characterized by its compulsive character, like every escape from threatening panic, it is also characterized by the more or less complete surrender of individuality and the integrity of the self.
(Erich Fromm, *Escape from Freedom*, New York: Harper, 1965, 284).

Thus her return to Bombay brought her a new child safely, Menaka’s admission to medical college is gained and the children are reared. And also her return to Bombay is a symbolic reenactment of the scene twenty years ago when she followed Raman, pitying herself for her helplessness, but this time it is of her own free will that she follows him. Sita now realizes that escapism is no answer to life’s problems: “She had escaped from duties and responsibilities, from order and routine, from life and the city.” (*Where*, 139). But now she is convinced that life must flow on, and she too must have the 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 (*Where*, 138).

Thus *Where Shall We Go This Summer* is an answer to temperamental incompatibility and the resultant existential predicament. This novel is in contrast to the other novels like *Cry*, *The Peacock*, *Voices in the City* and *Fire on the Mountain*, in which the problems of frustration of the female characters come to violent and tragic ends. This novel presents a positive approach to the existential predicament. Sita neither dies in the end nor kills anybody nor does she become mad. She simply compromises with her destiny. Self-adjustment is the remedy for Self-alienation.

These novels of Anita Desai, portray female protagonists who are not average but have retreated, or been driven into some extremity of despair, and so

turned against, or made a stand against the general current. Withdrawn into a life of seclusion and loneliness, their material wants are taken care of by affluence of wealth and servants, but their emotional needs are much more difficult to meet. All the central female characters in the novel are either misshapen or bogged down by life, and by men. As a result of this, they seem to live in a closed world of private suffering of temperamental incompatibility and the resultant existential predicament.

The existential problem of temperamental incompatibility finally emerges to be the central theme of her novels. Desai represents therefore “a set of new attitudes and themes” (Dieter Riemenschneider, *British Characters in Indo-English Fiction*, in M. K. Naik, ed., *Aspects of Indian writing in English*, Macmillan India, 1979, 137), associated with modern Indian novel in English.

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